

## Can We Start Again, Please?

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## Can We Start Again, Please?

by [InterstellarSiren](#)

### Summary

The motley crew of La Sirena continue their adventures. When they are thrust into an alternate universe by an ill Q, they must put former differences aside to find their way home, and gain unexpected allies in the process.

### Notes

This is my own version of what fans could have gotten with Star Trek: Picard S2. Remains partially canon compliant

## Chapter 1

If anyone asked Cristobal Rios six months prior to now where he thought he'd be, he'd have probably shrugged and deflected rather than giving an answer. The last possible place he would have responded with was Starfleet Medical, waiting for a fitness assessment. Not when there were so many other qualified officers ahead of him.

*Hell, at this point, Seven would be a better choice than me. They let me go because I was too messed up to be worth anything anymore, right? Kinda hard not to be in my situation, though.*

The crisp, bright walls of the medical facility nearly blinded him when he first walked in. He'd spent a few weeks holed up on La Sirena, anticipating whatever might come next. He'd thought it would be another transport, a return to what he had learned to accept as normal. But nothing was really "normal" for him anymore. It hadn't been since Raffaella Musiker had brought him some strange cargo that had flipped his world upside down.

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Just a few short hours ago, he'd been on the deck of his ship, the one thing he had free and clear, wondering why they wanted to talk to him. He'd called Seven, drunk and brooding as usual, just to check in with her.

"Rios. Good to hear from you. Got something for me?"

"Yeah, I think so. Been hearing some chatter about—", he'd started, but she'd seen through the facade.

"Wait a minute. Are you drunk right now? Please tell me you're not flying." She got a hiccup in response. Sighing, Seven put her head in her hands. Where were the holos when you needed them? Then, Emil shimmered into view.

"Forgive him, Seven, he's a bit hungover. I tried to stop him but he hit the pisco pretty hard last night. I think it has to do with Dr. Jurati. To answer your earlier question, no. Enoch has the conn."

"Are Rios and Agnes fighting again?"

"Their 'discussions' have been rather heated of late." Emil sighed and tutted. Seven half-smiled at the display— she knew that the hologram worried about his captain (though it was still up for debate as to whether holograms were capable of feeling such things; the Doctor aboard Voyager had been, so why should Emil be different?)— and wondered how best to help her friend.

"Can you sober him up and contact me when he's coherent?"

"My dear, you underestimate my coding." That almost made Seven laugh— it would have, had she not known the full situation. Rios was a functioning alcoholic, and she was certain Emil had been there to clean up his binges on more nights than either of them would care to remember. She ended the transmission with a shake of her head. Whatever chatter he'd heard, it was better to get the report from a sober captain.

It had taken nearly two hours to get Cris back to himself again. But when the EHH shimmered back into his view, the captain groaned as if pained by the hologram's appearance.

"What do you want now? *Deactivate*—."

"You should call her back.", came the calm voice that now felt more like an echo in his head because it was a reflection of his own, though dressed in a different accent.

"Call *who* back?", Rios snapped, harsher than he'd intended; though the sentiment remained. Why hadn't he found a way to deactivate the hologram? Agnes had called earlier, but he'd ignored her. The last thing he needed was her gushing about how perfect things had been on her last diplomatic assignment.

It'd been a few months since she'd come to visit him after he'd left their detail. Starfleet had bandied him about for the most part, pulling him in temporarily because he knew both Agnes and Soji. Soji, he'd heard, had insisted on his presence during his last attachment with them. He'd been told it was because he made her feel safe.

"Doctor Jurati."

"What does my ex have to do with a hospitality emergency? *Santa Maria*... I need to recode all of your programming. . ." Rios started a rant but dropped it before he could let himself finish. There was no point. The holos wouldn't listen to him, even if he wanted them to. He picked up his bottle and walked away, leaving the hospitality holo shaking its head.

"He really *never* gets any nicer.", tutted the EHH, before shimmering away when he realized the captain had failed to deactivate him in his anger.

