**Ex-Presidents Day-Part II**

As the second fanfare died away the only person who appeared was a young Chancellery Guard who ran in through the Great Doors, his breathless cry loud in the silent Panopticon.

"They're…. Gone."

For half a second Marion's thoughts turned to the scene near the end of the Sound of Music when the Von Trapp family had escaped from the concert venue. But then her mind snapped back to the scene in front of her and even before the young Guard explained himself, she knew it was the Presidents, all of them, who were gone. She felt Talitha's hand, cold and clammy with fear, grip hers. A hand on her shoulder was Aineytta, pale-faced and worried as she looked around at her fellow First Ladies.

There was a hubbub of consternation on the Panopticon floor, but here there was only stunned silence. The ladies all looked at each other in bewilderment. What could it possibly mean? Where were their husbands? How could they be gone from the ante-room where they were waiting for their part in the ceremony?

Then that silence was broken by the arrival of a phalanx of Chancellery Guards who marched into the lounge and ranged themselves around the walls, bastic rifles aimed at the startled. The Guard Captain in his shining breastplate and plumed helmet marched to the video-screen and turned down the sound before addressing Talitha, as wife of the sitting President.

"Madame, we are here to escort you and the other Ladies to a safe place until the current situation is resolved," he said.

Talitha looked at him for a long moment, then shook her head, slowly.

"No.” she said. "None of us are going anywhere with the Chancellery Guard. We are all wives of Lord High Presidents. Only the Presidential Guard may escort us anywhere. I, personally, am going nowhere until I hear from some higher authority than you, Ximon Koscieda, about what, exactly, the ‘current situation’ is. And in any case, neither of the Reidluum Ladies are leaving this room without some dignity accorded to them. They are not going to be bundled away like laundry."

Marion felt Talitha's hand in hers again. It was hot and dry now after such a brave speech. She trembled a little but stood her ground facing up to a man who seemed too much like a bully trying to make her do something she didn't want to do.

"Koscieda?" Marion queried in a low voice before realising there was no reason to speak quietly. Even this Guard Captain was less important than any of the ladies in the gallery. “Related to the former President?”

“A scion of that family,” said the elder lady Reidluum. “I believe I remember him – a wayward boy who paid little attention to his tutors and failed to graduate from the Academy. I am surprised he was able to pass the Chancellery Guard examinations. He certainly never learnt any manners. He ought to have removed his helmet in our presence.”

“Be quiet,” the Guard Captain snapped, all pretence of courtesy gone. “If you will not come with my men, then you will remain here under guard until our work is done. Now, sit down and be quiet, woman.”

“I will sit down after I have brought water to the Reidluum ladies,” Talitha answered, moving towards the refreshment table. “And then you can explain what is going on in the Citadel at this time.”

“It is quite simple,” the Guard Captain answered. At a nod from him the soldiers around the lounge threw off their scarlet Chancellery Guard cloaks to reveal black uniforms that immediately reminded Marion of neo-nazis. Their behaviour was not helping dispel such an idea.

“Is that the Koscieda family crest they wear?” Alanna Stǐllhǽvęn demanded. “Such arrogance.”

Captain Koscieda didn’t respond to that at all. When he spoke again, he clearly had a prepared speech he was determined to deliver in the face of the derision from the Ladies.

“A New Order for Gallifrey,” he said. “The restoration of the Koscieda name to the Presidency and an end to the soft, liberal thinking of the self-satisfied Oldblood elite and the upstart demands of the Caretaker underclass – trade unionism, private enterprise, wage rises… all given in to by the ineffective and effete High Council.”

Marion thought it was an odd kind of revolution that condemned both the top and bottom of society at the same time. A revolution of the middle ground?

Others had their own thoughts about the matter.

“A Koscieda as Lord High President? Not you, surely?” Lady Reidluum scoffed. Ximon Koscieda swung around as if to hit the elderly woman but was blocked by Bellira Gyes who deflected his arm with Lady Andrissa’s walking stick which she had grasped on impulse and wielded in a surprisingly strong grasp.

“How dare you attempt to strike ANY woman, let alone one who is elderly and infirm,” Bellira demanded of him. She looked around at the men who were following the Captain. Most of them looked shocked and uncertain. Hitting old ladies was not something they joined this New Order to do, but at a grunted command from Koscieda they renewed their resolve.

