

SCENE 24

By Chris Underwood

"Alright then, Peter," Milan said nonchalantly, checking over the PADD she'd been handed. "This looks good. Chances are this will look great for you on the personnel reviews."

"Great!" said Peter, a little too enthusiastically. But he had every right to be happy.

"Alright, then, you're— What the...?" said Milan, wiping illusory grit from her eyes.

Down the corridor, she saw a woman with a sallow complexion, tinged with the lightest hint of green, a result of the copper in her blood, approaching them. She was carrying a medium-sized black handbag, with a Star Fleet seal, on her arm. She walked up the corridor with a confident stride, but on approach she seemed to shrink away from the Avenger's Chief of Operations. Without much of a word, and even less eye contact, the Vulcan went past and quickly disappeared from sight.

Milan, agog, just stood there, her mouth still open, looking hard moments after, disbelieving.

"I gotta go, Peter," she said to the air, dropped the PADD absently, and began pacing after the woman.

The bridge was a bustle of activity when Lauren Milan stepped off the turbo-lift. Crewmembers could remember, years later, that it was one of the rare times they'd ever seen the resident shapeshifter actually slapping her approximate temporal lobe, obviously trying to jar something loose.

Milan paused, gazed around the bridge, then stepped back into the lift and through it into the small mess area aft starboard, and found Captain Maldonado sitting and well on his way to his second cup of morning coffee. She saw a black bag lying on the table opposite his position. It was strikingly similar to the one she had just imagined in the corridor a few decks below.

"Captain," said Milan, just starting in without a moment's wait, "have you seen Keahi? I need to put in for some downtime."

"Haven't seen her since she checked out this morning," said Maldonado absently.

"Checked out?" caught Milan, sitting down opposite the captain, near where the bag lay on the table.

"Hmm?" said Maldonado, studying the contents of his PADD, until he felt the pressure of a hand on his forearm.

"Oh!" Carlos broke his concentration, tucking the PADD into the cushion he was sitting on. "Sorry, new mission itinerary," he explained. "Quite interesting really."

Milan coughed, and at that prompt, Carlos recalled the question. Milan repeated, "About Keahi 'Checking out'?"

"Ohhhh. Yes, Commander Uhma has accepted another position within the Fleet."

"What?"

"Yes, apparently 'Fleet is of the opinion that she's far too talented to remain an Executive Officer, and I agree with them."

Milan was stone silent.

"As of this morning, her orders came in. She's been given command of the Ascendant. To tell the truth, she was the only one of us really comfortable there, anyway, and with her skills, no doubt she'll be giving SI their credit's worth."

"She's been reassigned!" Milan exploded. "Who was going to tell me!?"

"Calm down, Commander," Carlos said sternly, rising from his chair to meet her. "Like I said, it happened this morning, 0300 hours. She thought it best not to wake everyone. Besides, Star Fleet Intel was pretty adamant that she get going right away."

"She was one of my best friends!" said Milan, obviously disturbed. "She didn't even say good-bye!"

"They didn't give her much time, Lauren," Carlos spoke softly, catching her arm gently. "By now the Ascendant is already underway, going God knows where, doing God knows what. I'm sure she'll contact you when she can."

"Okay," said Milan, taking it hard, but taking it.

"Look on the bright side though, our new XO isn't a stranger."

Milan's stomach began to churn.

"Then that bag; she...she..."

"Yep, Se'ele told me you'd seen her on her way in," said Carlos.

Milan fainted.

1100 hours, Sickbay, Deck 7, Jan 19, 2302

"Hey, there's our Chief of Operations," said Dr. Reilly, her voice reassuring as she roused Milan from her fainting spell. "How are you feeling, Lauren?"

"What happened?" asked Lauren groggily.

"You fainted," said Reilly, picking up a scanner. "Hit your head, too, on the way down. Luckily, though, your physiology being what it is, you'll be fine. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was in the bridge mess area, talking with the Captain."

"Go on."

"He... He said..." Milan searched her brain. "He said that Keahi got a command and..." Milan searched deeper. "And..."

"Well, I'm sure it'll come back to you," said Reilly, putting down the scanner, satisfied with her use of it. "In the meantime, you have a visitor."

"Visitor?"

