

I've Traveled the World and the Seven Seas (Everybody's Looking for Something)

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/907) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/907>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Picard , Alternate Universes (General)
Relationship:	Cristóbal Rios/Original Female Character
Character:	Cristóbal Rios , Original Female Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Academia , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Starfleet Academy , Pre-Series , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Friends to Lovers
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Tales from the Starfleet Academy
Stats:	Published: 2022-10-27 Words: 3,002 Chapters: 1/1

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by [InterstellarSiren](#)

Summary

Cris' favorite cadet pays him another visit at the library. He learns he's not the only one looking for a place to land.

Notes

Most of my works in this fandom assume that the incident aboard the USS ibn Majid was a much bigger deal than it was made to be in canon. These works paint Cris as the sole survivor from the incident and suppose that he's working at Starfleet Academy to write a book about what really happened during and after at a time when the powers that be are considering restoring her to the records.

The first time she put on her Starfleet Cadet uniform, Erin McLaughlin knew she was in the right place. It had started with a feeling of wanderlust—a desire to see new worlds and live an explorer's life. There would always be new worlds and races in this ever expanding galaxy. The uniform never felt quite right, though, for reasons she didn't know how to explain. So, on her off days from classes, Erin took the opportunity to study in the library— one of the few places on campus where she could stay without getting demerits for being out of uniform.

Not to mention the world-weary librarian was one of her favorite people at the Academy. She'd studied him from afar, long enough to know that most of her friends would tell her to stay away from someone like him. She couldn't help wondering what horrors she might unleash if she admitted that she found him attractive. With his disarming smile and acidic wit, he had scared off almost everyone who came near him. He was comfortable with this fate, happy to be left to the research that he had championed after his discharge. If this was the way for him to avoid being poked at and prodded by Starfleet while they tried to get inside his brain for answers about his former post, so be it.

Though Erin didn't know much about Cris, she could tell he was someone with stories to relate, if he were ever asked for them. There was an air of sadness and mystery about him. She had heard the whispers, cadets who spoke about him behind his back and told tales he had no way to refute. She hated it for him. He had done his best to get her to stay away, but all it had done was make her more intrigued. He didn't fit the mold of a typical Starfleet researcher, and she had heard the bitterness in his voice when he told her how he felt about it. What was it he'd said to her? Erin closed her eyes and tried to remember the conversation. He'd called her a beauty, said that it was a shame to think she would be "caught up in something like this." The words pinged around her brain for a moment as she recalled questioning that statement only for him to rebuff her in the most haunted tone she'd ever heard. He'd told her that they were "just cogs" to Starfleet, but what exactly had he meant by that? Was this some sort of warning, or had the organization taken pity on him because something deeper was wrong?

The mystery of the handsome researcher troubled her; the more she considered him, the more she realized he had to have intimate knowledge of Starfleet. Perhaps he wasn't always a researcher. Maybe he had once been a part of the system in a more profound way. That would explain why he did not want to think about her being a commanding officer. Everyone who joined was looking for some sense of a larger purpose. She had wanted to explore new worlds, and change the galaxy for the better, but what was his reason? He wouldn't be here without some sort of connection. When she went into the library the next day, she found a history book on the research desk with her name and a hastily scribbled note on a piece of folded paper inside the front cover.

Erin,

I know we haven't spoken much, but I feel safe with you. I don't know the reason why, but you deserve to understand why I warned you

about Starfleet. Page 42 has the answers I can't talk about. Come find me when you've read it, if you still want to talk to me. I'll explain over coffee.

Best,

Cristóbal

P.S. You can call me Cris, if you like. Erin knew how important it was that he trusted her. Her instincts told her that he did not open up under normal circumstances. If she had seen the same things, Erin supposed she wouldn't want to open up either. But if that was the case, if he was so afraid of what he might find, then why was he still around? He could easily have found his peace at the bottom of a bottle and faded into obscurity, but he wanted to be here?

Who wanted to be here, unless they had the drive to make it further than a measly research position? Maybe he was right, and she should run, but there was something magnetic about his persona. . . The more he attempted to push her away, the more she found herself drawn to him. Everybody here was looking for something. They all wanted a way to explore the stars in their own manner. For her, it was commanding a ship. Someday, that dream would come true and she'd be in a position where she could make the galaxy a better place.

In the solitude of his library, Cris stared into his coffee, wondering why he was back here. Why had he returned to the organization that had forced him to cover up the death of a man he had loved so desperately that losing him had shaken all of the beliefs he held in their ideals? He still clung to them, as a drowning man would to an anchor, for no other reason than the desperate hope that he would survive instead of giving into the voices that urged him to end his existential pain and meet death as a savior and friend. Why had these thoughts started again now, when it didn't matter anymore?