“Lower those guns,” Talitha Dúccesci ordered in defiance of the Captain. “If we are to be confined here, or anywhere else, then so be it. But the courtesies will be observed. We will NOT be quiet and we will not sit still. We will avail ourselves of refreshments, and somebody can turn the sound up on that video screen so that we may hear what is being said in the Panopticon.”

Much had been going on down on the Panopticon floor. More armed men, all now wearing the black with the Koscieda crest, had surrounded the Dais and were holding Gold Usher, the Premier Cardinal and Chancellor hostage as well as the assembled Lords. There was still no sign of any of the former Presidents, or, indeed, the present incumbent.

Then the great doors were swung open and a woman strode onto the Panopticon floor. She was a striking figure, tall and slender, dressed all in black leather. Her hair was cut severely short. She looked as if a long whip would have completed her ensemble, but she made do with a jet black swagger stick.

“I am Jocina Koscieda,” she announced, her voice carrying even without the air-microphones that normally provided enhancement in the huge chamber. “I am here to inform you that the Lord High President has resigned.”

There was a gestalt gasp around the Panopticon. In the lounge there was an echo of that shock, followed by unanimous disbelief.

“Malika would not resign,” Talitha was adamant. And nobody disputed her. “There had to be pressure put on him. And who exactly is supposed to replace him?”

“She will,” Ximon Koscieda answered.

“Who is she?” Marion asked. “Your mother?”

“My grandmother,” Koscieda replied. “And you will learn to respect her.” He looked closely at Marion and laughed coldly. “At least, the others will. You, the alien, will doubtless be deported very shortly, so it will not matter to you. There will be no watering of the blood in the New Order.”

“Oh, not that old pure blood chestnut,” Marion answered. Koscieda, again, looked as if she might strike a woman, but Aineytta and Lady Gyes both stood to protect her.

“You forget your manners again, Ximon Koscieda,” the Elder Lady de Lœngbǽrrow told him.

“I forget nothing,” he replied. “I remember that YOU, when all is said and done, are one of the inferior Caretaker class. You, too, will be removed from the New Order. Gallifrey under the rule of Jocina Koscieda will not tolerate such chaotic behaviour. Caretakers will learn their place – as servants.”

“You are a foolish man with ideas that have been discredited throughout the galaxy again and again,” Bellira Gyes told him. “Ask Lady de Lœngbǽrrow what happened to such regimes when they attempted control of her world.”

Marion could certainly have done so if she had been asked, but Ximon Koscieda had little inclination to listen to anyone and certainly not an ‘alien’ of no account to the New Order.

Marion couldn’t stop thinking that New Order were a rock band from the nineteen-eighties whose music she really wasn’t all that keen on.

Meanwhile, in the Panopticon, Jocina Koscieda sat on the throne of Rassilon and demanded that she should be invested as Lord High President, ordering the Chancellor to begin the ceremony at once.

Gold Usher pointed out that the Sash and Coronet of Rassilon must be brought for such an investiture.

“They are being brought as we speak,” Jocina Koscieda answered. “They were relinquished by the former President.”

That caused a commotion in the Panopticon, while in the lounge Talitha Dúccesci denied that her husband would do such a thing without coercion. She maintained that position even when two of the would-be dictator’s men walked into the Panopticon bringing the two greatest relics of Rassilon, both essential to the making of a Lord High President.

“Even with the regalia of investiture, we cannot proceed without the proper formalities,” the Premier Cardinal pointed out. “First of all, if President Dúccesci is not to be present, a document confirming his resignation is required.”

“Naturally,” Jocina Koscieda responded, nodding to one of her soldiers who brought a parchment document rolled into a scroll. She handed it to the Premier Cardinal who slowly unrolled it and equally slowly read it aloud.

Talitha was at first dismayed to hear the formal declaration of resignation. Then she allowed herself a little hope. There was a curious expression on the Premier Cardinal’s face as he continued speaking.

“As required by law the signatures of six witnesses, all of impeccable authority and high status are affixed to this document,” he said. “The six are as follows….”

He took a deep breath before continuing.

“…Lord Byron, the Duke of Wellington, Lord Voldemort, the Count of Monte Christo, Admiral Horatio Nelson and Lord Kitchener, each bearing witness to the signature of The Patrician of Ankh-Morepork, wherever in the cosmos that might be, who is named as the retiring Lord High President.”

