

## the also-ran

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1791) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/1791>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Star Trek: Enterprise</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Charles "Trip" Tucker III/T'Pol</a> , <a href="#">Elim Garak/Julian Bashir</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Charles "Trip" Tucker III</a> , <a href="#">T'Pol</a> , <a href="#">Elim Garak</a> , <a href="#">Malcolm Reed</a> , <a href="#">Julian Bashir</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Historical</a> , <a href="#">Mutual Pining</a> , <a href="#">Coming Home</a> , <a href="#">Found Family</a> , <a href="#">Period-Typical Racism</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of <a href="#">far beyond the stars</a>
Stats:	Published: 2024-09-07 Words: 16,456 Chapters: 3/?

## the also-ran

by [meriwethersays](#)

### Summary

And so it comes to this: Trip Tucker, formerly of the SIS, formerly of Bell Aircraft, formerly of the United States Army Air Force, hunting through a junk shop the way he used to when he was a kid to find a half-busted typewriter so Garak can present it to Julius like a bouquet of roses.

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[runner-up](#), the Trip Tucker story.

## before the stars (1928-1948)

### Chapter Summary

The flight is—incredible. The B-29 lifts Glennis up and up and then releases her, and Trip swallows hard against the stinging in his eyes when the technician cries, “That’s Mach 1!” All around him, people are cheering and pounding each other on the back. When Captain Yeager returns, there’s champagne sprayed everywhere and the bar is full of people pouring each other shots of liquor and music playing like a whirlwind. Polly comes downstairs from her room and he grabs her by the hand and pulls her into a spin and then kisses her full on the mouth, for sheer joy more than anything else.

Trip isn’t so much drafted as he is invited to join the war effort. He’s always been good with machines, and he’s been working in his granddaddy’s shop since he was old enough to hold a wrench. TUCKER ENGINE REPAIR, it says, and they work on boats, on cars, on people’s strange little hobby airplanes, refrigerators and typewriters and boilers and radios and just about anything that could break. No one can afford to buy anything new these days. He squirrels away the half-broken parts to build his own toys, solders rotors onto model airplanes to see if he can make them fly. He practices his reading on old issues of *Popular Mechanics*, learns about the Good brothers and their radio-controlled airplanes when he’s eleven and tries to build one himself, but he doesn’t have the right kind of radio.

He’s not much for English and history, but math comes easy to him, physics and chemistry too. His shop teacher tells him he could do more than fix cars, maybe even go to college for engineering. He knows better than to bring it up at home. His father got blown up during the Great War and came back a little wrong, his momma says, but that was long before Trip knew him. All he knows is that his granddaddy runs the shop and his father can’t be counted on to take it over, which means it’ll be his in a few years.

He doesn’t so much graduate high school as he decides to be done with it. By then it’s ’43, and he figures he’ll be drafted if the war isn’t over by the time he turns 18. He’s hoping to be an airplane mechanic, but he knows someone will probably put a gun in his hand and send him off to France.

Around the time the war starts, an odd blue-eyed man named Gary begins coming into the shop now and then with strange little machines for Trip to fix. Trip knows just about everyone in Panama City—it’s not that big a place—and he only ever sees Gary in the shop. He has an unerring sense for when Trip is working, and Trip has stopped asking “What’s it supposed to *do*?” when he accepts a project. Gary seems happy when he gets a tiny engine running, even if it never makes anything happen, and he pays Trip whether or not it’s a success.

One day, Trip’s working on a particularly fiddly little puzzle when Gary comes back early. “‘Fraid it’s not quite ready,” Trip says. “Give me another few hours.”

“Have you figured out what it does?” Gary sounds curious rather than doubtful.

“No,” Trip admits. Well. “Takes some kind of input and—puts out something else.” It’s the best way that he can describe it. He *understands* it, even if he doesn’t have the words to say it.

Gary doesn’t give any indication whether he’s right. “How old are you, son?”

“Seventeen.” Or he will be, in a couple months.

