

## Gestures of Love

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## Gestures of Love

by [InterstellarSiren](#)

### Summary

Cris finds ways to stay connected and show affection to the woman he adores as she completes her time at Starfleet Academy.

Summer sessions at Starfleet Academy were always rigorous and stressful for the cadets and staff. For some, it was a chance to get ahead. For others, it was the difference between a step toward their future career and the biggest stumbling block they would ever experience. This was the time of year that Cristobal Rios had decided he enjoyed the most. The library bustled with dedicated students, but his section remained quiet, leaving him to focus on his research. When he wasn't working on correlations between the duty that Starfleet assigned their cadets and complications such as Post-Traumatic Dysphoria, Cris retreated to a small alcove above the library which he had converted into a greenhouse with permission from the head of the Academy.

Cris didn't know what had possessed him to attempt to grow roses here, but whatever the reason, his flowers were prospering. The bushes had become a routine for him; a bit of stability in the chaos he still wrestled with as he tried to find his place now that he was no longer commissioned by Starfleet. He'd been offered higher positions in the Academy because of his former rank, but he'd politely declined every single one.

"Teaching's not my thing. I never really wanted to come back here in the first place, but as long as I can keep to myself, I can deal with it. Believe me, these kids won't listen to me. I remember how I was when I was a cadet; wide-eyed and full of hope and ideals. I don't want to ruin that for someone who may have a better experience than I did." Instead, he had thrown himself into his research and accepted the fact that this was his path now. Away from Starfleet but never quite out of it in full, he consoled himself with the knowledge that he might help someone with his work. If that was true, and if he could come one step closer to preventing another tragedy like the *ibn Majid*, then it would all be worth it.

He'd never anticipated that he might meet someone. But the previous fall, his world had been turned upside down by an unlikely friendship with a cadet. He hadn't meant to get so close to her, but there was something magnetic about the way she carried herself. She had helped him pull him out of the melancholy that had taken over. The sadness that controlled his every waking moment began to fade when he was close to her. She was the reason he'd started poring over the books on gardening. He loved the idea of sending her into a field of flowers grown entirely for her. When he met her, she'd been close to finishing. Now, he needed a way to make certain she didn't forget him wherever she landed.

Learning to grow flowers was the last thing he had expected from his time at the Academy. Keeping the small garden on the roof had proved calming. He'd told someone that some aches had no balm, but that wasn't entirely true. For some, you only needed to find the right one. Now that he believed he had found her, the question changed. How could he show her that his feelings were real? That was where the roses came in. Rios knew he would need something or someone to help him stay connected to his reality instead of thinking about the past. So he'd found some books on gardening.

He wasn't sure why roses made sense to him. Perhaps it was the idea of beauty coming out of something that could be harsh or dangerous. If something good could come of a thorny plant, then who was to say that his time in Starfleet had been wasted? Beauty could come from these complicated vines, so why couldn't it be a thing in his life as well?

*I guess I just need the time. If I can start seeing the good in all of this again, it'll be worth it. Then, maybe I can prove myself worthy of her, before she graduates the Academy and leaves me behind forever. Weeks passed, and with tender care, the roses flourished. He couldn't wait to present them to the woman who had made him see things in a whole new light— this was something he hadn't felt in far too long. It was almost beyond memory, but when he needed it the image was there.*

These roses were special, a deep, dark crimson that reminded him of the pain and loneliness that had been his existence before he gave in to love. He spent all of his spare time in the garden, enduring the prick of thorns and waving off injuries to surprise her on the last day of her finals. Crimson also reminded him of blood— blood he would be willing to spill if it meant keeping her safe, though he knew she was about to go off on adventures in space without him.

The day before her last exam prior to going home for the semester, they met in the library as they had every day for weeks. Erin tried not to be suspicious, but she knew Cris. He was always trying to soothe her anxiety about the command training program or help her study. Anything he could do to support her was fair game for him.

“You know, I don’t think I can share you with anyone today. I have just the thing to relax you. Come up to the roof with me. I want to do something different. Got something you need to see.”

“I can’t, Cris. I’m exhausted, I—.” Erin shook her head, shoulders trembling as she moved. Her tests had been more taxing than she expected, and she was certain she’d failed every one. She wanted to focus, but her mind spun with every scenario and detail she had memorized and the thousand ways each one could turn deadly.

“Just come with me. Please. You need a break.” With a smile, he led her to the roof of the Academy library. He’d made sure to cover her eyes once they had ascended the steps; the last thing he needed was to become too excited and give any of it away.

“What exactly are you doing, Commander?”

“I’m helping you take a breather. You’ll drop if you don’t.” Erin gave him a wolfish grin.