Talitha Dúccesci smiled softly. Marion de Lœngbǽrrow couldn’t control herself and laughed into a cushion, congratulating herself on how the Earth literature in her free libraries had been disseminated by the retired Presidents.

“In short, this declaration is invalid,” the Premier Cardinal proclaimed. “You, madam, cannot make any claim to the Presidency in such circumstances.”

“I will have them ALL executed for this defiance,” Jocina Koscieda declared. “And their wives, too. But first, kill these three foolish old men who have tried to stand in my way.”

There were screams and cries of consternation in the Panopticon. But there were too many guns for anyone to attempt a resistance. Jocina Koscieda’s men turned their weapons on the three unarmed and helpless senior members of the high council and opened fire.

Or tried to.

The guns sputtered noisily, but no projectile came from the barrels. Jocina Koscieda cried out in frustration and ordered them to fire again.

Still nothing happened. When she ordered the rest of her men to open fire on the rank and file in their seats around the Panopticon nothing happened except that several men and even some women of the Council rose from their places and fought the suddenly vulnerable soldiers with their bare hands.

“The guns have been disabled, somehow,” Aineytta said, watching the screen in astonishment.

“So they have,” Talitha noted and swung her arm around to punch Ximon Koscieda square on the jaw. Meanwhile, Bellira Gyes who was still holding Lady Andrissa’s walking stick brought two men to their knees with one whack. Even Mia Reidluum managed to run down one man with her wheelchair as the ladies of Gallifrey fought back as tenaciously as their friends on the Panopticon floor.

“Kristoph!” Marion looked up from helping Talitha to detain Ximon Koscieda and saw both her husband and her father-in-law enter the room followed by enough Presidential Guards to establish order.

“Is everyone…” Talitha began, suddenly showing how scared she must have been all along. “Is Malika safe?”

“He’s fine,” Kristoph assured her as he made Ximon Koscieda fully secure with unbreakable but lightweight plastic cuffs. He stood from that task and embraced Marion. “The crisis, such as it is, is over. Look….”

Talitha gasped with relief as she saw Malika on the Dais beside the Premier Cardinal and Gold Usher. Both were examining the unmoving body of Jocina Koscieda, slumped on the Throne of Rassilon. She was wearing the Sash and Coronet, having obviously seized them in the confusion.

“The Coronet is no mere decoration,” Kristoph said. “It is a conduit to the minds of hundreds of past Lord High Presidents and thousands of other Time Lord minds stored in the Matrix. Her mind was rejected. If she isn’t dead she will be seriously brain-damaged.”

“I hope she is dead, then,” Marion said. “The other option is too horrible. But… what happened to you and the other Presidents? Where were you all?”

“Oh, just a long forgotten sub-basement under the Citadel,” he explained. “Some traitor, one of Madame Koscieda’s followers, disabled the anti-transmat fields within the Citadel so that we were easily taken from the robing room. We were all right, don’t worry. There were a lot of guns and threats and some high-handed political ideology thrown about.”

Marion thought he might be lying about the level of violence and coercion they were subjected to, but it mattered little, now.

“How did you all escape?” asked Aineytta as she tried to hug her husband and son at once, Her question was one everyone wanted to ask.

“The Koscieda traitors forgot that one of the ex-Presidents of Gallifrey was once the Celestial Intervention Agency’s most able men,” the senior Lord de Lœngbǽrrow answered with a wide smile and a proud glance at his son.

“And they made the mistake of leaving only four guards to look after us frail old men,” Kristoph added. “It was not difficult to overpower them. On the way back to the Panopticon to put a stop to the shortest coup in galactic history I stopped at the old Celestial Intervention Agency’s bunker directly under the communications tower. A wide-ranging static field disabling the type of bastic rifles they were using put paid to their efforts. After that it was all academic.”

“It will take far longer than the Koscieda coup lasted to mount an investigation into how she was able to gather so many followers for her cause without anyone knowing about it,” the elder Lord de Lœngbǽrrow mused. “I'm glad I’m retired from politics and won’t be on the panel.”

“I agree,” Aineytta told him.

“I just have one more question right now,” Marion said. “Malika chose to sign himself as Patricia of Ankh-Morepork. So which of the other names did you two choose? I don’t know how I feel about being related to Lord Voldemort.”

“I am afraid that may have to remove a state secret,” Kristoph answered her with an inscrutable smile.