Lay off the synthehol, Cris. It's going to keep fucking with you like this. Only option you have now is to move on and hope that you don't drag her down with you. They won't listen to you. This was a pity position and you know it. That girl's too good for you, and she's never going to listen. No one ever listens. You're a drunk and a washout. Get some coffee, and sober up for a change. He wondered if there were any way that Raffi would have the time to talk to him and make all of this make sense of whatever was going on in his head.

Why did he care about some pretty cadet who he felt was throwing away her future for a position in command. Starfleet needed people like her. They needed people who were strong enough to make it when shit hit the fan, the way he once had been. Everything had upended after the *ibn Majid* and then he'd washed out of command. He could only hope he managed to save Erin from the illusion that working in command of a Starfleet ship was her way to help the universe. He had time to talk her out of it. The only thing to do now was to hope she would listen.

Today, she wore the full command cadet uniform. The moment she entered the room, Cris' breath caught in his throat. He'd seen many cadets come through the Academy in his time as a researcher, but none had ever had quite the effect on him that she did. He wondered what his old friend Raffi would think of this young woman.

Raf would probably be thrilled to see more women in the command ranks. Not to mention trying to push me into her., thought Rios with a laugh. He smiled and nodded when she approached the desk.

"I just wanted to thank you for the recommendation, Cris. The book you told me about was quite informative."

"Are you all right? You look a bit shaken."

"I just can't imagine. . . A first contact gone so wrong. The survivors must be haunted."

"Correction," Cris swallowed the lump in his throat, uncertain why he was about to admit to the pain he'd been holding onto for so long. "Survivor, singular."

"You mean there was only. . . Oh, my word."

"I should have properly introduced myself sooner. Cristobal Rios, SC-850-705. Former Commander of the USS *ibn Majid*. That survivor I mentioned earlier? You're lookin' at him. God knows I wish you weren't."

"Commander, I—."

"Please. No one's called me 'Commander' in a year. To you, it's Cris."

"Due respect, sir, you outrank me."

"And I'm telling you the titles aren't necessary. At ease, cadet. Do you mind if I say something that may seem a bit. . . Inappropriate?"

"N-no. Speak freely, please."

"Been a long time since I've seen someone carry that uniform as well as you do, Erin. Command red suits you. By the way— that book? There's a reason you can't find it on the library shelves here."

"You're writing it. In case Starfleet ever restores her to the records, aren't you?"

"Smart woman. Yeah, that's why I'm here. I'm out of the service now; post—."

"'Post-traumatic dysphoria'. I know, I read. Explains a lot. After what you saw, I don't fault you at all."

"I'll submit that book the day Starfleet decides her story needs to be told."

"I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what this feels like for you, Cris. Especially after the way Captain Vandermeer. . . Your manuscript says the two of you were close. Explains your dysphoria, though. I wouldn't be too pleased with life, either."

"I know somebody had to tell them what happened. I just never got why the old man trusted me to do it." Erin froze for a moment. How was she supposed to respond to something like that? Well, the best way was the truth, wasn't it?

"I do."

"Enlighten me, please?"

"Do you remember what I said to you the day we met?"

"How could I forget? 'I don't know what burned you, Cris, but you're still one of us. It doesn't wash off. Never will.'" He'd never forgotten it. That was the phrase that made him think someone might understand him and why he was here; what he was trying to do, at last. Few had tried, and the rest had left in confusion.

"Exactly. Vandermeer had to have known that, too. He knew you were suited for command, that you could be trusted. That's the kind of drive you can't outrun." That made Cris smile. He wasn't sure how long it had been since he let himself feel something that wasn't the existential pain that had plagued him since his days as XO of the *ibn Majid*.

"Says the woman who told me she wanted to be a communications officer, but is now in command red." She shrugged.

"Last I checked, sailor, we weren't talking about me."

"No, no no. Don't try to avoid this, Erin. You changed your major. You owe it to me to tell me why."

"I didn't change majors. I changed outlooks. Just like you're trying to change the subject now." Cris had to swallow before he spoke again, she was better at getting to him than she realized.

"Not going to lie, you make it look good, but I'm a little surprised, I—."

"Just going to dig ourselves deeper into this hole, huh, Cris? Anyway, to your question. Vandermeer trusted you to be the one who made sure Starfleet knew things had gone wrong because he valued you. You have an innate ability to either drive people away or put them at ease—I think you manage to do the latter for me. I was—I don't know—."

"Unsatisfied? What, were you thinking I could—?"

"—change that? No. That was up to me. I realized that after talking to you. I can do more with command."

"Trust me, you don't—."

"Don't tell me what I want. You don't know me."