“How would you like to serve your country doing something more interesting than firing a gun?”

Trip’s breath catches at that. There’s no sign of the war ending. If he’s going— “Doing what?”

\* \* \*

He signs on the line and goes through the physical and his momma cries, “We were supposed to have two more years,” and his father goes even quieter than before and his little brother Bert stares up at him with big sad eyes.

“You sure about this, Charlie?” His granddaddy is the only one who doesn’t call him Trip. Charles Tucker III has always sounded too fancy to Trip, but it means something to his granddaddy.

Trip nods. “I’ll be back for the shop when it’s over,” he promises.

There’s something doubtful in his granddaddy’s eyes, but he shakes Trip’s hand and says, “Keep your head down,” and then Trip gets on the bus to Arlington, Virginia.

He almost laughs when he gets there. There’s no sign of Gary, only big rooms full of messy desks with people typing away or flipping through manuals. A good number more women than men, too, which he supposes makes sense when he thinks about it, and which he doesn’t mind much. He’s shown to a desk with three different typewriters, a mechanical calculator, and a set of tools. “Take them apart and put them back together,” his manager tells him. “There’ll be plenty more for you soon enough.”

Well, it’s not exactly aircraft engines, but there’s an energy throughout the whole place that’s contagious. The typewriters are all a little different, some with slots for punch-cards, and when he’s not busy he amuses himself by modifying them more, streamlining their operations, rearranging bits to operate more smoothly. Electric typewriters are rife with little things that can go wrong, after all. Eventually, a girl named Amanda Cole comes to him and says, “How would you like to do something a little more complicated?” She has long dark hair and an easy smile and she’s from Florida too, and she’s gotten him permission to work on code himself, when he’s not repairing machines. “It’s math,” she

tells him, when he struggles initially. “It’s all just math and logic.”

It’s not, really, but it’s *fun* to look for the patterns. Anything he finds gets passed up the ladder, and sometimes he wants to know more, but Amanda smiles at him and shakes her head and sometimes they go dancing together. They would be simple together, he thinks. Go home to their folks when the war is over; he’ll take over the garage and she’ll stay home and raise Charles Tucker IV, and—And that’s where his brain stutters to a halt, because he *likes* this, likes the challenge of it, and he doesn’t think Amanda has much interest in ever moving back to Florida.

Trip is in the midst of this emotional crisis when Gary comes to visit Arlington Hall. Trip is summoned into his supervisor’s room and left alone. The man is in uniform, but without any markings of rank at all. His hair is a little longer than regulation, his blue eyes so sharp now that it’s almost painful to meet them, and he says, “Trip, isn’t it?” as though he might have accidentally summoned the wrong Charles Tucker III from Florida.

“Yes, sir.” Trip salutes, mostly because he assumes anyone older than him is higher ranked. He’d always figured Gary was in the military somehow, what with the recruiting speech, but he’d pretty much stopped expecting to see him.

“How would you like to do something a little different?”

He hears the echoes of Amanda’s words. “Different, sir?”

Gary’s smile is almost conspiratorial. “I understand you have a knack with machines,” he says. “I—travel a great deal, in the service of the Army, and I could use a man who can fix things when they go wrong.” He offers his hand to shake. “You can call me Garak.”

Trip takes it. Garak’s hand is very hot. “Where are we going?”

He doesn’t get the chance to say goodbye to Amanda.

\* \* \*

The things he fixes, as they travel around! Coaxing the last bit of life out of a half-burnt truck outside of Asmara to reach the city so he can set listening devices into the niches of the Italian villas there. Skulking through New Delhi as tensions simmer around Independence Day and he thinks to himself that Britain won’t hold on much longer here, even as he scrounges for the parts they need to repair the listening station there. Garak seems to trust him implicitly, because Garak is off meeting with the sort of people that Trip steers well clear of while Trip is up to his arms in grease and wires. They go to Hawaii, where the ocean thunders against the beaches like it never did in Florida, and he muffles the motors of boats as they transport a linguist, Hoshi Sato, from island to island. He’s not really supposed to look at the information coming in through the listening stations, only to make sure that it gets relayed onward, but sometimes he can’t resist and he marks the patterns that he does see. No one ever complains about it.