"Yes, V-i-s-i-t-o-r, Visitor."

"Lauren, may I present our new Executive Officer, Commander—"

Milan fainted again.

It was 2300 hours before Milan woke again. The lights were dim and her eyes were dry, so she kept them closed for a few moments. As her mental faculties re-emerged, she felt the

sensation of a hand laying on hers. It was so light and delicate that it took a few moments to register.

She opened her eyes after that, blinking away the dryness within them and turned her head to her left to see who it was. It was the fourth time today, whichever day it was, she had been confronted with what she only now guessed to be reality. Sitting there, in an off-duty smock, was her old friend, albeit grudgingly at first, Se'ele.

It was her hand that covered Lauren's and it was odd, she thought, that Se'ele was even here at all. The last time she had seen Se'ele was in a much different state on a lone and distant moon several hundred light-years from their present position. Se'ele was frightening then, disturbed beyond measure and destroyed on the inside.

At least that's what the initial psychiatric report told her about her mental stability after her rescue. Se'ele was kept isolated from the rest of the crew, her screams permeating the bulkheads so much that Lt. Savanya had to install soundproofing on all sides of the padded room they'd had to build for her.

Se'ele disturbed Milan then, as much as they had become friends in the short time they'd been serving together. The sight of her friend, a Vulcan—admittedly part Rihannsu—completely out of her mind, was more than Milan could bear. The fact that they had pushed her psi-talents during her captivity didn't help much either; anyone that got near her got a firsthand account of whatever part of the atrocity she was reliving at the time.

But now, she seemed like a broken doll.

Lauren rolled onto her side on the bio bed and watched her for several minutes, silently assuring herself that the screaming wasn't going to start all over again.

Lauren got down from the bio-bed and placed Se'ele's hand back under the blanket someone had lain over her sometime earlier.

Leaning over her, Milan noticed that some of the scarring from the piercings had healed, but some of the scars were still there. Those awful piercings. She brushed aside a lock of Se'ele's hair, and saw the nick she'd gotten when they'd had to cut Se'ele's hair in the iso-room. If they hadn't, she'd have succeeded in strangling herself with it. The nick was still there. Lauren had done it, accidentally, with the shears. It was something she hadn't still forgiven herself for.

The body heat, or perhaps the gentle touch, roused Se'ele from her slumber, and that hand shot up and grabbed Lauren's with the force of a vise. Se'ele's eyes slid open and rotated up to look at the person standing over her. No other muscle even flinched.

Lauren's face was panicked, at first, but then her body remembered it could shapeshift. As soon as her arm was free, Se'ele seemed to ...smile? This was an unnerving expression for a sane Vulcan, but for Se'ele, at this time, it was positively wicked. At that moment, Se'ele lunged at Lauren—

Lauren realized a scant few seconds later that she wasn't, in fact, under attack, but under a hug. The biggest, hardest, most lung-crushing (if she had lungs per se) hug she'd ever endured. Lauren couldn't be sure, but she thought she heard a whisper in her ear saying 'Thank You' over and over again for several seconds.

And for the first time, with a tear welling up in her eye and gladness in her heart, she answered, "You're welcome."

Morning came quickly and Lauren hadn't remembered how she'd gotten back into her bio-bed. She remembered the hug and had she bruisable ribs, they would have been, but she didn't remember anything after that. But she noticed the empty chair next to her, and the doctors and nurses coming on duty.

Milan checked the chronometer on the wall and found it was shortly before Alpha Shift, about 0730, and she was famished. She quickly waved down a nurse and asked for the CMO.

Reilly weaved her way through some entanglements and arrived at Milan's bio-bed a few minutes later. Her uniform was crisp and her short red hair was shining in the halo from the overhead lamp.

"My, we've had a busy night, haven't we?" said Reilly, pressing the areas where Milan's ribs would've been. "Does this hurt?"

Milan had a twinge of pain, but it was tolerable.

"Funny thing. You being a shapeshifter and all, we didn't expect you to be so easily damageable, but then you have to remember to shapeshift when things lunge at you," Ann Marie kidded.

"Thanks for the concern," Milan commented. "Now can I go? I have a shift to get to."

"Actually, you have breakfast to get to. By order of the XO, in her quarters."

"Oh, really?" Lauren hadn't expected this.

