

Fairy Tales  
by Stuart Dycus

Oran Kalamak ran through the streets of the town he had grown up in. It was a nice enough sort of place, but almost everyone was a foreigner. Well, actually he was the foreigner, but no one seemed to like reminding him of it. Mentioning his native country of Ralishea made people stop whatever they were doing and stare at him. Sometimes they looked sad, but usually they just looked scared or angry. Dad had told him not to bring it up unless someone asked him directly, which Oran didn't really understand, but assumed must be one of those adult things that were not considered important for eight-year olds to know about.

But none of that really mattered today, because today was the one day of the week he got to visit Grandpa Sephik. Everybody in town respected Grandpa, but he lived outside of the gates, all the way at the top of Watchman Hill, and he rarely visited. Once a week, though, if Oran did all his chores, Grandpa Sephik was very strict about that. Mom let him go up the windy side trail off the north road to the house on the hill where Grandpa lived.

Oran loved visiting Sephik because he told the best stories about the Demon War. Dad said that Grandpa had been a soldier in the Ralishean Army during that time, but Grandpa didn't tell many stories about himself. Mostly, he told stories about the Twelve Warriors. Oran knew all their names and could recite most of the stories by heart, but he never tired of hearing them again and again. His favorites were the Two Friends, Tadaka and Tir, because, even though they weren't the strongest, they always seemed to come through when things looked the worst. He'd told Grandpa that once, and Grandpa had given him the oddest look.

Thinking of them reminded him of something he'd wanted to ask, and he picked up his pace as he turned onto the windy path, wishing Grandpa Sephik didn't value his privacy quite so much.

As usual for Oran's visits, it was near sunset, which meant the house was in shadow when the path finally meandered its way to the hill's crest. The sight

of the sturdy wooden house, overlooking the Havershin Forest and the North Road which cut through it, never failed to awe him a little. From that perspective, Oran thought, it was as if the house stood guard over the city, a silent sentinel against any threat coming down that road. Grandpa would be in his large wooden rocking chair on the front porch, as always, facing north. Most of Oran's neighbors didn't like looking north from high places, because just above the horizon you could see the Shroud of Ralishea, the dark cloud the Demons had summoned over that cursed land to blot the sun and show their influence. Oran had heard the grown-ups whispering that when the Shroud covered your land, it meant the Demons would attack you. It hadn't ever gotten any closer during Oran's lifetime, but Grandpa Sephik always watched it.

These dark thoughts left Oran as soon as he spotted his grandfather, sitting in the chair and gazing into the northern sky, lost in thought. Though Grandpa's hair and beard were the speckled grey of thick smoke and the creases on his face deep chasms, his eyes still radiated sharp intelligence. He had never given himself to any excess and because of that he still stood tall with a lean body and broad shoulders. More than his health though, there was a kind of vibrant energy about Sephik that age couldn't seem to touch. This energy never failed to infect Oran, so that the weariness from his recent journey was completely forgotten, and his small feet were staccato drumbeats on the wooden porch before he threw himself into his grandfather's lap with a gleeful shout.

"Grandpa!"

"Oof!" Sephik responded, and he gave Oran a reproachful grin. "You're getting a little big for that. You'll grind my feeble old bones into powder if you keep it up much longer."

"Grandpa! You're not feeble!" Oran giggled merrily. "Heck, you're not even that old! Now Mr. Shamanif, our neighbor, he's as old as dirt. One time..."

"Oran! You should show more respect for your elders," Sephik said, his tone becoming stern. Oran looked at him apologetically, but then Sephik grinned

again. "I think we both know that dirt couldn't possibly be as old as Mr. Shamanif." This caused Oran to collapse with laughter, and his grandfather couldn't help joining in.

After the two managed to regain their composure somewhat, Sephik took Oran inside. Oran sat down in his usual place on the wool rug in front of the fireplace, while Sephik crossed over to the comfy armchair next to it. Though the house was old, Oran loved the smell of the wooden floor which mingled with the burning log, so different from the dry, cold smells of brick and coal in the city. Though the rest of the house was bare of almost any decoration or furniture, possessing only a table, some chairs, a bookshelf, and Sephik's bedroom, that cozy spot by the fireplace was a private retreat just for the two of them, sacrosanct from any intrusion by the world outside.

"So then, lad," Sephik began with a smile after they were seated, "which story shall it be today?"

Oran frowned for a moment, trying to gather the courage to ask the question he had thought of on his way here, and wondering if he should. "Grandpa what ever happened to Tir and Tadaka? I mean, what are they doing now? You never told me that part of the story."