Trip realizes that Garak is queer the second time that they’re in New Delhi. It’s a very little thing, the tenderness in a contact’s hand as the man brushes some invisible insect off Garak’s face. Huh, he thinks. He’s never known anyone queer before. Maybe it should feel like a revelation, but he’s already realized that the world is a great deal bigger than his home in Florida—it feels as though he’s spent the last few years realizing it over and over again. Maybe Trip should be unsettled by it, but if so, it would be at the very bottom of a long list of all the things that unsettle him about Garak. “Is that—your fellow?” he asks Garak, once they’ve gotten back to their room for the night.

If Garak is startled, he doesn’t show it. “What, Anjan? No,” he says, his voice a little sharp. “It’s one thing to have someone waiting for you when you march off to war. It’s something very different when you simply—disappear, and reappear sometimes.” He looks hard at Trip, as though he’s about to ask a question, and then doesn’t.

Of course, even as the war winds down, the Allies are already cannibalizing themselves. He sees Russian code intercepts in Alaska and keeps his thoughts to himself until the day that Garak turns to him and says, “I suppose it’s about time for you to go home to Florida.”

Trip stares at him. They’ve just announced the reorganization of the Signal Intelligence Service into the Army Security Agency. He’s seen those lightning-bolt patches that they’re issuing, and it’s not that they really remind him of SS patches but there’s something uneasy in his stomach when he thinks about returning to the United States. He tries to imagine going back to the garage and spending the rest of his life repairing engines and refrigerators. “What are you going to do?”

Garak fixes a sharp look on him, like he knows exactly what Trip is thinking. Over these last two years, Trip has come to realize that Garak pretty much always knows what he’s thinking. “I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?”

“I have a few friends out in California,” Garak says. “I think I’ll—take a little time off. Consider the future.” His eyes are hard as he looks at Trip. “You have a family back in Florida, Trip.” The *don’t waste it* is unspoken but clear.

His father died during the war, under circumstances that no one wants to think about too closely. It’s just his momma and his granddaddy and Bert now. He’ll miss them, but—he’s not the same person that left them. “I’ll write to them,” he says. “If I stayed with the ASA, the agency would probably send me away anyway.” As a young, unattached man—almost certainly. It’s reorganizing into units now, SIGINT and HUMINT. He knows what *human intelligence* means, and that’s Garak’s skill set, not his. “Take me with you to California?”

\* \* \*

California, it turns out, means a crowded bunkhouse on a big piece of property, deep in the woods of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The others are all refugees, for lack of a better word, from the reorganization of the American security state. Three from what used to be the OSS and one from the Army, recognizable even without a uniform.

Maybe things would’ve been different if *she* hadn’t been the first one that he spotted. “Polly,” Garak says, “This is Trip Tucker,” and when he

offers a hand, her nose crinkles with the slightest expression of distaste. She hesitates before accepting it.

“It is nice to meet you, Mr. Tucker,” she says, and he thinks her voice is a little velvety. Her dark hair is cut short and blunt across her forehead like a man’s, her cheekbones sharp and her chin almost pointed, and there’s no smile in her eyes. There’s the slightest wrinkle to her nose as though he smells. He’s caught somewhere between hypnotized and defensive. Polly looks annoyed at the simple fact of his presence, and he wonders if Garak wasn’t supposed to bring him along.

The others are more welcoming—Katie, Captain Chakotay, and Lieutenant Malcolm Reed, who mostly looks uncomfortable. Polly is the only one who watches him like he’s something dangerous. He doesn’t know if it’s his mannerisms—the way he tends to drawl and slur through contractions when she’s so precise—or his slouch or his smile or what, but he finds himself wanting to poke at her a little more, like a little boy trying to get her attention. He shouldn’t do it, not when he’s the odd man out already, but everyone else is happy enough to welcome him in.

