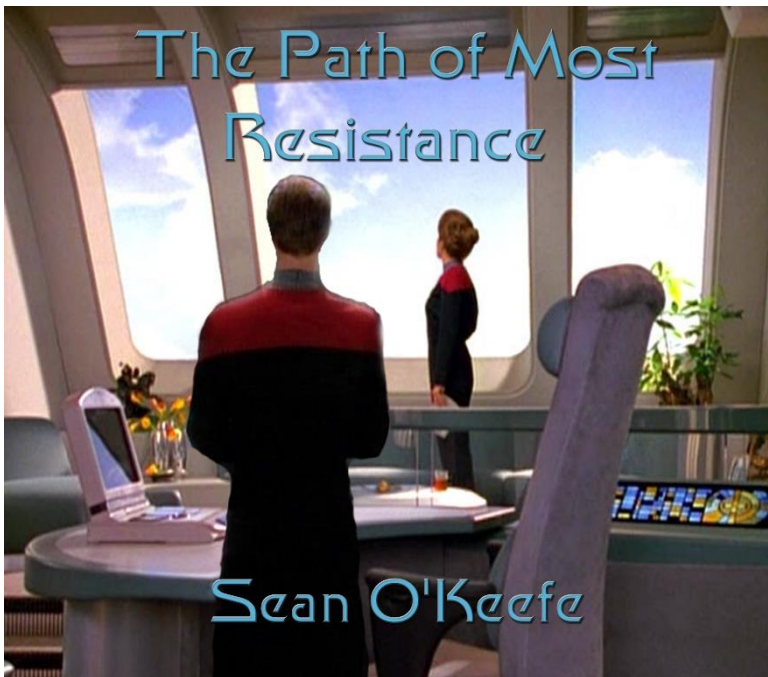


The Path of Most Resistance

Sean O'Keefe



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Captain's Personal Log, U.S.S. Billings, Stardate 48305.3.

As I draw near to my retirement, I find my choice of successor aboard ship to be a simple matter. Kate Janeway has been an excellent XO and Starfleet would be mad to pass her up to command the old girl. However, I've just received a communique that will muddy the waters a bit. I wonder how she will take it.

Captain Seamus McBride looked up as the door chime to his ready room sounded. Kate was nothing if not punctual, he thought. A glance at the wall chronometer confirmed it. Oh eight hundred hours precisely.

"Come in," he commanded. For all his years in space surrounded by people of all sorts, Seamus had never lost his native, Irish accent, nor his taste for Guinness. That was one thing he was looking forward to in retirement. Plenty of time for fishing in the river near his family home and chinwags with the boys back home.

The door whooshed aside, and Kate stepped into the room. She was all business with her red hair tied up in the bun he had always detested, but the woman was a stickler for

regulations. "What can I do for you, Captain?" She stood at ease before his desk. Given they had served together for four years, she still did so regardless of how many times he had asked her not to.

For a split-second Seamus wondered if Janeway was truly ready for the job. Her all-business attitude could be a problem for his crew – a group he had come to think of as family. However, he was not a man given to second-guessing himself. No, his mind was made, but what Kate would choose to do was yet to be seen.

"Take a seat, Commander," McBride said with a flourish.

Kate seemed almost hesitant, but quickly took the offered chair and sat expectantly, back ramrod straight.

Not wanting to waste time, Seamus said: "I'll get right to it, Kate. As you're probably aware, I'm approaching retirement age and I've decided to go out on a high. With our recent successes regarding the Tholian treaty, I think it would be a great time to put myself out to pasture before I start going off like old milk."

Janeway seemed as if she was going to disagree with him but decided instead to hold her silence. She wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I've already communicated with Starfleet my intention to retire tomorrow when we get back to Earth."

Janeway started. The *Ambassador*-class ship they commanded was due for a re-fit; she was going to be in dry-dock for six weeks while several systems were upgraded. Kate had considered going home to visit her family. However, if the Captain was about to say next what she expected those plans just went straight out the window. McBride was silent for a

moment, and she felt compelled to ask: "Have you considered a successor, Sir?"

