

STORMWIELDER

BOOK I OF
THE SWORD OF LIGHT
TRILOGY

Aaron D. Hodges

By Aaron D. Hodges

The Sword of Light Trilogy

Part 1: Stormwielder

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Aaron Hodges was born in 1989 in the small town of Whakatane, New Zealand. He studied for five years at the University of Auckland, completing a Bachelor's of Science in Biology and Geography, and a Masters of Environmental Engineering. After working as an environmental consultant for two years, he now spends his time traveling the world in search of his next adventure.

Thank you to my family, friends, and teachers for all the support you've shown over the years. This has been a work in progress for half my life.

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For all the people who have changed my life.
Always keep fighting.

PROLOGUE

Alastair stared into the fire, letting its heat wash through his damp cloak. The autumn storm had caught him in the open, drenching him before he could reach the shelter of a band of trees. The sudden violence of the storm was a grim warning of winter's fast approach.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Alastair shifted position, groaning as his old joints cracked in the cold. He added another stick to the fire. A greedy tongue of flame licked up the tender wood. Wind rustled the dark branches above. The fire flickered in the breeze and blew smoke into his face. Its feeble light cast dancing shadows across the clearing.

A head appeared in the trees nearby, its long face staring at him. Alastair gripped his sword and fought to control the pain in his chest. His horse snickered at his fear and retreated into the shadows. It was only

Elcano, his constant companion for almost a decade. Shivering, he released his sword hilt. He knew all too well the dangers of the night. Once he had been one to stand against such things. Now, though...

He shook his head to clear the morbid thoughts. He was still a warrior, and creatures of the dark still feared his name. Yet lately doubt had crept into his mind. It had been a long time since he'd fought the good fight, long before the ravages of time stripped away his strength. The old man shivering at autumn shadows was but a spectre of the Alastair who had once battled the demons of winter.

"If only..." he whispered to himself. The words haunted him, carrying with them the weight of wasted decades. If only he had known, if only he had prepared himself. Instead the great Alastair had settled down and put the dark days behind him.

Then two years ago, Antonia had come. She shattered the peaceful world he had built for himself and dragged him back into a life he had thought long buried.

"Find them," she ordered, and he had obeyed.

If only it were so simple. Things were never as they seemed when *she* was involved. Two years of searching and he was now farther from the truth than

when he started. The trail was ancient, his quarry adept at disappearing without trace. He himself had taught them the skills, but for generations they had perfected them. Alastair had tracked them as far as Peakill but there all trace vanished. For all he knew they were dead. He prayed to Antonia it was not so.

The wind died away and the chirp of crickets rose above the whisper of the trees. The fire popped as a log collapsed, scattering sparks across the ground. He watched them slowly dwindle to nothing and then looked up at the dark canopy. Through the branches he glimpsed the brilliance of the full moon.

Alastair gritted his teeth. She would come tonight. His hands began to shake; he had dreaded this moment for weeks. The sickly taste of despair rose in his throat. The world would feel the consequences of his failure.

“Not yet, there is still time,” the soft whisper of a female’s voice came from the shadows.

Antonia walked from the trees. A veil of mist clung to her small frame, obscuring her features. Her violet eyes shone through the darkness, making the firelight seem pale by comparison. Those eyes held such power and resolve that he shrunk before them. The scent of roses filled the grove and cleansed the smoky

air. Her footsteps made the slightest crunch as she glided towards him.

“It doesn’t matter. They’re gone and I don’t have the strength to continue. Find someone else to fight this battle, I’m done!” he lowered his gaze, unable to meet her eyes.

“There is no one else like you. You know that,” there was anger in the girl’s voice. “Look at me and tell me you would abandon everything we have worked for!”

Alastair glanced up. “I abandoned my *family* for your cause,” he forced the words out, struggling to hold back tears. “I have given *everything* for you, and it has all been in vain. It’s over, they’re gone.”

He stared at Antonia, expecting anger, scorn, disappointment. She smiled. “It has not been in vain, there is still hope. Elynbrigge has found them.”

