Troubleshooting

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Foreword

Some time before I wrote this story I wrote a science fiction story that I called first “Transmogrifier” and which was revised and published here as “Anomaly”, about a mysterious machine discovered by the crew of Star Trek’s Enterprise on a planet with a medieval military-based culture. Captain Kirk and three others discover that the machine changes sex from male to female and it is irreversible. Of course, complications ensue. The mystery remaining was: What advanced civilization built this machine and why? This story is meant to answer those questions.

The Story

The ancient term is “a Troubleshooter” – somebody sent in to resolve a problem that nobody else can solve, and quite possibly, do it alone.

There are problems and then there are problems. In this case I understand that the ancient phrase is “a Clusterfuck” – something of our doing which with other intervening causes has turned into a major disaster. In the case of Planet Lyssa 4B the end of intelligent life can be considered a disaster, not because it cannot happen, but because we caused it.

It was our doing because we played around with the genetics, or the military division did. We needed soldiers. Soldiers fit for a nitrogen oxygen atmosphere and gravity conditions close to 1G. Soldiers who were intelligent and aggressive, but not overly curious or inclined to think too much. The medieval culture on Lyssa 4B was ideal.

Then the demand came for more and more. I believe that the ancient term is “Cannon fodder”. That meant no girls to be born on Lyssa 4B. Only boys. And that continued to be the case after the need had gone. A planet of men, with only women beyond childbearing in residence when I was sent there.

Everybody understands the “Prime Directive” comprised in Starfleet General Order 1 – do not interfere in the internal and natural development of alien civilizations, in particular those below the threshold of a certain benchmark of development. There are those that say that the real Prime Directive is contained in the Preamble to those orders, where it is said that our objective is “to explore new worlds”. How can you explore without affecting the people of those new worlds.

Anyway, we are military, and military people know that we need to work within the rules where we can, and where we cannot have at least a plausible justification for our illegal actions. The start of that is to limit our impact, and the end of it is to put right what we put wrong.

Are you with me so far?

We figured that the genetic modifications would not be 100% successful. When are they ever? “Nature always finds a way” it has been said. There would be women. We were only interested in the surplus of males. To leave them on the planet would cause those all too familiar consequences of gender imbalance where there are too many men – violence and disruption. But as I have said, when the last of the women on the planet ceased to be capable of child-bearing, I was called in.

Our initial approach was to consider reconditioning the older women to bear children, but there were not enough, and the age would cause a problem in any event. We then considered importin alien females, or even clones of human women to create a stock of women from scratch, but this would involve DNA foreign to the planet and compromise species integrity.

We decided that we would need to use the DNA of the existing men on the planet. For anybody who understands basic biology there are some principles that remain always true – the egg is female and the sperm is male; and in humanoid biology the egg carries the majority of DNA beyond characteristics, so the default form is female. In all humanoids we have discovered that what makes a create male is just an add on. It is something that can be excised – simply lopped off with an appropriate targeted radiation that could act upon the whole body in an instant. After that it is simply a case of having physical form readjust, preferably at an accelerated rate.

We had the technology. We could modify embryos to produce cannon fodder, and we could also modify surviving fodder into child-bearing women. It is advanced technology, but it existed. It would enable us to turn existing men into fecund and birth-capable women.

By the time that we face the problem there were no children, so we had to use adults. I think that it was assumed that long term children would be chosen to have their sex changed, but as every military person should know, things do not turn out as you would like unless you make them.

As it happened we were talking about a large machine, so it really suited somebody who could walk through the beams for a period on their own, and only once. It was not designed for carrying infants as the initial application was for adults.

So why me? Well, I was ready to do it. I was appalled by what had been done and I was keen to put things right. Some had suggested: “Let them die. There are primates on that planet that might evolve into intelligent life over time.” Perhaps I am prepared to manipulate the non-interference rule, but I cannot accept that a whole humanoid species should cease to exist by our mistake.

My view was: We did this; Humanity did this. We needed to put it right. So, I volunteered.

I am a troubleshooter. People like me get in amongst it and we get dirty. I was ready for that. I had to study these people, learn their languages, wear their clothes and learn to use their tools. Troubleshooting is all about learning to adapt, and to do that on the spot. In our modern technological world life does not seem to have these challenges anymore. I thrive on them.

We had to find a place to install the technology, and we would need to work on it undetected. We decided that the best place was to place the device underground, and we could make use of caverns. All we had to do was tractor the equipment down from orbit on a moonless night, cutting into the rock on the side facing a lake so that all spoil could be dumped there. The emission array could be concealed behind a hanging wall of the cavern and still penetrate inert rock. With our gravitation excavators we could easily improve the passage through from one cave entrance to the other. We ran tests. We were ready to go live.

It was my job to introduce a miracle to the people of this planet. You need to be careful with miracles. People can react badly and get destructive. And you need to avoid becoming the object of worship. It can happen. The miracle should be a thing – like “The Magic Grotto” – a place where men are turned into women.

I was made my way to the village nearest to the cave, on the other side of the lake. I cleared a path with the dematerializing tool and then buried it with the digging tool that had been made to appear like old technology. I had a weapon and a communicator concealed inside it, but otherwise it was a farming implement. My clothing appeared of the times but had some armor, and I carried a sack with some ceramics of the period made in our workshop. I would be a trader out looking for clays and selling pots.