The end of the war should be a relief. Somehow, though, it doesn’t feel quite like the end. He doesn’t know what to do with himself and the lurking specter of the split between the United States and the Soviet Union looms larger every day. The *cold war*, Garak calls it, and tells Trip that he should read more Orwell. Polly still has contacts in the government; the things that she tells them about Operation Paperclip, in her measured, emotionless way, make Trip’s stomach churn.

“I can’t,” he says. He leaves for nearly a year. He goes to San Francisco and works on anything he can find, anything he can *fix*. The city is full of new people, returning soldiers and new immigrants and new thoughts. Trip loses himself in it, telling himself that he could be satisfied like this. But then comes the general strike in Oakland, and at the same time the XS-1 rocket plane flies and he remembers that there was a time when he wanted to do more than fix cars.

He’s not surprised when Garak comes to see him. “You look good,” he tells Garak. Garak does, a little less gaunt than he was during the war, his eyes a little less sunken. “You’ve been watching me, haven’t you.”

Garak smiles in the way that means *obviously*. “You heard about the XS-1, I assume,” he says.

“They’ll get it supersonic.” Mach 0.8 on a test flight? They’ll get it there soon.

“You could work there,” Garak tells him, and Trip scoffs.

“I don’t think I’m quite what they’re looking for,” even as everything inside him *yearns* for it. He never went to college, never learned anything he didn’t figure out from taking something apart and trying to put it back together.

“I can get you in.”

“Why?” It’s been a long time since he knew what Garak was into, since they had common goals. “I’m not—sabotaging, or stealing secrets.” He keeps his voice low. His landlady has excellent ears and is always home.

“Not at all.” Garak looks a little insulted. “No, Mr. Tucker, this is—if I’m right, this is the beginning of something, something that could unite the entire world.” He sounds entirely sincere, but Trip has heard him sound sincere before. “If we can build a supersonic plane—if rocket engines become the reality of things, you know what the next step is.”

Trip can’t quite scoff at that. He read the stories about outer space like everyone else, H.G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs when he was supposed to be reading Shakespeare. Sure, they’re only stories but they still live deep in his heart. “And you can get me a job at Bell?”

“Yes,” Garak says. Maybe it’s all a trick, but Trip has been missing adrenaline for far too long.

\* \* \*

He spends six months at Bell Aircraft before Garak has to get him into the Army Air Force to keep working on the project. Some part of him—maybe even some large part of him—wishes that he’d found this before he’d ever met Garak. He could be almost happy working on aircraft design, he thinks. “Polly will be your contact,” Garak tells him. “Your long-distance fiancée.”

“Polly agreed to that?” He’s thought of her a few times, during his time in San Francisco—how vindicated she must have felt, watching him walk away at last. He hasn’t seen her since the day he left Katie’s ranch.

“Eventually.” Garak’s tone suggests that Trip doesn’t want to know how many times she refused first.

Polly arrives in Muroc on the weekly bus a few days later. “Hello, Mr. Tucker,” she says flatly. “How nice to see you again.”

“You know, I don’t think that’s how my girl would greet me after months apart.” There’s a strange energy curling in his stomach and surging through his body, and he doesn’t think it’s heat stroke.

“Very well.” Polly drops a perfunctory kiss on his cheek. She smells like cheap hand soap and, beneath it, other people’s sweat. Her cheek, when she presses it against his, is very smooth. “You did not shave,” she observes, touching her own cheek. “Would you greet your girl in such a manner?”

“Late nights,” he tells her. “We think we’ll have the X-1 ready for Captain Yeager to take up the day after tomorrow.” He’d blushed and stammered and nearly tripped over his own feet when he’d met Captain Yeager the day before. “Come on.” He hefts her suitcase and has to keep himself from swinging it in eagerness. Strictly speaking, Polly is staying at Rancho Oro Verde and he’s bunking at the airfield itself, but there’d been a lot of laughing and elbowing when he’d said his girl was coming to visit and it was clear that no one expected him to come back until late.