A rush of strength surged through Alastair. “Where?”

Antonia laughed. Absently she flicked a strand of hair from her face. “The trail was years old, but they are alive and well in Chole. Look for them there. He will watch over them until you arrive.”

Alastair jumped to his feet, scattering firewood into the flames. The blaze roared and leapt to devour the

fresh meal. He ignored it. The fire be damned, *they were alive!*

“Wait,” the tone of Antonia’s voice gave him pause. “First you must go to Oaksville. There is someone there who needs you. When you find him, take him with you. Be quick; Archon won’t be far behind.”

“Who is in Oaksville?” the town was close, but the detour would cost precious time.

“*Eric.*”

Before he could reply, she was gone.

For a long time Alastair stood staring at the space where she had vanished. Her words spun through his head. His anguish was gone, replaced by a fragile spark of hope. Despair still prowled at the back of his mind, but for now the spark was all that mattered.

He did not sleep that night and the sun was approaching noon as he neared the town. As he cleared the last of the trees he saw the sickly pillars of smoke curling up from the city. He kicked Elcano into a gallop.

ONE

A pillar of smoke rose from the burning house. The roar of the flames was deafening. Heat scorched his eyes but he could not look away. The blaze lit the night, chasing the stars from the sky. Amidst the fire the silhouette of a boy appeared. He stumbled from the wreckage, clothes falling to ashes around him. Sparks of lightning leapt from his fingertips, leaving scorch marks on the tiled street. Soot covered his slim face, marred only by the trail of tears running down his cheeks. The wind caught his mop of dark brown hair and revealed the deep blue glow of his eyes. He wore an expression of absolute terror.

“Help me!”

Eric sat bolt upright, the nightmare tearing him from his sleep. He gasped for breath, eyes darting around in search of escape. A wall of vegetation loomed above him. The dark fingers of branches clawed at his clothing. He scrambled for his dagger but it tumbled

through his hands. He dove for the tumbling blade.

His knees hit the dirt and with a sudden rush he remembered where he was. Eric took a deep breath; slowing his racing heart as he rose to his feet. The clearing had not changed while he slept. The trees still stood in a silent ring, their leaves speckled with the red and gold of early autumn. Where the canopy thinned above he could make out the blue sky, but below the dark of night still clung.

Eric shivered and wished he had more than a holey blanket and worn leather jacket to ward off the cold. Reaching down he stuffed the blanket into his bag with the rest of his measly possessions - dried meat, a water skin, and the steel bracelet his parents had given to him as a child. The familiar dream clung to him, the boy's face lurking in the shadows of his memory. He knew that face. It was his own.

A tremor ran through his body. He flung the bag over his shoulder with a little too much energy, determined to forget the bad omen. Just through the trees was the Gods Road and about a mile west was the town of Oaksville. There he planned to make a fresh start for himself.

Eric paused long enough to pull on his travel worn boots and brush the leaves from his hair, then he was

away through the trees. Excitement quickened his pace - this was it. Today he would end his exile. In the two years since his fifteenth birthday he had wandered alone through the forests and plains of Plorsea. In that time he had kept his own company. It had very nearly driven him insane.

The trees either side of the Gods Road soon began to thin, giving way to the grassy steeps of a valley. Eric squinted into the rising sun, straining for his first glimpse of Oaksville. A layer of fog clung to the slopes, but it was quickly fading in the rising sun. Buildings began to take shape - wooden houses with tall smoking chimneys, the three-pronged spire of the temple, an old castle set in the centre that towered above the town walls.

Eric's spirit leapt at the sight. Then the first gust of wind reached him on the hilltop, carrying with it the clang of hammers and clip clop of hooves. His nose twitched at the tang of smoke and humanity hanging in the air. The image of a burning house flickered into his mind.

He paused mid-stride. A voice whispered in his mind.
Go back - it's too dangerous!