Sephik's smile faded and his face seemed to darken. "So you want to know how the story ends, do you?" He murmured slowly, his eyes staring at something Oran couldn't see. "I don't think hmmm..."

Sephik fell silent and gazed at Oran in frank appraisal. It was an expression Oran knew well but rarely saw, as his grandfather reserved that measuring look only for times when Oran's actions merited his serious consideration. Usually this meant Oran had done something bad, and his insides churned with the desire to confess to some contrived mischief and bring up another subject. This time though, he knew he hadn't done anything wrong, so he made himself be brave and meet Grandpa's eyes squarely.

"I suppose if you are old enough to ask the question, you are old enough to hear the answer," Sephik sighed at last, his shoulders sagging heavily.

In that instant, it seemed to Oran that the warmth and light went out of the universe, as all Grandpa's many years collapsed onto his body at once, robbing it of health and vibrancy. For a moment, he might have been the oldest man in the world. Oran's heart skipped a beat at this picture of his grandfather, and his bottom lip quivered as his resolve melted away. He no longer wished to know what happened, and he would have admitted to any fault, accepted any punishment, if only time would flow backwards a few seconds and erase his question from its records.

"But be warned, boy," Sephik spoke again, and the harshness of his voice sent chills down Oran's spine. "This story takes place during The Last Stand. You remember that story don't you?"

Oran could only nod. It was the story everyone knew, and he'd only asked Sephik to tell it once. It was the story of the final battle of Prince Horatio at Stronghold, City of the Mountainside. He had always known that Tir and Tadaka had been there. All of the Twelve had. But subconsciously, he'd always grouped them with the refugees that had made it out with General Sabin using the secret tunnel through the mountains before the city was completely overrun. A horrible sense of foreboding filled him. If that was where the story ended...

But he refused to back down. Something about this question pulled at him. Now more than ever, he had to know.

"Yes, I can see that you do remember it," Sephik murmured as he studied the boy's face. "In that case, I don't need to go through the details of the strategy and tactics involved, so we'll pick up the story on the final night of the siege."

Sighing again, he closed his eyes. When they opened, they were the eyes of a storyteller, commanding absolute attention from his audience, and his voice was the rumble of distant thunder as he began. "Rain poured down from a sky as black as a Demon's heart. Stronghold's walls had been breached, and the terrors had begun flooding into the fortress. The swords of the defenders flashed with every lightning stroke."

Oran's favorite part of Grandpa's stories was the way he made them come to life, imitating battle cries and explaining positioning, all as if the two of them were right there in the thick of it.

"Breach! Breach!" came the cries from the watchmen. 'Enemy in the castle! Remove to the fallback positions!' Captains on the walls marshaled their squads, for they knew they must still gain more time for the civilians to escape. Many marveled now at Horatio's wisdom in beginning the evacuation south across the Malakar river earlier that day, but some worried that it had not been soon enough. Never-the-less, they knew their duty was to hold key streets and boulevards for as long as they could, then retreat back to the crossing point in the south-west corner of the city, the Beren Dam. But one had to choose wisely when to break, for when the demons reached the Dam, it would be destroyed, and the castle flooded. The water of the Malakar, you may recall, had been made death for the Demons through an enchantment, its mere touch enough to turn one of them to stone. Thus flooding the castle and plains outside meant victory, but most of the soldiers recognized that they would not see the next sunrise.

"Yet they blanched not from this fate! For their lives would buy freedom and peace for their families. And if death be certain, then withhold nothing from the fight, for there is nothing left to fear! 'To your posts, men! Hold until the end, that even the Saints may feel awed at your courage! To your posts!'"

"Thus they retreated from the walls, to spread like so many ants through the city, each group knowing their task. Here houses were pulled down to make a barricade, there a pit dug out to slow pursuit later. And so the city was quite cunningly transformed into a maze, with only the Captains knowing the correct paths. But the incorrect paths must be guarded as well as the correct, so that the enemy may not infer the route to take. Such was the case of the Two Friends, whose station was near the eastern wall, the farthest point from exit."

"And so, after some hours of heavy fighting, we find Tir, that master of the twin swords, in a courtyard single-handedly facing down three of the terrors.

His blades hissed through the air like striking snakes, moving far too quickly for the eye to follow. Even together, only three of them were the work of a twinkling, no more, and then he truly was alone. He took pause for a moment, as he realized his command had all died, and the fighting had moved elsewhere. Now was his moment to choose: stay or go."

