**Gender Fluid**

Marion was sitting in her rose garden with the last, late blooming plants scenting the air. Tea was served in a silver pot – Earl Grey, imported from Earth along with lemons that had been stasis sealed to be fresh even after travelling light years across the galaxy.

Aineytta de Lœngbǽrrow was with her, enjoying the citrus fragrance of the tea and a selection of daintily cut sandwiches.

But there were things Marion needed to talk about that spoiled the pleasant scene.

Trying to find a way to open the subject was the difficult thing. Fortunately, Aineytta knew full well what was bothering her daughter-in-law. She broached the subject herself.

“Kristoph tells me you are still disturbed by some of the things that happened while you were away, particularly General Charro’s regeneration.”

“Yes,” Marion responded, grateful that the subject was broached so easily. “All the time I have lived here on Gallifrey... nobody ever told me that you can regenerate into the opposite gender.”

“It was an oversight rather than any attempt to deceive you,” Aineytta assured her. “Do not think badly of any of us.”

“Yes... but…”

“Especially don’t think badly of Kristoph. He certainly didn’t mean any deceit.”

“I…” Marion started to deny it, but she couldn’t. The idea that Kristoph had deliberately kept from her something she would have found disturbing had crossed her mind more than once. That was why she had not talked to him about it, but invited her in-laws to tea on a day when he was away in the Red Desert teaching orientation skills to a select group of youngsters.

“It is called an ‘arbitrary gene’,” Aineytta explained. “In some individuals regeneration can result in gender change. It is… unusual, but not impossible.”

“How unusual?” Marion asked.

“I know of only two other living people on the planet who have regenerated as General Charro did. It is that rare. Three in a generation as long-lived as ours.”

“And… are those people married?”

“No,” Aineytta admitted. “But one of them was a Brother of Mount Lœng. When he regenerated as a young woman it was necessary for her to leave the mountain.”

“And what happened to her?” Marion asked, wondering how that individual had felt about being expelled from the company of friends and colleagues. Was it done kindly, and regrettably, or was it hard and cruel, with former brothers turning their backs on her?

“She joined the Sisterhood of the Plains and rose to be their greatest Sister Superior, a noted philosopher and poet,” Aineytta explained.

“All right,” Marion conceded. “That sounds as if she was happy enough. But what if…”

She paused, framing her question carefully.

“But what if a Time Lord who has a wife regenerates as a woman. What happens to their marriage? I mean… on Earth… at least in some countries… couples can be two women or two men, and they love each other just the same. But I have never seen such couples on Gallifrey.”

“That would be a difficulty,” Aineytta admitted, though as if it was a mere theoretical possibility. “The Alliance of Unity is clearly stated to be between a man and a woman. I don’t know what would happen in those circumstances. I really don’t.”

Aineytta was clearly and rather distressingly non-plussed. She had obviously never thought about that, before. Marion wondered why. She wondered, too, why there wasn’t some legal provision for a marriage in the case of such a regeneration.

“I have read all of the books in Kristoph’s personal library,” she said. “All about Gallifreyan physiology, all about regeneration and everything. The idea that a Time Lord could become a Time Lady in a regeneration was not mentioned.”

“They would still be a Time Lord,” Aineytta said gently. “The term describes one with the power over time, not their gender.”

“That’s just words. You know what I mean. Why is it not mentioned in any of the books?”

“I… suppose because we… as a people… find the idea more than a little disturbing. We ARE a patriarchal society. Male children are valued above females. Men have better career prospects. The idea that a man might regenerate into a woman or vice versa, does sit oddly with that patriarchy. We have… ignored... the possibility that it could happen… for generation after generation.”

“That’s a bit… short-sighted, surely?” Marion said.

“Yes, it is,” Aineytta admitted. “And perhaps there may come a time when we will have to address that failing, but it has not come to it, yet.”

