

A Sacrifice Not Made in Vain

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A Sacrifice Not Made in Vain

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Summary

After his discharge, it took Cristóbal Rios a while to leave Starfleet behind. Now a librarian and researcher at Starfleet Academy, Rios hopes to make sure that what happened to him was not the fate of anyone else in the organization. He meets a cadet with a thirst for command who changes his perspective.

Notes

IMPORTANT: The *Tales from the Starfleet Academy* universe is a fusion of alpha and beta canon events that also imagines that Rios was the sole survivor of the 2390 incident aboard the *U.S.S. ibn Majid*. Later works in this series may borrow portions of the beta canon Rios centric novel *Rogue Elements* by John Jackson Miller.

Starfleet Academy, California, 2390

Cristóbal Rios knew he was going through the motions, even as he tugged on the black cable knit sweater that had become his go-to since being discharged from Starfleet. He had been invited back for research purposes, a year after the tragedy that had changed his life forever, and resulted in the death of his captain. He missed the vibrant colors of his uniform, but they reminded him far too much of the past. Those screams still haunted him every night as he tried to sleep. He remembered the dream as vividly as if the memories that inspired it's events had happened the day before.

Two androids, aboard a ship that had been assigned a deadly directive. A determined, hard-ass old captain who had taken a young officer excited about the possibility of first contact under his wing. Cris shook his head to get rid of the memory before he came face to face with the worst part of it. He walked to the replicator and got himself a cup of strong black coffee, praying that no one noticed when he lifted the soft fabric at his waist to retrieve and pour a splash of brandy from a hidden flask on his hip. Being back here was torture enough. No one ever said he had to do it sober, just as long as he could function and he wouldn't get caught. Lucky for him—and, it dawned on him now, for everyone else—Cris had learned how to be subtle about his self medication.

Gracias a Dios., he thought, not daring to speak the words out loud. He'd given some serious thought to telling Starfleet to go to hell after they discharged him, but instead of throwing him out into the cold alone, they had offered him a respite. He still couldn't talk about the ship, Vandermeer or Jana and Beautiful Flower—not openly, at least. But he could stay on as a researcher—helping them find the causation and link between Vandermeer's suicide and why this dysphoria still haunted him a year on.

He should have told them to rot, and he knew it. Yet, here he was, manning the archives of the Academy's library. What would the old man say if he could see him now? Alonzo Vandermeer had such great hopes for him. Maybe, just maybe, if he put in the work, the research would show him where he failed; how his captain's death might have been prevented. He'd practically worshiped the silver-haired commander who gave him access to a whole new world of opportunities and experiences. Vandermeer had both pressured and inspired him. That kind of man deserved a memorial wing in a place like this.

Yet he gets nothing. They erase us from the goddamned records like we never fucking existed and I'm still fucking here when I don't want to be. Almost wish he'd popped me, too. Or that I'd had the guts to do it myself after I relayed the message. But no, I had to be the good little Starfleet officer and do my damned duty like they taught me. He took another swig of his coffee.

He was doing this for the man he remembered Vandermeer to be; the man who had inspired his love of the stars and taught him to keep one eye trained to them no matter where he was. But he no longer looked to them for guidance as he once had. Cris had a unique aesthetic that most of the students did not dare to touch. He was the one to ask if you were looking for the hard reads; a brooding existentialist with a penchant for the end of life and what happened after it. There was one, however, who fascinated him beyond words. Erin McLaughlin, a Starfleet Academy cadet who reminded him of the man he used to be. His eyes drifted back to the reception desk. The worn copy of Surek and Existentialism with dog eared pages and a faded cover lay forgotten behind him. Underneath it was a copy of his personal favorite, The Tragic Sense of Life.

His eyes flitted back to the dark blonde cadet with a layered pixie cut who looked out of place among all the other students. Most of them were out of uniform today, but this one had a very unique style that made him feel as though he'd stepped into a time machine. She wore a green silk button up shirt, with the first few buttons undone to reveal a cream lace bustier. Her shirt was tucked carefully into a grey a-line pleated midi skirt. A layered constellation necklace twinkled at him from her collarbone, held just beneath a delicate choker of ivory lace. Finishing her look was light make-up in greens and light blues that made her ice-blue eyes pop when she cast a glance in his direction. He'd heard someone mention her name when she walked in, but he didn't remember her. She seemed smart, but shy and quiet.

Something about her reminded him of the peace of a bygone era. She was mostly silent but spent most of her time wandering among the shelves looking for something new to excite her. Not that he could blame her; he had devoured other books when training at Starfleet. It was something Vandermeer had teased him about. He could still hear the soft laughter.

"You've always got your head in a book, kid. What exactly are you waiting for? Think we're going to make first contact with a society that values education?" At the time, Cris had shrugged, half smiling.

"One never can tell, sir. We've made poor assumptions about other species before, and they cost us dearly." It was true; even Vandermeer had to give him that much. The other crew members had learned no to make fun of him, since the captain seemed to have given his stamp of approval to his second in command's pastimes.

Snapping back to the present, Cris looked up and subtly focused his gaze on her again. There was something hypnotizing about this woman, something that reminded him of home. How could that be possible? He had not had a real home since he'd left Chile with an eye on the stars. He wondered what her specialization would be; if he had to guess, he might have picked her for a communications officer. The textbooks under her arm baffled him. She clearly had a gift for language and possibly writing. An overwhelming desire to introduce himself to her nagged at the back of his mind while he tried to talk himself through the possibilities.

She appeared older than the traditional cadet, making him wonder if an exception had been made for her to attend. He'd never noticed the age of a cadet before, further convincing him that there was something different about this one. He couldn't put his finger on it, but she was special. If only he knew why. She reminded him of the ancient porcelain dolls he'd seen in the history books. Then, she turned to face him.