"I'm not. For the first time in a year, I'm finally settled into the reality that this is about me." Cris shrugged, his shoulders easing a bit of their weight for the first time since he'd arrived at the academy. He wanted this woman to teach him how to live again. There was no mistaking this—he'd felt this heat before, unforgiving and completely unbidden. But that was the best way to experience it.

I wonder what her skin feels like? He almost let the words tumble out. But he bit them back. She had come to him with a question. More often than not, questions needed answered.

"What are you looking for?"

"Um— well I wanted to find a copy of the command manual."

"You're not here for the command manual and we both know it." There was no use in hiding it now. Cris had been much wiser than Erin ever anticipated. Maybe he would understand why she wanted to join command. But why had he assumed their earlier discussion had anything to do with him? She tried over and over to make sense of it before realizing that the only way to get anywhere was to ask him.

"What did you mean, when you said this was about you?" Erin's hand rested on Cris' shoulder for a moment. It was the only way she knew to reassure him.

"A story for another time. You'll be late for your—," he paused, glancing at the books under her arm.

"Xenolinguistics. Yeah, no. I've got a couple hours to kill, so I came here. Thought maybe I'd take you up on that coffee and talk about command." Cris fought back a laugh. She had seemed distracted when they began the conversation. Maybe her classes were getting the better of her and Erin needed a break. But, hang on. . . That book. He remembered it all too well from his own time here.

"I thought you weren't in communications anymore— they require xenolinguistics for command these days?" Cris was astonished.

"They want us to be prepared for every eventuality. Including," Erin paused, either not ready or unwilling to meet her companion's gaze. She knew how much it stung for him to hear about other cadets flying off into space when he'd been grounded. None of that would have mattered to Rios, but Erin still lowered her voice, her tone switching to sympathy when she added the final three words.

"A first contact," Cris' voice joined hers, remaining somber. He hoped they were preparing cadets better now than they had been when he attended the academy. He watched as she fumbled with the collar of the uniform. It had taken him a while to get used to it, too.

“Here. Let me help. Feels too hot at first. I haven’t forgotten.” Cris smiled, gently taking hold of her collar and adjusting it for her. While it was still in perfect regulation order, now she could breathe.

Thirty seconds passed in silence before she realized that he was too close. The combination of coffee, cigars, and Chilean brandy assaulted her senses. Everything in her was screaming that she should run; after all, hadn’t he warned her that he was no good?

Instead, she was frozen to the spot.

“Thank you.”, she mumbled at last. Heat flooded her face as she turned away, praying in desperation that he hadn’t noticed.

“Hey, one last thing before you go. Remember that everyone around here is searching for a sense of purpose in some way. Take it from someone who’s been down this road. You’ll find what you’re looking for someday— and when you do, the stars we explored will always guide you home. Even for all the pain I got, they never steered me wrong. I’m confident they can and will do the same for you.”

“Thank you, Cris.”

“Anytime. Oh! Almost forgot: If you ever need a study session, or just someone to vent to, I’m always here. I may fly away from this place someday, but it won’t be any time soon.”

“Good to know, considering you still owe me that coffee.”

“I was counting on the fact that you hadn’t forgotten, Cadet.”

“Call me Erin, please. I’ll meet you back here at the end of your shift, and then we can settle old scores. Sound good?”

Cris’ entire body hummed in response. It had been far too long since he’d had someone he could talk to beyond a superior or the voices in his head that questioned his every move. They told him that he was insane, that the tragedy of the ibn Majid was all his fault.

“That sounds. . . Like a dream. I’ll see you back here at about—hmm— 1900 hours?”

“My last class ends at 17:30, so that gives me time to get ready. I’ll see you then. I can grab us dinner on my way over.” With a wave and a smile, she left him to his research again. This time, Cris’ uncertainty faded. He knew he’d made a promise to her he wasn’t certain he could keep.

Now, in the solitude of his research wing, he also knew what it meant to him to feel alive. For the first time in years he had something that he wasn’t willing to give up. He’d often asked himself what it was he wanted from his time as an Academy researcher.

For so long, he’d believed it was about helping vets like himself recover from the wounds of traumatic experiences. He didn’t want anyone to be left in the cold. But what he had told Erin rang true, even for him. Everyone was looking for something, and he wondered if she was the key to finding the thing he’d searched for in the years since his life imploded.

Maybe it was time to give love a chance after all. If his time in Starfleet had taught him anything, it was that hope always won. Perhaps, it still did, even when he couldn’t see it. If he was lucky, she’d hang on long enough for them to go on a journey and find what they were searching for together. Then, for the first time in years, he wouldn’t be alone.

She might make it all worth the risk.

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