

## Counterparts

*That fine sense of design*; were they the words they used? The possibility she was mistaken held her captive a minute. A mere instant, enough to lower eyes once more to the workbench, where among black metal filings lay her precious burins and gravers – kept very sharp – and Papa’s maul and oldest mallet.

Resting in the palm, that mallet felt like his hand, distracting her from the men speaking behind her. Its weight was meaningful, worthy; its balanced weight like his hand on hers, more than a memory as his spirit guided her use of a graver, wielding the mallet as it ought to be exercised.

‘She has no business down here, you well know, Josiah.’

‘Reuben of West Lea trained her. She takes on his fine sense.’

‘Ha ha – sense of *design*, you say! It helped her father not one jot.’ Again, those words, with such contempt. ‘Reuben of West Lea lies in a poor man’s grave *outside* church grounds, Josiah.’

Even with eyes down and mallet poised to strike, the venom of that man’s words burned. Peter, the guard; full of bile and bitter hatred. But after all, few regarded her and her father well, because they were abandoned. When Mama walked off with another, in the clothes she stood in, shunning even the fact there were two tortoiseshell combs on the mantel, and a little clay pot full of groats and farthings, it was a fateful day for her and Papa. Hurt, stung, they felt slighted by the very heavens. They stopped going to church.

‘The daughter does all Reuben did, at a more rapid pace. Precision is ...’

'Whatever she does, Josiah, changes not the fact she is a woman, down here, in the castle's bowels. No fit place for ... why do you laugh?'

'I laugh, Peter, I laugh.'

She too knew why Josiah showed his teeth and chortled. First the guard showed disdain for her, then suggested the castle's lower levels were no fit place for a woman. Maude smiled. It was not an elegant location, to be sure. The men were foulmouthed and coarse, the air tainted with unmentionable stench. There was damp-laden dust aplenty, and the stink of mildew. It was no wonder the sound of coughing was part and parcel of the fouled air. Sweeping often, to control dust that sifted through the gratings above, was not possible. First there was the matter of time, and the damp nature of the debris, which sometimes made it impossible to shift, and then the way dust rose, and settled again quickly, especially in the drier seasons.

Her skirts took on the smell and colour of grime. Her skin, though pale, became greyish. The nails on both hands resembled those of a man; those of her poor dead father. The work she did was not kind to the skin. The milieu in which she was placed because of her work turned the natural lines around her mouth black. Her age seemed doubled. Her regard of men and their adverse attention grew something like scorn in her heart.

*Design*, design; it was the word she heard.

'And do not, pray, put haughty ideas into her head. It's not design. She merely fulfils what Rueben once did. He was castle locksmith, a mere smith, with nothing in his sphere of concern as lofty as style, or elegance, or even yet design.'

The other man agreed what she did was quotidian, useful, an undertaking without which the castle would develop a weakness, a fault. A capable locksmith was a vital member of the castle staff, equal to that of mapmaker, perhaps, or armourer. Both

those men laboured in their sections of the basement, as did the earl's herald and shield maker. All generated dust and debris of their own; making their particular noises and smells.

Ink, shavings, bent nails, scraps of parchment and skin. They littered the place and rarely cleared their mess. Each thought they were the most essential, each valued themselves above each other. But each sneered at the thought she was valuable.

Valuable; she confirmed it only three days ago, when straightening the shaft of a large key that had met with some accident. After she repaired it, the bit met the wards neatly again. It took a mere quarter-hour. It installed something of what she might call satisfaction in her core. The shank, stem, collar, throating, wards and bit; they were parts she knew. The men could discuss her efficacy with those things, instead of the validity of her presence down there because she wore bonnet and skirt.

She could not mention, for sure, that she had been accosted not a week ago on the middle reaches of the winding stone service staircase by a lady of the house, and that the work in hand now was a secret.

She lost interest in the rumble of the men's conversation, considering how she was, early on Shrove Tuesday, stopped and asked to step into one of the alcoves called cabinets, which occurred at intervals inside the thick walls of the corkscrew staircase. A lady, there? This was a place of servants and workers.

She curtsied in the tight space. 'My lady.'

'What's your name? I seek Maude. Someone told me she – or her father – can provide a key.'

'Only I can help now, my lady, since Papa has ...' she took a breath, '... departed this earth.'