Perhaps it really was better for Captain Rios to be alone, floating in space on his own vessel and drowning his sorrows in pisco. The EHH, who had taken to calling himself Steward when the fancy suited him, for that was the name that best defined who he was and what he did, wondered if some part of his captain and programmer had not wanted to return to Starfleet full time after the brief taste of it he had gotten.

There was the matter, of course, of Starfleet's two requirements. The first was that Captain Rios would need to undergo therapy to prove himself fit for duty aboard a Starfleet vessel. The second was that La Sirena would need to be kept up as either a civilian transport vessel or handed over to an organization that could make better use of her skills. For Cris, who had spent the last decade floating around in space,

making the ship his home seemed a good option. What Starfleet didn't know wouldn't hurt them. He'd find an apartment somewhere on-world to placate them. But if he proved his skills, there wouldn't be much need for it anyway. Not that he minded the idea of putting down roots; it simply required. . . more from him than was currently an option. Or, at least it required more than currently appeared to be an option.

He wanted to keep his mermaid, but if he couldn't, there were options. Seven of Nine had asked if he would consider loaning La Sirena to her for the work of the Fenris Rangers. But it was Picard who owed the Ranger a ship, and therefore, his debt to repay. She'd even said so when he ordered her beamed aboard after Cris blew her out of the sky with Emmett's assistance.

*That aside, I do trust her, in a strange sort of way. Raffi loves her, and I like the way she thinks. I understand her dedication. She's looking for something to fill the space, something to make it all count. Just the same as he was.*

No one could understand the troubles that Cris had experienced; the sorrows he'd drowned in a bottle. God only knew how many years it'd been of nightmares, scars, therapy that didn't help.

*I'll have to go back to it now to prove I'm fit for all this. Is it worth it? Maybe. Will I forgive myself if I don't try?* The answer was right in the back of his mind. He didn't want it, but it was there. The image of a furious Agnes, begging him not to go back out into the cold of space, to stay with her, to love her, gnawed on the edges of his conscience.

Cris closed his eyes to block out the memory as Picard hailed him.

"Admiral. Good to hear from you."

"Cris. Starfleet needs a decision. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Admiral. . . I'm not sure I can do this. What happens if I fall on my face? What if my dysphoria causes me to freeze? What—"

"Enough. You know I was right about my initial assessment of you, Captain Rios. You are uniquely qualified to lead this specific mission. There is no one better to take the reins of the Stargazer than you. I know of no one I'd put more faith in to lead this crew." The comm went quiet, and Picard knew that Cris was weighing the decision. He couldn't blame him; there was a lot to take in.

The comm crackled back to life, and Picard noted a rigid determination in the captains' voice. That was expected. Give a man like Rios the time to weigh a decision, and he knew what was right.

"Tell them I'll report as soon as they need me."

"Good man. Oh, and Rios?"

"Sir?"

"Thank you."

"Nobody knows the things I've seen better than me, Admiral. If I can help—it'll be worth it."

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## Starfleet Headquarters, 2400

On his first day back at Starfleet, Rios was struck by how much had changed. The offices were brighter than he recalled. He whistled to himself under his breath. It had been a decade, he knew, but still. . . Everything was so. . .

*Bright. Hopeful. New. All of those words fit. Why do I still feel so out of place?*, he wondered. Perhaps because it had been ten years. Perhaps because he wasn't the man he had been when he enlisted. A boy, really, with a head full of dreams, desperate to look to the stars. He'd been drawn to cargo ships because that was the kind of work his actual father had done at home in Chile. He had fond memories of his mother in their kitchen making him food, singing to him every night. When she'd at last had to go to work it was natural for her to go into research.

She'd wound up at Starfleet Academy. He snuck into the building more than once just to watch her work. To many people, Starfleet was a beacon of hope. The idea that knowledge was waiting to be discovered in the stars, that a future might be forged there, was something that the people of Earth had learned to cling to as it became more difficult to inhabit the planet.