This was a primitive civilization, so I expected some aggression. These humanoids are so similar to us that some slight oddities in my appearance could be easily ignored. What I carried with me was of value, and rather than kill me and take it, they saw the opportunity for trade. People gathered around with goods to offer.

But it was then that I told them that I had met a young woman on the road, headed in the other direction. They were amazed. The youngest women in their village were in their fifties, and they had heard of nobody younger than theirs for many years. I explained that she had said that she came from a magic cave. She had walked in a man, and walked out the other side a woman. They were spellbound.

They asked me to show them this cave. So far so good.

I was given food to eat. It was animal-based protein that I did my best to simulate that I found delicious. Then they offer to keep my sack with them while we walked back to our installation. I told them that as this was place was underground I would retain with me my tool.

There was a large crowd in our party, or different ages, all curious to witness magic. Some were wary of me, wondering if this was a trick and an ambush awaited. They were armed and watchful, but the way was clear.

We came to the entrance and a vigorous discussion took place. It was agreed that at least one person should venture in, but it was better that there be two. They should be two of courage, but then if it were true that there was magic here, those men would be lost, and replaced by women.

There was some discussion as to who within their number might be happy to become women for the benefit of their tribe, as they were in desperate need of children. It all got very agitated. I suppose that I should not have been surprised. You assume that community survival will be the dominating consideration, but there are many issues. If a man becomes a woman then her will need to take a man inside himself, so the ones to go in should be of the many passive men serving to satisfy sexual demands. Would older men be rendered young? Should the youngest members of the party become the women? What of those men who wanted to enjoy a woman and would be denied that y becoming women?

One of them turned to me and told me that I should go in. But I said that I was not one of their number, so changing my sex would be on no advantage to them. Besides, to truly confirm things it should be one of them. I did not want to appear reluctant so as to hint at danger, but I knew that the change would work on me as well, and I did not wish to become a woman.

That was when one of their number drew his sword and announced the solution to their problem. I would pick one of them and enter the cavern with that person.

I had placed my tool against a rock while we talked. I meant to keep it close to hand, but as things developed it was out of reach. I would have been cut to pieces if I went for it, even if it was of any use with such a large number watching me. This is what being a troubleshooter is all about – not shooting when you get into trouble but coping when you cannot shoot.

You have to assess the crowd that surrounds you. They were essential a savage people. There was no prospect of rationalizing or moralizing where logic and morals were still not fully developed. My best hope was that by choosing the person that invited the choice, he might back down. So, I pointed to him.

I could see that he was shaken, but I could also see all the others looking at him. I wondered if now was the time to try again to retrieve my tool and the weapon it concealed, but with what intent. We had gone to all of this trouble to conceal our technology and put right what we had done on this planet. To use the power I had would mean to kill everybody there, which I could easily do.

I decided against that. I might have told myself that the change could be reversed, although lopping off a piece of DNA is easy – building a whole new chromosome is still beyond us. But I decided to walk into the cave with the man who had confronted me.

I knew that we should push on and come out the other side, so he led but I pressed him forward into the light at the other end. We could see the crowd slightly above us and my companion called out to them, as he did his voice cracking like a teenager but in reverse. I could not see the changes in myself but I saw some in him – his beard fell out and I some new hair appeared to sprout in the bald areas of his scalp. It would take time for the transition to be complete, but the others had seen enough to know that the miracle was true.

As I returned with them to the village to retrieve my belongings, I could feel the internal changes and the tenderness in my chest. I explained that I had to return to my village to tell my own people about the magic cave. I said that I would recommend that up to half of our menfolk should be selected to undergo the change. There was more discussion among them as to how this should be decided, but by then I could slip away.

I communicated with my team in orbit, without explanation, and they beamed me up. I asked to go to sickbay for diagnostics, which confirmed that my chromosomes were female. The changes that followed were gradual but not slow. The solution that we had designed was meant to operate quickly and to produce fully functioning females within months rather than years.

We stayed on in orbit as we had intended. We observed changes in the society on the planet by remote sensing and from a distance and watched the creation of other new women and all that this sudden change brought about. The marvel of it all engaged all of us. I barely had time to consider the changes in myself, including mental changes, even as I observed them on Planet Lyssa 4B.

Men jostled and even fought for the attentions of these new females. It seemed hardly surprising since this was a fairly violent society and procreation was an imperative. It seemed harder to explain why members of my own team should become testy in competing for my attentions.

Still, we had to be practical and that meant sharing the only woman onboard – me. If you have not noticed, I am a practical person. The process that we had designed and built had taken its course and I was now a woman.

At that time there was no undoing what had been done, but I understand that things are different now. When we returned from Planet Lyssa 4B the genetic engineers had found a way. But I no longer care. The truth is that I quite like being a woman.

Women may enjoy moments of polyandry like I did circling that planet, but the inner urgings call for a choice. Those longings are powerful as I discovered. As a woman I needed to become a mother. One of my team is now my husband and we have two children as is permitted.

I am still a troubleshooter. I adapt and learn to cope in times of trouble. My husband says that is what makes me a great mother. Small things like that make me the happiest woman in the galaxy.

The End

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