

In the Tower

An Incomplete Novel by Thomas A. McKean

The castle looked majestic in the twilight, and it was good to be home. Thanks to my husband, the evil wizard Banazar was imprisoned in exile, and all we had left to remind us of him was the magic silver tusk. Orkyn decided to put it in the castle's vaults for safe keeping, after which we decided to get some sleep.

No matter how many times I see it, the beauty of Island Root never ceases to amaze me. Few things in this life are more comforting and relaxing than a cup of morning tea made from the leaves of the trees of Castle Base Maple. What made this morning even better was the fact that I knew that I'd be reunited with my daughter once again. I had missed Sharra much the past few months, and I looked forward to seeing her again. Then I heard a knock on the door.

I turned and Sharra stood before me. My sixteen year old was even more beautiful than I had remembered. I put my arms around her and held her close.

"I missed you, Mom," she said.

"I missed you, too."

"Where is my Father?" she said, letting go.

A good question; I myself had not seen Orkyn since the dawn. "Let's go find him," I said, "It'll give us a chance to explore the castle."

Indeed it would. The castle was huge, and we had barely moved in before Banazar tried to take over the island. The only parts of the castle we had seen so far were the kitchen, two bedrooms, and the dungeons, which of course were not used except for storage.

Our first stop on the castle tour was the dining room. It was big, with beautiful chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The oak tables were hand carved (no doubt by the Ancient Ones), as were the designs on the walls. There was another kitchen off to the side of the dining room, complete with utensils and enough food to last for quite a while. The view from the dining room was truly magnificent! You could see all of the Oak Wood Forest. Sharra and I were both a bit uncomfortable as we left the room. We had been living in a small hut, and we were not used to these kinds of luxuries.

Then we went to the laboratory. It was full of books, potions, and magic spells. Most of the stuff in this room had been covered up. That's not really surprising, this castle had been off limits since the time of the Ancient Ones. Its doors were closed for thousands upon thousands of years. Then Orkyn accidentally found the spell to unlock them. He has yet to tell me where he found it.

"Do you suppose these potions still work?" Sharra was fascinated by what she saw.

"I suppose so," I said. "I've never known magic to have an expiration date. We had better be careful about this room. Don't let anyone even know it is here."

Sharra uncovered more of the shelves. "Some of this stuff looks pretty powerful," she said, "Do you think maybe that's one of the reasons Banazar tried to take over?"

"It's possible," I told her, "but I hate to think that he'd even know about this because...hey! Come look at this closet!"

We opened the closet only to find a suit of armor about Sharra's size. Above the armor was a shelf full of medieval weapons. As the tree people were mainly peaceful folk, we had no need of such things. We closed the closet door and walked out of the room.

The next room we found was the library. It was without a doubt the largest room in the entire castle. Most of the books were in an ancient language that we did not recognize, and some were so old that they crumbled to dust when we took them off the shelves. I can't help but wonder what information or knowledge they might've contained.

Venturing deeper into the catacombs of the library, we came across some beautifully carved oak wood doors. Sharra tried to open them, but they were locked tight. "I wonder what's in there," she said.

"I don't know, but if the Ancient Ones left it locked, there must've been a reason for it. Still, maybe we can find a key."

Searching the archives, we finally found Orkyn. He was sitting at a table reading one of the books he had found. "How can you read that?" I said, "The newest book in here is thousands of years old, and we don't know the language."

"We do now," he replied, "Somehow this magnifying glass I'm holding converts this ancient script to our modern language."

The rest of the day was spent looking around the castle. Orkyn, who had a history of dedicating his free time to the study of the Ancient Ones, was able to explain some of what we saw. But most of it remained a mystery.

Darkness fell on Island Root. Sharra and I were exhausted from the tour and went to sleep. Orkyn spent the night in the library with the magic magnifier reading up on the history of the Ancient Ones.

The next morning, we found Orkyn in the main room studying the armor that Sharra and I had found. It was obvious he had gotten no sleep the night before. "This is no ordinary suit of armor," he said, "It definitely has a few magical properties. According to this book, the suit was designed to be the ultimate weapon against evil.

"It comes equipped with armor of leather, sword of warrior, necklace of power, belt of potions, boots of stealth, cloak of invisibility, and a talisman of passage. It should also have an amulet of protection, key of life, and some sort of ring. But those items all appear to be missing."

"May I try it on, Father?"

"Sure," said Orkyn, "It should just about fit you."

Sharra walked away with the suit and returned some fifteen minutes later. "Well," she said, "How do I look?"