He'd inherited his mother's natural curious disposition. To him, the galaxy was vast and unknowable, but he'd always had a fondness for old sea tales. Both of his parents had raised him on them; told him stories of ships and mermaids.

There was a part of him that wondered why he stayed, but in truth, he had done it to become the man his mother wanted him to be. Just a year earlier, he'd been floating aimlessly in space, a pirate of sorts without an anchor. He'd stolen a ship from the Iotians, and he was happy with his life, or so he'd believed.

*But it wasn't enough. I didn't realize that until I met the Admiral. Reading a book written by him and getting to know the man himself were two different experiences I never thought I'd have. The stars are all I've ever known. He could see that.*

"And just like that. . . I'm back where I started. Back working for an organization that I've had reservations about for a long time." Eleven years now since the black flag directive that had spun him out and cost him everything. Eleven years since he'd struck out on his own and now, he had been pulled back in. He put a hand on the door, bracing against the habit of regulation and duty that had been shockingly easy to return to, an instinct he thought he'd never need again.

*I hope I've made you proud, Mamá.*

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The door opened with a silent whoosh, and the sounds of quiet computerized chirps, beeps and boops filled Rios' ears. He stood, silent, at attention and waiting to be recognized. It made him feel more like a child playing dress up than a captain headed to his first command. He wondered if anyone had reservations or second thoughts. How had Picard—elegant speaker though the Admiral may have been—convinced *anyone* that he deserved a second chance? At last, he ventured,

“Commander Rios reporting as ordered, Admiral. I was told you asked for me.”

“At ease, Cris. And in future, you’ll address yourself by proper rank, Captain.”

“Uh. Permission to speak freely, sir?”, he questioned, and he was sure he heard the old man chuckle. Picard waved a hand, as if telling him to realize where they were.

“Granted.”

“*What the hell* am I doing back here?”

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As Picard filled Rios in on the particulars of his new mission, Dr. Agnes P. Jurati was preparing to leave on a new calling of her own. She had been tried a few weeks after La Sirena’s successful connection with Soji’s home world. The jury had been sympathetic to her plight and rendered a verdict of not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. Admiral Picard was reinstated and had pledged to look after Agnes to the best of his ability.

Seeing her passion for working with sentient synthetic life, the court had also appointed her status as an ambassador and aide to Soji. The two were set to embark on a tour of Federation space with temporary Starfleet escort, in order to forge goodwill between the synths of Coppelius and other planets.

“I’m not sure why they chose me. I barely even know how to walk in heels, much less how to be a dignified ambassador’s aide.”, Agnes mumbled as she flicked through the screens trying to decide what to wear. What was appropriate dress for such occasions?

She was talking to herself again, she knew, but how else was she meant to have an intelligent conversation when there was no one else around to talk to her? She was still waiting for Soji’s arrival.

Agnes’ eyes drifted to the hothouse just outside the research compound. She’d been experimenting with a new kind of tech meant to assist with gardening, something she’d prepared herself for in case she spent time inside a Federation prison for Bruce Maddox’s murder. Her eyes fell on the pretty purple hyacinths and the pink and yellow rose seedlings that Soji had brought her after the trial. The poor thing had thought it was all her fault that Bruce was dead.

“The flowers are thriving. I think everyone would be proud of you.”, came the quiet, melodic voice that never stopped filling Agnes with wonder. She turned to see Soji, dressed in the uniform of an ambassador. Her heart swelled with a mix of pain and pride— Bruce would have loved to see this, she knew — but, knowing they had little time, she set the emotion aside.

“I can’t decide what to wear.”

“That is a conundrum. What exactly *does* one wear to introduce oneself on a new planet? Which reminds me, I need to prep with a few subroutines.”

“Oh, Soji, stop. *You’ll* be fine. It’s *me* you have to worry about. I have no experience with this sort of thing, I’m not an ambassador.” Soji’s eyes flickered. Clearly, Agnes was out of her depth.

