

## **Zeller Strampton**

by Loren Hidalgo

Born the son of a tanner, Zeller never wanted for much in the way of material things. His father's operation provided well for the kingdom, and his family was treated exceedingly well in return. Zeller would go on long journeys into the forest. He did this often dreaming of life as a swashbuckling adventurer. Brandishing a stout branch for a sword and a handmade sling, he would battle the most dangerous of imaginary creatures and save the most beautiful damsels in distress from evil wizards and tyrants.

On one such occasion, (after ridding the land of the terrible two headed ettin that was terrorizing the countryside), he found himself confronted with a very real threat. Lying in wait upon the main road that led back to town were five bandits. Zeller saw them in the distance. He could hear a coach approaching down the main road and realized immediately what these men intended to do. Zeller moved as quietly and quickly as his feet would carry him, all the while hoping he hadn't been spotted. Using his sling he shot off one stone that knocked one bandit unconscious and let two more fly into the distance. The remaining bandits were duped into thinking the threat came from the other side of the road. Quickly they dispersed believing themselves to have been discovered by the royal guards. He reached the coach before it and its' entourage rounded the bend. Jumping out in the middle of the road he flailed his arms wildly. The two knights guarding the coach pulled their horses to a stop and the coachman followed.

Zeller informed them of the impending ambush and led the two knights to the reluctant sleeper on the side of the road. He bore a mark that indeed labeled him as one of the guild members that had been robbing coaches in this land for quite some time now.

Later that evening, an emissary of the king came knocking upon the door of the tanner and his wife.

It so happened that the king sought an audience with the young boy regarding his bravery earlier that day. You see, the king's mother was in that coach on a return from holiday. If not for Zeller's bravery and quick thinking who knows what may have happened.

He was taken to his new home in the castle and trained by the masters in the arts of stealth and warfare. Finally his wishes would come true. He would become the hero he always dreamt of. Zeller from then on grew up on the battle field and fulfilled many secret missions for the king. But he soon came to realize that the dreams he thought he wanted were not what he wanted at all. The king charged him with a campaign that would take him far from the kingdom into foreign territory for who knew how long. He did not wish to leave his family behind, and pleaded with the king that he should stay to protect the kingdom. The king coldly explained to him that Zeller was his blade and not his shield and admonished him to do as he was bid.

Zeller spent two cold years in the north with a crew of forty men intercepting Viking vessels and laying them to waste. It kept the trade routes open but no less violence ever came of it. Battle after battle depleted his once proud crew of forty to a saddened eleven. It was time to go home. After a very long journey he and his men had reached the main road, that same main road that had marked him a hero so many years before. On the way many of his men were met by their families and said good bye to Zeller. All save Aleman, his most trusted comrade and fearless warrior. Aleman's brother was numbered among the deceased warriors of the crew. Without him,

Zeller was Aleman's only family.

Three and a half days journey from the town they were met by a large group of villagers Zeller recognized from his youth. Pulling one aside, he asked where they were traveling. The villager told him that they were fleeing the village. He gave him the tale we know all too well of the Dragon Bloodtharcken and the carnage that she left in her wake.

The traveling went fast after this news. Three and a half days turned to two with no sleep. Zeller and Aleman feared the worst, but it still didn't prepare them for the sight that greeted them. The village was devastated. Those too proud to leave their homes had paid the price. The tanner was marked among them as well as his wife. The castle stood a charred ruin. Zeller searched the grounds and finally discovered a locked door that led to the king's wine cellars. There he found the nobles and the king cowering like mice.

So enraged was he by the sight of the man who sent him away that he flew at the king, sword raised high. He struck low by the king's side splitting the stone of the foundation. Zeller told the king that he wanted him to live a long life with the knowledge of his cowardice and informed him that he would be his blade no more.

The next few months were spent in pursuit of the fowl beast that destroyed Zeller's life. They journeyed from forest to plains to mountains to forest again, and finally discovered her whereabouts in a town on Lake Elizabeth.

Boarding a small skiff they set out across the lake. Half way there, a whirl pool opened up beneath them. They thought themselves at an end for sure. Aleman began to feel dizzy from the spinning and Zeller too found himself falling in to a deep sleep. When they came to they were in a grand palace.

A beautiful woman with raven hair came to greet them. She told them her name was Elynthil and she knew why they were going to Bristol, and what they intended to do. Elynthil said that if Zeller were to slay the dragon and drink the fresh blood of the beast, she would be able to use him in a spell to bring his family back. She didn't tell him that the fresh blood of a dragon and the pure heart of a warrior who slew it would free her from this underwater prison. Aleman tried to tell Zeller not to listen to her. He suspected something peculiar amiss but his head was swimming from the enchantment Elynthil was using on them both. She wouldn't have needed a magical suggestion to sway Zeller. The thought of what she promised was more than enough to buy his allegiance. Weakened by the illusion she was generating, and feeling her suggestion had taken weight in their heads, Elynthil used one more great effort to cast them into slumber once again and send them to the Bristol shore. She was very weak now, and would need to rest up to restore her magic.

Elynthil's timing could not have been worse, for as Zeller and Aleman awoke they looked out from the banks to see their nemesis there before them, already dead. Her life blood fowling the ground beneath her.

Zeller was in a panic. He had not slain the dragon. He ran to the dragon's remains and pierced through the scaly flesh on the side of its neck. Filling his cupped hands with the cold blood from this new wound he took a long draught. It had to work, it had to. Zeller ran back into the water and screamed for the witch.

Elynthil, awoke in shock, hardly rested at all from her ordeal. She was exhausted, but the sound of her freedom reverberated through the water to her evil ears. She had rested enough to get Zeller into her underwater realm. No strength for illusion this time. Zeller looked upon her palace turned cave, and her in all her vile wickedness. The witch was close enough to him now to sense his transgression. She wailed at him that the blood was not fresh. By lying to her about

killing the beast, his heart was no longer pure. She had no use for him now. Not realizing her weakened state she flew in to a rage. The hag cursed the blood that flowed down Zeller's throat. She turned up its heat to burn Zeller from within. Zeller could feel his insides on fire as he unsheathed his sword. Before she could complete the curse, he ran her through.

Water engulfed the cave and Zeller was pushed to the surface. Aleman was waiting for him atop a nearby bridge. He saw him break the surface close to a chain that dangled down into the depths and bayed him take hold of it. Zeller pulled his way up to the bridge, his throat ablaze. He drank gulp after gulp from Lake Elizabeth in a vain effort to slake his thirst. He ran insanely down a nearby street and pulled a cup from a patron's hand. He drank the liquid from this leather mug and found his thirst was sated. It did not last for long, but what did it matter. If the Bristol ale is what he needed to abate this curse, then he would be forced to stay here. He had nowhere else to go anyway.

Zeller felt a hand upon his shoulder and whirled around, there stood a man with an eye patch masking three nasty scars. Calmly he said, "I'm afraid your work is not done."

Aleman finally caught up to Zeller, hands on his knees he gasped for breath and at length said, "Are you buying me some ale or what?"