Fear gripped him. *What if I'm not ready?* His knees shook. His heart pounded like a runaway wagon on a

cobbled street. His vision swam and he felt the warmth of tears on his cheeks.

Eric turned his head and looked back up the hill. The long grass rippled in the wind, the trees beyond shadowing the movement. The forest could offer him nothing more. He drew a breath of air and faced the town. He took a step forward. The terror returned. His chest constricted until he could hardly breathe, but this time his nerve held. Eric walked down the valley towards the gates.

Soon the outer wall loomed over him, its great stone blocks casting the path in shadow. Ahead a gaping hole in the stonework swallowed the road whole. A guard stood to either side of the gates, dressed in the chainmail and crimson tunic marking the Plorsean reserve army. Each held a steel tipped spear loosely at their side and a sword on their belt. The one to the right spared Eric a glance as he passed by, then returned his eyes to the road. Until recently Plorsea had enjoyed decades of peace. But now bandits had moved down from the mountains and were plaguing the countryside. At first they had only targeted travellers, but lately raids had been launched against some of the smaller settlements.

Eric passed between the open gates and into the darkness of the tunnel. Moss covered the giant slabs

of rock on either side of him. Iron grates peeked from the ceiling, once used to pour burning oil on invaders who breached the outer gates. These walls dated back to darker times, before peace had come to the Three Nations.

With a deep breath Eric stepped from the tunnel and back into sunlight. A bustling marketplace spread out around him. The air was heavy with dust and the stink of human bodies. The buzz of a hundred voices assaulted Eric's ears. To his left bakers stood at their booths waving loaves of bread in the faces of passers-by. Elsewhere he could see others plying their wares; butchers and jewellers, fishermen and carpenters, all chaotically crammed into the small square before the city gates. Each was doing their best to draw the early morning crowds to their stalls.

A jeweller caught Eric's eye and began motioning for him to look at his array of golden necklaces laid out on the table. Eric smiled and shook his head, but suddenly the jeweller was out of his stall and moving through the crowd towards him shouting, "Sir! Sir!"

Eric shrunk back towards the cool comfort of the tunnel. His feet stumbled on the uneven surface and sent him tumbling to the ground. His head struck the cobbled pavement. His ears rung. Groaning he looked up, straining to see while his vision spun.

A face appeared overhead. "Careful there, mate," the man offered a hand. Eric immediately recognised the western twang of a Trolan accent.

Eric took the hand and the man hauled him to his feet. He stumbled for a second, trying to regain his balance.

"That looked like a nasty fall," the Trolan offered. "You okay?"

The man wore a dark brown cloak and towered over Eric's own five feet and seven. A poorly trimmed beard and moustache matted his face, while a broad smile detracted somewhat from the twisted lump serving him for a nose. His hazel eyes looked down from beneath bushy eyebrows. Silver streaked his black hair.

Eric nodded. "It was my fault," he stuttered. "Everything is so... overwhelming."

"A country boy then?" the man gave a booming laugh. "I remember my first time in a town like this. They stole every penny I had, not the pickpockets, those crooked merchants! Bought a dagger that snapped the first time I dropped it. These townsmen prey on the weak. Well don't you worry mate, us country folk look after our own. The name's Pyrros Gray, what can I do for ya?"

Eric grinned. The man reminded him of the warm manner of people in his old village. "I'm Eric. Is there some place quiet I could sit for a while? My head is spinning."

"My pleasure, Eric. There's a tavern not far from here, it's usually quiet at this hour. I know the owner; he won't mind you sitting down for a bit. Just follow me and we'll have you there in no time. Only try not to catch the eye of any of these vultures, or they'll soon convince you to trade everything you own for one of 'em statues that grants luck with woman."

Pyrros set off through the crowd. Eric followed close behind, afraid to lose him in the press of bodies. His legs felt unsteady and his head throbbed with each step.

A big woman stepped between them and thrust a wet trout in his face. "Cheapest fish in town! You buy!" she demanded.