“We’ll have help, remember. They’re sending us a Starfleet escort. Though they haven’t told us who it will be.”, Soji offered, trying to keep her voice light. Raffi had been sent back to the Academy to teach. Elnor had enrolled in his first semester as a cadet there. Seven was off transporting cargo for the Fenris Rangers with the use of Captain Rios’ freighter.

“God, I’m not sure I *want* to think about that — it could be Rios. We got into a huge fight when he told me he was going back to Starfleet.” Agnes shivered at the mention of her ex’s name. They hadn’t spoken much, though he’d popped up every so often to check in on her. A few evenings here and there helped to quell their loneliness.

“I hear he’s taking command of a Sagan class ship. The *Stargazer*. She’s a refit of an old ship the Admiral commanded. I have faith in Captain Rios. If he could get me home, we’ll be fine.” Agnes said nothing. She and Rios had tried desperately to make things work between them.

“Soji, don’t. Rios and I tried that. He thought he was out, and Starfleet pulled him back in. The best thing for us to do is focus on our mission. I can be civil, but you and introducing you to others comes first. This is huge for you and other synthetics.”

Soji frowned. She knew that Agnes didn’t want to think about her ex or their past. But she also knew something big had changed for them during Agnes’ trial. Maybe it had happened while she was being held during the proceedings. How could they even be certain that Rios would be the escort that went with them?

“Just when we both thought we were out, they pulled us back in. I hope we can make it work.”, Agnes muttered under her breath. Fortunately, Soji didn’t hear. At least, for now, they would be staying on Earth until the *Stargazer* was ready to fly. Maybe that would give them both time to process.

She gathered her things, looking back at the flowers as she did. There was time to pluck a few. She might be able to make amends. She wondered if Rios—and her own heart—would let her.

*No better way to start fresh than to just ask for forgiveness and see if we can begin again.* Once the past was behind them, Agnes could put her best foot forward. Cris might even be looking forward to this. Why shouldn't she do the same?

## Chapter 2

Cris knew he had a choice to make as he left headquarters. Taking the *Stargazer* was the chance of a lifetime. He'd never realized just how much the institution of Starfleet still meant to him, despite all his past pain and regrets. But it would also mean leaving his old life as a freighter captain behind. His beloved space mermaid would need someone to look after her while he was gone.

He knew that Raffi had returned to the Academy, also with help from the admiral. He was proud of her for kicking the snakeleaf habit that had ruled her life in the time since he last saw her before they met again in 2399. He hated to bother her, but if there was one person he could trust to give him honest advice, he knew it would be her. They had leaned on each other far too often in the time that she had roped him into assisting Picard.

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He hailed her that evening, once he knew she was finished with her cadets and would have time to discuss the matter with him. He'd sent a message to her PADD ahead of time so she would know to expect him. Surprisingly, she was on time for once, her hair in perfect order and her uniform crisp. Her eyes shone, no trace of snakeleaf in her system.

Cris wondered for a second if she had kicked the habit and neglected to inform him. He tried to say something poignant. All he got out instead was,

"Whoa." Raffi's eyes widened for a moment. She hadn't expected that reaction from anyone, least of all her best friend. She knew all of his secrets, knew how much he had hated Starfleet for a decade. She couldn't help but wonder if he was mad at her for going back. At least, perhaps, she might save a few cadets from the torture they'd endured.

"Yeah, yeah. Get it all out of your system now, honey. I know you got jokes for this one." Raffi didn't laugh, but there was a taunt in her gaze. She was daring him to say what they were both thinking. A thousand questions existed about her path from the bitter woman she had been when Picard found her in the trailer at Vasquez Rocks, but Rios knew most of the answers.

"Actually, no. I don't. Starfleet always agreed with you, *Commander Musiker*," Rios answered, a grin crossing his features. He was right. They had both pledged their entire lives to the cause. Raffi made it look good. He wasn't quite sure how to feel about his own return yet. He wondered if she had noticed yet—if it had registered in her brain where he was. He chuckled inwardly and counted down in his head. . .

3 . . . 2 . . .