"That visor hides your features," I said, "I'm not sure I'd recognize you."

Sharra laughed. "Now," she said, "Let's see if this really works." She draped the cloak around her and disappeared from view.

I wish I knew more about the Ancient Ones. I'd seen magic in my time, but nothing like this. I turned to Orkyn, but he was fast asleep on the floor. Sharra quietly took off the suit and placed it beside him. We then took the magic magnifier, and headed to the library to learn more about the suit and the Ancient Ones in general. Needless to say, we had no idea what we were looking for. Or even where to begin.

Sharra and I were amazed. The more we read, the more we had to wonder what became of the Ancient Ones. They seemed so wise and peaceful. What could've destroyed them?

Then Sharra found this passage:

"To any who may set their eyes upon this; know the plight of the first ones, that the same fate may not apply to you

"We were a peaceful people. We did not know of war. We did not know of famine. We did not know of disease. We lived on our own planet for many a millennia. Then one day our chief scientist discovered that our sun was to go nova. We needed to find a new world, and we had not long to do it.

"We searched the universe for many years and travelled many light years in search of a new home for our people. We had only begun a routine investigation of the earth when the asteroid collided with our defense systems. The ship was damaged beyond repair, and the search party was forced to colonize on the earth.

"While many of our number died in the crash, many also survived. But alas, our brave and most noble leader was driven insane by guilt, and fled into the trees. Those of us who remained, not wanting to be spotted by the primitive civilization, burrowed out a hollow underground to live our lives free of the decay that cursed the surface dwellers.

"Our people set out to duplicate our natural living conditions as best we could. Island Root was constructed, on which was created the Oak Wood Forest and Castle Base Maple.

"We had no choice except to stay here. We dubbed ourselves the "Tree People," and settled down into our life in exile. We lived peacefully for many, many years. We grew in numbers and strength. We planted gardens and built huts to live in. Then one day disaster struck again.

"While on routine observation of the surface dwellers, one of our number caught a virus, bringing it back to Island Root. Even our finest doctors and technicians could not find a cure. Now we are dying a slow and painful death. Only a few of us are left. As soon as we discovered this virus, we sent many of our people away to Flower Island to avoid contamination. To further protect them, we have locked ourselves inside Castle Base Maple.

"I, Mordeaux, leader of the Tree People, have placed a spell on the castle. It shall not be opened again until this virus is dead.

"However, we are making good use of our quarantine by constructing the suit of Sharra. It has been said that many centuries from now, a young beautiful princess will rise up from the Tree People and begin a peaceful alliance with the surface dwellers. It is for this brave and noble warrior of peace that we create this suit. Should ever need help, all she need do is push the button of the tree on the ta..."

Sharra was speechless. So was I for that matter. We sat looking at that passage for what seemed like an eternity.

"The surface dwellers? An alliance?" Sharra was having trouble taking it all in. I did not blame her. "I was always under the impression that the surface dwellers were evil. Always hurting and killing one another."

"They are. And they do," I told her. "I hate to see people getting hurt, no matter who it is."

"You don't suppose...," Sharra said, "Mom, why did you name me Sharra?"

"Sharra is one of the few words we all know from the language of the Ancient Ones. It means Peace. We wanted to name our daughter Sharra, whose name means Freedom."

"That must be what Mordeaux meant," Sharra replied, "Peace. Both from and with the surface dwellers. But what about the button of the tree on the ta? What is a ta?"

"Let's show it to Orkyn," I told her, "I bet he can figure it out."

"You have a lot of faith in him, don't you, Mother?"

"Yes, I love him very much."

We found Orkyn in the lab doing further study on the armor. He looked over the passage carefully. Then he looked over the passage again. "Hmmm..." He said, "I would say that those two letters are the first part of another word. Why Mordeaux never finished it, that I cannot answer. On a related subject, however, I have found some very interesting things related to this Suit of Sharra."

"Dad," Sharra cut in, "Could you just call it the armor? Calling it the suit of Sharra kind of makes me nervous."

Orkyn looked up at Sharra. "Okay," he finally said, "Armor it is then. Now, as you already know, the cloak of invisibility is just that; a cloak of invisibility. I have also discovered what these other items do. For instance, the armor itself is actually quite strong. You won't be hurt easily while wearing this

"The boots of stealth give the wearer the illusion of silence. You will not be heard while you wear these. Even if you walk on creaky floorboards

"The necklace of power enables flight. You can actually fly with this thing. Well, that's what my research indicates. I personally would have to see it

"This belt of potions is quite interesting as well. Some of these potions are vials of liquid. Others are round pellets. Further research is needed to understand what they all do.