Eric shook his head and side stepped the merchant, trying to avoid any further contact. She shouted after him but he ignored her words. He scanned the crowd, searching for Pyrros.

"Didn't think I'd leave you behind, did you?" Pyrros' voice came from behind him.

Eric spun around, relieved to see the bulky man right beside him.

Pyrros laughed. “So what brought you to Oaksville, mate?”

Eric shrugged. “I wanted a fresh start.”

“Well we’ll have to see what we can do about that. Now come on, we’re almost there.”

They slipped into a narrow alleyway which twisted away from the marketplace. Tall brick walls hemmed them in on either side, casting the alley in shadow. The drone of the markets died off as they rounded the first corner. Dead wood and discarded garbage lay in piles along the alley, but someone had maintained a trail through the mess, leading deeper into the town.

Eric wrinkled his nose as they passed a pile of decomposing fish heads. He stepped around it and hesitated. “Are you sure this is the way?”

Pyrros turned and grinned. “It’s a short cut. The streets surrounding the marketplace tend to get so crowded you can hardly move. This way goes around.”

A chill breeze blew through the alley. The hairs on Eric’s neck stood up. He did not like the way Pyrros

was grinning. The man no longer seemed so friendly; suddenly the way he towered over Eric was threatening and a strange glint had appeared in his eyes. Eric's gut churned in warning.

"I think I'd prefer the crowd to this mess, thanks," Eric turned to leave.

Two men blocked his path. One spun a wooden baton in his hand and the other held a heavy club. Each stood a head above Eric. They were dressed in plain clothes, but the smiles they wore lacked any trace of warmth. A coil of rope was slung over the baton wielder's shoulder. They spread out to block Eric's escape.

"Don't bother running, mate," Pyrros' voice was menacing now. "You'll make this easier on everyone if you come willingly."

Eric half turned, keeping the other men in sight. "What do you want?"

Pyrros shrugged. "Fair trade's not the only business that's booming. Slaves have grown popular in southern Trola. So long as we're discrete, take the ones no one misses, people turn a blind eye. You're one of those, aren't you mate?"

He shook his head. "No, my parents are waiting-" he

was interrupted by a harsh cackle.

Pyrros scratched at his beard. “So you were lying earlier? About starting a new life?”

Eric clenched his fists, tense as coiled wire. He glanced at the men behind him, gauging the distance between them. Fear made his breath come in short, ragged gasps.

“No, I think you’re lying now, mate. I don’t think anyone is out there waiting for you. I don’t think there’s anyone in the world who will miss you.”

This cannot be happening!

Pain pounded at Eric’s head, but he fought it down. He glanced at Pyrros, and then leapt at the man with the club. Grinning, the thug lifted his weapon. A moment before he swung Eric dived sideways, twisting for the gap between the men. He almost made it.

A club to his chest stopped him cold. For the second time that day he found himself flat on his back. Winded, he choked for air, the faces of the two men spinning above him. He could feel his anger taking hold. Overhead, thunder clapped. Drops of rain began to fall.

Footsteps came from nearby. Pyrros appeared above

him, a frown on his face. “The first thing a slave must learn is obedience. You disappoint me, Eric. I took you for a quick learner.”

The man’s boot came up and crashed down on Eric’s stomach. The breath exploded from his lungs. Pain constricted his chest and he gasped, eyes watering, desperate for air. Inside, Eric felt the embers of his fury take light.

“Stupid boy,” by now the rain was bucketing down, soaking through the clothes of his attackers. Pyrros’ foot lashed out again, smashing into his ribs and head.

Eric curled into a ball as the assault rained down. He choked back his tears, fear and rage battling for control. There was a sudden roar as something within snapped, giving way to the chaos of his emotions. A terrible power exploded through his mind, slipping from the darkest recesses of his conscious. He no longer felt the blows, or the rain, or the dirt beneath him. All that remained was an all-consuming hate; a need to lash out. A scream of torment echoed through the alleyway. The last barrier in his mind shattered.