“Oh, it has,” said a warm voice with a faintest touch of humour in it. Marion turned to see her father-in-law, the esteemed Chrístõ de Lún de Lœngbærrow, fondly known by his wife and a few others as ‘Mooney’. He had diplomatically taken a walk in the garden while the women talked, but now he sat in a spare seat and reached for the teapot. He poured a cup, adding a lemon slice and a spoonful of sugar.

“This Earth tea has much to commend it,” he said after savouring the taste. “Though the infusions you make up are excellent, too, my dear.” He added the last to his wife and smiled indulgently.

“You… were saying something about….” Marion prompted gently.

“Yes, my dear,” he answered. “The complications of Time Lord marriage.”

“There has surely not been a situation where a married Time Lord has changed gender, thus invalidating his Alliance of Unity?” Aineytta insisted.

“Don’t be so sure,” her husband told her. “Do you remember Alexi and Sissero Ghan?”

“They worked with you at the observatory when we were courting. I think they were guests at our Alliance. Later they took an assignment at the Ganymede observation platform. I suppose they are working there still.”

“They are. I believe they have two children born on the platform who have never even seen Gallifrey. But the point is, you knew them as man and wife.”

“Sissero was always so elegant. She was one of the women I was daunted by when I was coming to terms with my elevation to your social class.”

“Then nobody ever told you that Sissero used to be a man? When I first knew them both, when I was a very junior astronomer, they were a same-gender couple. They had an apartment next to the observatory and lived as any two people did, except that they shared the household duties more equitably than most. Then there was an accident involving a fragment of a neutron star and Sissero was forced to regenerate. Everyone was surprised when he became a she. I think Alexi was the most surprised… and the most delighted. If anything they were closer than ever before… a very happily united couple.”

“Yes… but…” Marion was still not satisfied. “I mean… that’s….”

She was utterly lost for words to ask the question that most bothered her mind.

“I’m not done, yet,” Mooney told her. “You see that wasn’t the first regeneration these two had gone through. Three hundred years before I knew them, Alexi had suffered a catastrophe and regenerated….”

Marion looked at her father-in-law knowing he was about to say something interesting. There was a crinkling smile on his face that belied his dignified position in Time Lord society.

“Well, before the accident, Alexi was the only female astronomer on Gallifrey.”

“Oh….” Marion thought about that for a few moments. “So she became a he… and then… her husband… became his wife… Or… or am I confused?”

“If you are, so am I,” Aineytta admitted.

“I don’t think I can make it plainer without a diagram,” Mooney answered. “Just think about it a bit longer. But the real point is that, no matter what permutation of gender, the two of them were happily in love. That was never in doubt. And surely that’s all that matters in the end?”

“Well… yes, it is,” Marion admitted. “Of course, it is. But… I mean… what if....”

“What if Kristoph regenerated into a woman?” Mooney said. He hadn’t read her mind, but her face as she tried to ask the question. “You would love him still?”

“Well… yes. But… Well, it would make it very difficult for us to have the male heir everyone is so insistent that we must have… even though it now appears that a baby girl would be just as good if she could become a man in later life.”

“After eleven regenerations I don’t think Kristoph has the ‘arbitrary gene’,” Mooney assured her. “I think it would have manifested itself by now. But I do wonder if that’s why he never told you about this aspect of our Time Lord life. He might have thought you would fret about it.”

“And I have,” Marion admitted. “I always had this idea… the possibility that he could go off somewhere… maybe taking the Camp boys on a hike in the desert as he has today… and after some accident he might come home… as somebody completely different. I had always known there was a possibility. But the idea that the ‘somebody’ might be a woman just never occurred to me until... until I saw it happen with General Charro. But it you really don’t think it could affect our marriage….”

“I don’t,” Mooney assured her. “So no more worrying about that. And don’t blame Kristoph for not filling you in on our greatest Time Lord secret. That’s the nature of secrets.”

“Yes, of course,” Marion agreed. She was relieved. It all made so much more sense, now.

But how long did she need to live on Gallifrey before she would understand it and its people fully?

That was a question with no answer.