

Shadows

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Rating: PG / P6

Summary: The waking world and the shadows of the night were two individual parts of her life. She had never intended them to merge.

Disclaimer: Belongs all to Paramount, unfortunately...

Author's Note: I was re-watching Tuvix and the way Kathryn seemed to look towards her bedroom after Kes had left kinda jumped at me...

More than once in her life she had thought that the hiss of a door sounded like the malicious snicker of a hideous beast, a beast whose belly she was living in; the only thing to keep her alive in the emptiness of space. It were the times when she felt left, alone, and close to buckling under the burden weighing on her. And when the doors closed behind her after she had stepped into her quarters, or behind someone else after they had stepped out, the sound announced the seal of her solitude.

She was alone. Again.

As a captain, her obligation was the greater good. No decision, no order was for the benefit of one, but as many as possible. That was what she had learned; what command lessons had taught her, written into her very flesh and blood. Taking care of the individual was usually something the captain's senior staff or the department heads were responsible for; ideally even a counselor. But not the captain.

On her ship, however, she wasn't only the captain; she was so much more. Far away from everyone and everything they knew, limiting herself to the responsibilities of a commanding officer would have been terribly wrong. In this unknown part of the universe she wasn't just the leader of a crew, of colleagues. It was a community they had here, people who shared their lives with each other, their joys and sorrows, whether they wanted to or not. And she was part of it, standing amidst them as just another link of the chain that was holding everything together - the people, the ship, the whole journey.

She was there for them, offering an open ear to everyone who needed it, who came to her. Most kept a respectful distance to their captain, simply out of habit - but would they come to her, she would never send them away. And how could she? Even if she can ever close to only think about *trying* to reject them, her guilt would remind her that this was not a matter of choice.

Being more than just a captain drained her, pulled at her strength so much it became hard to handle. Thoughts of home, of Earth, her mother and sister, of Mark - they occasionally helped. But they were only thoughts. And thoughts alone didn't fill the void that sometimes threatened to consume her.

She had always been the one to hold on to rules and regulations, believing that their existence served a purpose. The past months had her faith waver. She felt tired; incredibly tired. False hopes, betrayals by people they had thought were with them on their mission, their journey, shared their goal. The fear of losing everything, of failing, of making unforgivable mistakes.

And suddenly, what she had once trusted to be her answer in every situation deserted her. What else was there when she lost her home and family, and her guide that was supposed to lead her?

The steps she took back towards the arch that led to her bedroom were slow and hesitant; and when she reached the doorway, she stopped.

Dark eyes stared back at her from her bed, eyes filled with sadness - but also with unwavering devotion. She knew he considered himself to be more than just the man she slept with to ease her longing; her physical desires, her

need for someone to hold her, for a warm body accompanying her at night. For something to feel and to believe in. She also knew that he nevertheless didn't expect anything from her.

He wasn't pushing, he wasn't forcing her to make a decision. He was just waiting, always there, a stronghold for her command and her being equally. Without him, she may have broken more than once in the past two years. But the man who had been accused to be a terrorist was a skilled advisor, and the rock shielding her from crashing waves, and slowly but surely she felt him becoming more important to her than any of her even most trusted friends and comrades had ever been.

What they shared in the shades of the night had never been meant to be. Entering into an intimate relationship with a member of her crew, her first officer no less, was against her own principles, as was it against the rules she had been faithful to for so long. But what they had was also so vital - to her, her soul, her ability to function.

It was another life she engaged in whenever they were together. As vocal as they were in their daily business, the friendship they shared and showed during daylight hours, there was a, in every sense of the word, silent understanding when they met outside their work, in the privacy of their quarters, and seldom anything more than careful whispers, sighs and small moans were to be heard then, the wordlessness a pretense of something forbidden not being as real as they felt and knew it was.

Tonight, however, she felt the need to break their unspoken yet mutual agreement to let silence cover a relationship they were not meant to have, but both needed too desperately to give up.

"I'm sorry." Her words were barely audible even to her own ears. It weren't the words he needed to hear and understand though, for he read in her face what she was so tentative to vocalize and therefore acknowledge.

"Don't be," he simply replied. He shifted then, just the slightest bit; no overt gesture, no open invitation, just the hint of a movement that asked her to return to his side - and showed her that he didn't reproach her for what he doubtlessly had heard only minutes before; while she herself, for reasons she wasn't yet able to explain, felt as if she had just betrayed him. "I understand."

She shrugged off her wrapper, folded it neatly and placed on a nearby chair, buying herself some time to sort her thoughts, tell herself again why this wasn't wrong, before she returned to the bed and slipped beneath the covers. He pulled her close and she let him, pressed her body against his and rested her head on his bare chest. She heard his heartbeat and the steady rhythm soothed her mind a bit; as did his fingers gently combing through the thick tresses of her hair and massaging her aching head.

As of now, he was only a substitute for a life and a love lost; for someone she maybe never saw again. She knew it, and he knew it, and still they were both strangely okay with it. There had been this kind of spark between them from the first moment on, the moment they'd met almost two years ago, and had circumstances been different, they could be anywhere now - literally and figuratively.

But they weren't.

They were supposed to be enemies and had become friends. She should have thrown him in the brig or at least confined him to quarters, but instead she had made him her first officer; her right hand and the one she needed to rely on and trust most. They had never been meant to exchange more than a few necessary sentences; now they shared a well-working command relationship, and a constantly growing friendship. They enjoyed each other's company, and exchanged not only countless words every day, but also more and more private details, secrets even.

There wasn't much else to ask for - and neither of them did, not at the moment.

Still, she felt this desire - hers as well as his - for a shared closeness they hadn't found yet; they denied themselves because of their fear of getting too close, crossing too many barriers; becoming too vulnerable. They were friends

during the day, and it was a healthy and beneficial bond; and what happened in the shadows of the dark hours was nothing that was to be talked about. For some reason, it worked this way.

"I don't think you should give up hope either." His voice was a low rumble, something she felt more than she heard it. She looked up at him, again into those dark eyes, full of gentleness and wisdom. There was no anger or jealousy, not even hidden in the depths of the black orbs she had become so used to staring into during their secret meetings; just honesty; an almost kind generosity granting her feelings the freedom they needed to come to terms with her situation and the thought that she maybe never saw her family, and especially her fiancé again.

She laid her head back down then, her ear again over his heart, and snuggled a bit closer to him, into his arms that were wrapped her, and relished in the soft firmness of his body, the strength and yet tenderness he expressed in everything he did, including their intimate encounters.

His words touched her deeply, and made her insides clench at the same time. She knew she didn't deserve someone as understanding as him; someone who accepted that he was merely an instrument to sooth this ache inside her, to fill her inner void, and still never gave her the feeling that their encounters were just about sex. He showed an amount of affection towards her she knew was too great to be still excusable or explainable with their situation and their unique relationship, and it pained her to think that she would hurt him, sooner or later, with her inability to make a commitment, with her heart being weak because her mind used up all her strength.

One day, she would have to let go. One day, she would need to leave her life on Earth - and Mark - behind; when hopes diminished and reality caught up with them. The chances of making it home soon were too small to cling to. Their life was on Voyager now, in the Delta Quadrant, and even though they would make every effort to return before their calculated seventy-five years, they had to live in the present. Not in a past that was unchangeable, and not in a future that was unpredictable. If they wasted the present now, there was nothing that would ever bring it back to them.

She knew all too well that the here and now was too precious to let it pass.

And deep inside her she hoped, and if only for his sake, that she one day her heart would be strong enough to accept that.

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