Eric opened his eyes. Blue light lit the stone walls of the passageway, freezing the men in a sudden blue glare. He saw the hate in Pyrros’ eyes turn to terror,

saw the men beside him glance up, heard the crackling and smelt the burning as it came. Then the lightning struck.

The men vanished into the blue light, their screams cut short by the roar of thunder. There was no chance for escape. One second the three were there, the next the lightning had consumed them. But it did not stop there.

With a deafening crack the sky tore asunder, unleashing a hail of lightning. The screams of the villagers rose above the crash of thunder, as destruction rained down on the defenceless village. Splinters of wood and stone flew through the air as the blue fire tore buildings apart.

Eric struggled to his feet. His anger had vanished, his hatred spent. He stumbled towards the marketplace, mouth agape. Horror clutched his soul.

No, no, no, this cannot be happening - not again!

Eric watched the lightning burn a deadly trail through the marketplace. Booths exploded before its wrath, filling the air with smoke and debris. Dozens had already fallen, their clothes blackened and crumbling, their bodies broken. Gusts of wind swirled through the square, picking up tiles and rubble and flinging them into the air. The rain poured down, but even

that could not wash the smell of burning from the air. Eric stumbled amid the chaos, powerless to save his hapless victims.

There was no escape from the storm's fury. It tore through the market, an unstoppable force of nature. Eric fell to his knees, his tears mingling with the torrent of rain. Lightning struck his frail body but he felt nothing. Bolts of energy danced along his skin, raising goose bumps wherever they touched. Yet he remained unharmed. He buried his head in his arms.

Why?

The thunder died away, leaving a devastating silence in its wake. Eric could hardly summon the courage to look. At last he opened his eyes. His gaze swept the wreckage with growing shock. There was not a stall left standing. Burnt beams and canvas covered the square and flames were already beginning to spread. Bodies lay scattered amid the ruin, at times half-buried by the rubble. Eric choked at the sight. His mind rebelling against the truth.

This is my doing.

Movement came from his right. He looked across as a man struggled to his feet. Their eyes met. Eric saw the horror grow in the stranger's eyes. He looked down and saw that lightning still played across his

chest and arms. Noise came from elsewhere now as more survivors rose to view the shattered remains - and to see the boy with lightning dancing on his skin.

Eric watched them, heart filled with despair. The faces of those around him wore only hatred. He had to say something, but could not find the words. His body ached and his muscles burned but he struggled to his feet. A surge of blood rushed to his head. He swayed. Then, determined, he opened his mouth to speak.

An angry buzz of voices assailed him. To his left a man drew a dagger from his belt. He started towards Eric. Another quickly followed suit, ripping a makeshift club from a pile of rubble as he approached. The broken ground crunched beneath their booted feet. Each wore a grim mask of determination. When they were a few feet away they hesitated, eyeing him with caution.

Eric struggled to find some words of explanation. He wanted to tell them it had not been him, that he could not control this curse. Yet he knew in his heart it would be a lie. He had known his presence brought a terrible danger to all around him. A heavy weight settled on his shoulders. There was nothing he could offer these souls but his life.

More survivors joined the first two men, arming themselves with whatever makeshift weapons were within reach. Each sported burns across their arms and clothing, and dark bruises on their faces. A fire burned in their eyes, fuelled by the horror they had just witnessed.

Eric trembled, staring at the blades and cudgels held by men and women alike. His heart pounded in his chest. He clenched his fists, struggling to ignore the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. His rib cage ached where the club had struck him earlier. Bruises from the beating were already starting to swell on his arms and legs. His mind shuddered at the thought of the pain still to come.

Cautiously the survivors edged towards him, numbers fuelling their courage.

Eric backed away, his own courage fading with each step. The villagers moved faster, sensing his fear. He stumbled backwards over the rubble, unable to tear his gaze from the madness in the eyes of the crowd. He stumbled backwards over a pile of rubble and crashed to the ground. The shock lifted the spell. Eric scrambled to his feet and ran for his life.