Not a blink, nor a pause to express sympathy. The lady spoke on. 'Ah, you *are* Maude. I'll send a key, girl. Will you make another similar? And ...' she glanced out of the cabinet opening. '... hold your tongue?'

'Similar or identical, my lady?' Perhaps her tongue was in her cheek. Perhaps it was envy. It was how she felt smelling clean hair, seeing sweetness of complexion untainted by iron filings, by dust and filth.

The lady's angry frown scolded. Maude smiled now as she handled the mallet, which fitted in her fist so comfortably; it was as if Papa took her by the hand. She made a key identical to the one brought by a page, who stammered and lisped and said Lady Ermenegilde commanded a second one be forged.

Forged – hah! She did no such thing, being left an arsenal of keys fashioned by her father, with blank bits and shafts of varying lengths and thicknesses. Fitting the right parts together, welding them on straight and true, then filing and rasping the bit until it matched the original; that was craft. That was precision.

Forging – now that was no quick undertaking. True, they had a puddling furnace, and produced pig iron. Reuben, in his day, had set aside a week or more every semester, of heating and pouring, casting, moulding and hammering and shaping, until he had enough parts to fulfil orders sent down from all reaches of the castle. 'For let me tell you,' he would say, 'there's no part of a castle can do without locks, without padlocks, without bolts and catches and escutcheons and bars and latches and closures. And few of those things work without *keys*.' His presence was essential, he took joy in being useful. Without means of safekeeping, the castle could be ransacked in a trice.

Ah – the diameter of a shaft, the importance of the collar, the proportions of bow or grip relative to the bit. How her father Reuben delighted in symmetry and schema,

correct quotients and dimensions of locks and their keys; how she understood there was joy in manufacturing something clever and unique, when she used his dividers and callipers. Mechanics and methods, measurements and means; they worked.

A lock, a key – their marriage was one of security, of bonds and secrecy, of a true match. They were *counterparts*, keeping each other secure, their existence and function truly interdependent. Reuben knew the genuine meaning of that word. There was a match as well between the mind and manual ability of the maker of such artefacts. She looked at her hands. She could do everything Papa taught her, and well. One day, one day, she would say she had an equal mind. But she was yet twenty, and experience was scant.

She took up the metal on which she was working and marvelled at what she could create; a key, which could only fit one lock. What kind of magic was that?

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Turmoil, there was turmoil above. Two young servants thundered down the winding staircase, excited, full of what came to pass. ‘An uproar! Confusion, ha ha!’

‘What is it?’ Peter the guard was not only curious, but full of a kind of twisted malevolent glee. He delighted in the trouble and misfortune of others. ‘What has befallen our betters above?’

‘She’s gone! The ladies in waiting say she’s nowhere to be found.’

‘Who, the mistress? Our Lady Sidonie? How could that be?’

The boys bearing news looked exasperated. They waved hands about, flapping like startled pigeons. ‘No, no, her daughter. It’s Lady Ermenegilde. She has escaped the castle.’

'The daughter! Do you speak the truth? What a to-do!'

Josiah walked up. He looked as if he had just woken; the back of his head still flattened, his eyes bleary. 'You should go up, Peter – take your post. What's all the commotion?' His voice grew stern and hoarse. 'Why are you two down here?'

'Above is anarchy and disarray!'

'There is confusion and alarm like never before – indeed, you'd better come up that staircase too, and face it.' Peter seemed to enjoy a tease, seeing the chief servant had lain too long abed.

Josiah took the forearm of one of the pages. 'Speak! What has happened?'

'You know the young Lady was locked on her floor, the third floor where ceilings are lower and the windows all face west?'

'She *and* her maids. It was wise of the master. She'd no call to take a shine to that visitor from Bruges. She's promised to another. In a month or so, she leaves for Spain, where she will marry the Count of Ronda.'

'Who is a hundred and three!'

'And ugly as sin, they say.'

'But now ... ha ha ... they must find her first.'

It was Peter's turn to wave his hands. He began his ascent to the busy part of the castle, where the uproar was progressing in earnest. Before too long, he sensed he was being saddled with a deal of blame.