“Tired as I feel, might do that anyway; ‘specially if you let me go.”

“I would never. Not even on orders.” Catching himself in a moment of abandon, Cris winced. What was it about this woman that made him think about defying orders? He wanted to do much more than that when she was close to him. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d felt that way. He’d been out in the cold for too long already when the position at the Academy opened up. Now, he was fighting to stay afloat amid the tempest of memory and poor decisions that haunted his every move.

*I thought being alone was good for me, but something has changed. I don’t want it anymore. If I don’t start living again, soon there will be nothing left for me. If she leaves and I don’t take this chance now, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.*

When he moved his hands, Erin gasped quietly at the sight before her. A sea of roses covered the library’s roof in varying colors, but most of them were shades of wine and currant.

“Cris, what is—.”

“I’ve been growing these since I met you. Ancient horticulture was a bitch to learn, but you’re worth it. Now that you’re close to finishing your exams, I can finally say this. I love you, Erin. I’ve never met a woman who carries herself with the same confidence that you do. You’ll make a fine Starfleet captain someday, and I would have been proud to serve under you.”

“You’ve come a long way from ‘You’re one of those love sick fools who believes it conquers everything’. I dare say you sound like one yourself.”

“I was hurt, blustering. I had to tell myself not to think about you that way—in a romantic way, I mean—as soon as I saw you. I was too afraid of dragging you down, too. Afraid that you’d wind up a cynic like me, and I didn’t want that for you. I hope you know how amazing you are, and I hope you know I’m willing to wait for you. As long as it takes.”

“Well, you won’t have to wait long. It’s summer now. I’m headed back home to spend some time with my family. If you’re serious, then come with me. I want you to meet them, and my friends, too.” Cris cocked an eyebrow, leaning over his resource desk as he eyed her intently. Was she serious? What would her family say when she showed up with a man who was easily fifteen years her senior, and introduced him as the man she’d been seeing?

*You’re jumping ahead of yourself, Cris. You’re not seeing her yet. But maybe, by the end of the summer, you could be. This could be just the gesture you need to come back to yourself and understand who you’re meant to be now, when Starfleet isn’t in the picture anymore.*

She was probably getting the kinds of looks he imagined getting from her friends and family from other cadets. Most of them were eighteen, young, eager to see the world. . . . But she was. . . . Still young—still *far too young* for him—too much so to be wasting her life on Starfleet. He had wanted to stop himself, to ask her how she planned to explain him to her father.

Their hands caught, and Cris lingered for a moment too long before letting her go. He wanted to tell her that all of this was wrong, that her choices showed too much impulse. They weren’t ready for this and he couldn’t be sure that she was prepared for command. Instead, he reached up and caressed her cheek.

“I’m sorry I can’t come with you this time. I have . . . Business to handle; the less you know right now, the safer you are, and I want to keep you that way. I’ll communicate with you when I can, but I’ll be in and out of touch a lot.”

“That’s okay. Just promise me you’ll try to make it back in one piece.”

The summer flew by too quickly for Cris' liking, but he and Erin kept in touch throughout. She told him all about her family at home in North Carolina, and how proud and worried they were about her aspirations. Soon, only about a month remained in her time away, and he knew he had to do something before she sailed out of his life for good. He was trying his hardest to avoid thinking about her, and in attempting to do so, he had inadvertently forced himself back into the darkness of space.

How he'd gotten to Verex III, even Cris himself could not have explained. He wagered that too many nights of drowning the sorrows of his research had led him to believe he might be able to face going into the void again. Perhaps he had gotten just a bit too drunk and bitter for his own liking. He was face to face with the captain's chair of a Kaplan F-17 freighter. He brushed off the brusque salesman who wanted him to purchase or move on.

He wasn't in Starfleet officially anymore. He'd finished his research and they'd finally let him go. Erin was no longer a cadet. Soon, she'd get an assignment of her own and they'd be separated again. He'd need a way to see her, or to forget it when she couldn't be close.

*Wonder what she'd think of this beauty? Nothing says I can't own a personal transport. A little side hustle wouldn't hurt either.*, he thought, the glee nearly overwhelming his senses as everything in the little ship thrummed under his touch. He had a promise to keep before he set off on his own, and he intended to see it through.

*I know we can get there together. Come on, Sirena. Let's see what you got.* He didn't even hear the dealer's voice as they cursed him over the comms systems. He had somewhere to be. His first stop, however, was the small hothouse he'd kept on the roof of the Academy. Time to make sure his cadet got the roses she had been promised.

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## Starfleet Academy, San Francisco

Erin straightened her uniform and glanced in the mirror to make sure everything was in perfect Starfleet regulation order before she walked out the door. The beginning of her final year at the Academy was bittersweet, but she couldn't wait to see what was waiting for her. It was habit that made her check the clock on her dormitory wall, but what she was looking for was the sign of a familiar face.