"Surely, he chose to leave, right Grandpa?" Oran couldn't imagine his hero giving up that way. After everything he had survived, for Tir to just choose to give up and die now, surely that was impossible.

"It's not so simple, Oran," Sephik replied. "Command is a heavy thing, and to have everyone underneath you die can take a great toll on a man. Sometimes dying with them seems easier than living with the knowledge that they died following you. But don't interrupt. Where was I? Ah, yes. Now was his moment to choose."

"All at once out of the gloom and rain there came another figure, his eyes aglow with eldritch power, the mage known as Tadaka. Tir smiled at seeing his friend, and knew what his choice must be. 'You came back for me?' Tir asked, shaking his head in mock ruefulness. 'Of course.' Tadaka replied. 'Were it not for you, I would die of sheer boredom.' 'How much time do you suppose is left?' 'Not much, I'm afraid. We will have to hurry.' So saying, the mage flung his hand to the skies, calling for Time's aid in their travel, and they were off, moving so quickly they blurred the air behind them.

"Through the rubble-strewn city streets they tore, fighting running battles with the demons they met along the way. Their foes fell in twos and threes, yet the pursuers slowly grew in number. And in the distance behind them, always just out of sight, they heard the great pounding of giant footsteps, and a titanic, roaring bellow. At last, Tadaka's spell wore off, and they found themselves in a dead end, their path blocked by wreckage. Had they taken a wrong turn? Indeed, they thought so, and they turned to face the hoard, determined to make their last moments dear."

"But at that moment, Dezra and his grenadiers appeared atop the rubble pile, the strange weapons they called guns pouring fire into their pursuers. 'Hurry!'

he shouted. 'Through that house on the left you can make the street behind us!' And thus the Two Friends found themselves on the reservoir bank, the dam crossing only moments away. They tarried just long enough for Tadaka to collapse the house behind them to complete the barricade, for they knew there could be no others on that route. That task done, they came across the Dam to join Sabin and a few hopefuls waiting for relatives on the other side. The rest were already escaping through the tunnel."

"I knew it!" Oran whooped excitedly, leaping to his feet. "They did get out with Sabin! Grandpa, you were mean earlier to make me worry like that."

"Oran." Something in his grandfather's tone froze him in mid-sentence. "Sit down. The story isn't over yet."

Numbly, Oran collapsed back onto his spot under Grandpa's icy glare.

"Now then, you may recall that Beren Dam had earlier been warded against magic to prevent the demons from flooding the city, and it was too wet to use explosives. The only method left for collapsing the Dam was to close the floodgates, using the controls at each end. With the river swollen from the rain, it would only take seconds for the Dam to burst under such pressure. A young officer named Shyid, fleet of hand and foot, had been chosen as the man to hold the opposite bank until the last of those who would escape had crossed.

"Just as Tir had gained safety and embraced his Brother, who's Name we do not speak, there came a cacophonous detonation from Dezra's barricade, flinging men, stone and mortar away like so many pebbles. One heavy block of masonry, by horrid chance, caught Shyid squarely, pitching him off the causeway to the river far below. As the smoke cleared, that horrid bellow that had dogged the Two Friends' flight sounded again, and demons belched from the hole blasted into the rubble, gaining the far side but a breath later. The Dam crossing was quite narrow, only wide enough for two men abreast, but they came onward madly, howling for blood. Many fell or were jostled to their doom by their comrades, yet they cared not. All seemed lost. "

"But at that moment, a lone figure dashed in from the Ralishean side, twin swords set for battle. It was Tir who met the demon charge head on, first holding his ground, and then, impossibly, pushing back the tide through sheer ferocity. Tadaka paused only long enough to exchange a meaningful glance with Sabin before running out to support his friend, weaving magical protections about the doughty swordsman, and casting blue fire through the slaving ranks. Tir's Brother at once understood the meaning of Tadaka's glance, and he loosed a desperate cry as he leapt to stop Sabin, but too late."

"The powerful General closed the flood control for that side with a single mighty heave, then turned and seized Tir's Brother by the collar, dragging him away while calling for everyone to get to the tunnel. A pair of soldiers came up and grabbed the aggrieved man under his arms, but the fight had left him, and as they led him away he only raised a single arm toward his brother on the Dam as if to pluck his kin from danger despite the distance."

Sephiks voice trailed off as he said this, staring at nothing with tear-brimmed eyes, his arm mimicking the action he described apparently of its own accord. Dazed by the ending these events foreshadowed, Oran only dimly noted the oddity of his grandfather's actions. Tir's Brother had to be saved, for Horatio himself had prophesied that it would be his descendent who would finally conquer the Demons and lead the Ralisheans back to their homeland. That was why he was known only as Tir's Brother when telling the stories, to protect his family from assassination attempts by Demon spies. So why did Grandpa seem so sympathetic with his desire to risk himself for Tir?