"Really, and it's all official-like, so I'd change clothes and hop to."

"Great, just what I need," said Milan, morphing a uniform into place, stray locks of her hair reweaving themselves into position.

Ann Marie shivered. "Two years and that's still freaky."

"Glad to freak you, Doctor. Now if you'll excuse me."

"No problem, Commander," Ann Marie said, removing the blankets from the biobed.

"Oh, and Commander," said Reilly, "there's a Command Staff meeting at 0900. Don't be late."

0750 Hours, Quarters Module S005A1, Deck 5, Jan 20, 2302

Don't be late? Don't be late? What does she think is going on around here anyway? Milan pressed the door chime at the XO's quarters. *Geez, just because someone stays with me all day while I'm in sickbay and hugs the stuffing out of me in the middle of the night, she thinks that—*

The doors opened and Milan's jaw dropped. The quarters were made over in pinks and purples and she saw Rose petals, *real or synthesized?* scattered all over the floor. She stepped inside and the doors closed behind her.

"Hello?" stammered Milan... "Olly-Olly-X-O-Free?"

"Hi," said a voice as the lights dimmed to a setting that could only be termed 'romantic'. "Thank you for coming."

I'm tremendously overdressed. "No problem, just following orders," Milan said.

"You are correct, you are overdressed," said Se'ele, coming out of a side area carrying a translucent bottle of wine.

Elegant gown, excellent purple sheen. Inexpensive but tastefully—

"Please change and sit," said Se'ele, indicating a seat at a glass table in the other side area.

The table was set up for two and held a candle in a simple stand and a Bentsii Rose, renowned for their ability to change color in the face of mood, in a small single-flower vase. A carafe of orange juice and a small tray of scones vied for space on either side of the table, setting the breakfast mood.

Uh-oh, thought Milan, my orders say breakfast, the lighting says 'date', and the atmosphere... what is that?

"Aqua-DiGio," said Se'ele, her voice with an unusual lilt. *Is she...? No... can't be.*

"Vulcan to Lauren?" said Se'ele. "Please, have a seat."

Milan morphed into something a little more in line with the occasion and, puzzled, took her seat.

"I suppose you're wondering why I've ordered you here," Se'ele began, pouring the wine, *Peach Chardonnay*, into a tulip glass, handing it to Lauren, then pouring another for herself on a nearby shelf, exchanging the bottle for a small tray of strawberries, *Fresh?*, and cream.

"Well, yes, actually." *Probably thought I was going to cut and run after the hug last night.*

Setting the tray on the table, Se'ele took her glass and then her seat opposite Lauren. She took a sip and replaced the glass on the table. "Something like that."

"Something like what?" said Milan, suddenly cluing in to something nebulous.

"Thinking that you were going to stay as far away from me as you could for the foreseeable future," Se'ele recounted, "Something like **that**."

"How did you," *How did she know?* "know I was thinking that?"

"It is not hard to figure out," said Se'ele, "considering the events of the last time we met. And no, I am not 'putting the moves on you'," she continued, guessing at Lauren's body-language. "I have been in cold and sterile environments for the last year and a half, where the only color is gray, and honestly, I need something warmer."

Milan was at a loss. "I, ah... I—"

"Shh. Eat something. I know you like scones and if wine is not to your liking, please have some orange juice."

"I'm not so much of a wine person in the morning."

"It goes exceptionally well with the strawberries and cream," Se'ele countered, picking up a plump succulent strawberry. She dipped it in the cream and brought it to her lips and ate it slowly, all the while her eyes telling a very different story to Lauren than what she'd just heard come out of Se'ele's—

Stop looking, Lauren!, she thought to herself, immediately swinging her eyes away from Se'ele.

"I'm sure you're right on —"

"The peach flavor keeps the strawberries from overwhelming the tongue, so that each berry can be 'experienced' from start", Se'ele dipped another, "to finish."

Why is she still looking at me! Lauren thought to herself, starting to fidget in her approximation of a white satin nightgown.

"Coffee, actually, is more my forté," Lauren managed to get out. "It's my own true love."

"Well then," said Se'ele, popping the strawberry into her mouth, then rising. She swallowed, and then went to a synthesizer. She called across the room, "Would that be Raktajino or Swiss Mocha?"