Her budding relationship with Cristobal Rios had come to a near stand still when he'd announced his research had ended earlier than planned. She'd always expected the former commander to fly away— she just hadn't known at the time what it would mean for the connection they shared.

He'd left her several voice messages since he'd resigned his position, and she couldn't help but wonder if it was somehow her fault. Suddenly it dawned on her that she had about half an hour to kill before she needed to be in the auditorium for the official welcome to begin. There was time to listen to his last message.

"Computer, play last voice message."

"Accessing. You have fifteen saved messages." The device trilled, processing the required information.

"Your last saved message was received seven days ago, from—" A pause, then the familiar voice that made her insides twist—"Cristobal Rios. To access message playback, input or say your authorization code now."

"Authorization code: Zero five zero five zero two one one."

"Processing. . . Authorization code confirmed. Authorization granted; Welcome, Erin. Initializing message playback."

"I know, I know, I'm early. Don't worry, estrellita, I promise I'm finding my way back in time for your graduation. But just in case, I want you to know how incredible I think you are. Damn proud of you, too. Starfleet's lucky to have you, and you're gonna kick Command's ass, I'm sure of it. Hey, hang on. In case I don't get back to the Academy this year, I left you a little surprise in the rose garden on the roof. Something for you to hang on to til I see you again. I promise I won't keep you waiting, mi vida. Just keep an eye on the stars for me, hm? I'll be home in no time, and it'll be like I never left. Te adoro."

Erin let the words wash over her before realizing what Cris had said about the roof. She still had nearly twenty minutes, more than enough time to go check it and not miss anything. There was no way for her to leave him a message now. He'd said something about flying off to Verex III, though for what, she didn't know. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

She was keenly aware of the shady things Cris had needed to do to get his ship and to be accepted in cargo transport. Beggars couldn't be choosers in that line of work. With no choice but to take the work people decided to throw in his direction, Cris was experimenting with a sense of freedom; one Starfleet had no way to give.

"Hey, McLaughlin! We've got—," started a familiar voice, but Erin blocked them out. She would be back in time. What she needed now was the roof.

"Yeah, I know— I'll be back.", she muttered, just softly enough for her classmates to hear. She hoped she had enough time to make it before people came looking for her.

Pushing open the heavy doors to the Academy's rooftop garden, she made her way over to the spot that had quickly become Cris' favorite place besides the Academy library. He had often teased that he didn't have much of a green thumb, but she was one of the few people to know better. She'd lost track of the amount of times he'd allowed her to stay with him in the greenhouse while she studied and he planted.

She'd often wondered about the captain's love language, but now she understood. He had given her all the time he had when he was at the Academy. From dinners to allowing her to be his "date" to parties, to taking her for walks, he had always made sure he was close to her. When he couldn't touch her, he had ways of leaving reminders.

She had written him poetry; dark and aching, with expressions of their forbidden love and how she wished he could be close. Her world had shattered when he decided it was best to move on from his research and return to the stars.

She'd known it would happen, though. She had prepared herself for the shattering realization that he was cut off from the haven that Starfleet had once been. Perhaps his biggest gesture had been to stay when she was the only thing that mattered to him.

*Our roses are in bloom, Cris. I wish you were here to share them. Hopefully you'll make it back in time to see me graduate. Then I can take you on a walk and let you clear your mind.*

After her classes that day, she tapped the video call feature on her PADD and waited for him to answer. Of course there was a chance he was flying, but she needed the sense of quality time with him.

"This is Rios."

"Cris, it's Erin. I—well, I found your garden surprise for me and I— I'm speechless."

"The roses? Oh that was nothing."

"Ancient horticulture isn't nothing, Captain Rios. You really learned for me?"

"I did. They're hybrids— they'll bloom year round. Also, I planted them in a community garden. Students and staff can take clippings and buds and seeds. I'd suggest you save some."

"I will. Photos don't do them justice— I could send you some, but they kind of need to be seen in person for the full effect."

"I know. I just wanted you to have something of me there when I couldn't hold you. I wanted you to remember never to let anyone take your joy and beauty from you." Rios' smile could have lit the room; for the first time in months, Erin felt the endorphins and joy flood her entire being.

"I won't. Oh! That reminds me, did you get the maps I sent?"

"I did. My favorite star systems. I can't wait to go exploring them. Thank you."

"Just promise me you won't get into any trouble."

"That's a promise you know I can't make, *estrellita*."

"Have I ever mentioned how sweet I think it is that you call me 'little star'? Don't look so surprised, Cris. You know I speak Spanish almost as well as Standard."