Polite as always, he thought. Lead someone to the desired answer. Don't bludgeon it out of them if you don't have to. "I have, Commander. Starfleet still has the final say, but I've put my recommendation in for you to take over the centre seat of the *Billings*."

Kate was delighted. Her eyes sparkled and she could not help but break out in a broad grin. Her dream of a ship of her own was soon becoming a reality! Her train of thought was interrupted by the last word people want to hear at moments like these.

"However," Seamus said, pausing to collect his thoughts. "You've been given a rare opportunity most Commanders never get."

Confused, Janeway uttered an uncertain: "And that is?"

McBride broke out into a wide grin. "A *choice*, Commander." He pushed a padd across his desk for her to read. He summarised its contents. "You've been offered the new *Intrepid*-class *U.S.S. Voyager*. She's small, fast and highly manoeuvrable with a crew of about 140." In his mind there was very little choice. The *Billings* was by far the more impressive with a crew five times the size along with five times the bulk.

Kate was stunned. This was the last thing she expected. Even considering the odd conversation she had with Mark that morning. Her mind went back to the subspace call she had received shortly after she got out of the shower.

Dressed in one of her favourite silk gowns, Kathryn had answered the call from her fiancé on her private comm panel in her quarters. He usually called every other day after breakfast

when she was within real-time communication range. He had started the conversation with the usual banter about life on Earth without her and what their dogs had been up to. He had mentioned one of them was probably pregnant.

“You’ll have to take her to the Vet to confirm that,” she said, delighted their family was about to be extended.

Mark nodded. Then his face changed as he added: “You know, the strangest thing happened this morning. I was having breakfast with my mother” – their time zones were out by five hours – “and, well, you know how she reads tea leaves.”

Kate rolled her eyes. She didn’t believe in superstitions, but she didn’t try to make people who did uncomfortable, either. Janeway was a pure scientist and didn’t have much time for the supernatural. “What did the all-powerful English Breakfast tea leaves reveal?” she asked with a cheeky smile.

At that, her fiancé took on a haunted look. “Actually, what she said was creepy. She told me that you’re going to face a choice today. She said, and I quote: If you choose ambition, you’ll be a happy at-home mother. If you choose loyalty, you’ll lose everyone you love but change the world as we know it.”

As much as she didn’t want to admit it, Kate was a little shaken. She had given him a nice smile, blown him a kiss and wished him well for the day before signing off. Yet, as the day went on, she couldn’t keep the conversation out of her mind.

Now, here she was, two hours later, remembering the same conversation and suddenly wanting more information. Did taking command of the *Billings* represent ambition? How did loyalty fit into this? Why was she worrying about this stupid prophecy at all?

Seamus could see she was considering the situation, checking all the options in her head. It was clear to him that she wanted to know more. Was she seriously considering taking command of the *Voyager*? “Just so you know, I’ve been read in on the *Voyager*’s first mission. Starfleet Command called me and asked me if you were ready for it, as it’s a little delicate.”

“How so?”

McBride thought she deserved the whole truth. “As you know, Mister Tuvok is currently under cover for Starfleet Intelligence since we loaned him to them three months ago.” Seamus was well aware the Vulcan and Kate were good friends. “He’s been transferred to the *Voyager* crew since she’s been tasked with supporting his mission and I hear his contact has let him know. Anyhow, the Maquis ship he was serving on went missing in the Badlands yesterday. They need someone to take command of her to mount a rescue mission.”

Janeway’s blood went cold. She had personal experience in the Badlands. It was not a place you wanted to take a ship into – *any* ship. She looked down at the padd in her hands and brought up the specs on the *Intrepid*-class. Bio-neural circuitry? She did some quick arithmetic and realised the ship had the capability of navigating the dangerous plasma storms and eddies. Whatever mess Tuvok had gotten himself into, this ship was just the one to get him out of it.

She sat back and blew a lock of hair out of her eyes that had come loose. It was always happening to her, even though she tried to keep her unruly hair in check. “I see why they chose *Voyager* for this mission,” she said cryptically.