"Holy shit, you're back, aren't you? You're really one of us again."

"Always was, Raf. Guess the Admiral was right. I was — I am — 'Starfleet to the core', after all. From the looks of it, you were, too." Then, Raffi saw something that hadn't been present on Rios' face since they'd defeated Narek. He was smiling. He was happy. Her mind whirled with a thousand questions.

"How'd J.L. pull that off?"

"He put me forward for command personally. Called me in himself," Rios told her, the disbelief as prominent in his voice as it had been in hers. He still couldn't fully make sense of it. Even after talking with Picard, none of it made sense. All he knew was that they planned to make use of him. What and where his mission would be, he didn't yet know.

"You're happy." Not a question. It hadn't needed to be. Raffi could see the light back in his eyes. Command red really was his color.

Rios didn't answer. He didn't need to. But he was still curious about her.

"You're not gonna make a dig at me for it?"

"Of course not, honey. I'm just happy that you're happy. You know, I never thought I'd say this, but the Academy's nice, too. Better than when we were here, I'm sure." She smiled, then remembered another question.

"What ship are you assigned to?"

"I'm captaining the new *Stargazer*. Small missions first — diplomatic escorts, exploratory work, maybe. But I'm looking forward to seeing what's out there. Which brings me to the reason I called. I need to get in touch with Seven. I figured no one would know how to reach her better than you."

"Yeah. You know, she's in need of some assistance. The Rangers could use a new ship."

"Could they? I might be able to help with that, if you can get to her."

"Yeah. Actually, I can loop her in right now." Raffi quickly made contact with Seven, and placed them on a three-way communication.

"Raffi, hi. Is everything all right. . . You don't usually call— oh, hi, Cris." The Fenris Ranger raised an eyebrow, a little confused by the sudden appearance of their friend. She knew something was up.

"Seven, I hope we're not calling you at a bad time. But what I've got to tell you both is urgent. I'm about to do you and the Rangers a giant favor."

Seven didn't know what to think of the things she heard over the next few minutes. She'd never believed that Cris could or would be willing to return to Starfleet. But the fact that he was willing to hand over his beloved ship to her for the work of the Fenris Rangers told her that he

trusted her deeply. Knowing how he'd felt when she first met him, Seven realized that her relationship with him had come a long way.

"You want to loan me *La Sirena*? While you go back to Starfleet?"

"No point in her sitting in spacedock, hermana. We both know it. You've got the chops to be a great captain. Besides, aren't the Rangers working with medical supply transport? A freighter could come in handy. She's a trusty ship. Just. . . Look after her for me. 'Til I'm home."

"Cris, are you sure. . .?"

"You've been there for me when I needed someone. Now let me return the favor. Besides, didn't you say Picard owed you a ship anyway? Let me square it. After all, it was me who blew you out of the stars. You and the Rangers have more need of her than I will."

"In that case, I'd be honored."

"Just be careful with her, please. I'll meet you later to transfer the command protocols and all, but for now. . . Duty calls. Thanks. Rios out."

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For a few moments after the call ended, Seven sat in stunned silence, unsure what she should think. Rios was offering her something that would save lives. It was his ship, as he had made clear time and again, and he was free to give it to whomever he wished.

"Did that just happen?", she asked Raffi, who had remained on their side of the call despite Rios leaving. Raffi nodded, equally confused.

"Something's really changed him, Seven. Yeah, it happened. It might be the best thing for all of us. If I were you, I'd take it. Look, I know you said it was better if we took a break for a while. So I'm saying this as a friend. We both know the Rangers could use the help. The holo programs might be an invaluable asset. I'd take Rios up on it."

"You really think I could captain a freighter?"

"I think you could do whatever you put your mind to, honey, if you give yourself the chance. This might be a good test of that career change you were thinking about?" Seven couldn't lie; she had been thinking of calling in favors from her old friends to get into the Academy so that she might captain a ship of her own one day. The Ranger life wouldn't last her forever. *La Sirena* might be the perfect place to start.

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