

Straight on 'til Morning

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Straight on 'til Morning

by [InterstellarSiren](#)

Summary

Cristobal Rios was nothing if not faithful, even after his captain was gone.

Cristobal Rios had spent his entire life with an eye on the stars. It was not so much by choice as it was by habit. He almost could not believe that it had been ten years since the terror that had been the stuff of nightmares for him over the last decade. Ten years since he had been the second in command aboard the *ibn Majid*. Ten long, agonizing years that he'd dealt with the choices he'd made. The events of his fateful final voyage with the vessel that had been his home still haunted Cris.

The captain he loved was long gone, though the loss had left an immeasurable void in his heart. When he closed his eyes, he could see the white haired, smiling Vandermeer. The man had taught him so much in a short span of time. His brain could not wrap itself around the fact that Vandermeer was dead, although he had been there for the entire terrible ordeal. He still remembered the look of shame mixed with resolution in the eyes of the man he had considered a father figure. He could hear Alonzo's voice as clearly now as the day it had happened.

"I don't understand. You don't have to do this." Jana's screams rose above the din of the ship's noise. Most of the crew was dead and Beautiful Flower was close to it. Cris fought the urge to vomit at the scent of burned flesh—close wounds from a trained veteran who knew how to make death painful. This was not the captain he knew and loved. This man was a monster.

*"They're the enemy, Mister Rios. I have no choice—I have orders to follow, and so do you." Cris tried to scream, but bile rose in his throat in place of a sound. It seemed to him that the person before him now was not and could never be Alonzo Vandermeer. He was too rigid and cold to be the father figure that Rios had idolized from the moment he boarded the *ibn Majid*. It wasn't Vandermeer—he didn't know this creature or what had become of the captain he'd been willing to follow to the far reaches of the galaxy. His dream first contact had become the stuff of nightmares. So he'd confronted Vandermeer—gone at him with everything he had.*

"This is madness, Captain. We both know it. Killing Jana and Beautiful Flower—it won't fix anything. It does nothing to help us."

"I've been ordered to kill all hands— but someone has to let them know it's done. The only person I can count on is you." Rios' eyes bugged. Kill all hands? But that meant himself as well. He wrenched away from the captain who had grappled with him, and was still holding his shoulders. His legs gave way and his body crumpled.

"What the hell are you talking about? Are you mad?! You know this isn't a proper directive! Starfleet doesn't willfully commit murder!" Rios tried to get up; scrambling to his feet, he made a desperate attempt to shove Alonzo in a different direction, but the die had already been cast. He had to do something. Surely he could wrestle the phaser away from his captain.

"Goddamnit, Captain, what's gotten into you?! If I need to take over this ship—!"

"It's been an honor to serve with you, Cristobal. But this journey is over for me. You're the only one I trust to see it through to the end. You know what you have to do."

"No, I can't—I won't, I—... No, no no no. . . Please. . ." Cris' throat burned, and it was raw from screaming at him

"Straight on 'til morning, Mister Rios. You know the way. Shame I won't live to see the sunrise with you. Make sure they know it's done, and tell everyone I'm sorry I failed. Adios, m'ijo. Lo siento." Cris froze; he had never heard Vandermeer sound so resigned before. Only a few hours earlier he had been talking and laughing with Jana, and now she lay cold next to him. A helpless victim of circumstance who'd

had no way to know she was going to die, or even attempt to fight it, Frozen in horror, he could do nothing but watch as the last man other than himself who remained standing put the phaser in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

For about five minutes, Rios sat in silence among the bodies of the dead. Then, he knew exactly what he had to do. Taking precautions not to become trapped in it himself, he opened the airlock and let the lack of gravity pull the bodies of the lost into space. Then he rigorously cleaned the ship, deleted the transporter logs and made his way to the communications system.

“Computer, open a channel to Starfleet headquarters.”

“Channel open.”

“This is Executive Officer Cristobal Rios of the USS ibn Majid. Can anyone read me?”

“Loud and clear, Commander Rios.”

“I regret to inform you all that there has been a terrible tragedy. Captain Alonzo Vandermeer and all lives onboard have been lost. I am the sole survivor. Requesting further instructions?”

“Do you know of anything, any reason that might explain this loss of life?”

“I do not, but Captain Vandermeer...”, Cris paused to swallow the lump in his throat. “...died by his own hand.”

“Hm. Return to headquarters at once for a mission debrief, Commander. Further instructions will be given upon your arrival.”

“Aye. Rios out.”

Life had changed in the blink of an eye. The thought of putting on the uniform that had once meant so much to him and pretending it was all fine made Cris sick to his stomach. Commander Cristobal Rios of the USS ibn Majid was a distant memory now. All he could do was hope to hell he found a way to make the man proud. The same man who taught him, who his heart had adopted as a father figure, who he had failed. Yet, it had been impossible not to follow the directive.

“Straight on ‘til morning with an eye on the stars.” It’s how the old man always was. I don’t know if I can keep doing it anymore. . . I don’t want to keep doing it anymore. But he had to, he told himself. If Cris stopped now, everything would stop with him. So there was only one option: to keep working as close to Starfleet as possible. That was how he got the position in the library at Starfleet Academy. He hated it with a burning passion. So many young minds that reminded him of himself, all of them headed for ruin in ways he never could have explained to them if he tried.

The nightmares made it worse. There was no way to fight them off except splashes of his favorite aguardiente in his coffee every morning. Add that to shots straight from the bottle to help him sleep and he had a problem. Somewhere along the way Starfleet told him they were done, and not long after that he was on his own again. Before long, the ghosts of his past were back in the form of the too energetic Raffaella Musiker. He loved Raffi like a sister he’d never known, but eventually even she had a life to get back to. He had memories to drown. Five years in and he could still see the people he left behind. Maybe some day, when he healed, he would get back to them. ‘Til then, he had his ghosts to keep him company, his mermaids, and the promise of a sunrise he didn’t want to see.

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