"The sword of warrior isn't really a sword. It's more of a hilt attached to the belt. It's when you remove it from the belt that it becomes a sword." Orkyn removed the hilt, causing a bright, purple blade to appear. "The Ancient Ones claim it will cut through anything. Even darkness." Orkyn replaced the hilt on the belt, and the blade disappeared.

"I'm not at all sure what this talisman of passage does. All I know is that it has five symbols. A raven, a dove, an olive leaf, a star, and a tree. I have not been able to locate in the archives any information on what they all symbolize.

"There is also supposedly an amulet of protection, a key of life, and a ring of some sort. Those items are still missing. I have only been able to find information on the amulet. It seems to generate a force field for the person wearing it. They can put it around anyone or anything. Including themselves. It makes for good protection."

"A force field?" I cut in. "We sure could've used that when we went after the silver tusk."

"Indeed," Orkyn replied.

"Mom," Sharra said, "you never told me; what is the story with that silver tusk?"

Why is so important?"

Orkyn and I exchanged glances. We both knew at that moment that the time had come to tell Sharra the truth. Orkyn and I set her down in the library.

"It must've been around seventeen years ago that it happened. Orkyn, then a prince, was invited to accompany an expedition to the site of the Ancient Ones in the middle of the Oak Wood Forest. The expedition began digging and searching for clues to the the Ancient Ones. Who they were and where they came from. That's when Orkyn uncovered the magic silver tusk.

"Sometime later, he began to explore the forest. As the forest was forbidden back then, he had never been there, and always the curious one, he wanted to get some exploring in.

"Now you have to understand that all this occurred before you were born. Your grandparents ruled, and..."

"Never liked Grandma," Sharra cut in. "She was very cold."

"Yes, Sharra, she was cold. Your Grandmother, Queen Zitara, used to lock Orkyn in the cellar for weeks at a time, and..."

"Why?" Sharra wanted to know. "What did he do?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Zitara was just mean. She raised taxes, and took the people's property when they couldn't pay. She kept Orkyn under lock and key because he did not agree with her decisions."

"Where was Grandfather during all of this? Did he go along with it?"

"What do you remember about your grandfather, Sharra?"

Sharra thought hard. "Not much," she said. "He was never around that often."

"Exactly. One day after Orkyn and I were so happily married, he disappeared. Nobody seems to know what happened to him. Some say he's still alive, but I doubt it.

"Anyway, to get back to the story, Orkyn was kind of lonely with all this going on. He never had any real friends while he was growing up, because Zitara never allowed him out of the house. He walked through the woods wishing he could share his exploring with somebody. That's where I come in."

"You were in the woods?"

"Well, not exactly. See, the tusk that your father found turned out to be some form of magic. It is a powerful weapon activated by strong emotions. Orkyn's loneliness activated the silver tusk, and I was created in the Oak Wood Forest. The living embodiment of Orkyn's dream."

"You mean you're..." Sharra stopped, too stunned to finish.

"Sharra, I'm Tuskan. Just as you are half Tuskan. But you must promise not to tell anyone. I mean anyone."

"I won't," Sharra said softly.

Sharra thought hard. she remembered reading about the Tuskans in school. But up until now, she had thought them to be only legend. There was also, she recalled, something different, even special about the Tuskans. But she just couldn't quite remember what it was.

Alexandra went on. "Orkyn and I talked in the Oak Wood Forest for hours. When night came, we started making our way back to Timber Castle, where he was living at the time. But unknown to us, the expedition had been digging a little too deeply. There was a lava stream running deep under the earth. Even deeper than we are. The expedition dug too deeply and soon lava was everywhere. Orkyn and I were close to Surface Cave, so we ran into it, just barely out running the lava. We were forced to ascend higher and higher into the cave, because the lava poured in, blocking the opening. It looked very bad. The thought crossed our minds that we were going to die. Then finally the lava stopped. Orkyn and I continued to search the cave. High in the catacombs, we found a spring of fresh water. It was very small, so we had to take turns cooling off from the heat the lava generated. We were trapped in that cave for days, weeks, maybe months, I don't really know. We lost track of time after a while.

"How did you survive?"

"It wasn't easy. Surface Cave, as you know, is the only connection between ourselves and the surface world. Since the way home was blocked by lava, the only way to get out of the cave was to go to the surface. We discovered that the cave leads to an abandoned farmhouse. All we had to eat were nectarines from the trees nearby. We toggled our way between the farmhouse and the cave until we were rescued...

(To Be Continued?)