These thoughts left him as Sephik began speaking once more.

"My apologies. I must be getting old. Anyway, with his faithful companion at his back, his swords flashing blue in the light of Tadaka's spellfire, Tir advanced remorselessly, an incandescent tempest of steel and death. Inch by gory inch he gained ground, until with a final series of torrid strikes, he cleared the area around the dam control, and stepped onto the bank. Tadaka flashed into his wake and snatched at the lever, quenching the flow of water from the dam, then dove under Tir's whirling swords to stand next to his friend. The dam groaned and creaked for a few tense seconds before bursting

asunder, unable to contain the full weight of the river. There could be no pursuit of the refugees now, but nor was there any chance of escape for the two heroes.

"Even then, the two would not give in, and the hordes learned again what it meant to fight members of the Twelve. They fought as one, with speed beyond human and ferocity born of certain death. Dozens, then a hundred of the foul monsters fell, and still they came, climbing over small mounds of their own dead to attack the two warriors. Slowly, the Two Friends tired and their wounds began to mount. But still they fought.

"All at once the battle ceased, and they stood alone in a field of dead fiends, their armor and clothing a mass of shredded pieces and bloody rags. Back beyond the range of their weapons, the lines of demonic soldiers held off, waiting. A looming monstrosity made its way through their ranks, the earth trembling slightly each time it stepped. Chimadreon, the Lord of Demons, had arrived at last.

"I regret I do not have time to repay you all the trouble you have caused me these five years,' the horror rumbled as it pointed a single claw at them. Still, know that your deaths are in vain. After I slay that fool Horatio, I will catch your precious General and his fleeing worms. Now then, begone!"

"The entire river bank dissolved in a wave of hellfire. Exhausted as they were, Tir and Tadaka could make no defense against such an attack. So ended two of the greatest heroes of this or any other age," Sephik finished, then fell silent.

Oran struggled mightily not to let the tears that blurred his vision flow, clenching his hands into fists and biting his bottom lip. In the end, he could not stop them, and small sobs wracked his body as they slid down his cheeks. Sephik regarded his grandson quietly while he cried, offering neither comfort nor reprimand.

"It's not fair," Oran whispered at last. It was not a complaint or a demand, as a child might say in a tantrum, but rather a cool, slightly bitter observation.

The boy's head came up so that he looked his grandfather in the eye, not bothering to wipe his tears away. He didn't feel ashamed of them right now. "Just because they were tired and outnumbered it's not fair, Grandpa."

"Indeed," Sephik responded. "The world isn't a fair place, Oran. It's something we hide from children and even lie to ourselves about, but in the end, it is not fair." He paused to let that sink in. "Still, it's not as if Chimadreon enjoyed his victory for long. He and Horatio had their final duel in the flooded castle, each killing the other. With his death, the demons lost their leader and their desire to expand their territory. And though Tir and Tadaka died, they helped everyone else escape. We would not be here now if not for them."

Oran cocked his head to the side and thought on that for a moment. "So in some ways... it's up to us to make it fair. By winning when we finally take Ralishea back," Oran nodded to himself, then took on a serious expression as he looked back at Sephik. "I'll do it, Grandpa. When the Descendent comes back to lead us, I'll make it fair. This time, we'll win."

Grandpa stared intently at Oran for a moment after that. Oran could have sworn there was something peculiar about that look, but he couldn't puzzle out what, and a creeping fear began to gnaw at him. "I mean, it's true, right Grandpa? Prince Horatio's prophecy. The Descendent will appear and lead us back. It's going to come true isn't it?" There was a time when Oran would never have asked such a question, but his belief in the fundamental truths of his childhood had been violently shaken by tonight's revelation.

"Who can say?" Sephik replied distantly. Despair swelled behind Oran's eyes, and his grandfather frowned. "I told you Oran, the world is not fair. How can any of us know the truth of what Horatio foresaw? Even now there are those among us who claim it is all a fairy tale, and Ralishea is forever lost to us."

Sephik paused a moment, letting that sink in. "However," he continued, and he leaned forward to look his grandson in the eye, a confident, conspiratorial grin that almost bordered on smugness slowly spreading over his face. "Personally, I like the fairy tale ending better."

Again, Oran sensed something peculiar about that expression, but this time he found it comforting, and didn't question it.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Me, too."