"Mhm. Just another reason I love you."

"Right back at you, hotshot." Cris smiled, knowing she always had a comeback for him. He had struggled with the idea of her being part of a military organization for a long time, especially one he knew had the tendency to chew up and spit out those who didn't do what was deemed "best" by their standards.

He only wanted to protect her, and now he was no longer sure that he could. After all, he was the one who had decided to fly away. He needed to give her the space to find herself, the way he had been trying to when he was at the Academy.

"There's a reason I picked roses, you know.", Cris muttered absently, after a bit of silence. Erin's ears perked at the statement. It seemed he never did anything without much of a reason, but she remained curious. Rios hadn't struck her as the type to be overly protective.

"Because of the thorns. Aren't they a way to protect the flowers?"

"They are. But the flowers also symbolize love. I wanted to protect you." Erin looked astonished. Protect her? What was it he was concerned about?

"Cris. . . What are you saying?"

"Erin, I grew up in Chile with a dad who wasn't around a lot. I had to do a man's job at a boy's age— keeping my mother safe when she wasn't teaching, looking after myself when she was. I'm used to protecting the people I care about, and you. . . You're everything I wish I could have been. Everything I probably— by all accounts, anyway—should have been. You're optimistic, brave, ready to do whatever it takes to make sure we see all that we can of the galaxy, and we keep our people safe doing it. Isn't that why you switched to Command? I can see you're ambitious, but it's damn sure not a power play. Not for you. More than that, you're important to me. I know I can't ask you to walk away from Starfleet, but let me do what I can to make sure you're safe. I don't know that I hold with these ideals as much as I used to. I guess that's why I— never mind."

"You saw war. I haven't yet."

"I hope to God you never do. It's a nasty business. First one changes you."

"You can't keep me safe when I'm up there."

"Unfortunately, I know. I hate that. I wish I could stop you from going. I wish I could have met you before you signed up. Now all I can do is be sure you know how to protect yourself." Erin smiled at that. She wanted to kiss him, but if he'd been standing with her, she might never let go.

“Why?”

“Because, part of knowing you love someone is wanting to protect them. My choice: you’d have never come to the Academy. You’d be something more—creative. A writer, maybe. I don’t want you to see what I saw, or experience the Starfleet I knew. I don’t want you to have to fight for your life, only to be thrown away by them.”

“What is this; Soldier, Poet, King?”

“Ironic. My combat nickname when I was in your shoes was Aramis. Because. . .”

“No, wait, let me guess. Good with a sword, unstoppable with a phaser pistol?”

“Mm... Rifles, too. Still am. I don’t miss unless I mean to.” Erin’s shoulders slumped in relief. At least he could protect himself.

“You know— as much as I don’t want you to need to do this, there’s a program that will let you spar with a recreation of Athos on the holodeck. Might be good to sharpen your skills. Just in case, you know. That way, I won’t have to worry about you. Or, you could make him look like me and fight with my ancestor’s sword.” Erin froze. She couldn’t imagine fighting someone who looked like him, even in hologram form.

“Thanks Cris, but when I need you, we can spar in other ways.” Raised eyebrows told him all he needed to know; this wasn’t an open conversation and she preferred it that way.

“The things I do for love. Look, I’ll set up a way for you to blow off some steam and supplement your training, okay? We’ll build in good recovery, too. By the time you get your post, you’ll be ahead of the game like I was.”

“I wish you were here. Having someone who’s been through this by my side would make me feel so much more comfortable. You make me believe in myself more than I ever thought I would or could. I don’t know what it is, but. . .”

“If you’re gonna tell me I keep you grounded, I can tell you that you’re insane. I can’t do that from space.”

“Yeah, you actually can. . . And do.” It was the little things like this that mattered the most. These gestures of love were simple, but they were true, and Erin knew what her heart was telling her. Cris loved her enough to keep her safe, and every time she doubted it, the little things would be there to remind her.

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As Cris circled Verex III before taking off again, a pair of bookends caught his eye. He loved running his hands over them or smelling the petrified wood and the works held between them. They were a perfect memory of the woman who cared enough to give him something he’d use. She knew he adored their feel would enjoy being able to hold them.

He pulled his ancestor’s sword from the scabbard, staring longingly at it. He’d never needed to use it, and so it was kept in a chest that contained his ceremonial Starfleet sword. The thought of Erin, aboard the Raleigh and probably falling asleep at her station flitted through his mind.

*Maybe I should make sure she knows how to use one of these things, just in case. Loving her means protecting her, no matter the cost. That night, he thought of her before he drifted off to sleep. These conversations, these thoughts and actions, were the gestures of love that would keep them close, even when they were light years apart.*

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