0900 Hours. Senior Officer's Lounge, Deck 3

"Thanks for coming, everyone," said Carlos Maldonado Jr. to the assembled division chiefs.

"It's been a good three years now that I've been in command of the Avenger and in that time I've grown, and you've grown. We've all come a long way and rolled with the changes. Today marks another one of those changes. For the last year and a half, you all got to know and respect Commander Keahi Uhma as our Executive Officer. Commander Uhma has been an excellent officer and an excellent XO, and she will be missed."

The assembled officers all began the requisite chatter.

"All right, people," said Carlos, raising his hands, calling for quiet. "Commander Uhma was reassigned to the Ascendant yesterday morning at 0300 hours as her new Captain. She had to move quickly and I'm sure she'll be in touch when she can. In the meantime, as you all know, this means, we're getting, or rather, have gotten a new Executive Officer.

"XOs seem to be leaving this ship under mysterious circumstances lately, which makes me happy to report that we're getting one back at the very least. So it's with a certain amount of joy and relief that Star Fleet surprised me with our replacement at 0500 that same morning.

"We've managed to keep it quiet fairly easily since most of the crew has been on leave, but it's going to get out in just a minute and I think it's going to be a good transition for the ship and a great choice for the crew."

"Pardon me, Captain," said Ann Marie Reilly. "Motion to get on with it?"

"And the motion is carried, Doctor.

"Everyone welcome back Avenger's past and current Executive Officer, Commander Se'ele!"

Se'ele stepped from the Deck 2 foyer and stepped down the starboard-side stairwell and into full view of the assembled officers. She was there, as she had always been, in her maroon uniform, with a black ankle-length skirt, carrying a PADD in hand. This time, the crew noticed she seemed to become flushed, and her other hand clenched and unclenched nervously.

Commander Se'ele stepped down the short flight of stairs and into the throng of welcome-back well-wishers. Se'ele wasn't good

in groups and crowds these days, even nearly two years after her ordeal, but she'd get used to it over time, she was told. After things settled down, she went and took her seat to the right of the Captain.

When everyone else sat down, the Captain coughed, obviously indicating he expected Se'ele to have said something. Reluctantly, she stood, and addressed the group.

"Thank you for the warm welcome." She cleared her throat. "It has been a long time since I have been able to stand in front of anyone for any length of time, so please bear with me."

Se'ele tapped her PADD, apparently checking it for something to read, never-mind the fact if anyone checked they'd have seen it was blank. "I have heard Commander Uhma was a valuable member of the crew and I'm glad that she was an effective replacement. I am sure you are all used to the way she did things. This will change. Please come to me if you have any difficulties with these changes. I am not as open to, or as good at, reading people as I formerly was.

"Finally," she tapped her PADD again, "I wish to thank those of you here who rescued me nearly two years ago. It is not often that I have had the pleasure of being considered important enough to have life and limb risked for. Even in the face of the aftermath, I thank the medical staff for taking care of me in my darkest hours, and" she took a breath and exhaled heavily, "I apologize for any problems which may have been sustained from my... my... 'damage'."

1400 Hours. Office of the Executive Officer. Deck 2

"Knock, knock," came the voice after the doors slid apart.

"Lauren!" Se'ele smiled. "Good to see you." Se'ele got up, rounded the desk, and sat on its edge. She offered her hands to Milan.

Milan took them, but more out of support than what it seemed Se'ele had in mind. Milan gripped them and then put them back in Se'ele's lap as she put a little distance between Se'ele and herself.

Se'ele looked at her hands, then back at Milan and the smile, full of warmth, began to slowly fade.

Milan saw the expression, one she'd seen a thousand times before on a thousand different people. They were at least fully sane and hadn't just fought their way back from a meat grinder. Every second that passed, brought on the uneasy silence, in the face of which Lauren just couldn't continue.

"I," she stuttered, "I.. I was worried about you."

There was a long moment of silence. Milan could tell, like a sixth sense, that something was amiss. When Se'ele's eyes began to get green and puffy, she knew the 'waterworks' were on their way.

Se'ele nodded, and Milan took her cue to leave.

On her way out, however, Se'ele's voice caught her by the sleeve.

"Commander?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for cutting my hair."

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