Seamus noted she didn’t ask *why her*? “They need someone fast. You’re available and up for promotion. You’re

familiar with Tuvok and his situation. It's an ideal fit – as far as Starfleet is concerned."

Kathryn narrowed her eyes a little at *his* unspoken message. "But you think I'd be better suited here," she said slowly.

The Captain was glad she was beginning to see things his way. "That's right. You might be familiar with Tuvok, but you also know the entire crew of the *Billings*. They know you. They look up to you. They trust you."

His XO was beginning to see where this was going. It wasn't just her career he was thinking of. For the crew to lose both the Captain and XO in one fell swoop could be devastating for morale. Regardless of her feelings of loyalty for Tuvok, as he would remind her, the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the one. Never mind the extra prestige that came from commanding an *Ambassador*-class ship. They were only one step short of a *Galaxy*-class, like the *Enterprise*. Indeed, the previous ship to bear that name had been an *Ambassador*.

She looked down at the padd once more and touched the tab for the orders regarding *Voyager's* mission. They seemed pretty clear cut, but there had been an addendum that caught her attention. There was the suggestion that one Tom Paris, a convicted criminal serving time at the New Zealand Penal Colony, could be of some assistance as he knew the commander of the Maquis vessel. Instinctively, she knew this Paris was Admiral Owen Paris' wayward son. She had heard the stories – that he had joined the Maquis. Sure enough, the notes had him serving time for just such an offence.

Her mind went back to the first ship she served on, the *Al-Batani*. Owen Paris had been her captain and she had come

on board as a lowly Lieutenant JG. However, he had seen promise in her (he had revealed to her one day over a beer) and taken her under his wing. Under his tutelage, she had gone through trial after trial, but each mission she had succeeded in had only made her a better officer. When the opportunity had come for her to advance her career off the ship, he had selflessly written a reference giving her his highest recommendation. She wouldn't be where she was in Starfleet if it hadn't been for him.

Now she saw a chance to repay that debt by trying to rehabilitate his son. It was a longshot, but she had learned that few things were impossible to a determined mind.

She also owed her friend, Tuvok, many times over.

Kathryn looked up, her choice clear, the path obvious. While the *Billings* and all that came with it were a beautiful enticement, there was a huge streak of loyalty within her that would not let her rest otherwise.

Looking across the desk at her, Captain Seamus McBride realised she had made her mind up and, judging from the look on her face, he was going to be disappointed. All the same, a part of him was glad. She was the type of person who was willing to sacrifice her own career for the sake of a friend. Perhaps she really *was* ready for command after all. He stood up and offered her his hand. "Congratulations, Captain," he said in all sincerity.

Janeway stood and took it gratefully. "Thank you, sir. It has been an honour serving with you."

Seamus smiled. "That honour was all mine, Kate. You'll make a fine Captain and *Voyager* couldn't do better. I'll let Starfleet know your decision."

As her mind started whirling on what to do next, McBride shooed her out of his ready room. "Go and start packing. You're

going to need to leave as soon as we arrive at Starbase One. I happen to know *Voyager* is waiting for you there.”

Kate walked out of his office, feeling like she was floating on air.

Thirty hours later *Captain* Kathryn Janeway of the *U.S.S. Voyager* was cruising at high warp *en route* for Deep Space Nine where she would meet the last of this ship’s new crew and to meet Tom Paris, who hadn’t been ready for transport before she had to leave orbit. She had been delighted to hear he would join them on the mission, but she could see she had her work cut out with him. A rebel at heart, maybe, but so much like his father in many ways. Of course, she would never say that to his face.

The last two days had gone by in such a blur that only now did she have a chance to stop and think. She remembered the conversation she’d had with Mark, and she realised there may have been some truth to his mother’s prophecy after all. She had chosen loyalty over ambition for sure, and the thought of it possibly taking her away from all that she loved stabbed at her heart. However, for Kathryn Elizabeth Janeway, it was the only choice to make.