He hissed. It had nothing to do with him. How could he be responsible for the flight of the earl's daughter? He had heard she was pining. There was gossip and rumour she was wasting away, dreaming of a Flemish man with no title, no fortune, no property. The gentleman was merely part of a visiting entourage, accompanying a

nobleman on his long way to a ship berthed in Portsmouth. A ship with cargo so precious, a winter voyage to Antwerp was far too hazardous.

'Peter the guard! There you are.' It was his master's voice.

He had a lot of explaining to do, so started to form his thoughts. He bowed.

'I have inspected the door myself, Peter.'

'My lord.' He could not exclaim impatience and annoyance. What, if anything, would the master know about doors and how they could be secured and locked, or broken down, or forced open?

They walked together towards the heavy portal to the wide stairs that led to the third storey, the female partition.

The earl tapped and poked at the guard's upper arm the entire time, attacking him, charging him with questions and accusations. 'You are vested with the duty to keep us all safe. You and your men are our security, our shield. Our assurance against events such as this, Peter. *My daughter is gone.*'

They stopped in front of the studded door.

The guard examined it on either side. 'There are no signs of forced entry or exit, my lord.'

'What does that mean, Peter?'

The guard was silent. Could it be that the earl did not have the wherewithal to reason the obvious logic of what stood before them?

'Peter!' The earl seethed. He made fists and held them on either side of his head. 'What do you see here? How do you know the door is not forced? What does it mean, I say!'

'It means, my lord ... whoever opened this door used a key.'

The guard peered over her shoulder at scatterings of iron filings, well-used tools, and busy hands. 'What d'you make now, Maude?'

Her lower lip was caught between her teeth, her eyes fixed to the detail, the delicacy of what she wrought. She gave no audible reply. Peter would have to make do with a shrug. The order for four leg shackles, each with chain and unique padlock in the Persian tradition, was offensive to her, but with no real ability to choose whether or not she executed commissions from above, she worked diligently.

'Ah!' His frustrated exclamation sent hot breath to the back of her neck. 'Are those shackles I see?'

Still, she did not answer.

'Well, there is a report from one of the villages. There is word of a sighting. When Lady Ermenegilde and her three maids are caught, your artisan effort will restrict their freedom.'

'Indeed, Peter.' She was disgusted, but his words proved inspiring. What a thought. What control. Only she had the power to determine the extent of the ladies' freedom, if indeed they ever returned as captives.

She worked a fine plan, placing into intricate etchings and embossments of the ankle cuffs simple portmanteau locks, with no ward springs. A woman would cunningly deduce how to release the tongue. Keys lodged with the guard would be a mere artifice, a trick. She also worked on something for herself; something so ingenious, so secret, she dared not even think of it herself, lest it show on her face.

'We might wonder what freedom really means, Peter.'



'What? What? You talk of *meanings*? Make good locks, or you'll be the one locked up!' The guard sniggered.

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And indeed, the day came when she was incarcerated in the keep. Not because the ladies returned to be shackled, not because they freed themselves again from her clever shackles, but because they were never seen again. Peter connived for all blame to be placed on her, maker of keys. The unreasonableness, the cruelty, the lies, choked Maude, making her sick to her stomach, drenching her cheeks.

Without as much as a word, the earl dispatched her to confinement with the mere expedient of a pointed finger. She was taken away in silence.

By way of consolation, the keep was cleaner than the working cellar, but she was so deeply anguished to lose her father's tools, which she had to relinquish to some stranger they brought in from afar, she snuffled and wept for two weeks. The guards were convinced she would sicken and die. So they slept, played cards, drank, and lazed about, for she was no flight threat.

Prepared, poised, contemptuous of them, she waited out that fortnight. Months ago, she had reasoned that if she could make a key to open one lock, she could design one to open *all* locks, especially those made by Reuben. Inside her intimate shift, under a drawstring, was her secret; exactly such a cleverly-made key. A fine sense of design, indeed.

Her work and thought and study had paid off – the key that opened all locks, the master key, had worked. It had taken a mere smart twist, a bit of a push forward and tug backward, and the tongue of the cell lock slid back. The same happened with three

subsequent locks on her way out. It was a matter of designing a conjoint counterpart;  
a bit that met all wards.

That night, that dark night, in a matter of a scant hour, she strode silently and  
stealthily free, on the road towards true liberty, mistress of all skills that would have  
her start again.

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