Don't think about her. Don't let yourself daydream, you'll both be better off that way. You'll thank yourself for it later. You're too fucked up for her, and if you let this happen, you'll pull her down with you.

"Excuse me? Can you help me find a few things?" The slightest hint of a Southern accent tickled his ears. He'd always been curious about humans; an odd fixation since he was human, but then, with so many races and species out there, he supposed it wasn't as strange as one might think. He reached for his coffee cup, desperately craving a swig of it, if for nothing more than the liquid courage of his favorite aguardiente.

"Sure, I know this place like the back of my hand." He managed a sip without fumbling it, somehow. It's been a long time since he's been this close to a beautiful woman; and she is beautiful, if not in the most classical sense of the word, in her own unique way. The body rolls were visible under her corset, and the thickness of her frame was obvious when she moved.

"I'm looking for something interesting to read. I like the classics. You know, sometimes you need a break from the textbooks."

"I remember what that's like. Let me see what I can find. For someone like you, I'd suggest... hm. Ah! Here we go. Pride and Prejudice."

"Hm. I've read it already."

"Oh dear. Well, then, let's see.... Let me guess, you're one of those love-sick fools who believes it conquers everything."

"...Okay. And you're the scorned academic who believes life as we know it is utter torture."

"Guilty as charged. Hm. My name's Rios. Cristóbal Rios."

"Mister Rios." That made Cris laugh. He had not been called that since the end of his tenure on the *ibn Majid*. The last person to call him that had been one of his colleagues on the vessel. He did not need to think about that now.

"Uh, no. Just Rios. Or, well. . . You can call me Cris, if you like."

"A pleasure, Cris."

"Pleasure is all mine, Miss . . . McLaughlin, wasn't it?"

"I don't recall giving you my name, but, yes. Erin McLaughlin."

"Shame to think of a beauty like you caught up in this . . ." Erin cocked her head to stare at him. Caught up in what? What was he getting at?

"I'm sorry, I don't follow." Her skirt rustled as she stepped to the side to join him at his desk. What was his game?

"Starfleet. We're just cogs to them, you know."

"Then why are you still here?"

Valid question. Sharp young lady. Pretty too., thought Cris, catching himself on the very idea of calling her pretty. She was a cadet and he was supposed to be unaffected. She leaned forward, lace winking at him from the undone buttons of her blouse. It had been a long time since he had seen lace of that quality.

Soft, delicate and beautiful. So far above you that you don't deserve her.

"I suppose I feel like I—owe the people I lost a debt, if that makes sense to you. I guess I trapped myself the minute I pledged my life to Starfleet. There are things you can't begin to understand. Things I—things I can't even tell you. Now, all I can do is spend my days researching and pray. Hoping against hope that what I went through—the pain Starfleet caused me, doesn't happen again. Not to me, not to anyone. Especially not to a beautiful talented young cadet like you with her whole future ahead of her. You should run, Erin. You deserve better than me. I can tell just by looking at you."

"You don't know me as well as you think you do, Cris."

"Oh, I don't, do I?"

"No. Because someday, I'm gonna be the greatest communications officer Starfleet has ever seen, and I won't stop until I'm in a position where my voice is heard. I don't care if people know my name, I'm not some glory hog. All I want is what every Starfleet cadet wants. I am going to serve and do my best to reach beyond everything I know, and find things that help us establish greater bonds with creatures whose worlds we know nothing about yet. That's why I'm here."

"I wish you luck."

"You too, sailor. Maybe we'll land in the same port someday. Thanks for the help."

"How'd you. . ."

"I've got a sense for this kind of thing. Even out of uniform, I can smell a kindred spirit. I don't know what burned you, Cris, but you're still one of us. It doesn't wash off. Never will." He smirked. She was sharper than he had expected.

"Tell me something I don't know, kid."

"Should you be looking at a kid the way you're staring at me right now? Don't answer that." Cris winced. This woman had gotten a fast read on him, and he could not even be mad at her.

"Sorry, I just don't remember seeing a cadet so lovely before." Cris' brain was screaming at him now, he had to stop. This was insane. If the Academy found him fraternizing with a cadet, he might lose his position, and then he would truly have nothing left.

Walk away now. Tell her that you have some place to be, make up an excuse. She's pretty, but it's not worth losing everything you have now. You made all of those sacrifices, and if this is all you have left, then it's worth hanging onto, right?

"Some aches have no balm, Ms. McLaughlin. You'd be wise to stay away from now on. I can leave some recommendations for you, but that's the best I can do. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We could still see each other again some day. Oh, and Cris? They say time heals all wounds, but they don't know that it hurts like hell to go through the process. Any time you do something to make sure others are safe, when you put their interests above yours. . ."

"It's a sacrifice, but a sacrifice not made in vain. Huh. I've never met a cadet who could make that connection. Tell me, what's your rank?"

"Cadet second class. I hope to come out ahead of the game." Cris' gaze softened. He could see the ambition shining in her gaze.

"Major?"

"I'm a double, actually. Communications and Interspecies Relations. I did think about Command for a bit though." Cris flinched at the mention of command. How could she want to be part of something that would require her to sacrifice her life for the cause of Starfleet? How ironic that he of all people was the one asking that now.

"If you ever want to talk about what it's like in command. . . Come find me. We'll get a coffee and I can share some experiences with you."

"I might take you up on that, Cris. I should go now. I'm going to be late." Before Cris could say another word, she turned and walked away, her heels clicking against the floor.

Some sacrifices are worth it. If, by some twist of fortune, all that I've lost made space better for cadets like her, then it was all worth it in the end. He hoped that she would see the world with less pessimism than he did. This generation ahead of him proved that all he had done turned out for good after all.