Polly's bag bangs hard against his leg and he stumbles a little, leaning against her. That's not so bad, Trip thinks. It's still in the high 80s during the day, even at the beginning of October, and he's sweating clean through his uniform, but he likes the press of her arm against him.

The bartender glances a little judgmentally at Trip as he guides Polly upstairs to her room. This is a respectable establishment, more or less, but no one makes a fuss when Polly flashes a ring on her finger. The electricity is working—Rancho Oro Verde is one of the few places to stay where it's reliable—and there's a big ceiling fan sweeping around with a thwip-thwip-thwip kind of noise. As soon as Polly closes the door, Trip unzips his uniform down nearly to his waist and gasps in a sigh of relief. The heat here at Muroc is brutal, and that's a Florida boy talking.

Polly raises an eyebrow. "A breach of decorum, undoubtedly." Her voice is dry, and he wonders if she's teasing him.

"For sure." He'd strip to his skivvies if he thought he could get away with it. "How're things, Polly?" He mops at his face with a kerchief and for just a minute, he thinks he sees her eyes dart to his neck, his shoulders, the swell of his biceps. "I figure I should stay a couple hours or it'll look suspicious."

"I am here for your report," she says. "*Things* remain stable."

Trip stretches, arms over his head, just to devil her. There's a certain pinched expression on her face and he can't tell a damn thing about what's in her mind. "All right," he says, and he launches into the report. When he gets back to the bunkhouse at nearly 2 AM, there's a lot of teasing and elbowing until someone growls that they're all fired, and then they quiet down.

He doesn't have time to see her the next night, not as they spend their time checking over every inch of the X-1, making sure that every part is just right. In the morning, Captain Yeager looks to be favoring his ribs, but no one dares to say it to him. He pats Glamorous Glennis with gentle fingers and Trip thinks that this plane might be a little bit a part of Captain Yeager, just as it's grown to be a little part of his own heart.

The flight is—incredible. The B-29 lifts Glennis up and up and then releases her, and Trip swallows back the stinging in his eyes when the technician cries, "That's Mach 1!" All around him, people are cheering and pounding each other on the back. When Captain Yeager returns, there's champagne sprayed everywhere and the bar is full of people pouring each other shots of liquor and music playing. Polly comes downstairs from her room and he grabs her by the hand and pulls her into a spin and then kisses her full on the mouth, for sheer joy more than anything else. No one's paying attention to them, not enough to do anything but wolf-whistle before turning back to the celebration.

Polly's hand is pressed to his chest, as though to push him back, and he pants, "Sorry—sorry—but you should've seen it, Pol, it was incredible!" She hasn't lifted her hand away. If anything, she's gripped the material a little, sticky with sweat and liquor and grit, to hold him there, and he can't help thinking she's the prettiest girl in this bar, whiskey in his blood or not. She stays tucked at his side, quiet and dark-eyed as she watches everything, for the next few hours, as everyone works themselves into a frenzy.

Eventually, the men start to trickle away—or upstairs—with the girls they've been celebrating with, and Polly says, "We should go upstairs. It will look strange if we remain down here as the others leave." Trip stumbles over the stairs a little on his way up, brushing his hand across her hip as he catches himself. The look Polly gives him is—different than he'd expected. Something he felt when they kissed, but something he's never seen on her face.

Trip is a nice boy, his momma raised him right, and so he holds the bedroom door open for Polly. He follows her in, but he keeps his hands to himself until the door is closed behind them and she pushes him back against it. His back hits it with a thump. If it hurts he can't feel it because Polly is unbuttoning her dress all the way down the front, one little metal button after another, and her eyes are hot and dark. "Mr. Tucker," she says.

"Trip," he corrects automatically, because whatever's about to happen, he can't have her calling him Mr. Tucker for it. "Pol—" She curls her long fingers on the back of his neck and tugs his head down a little, enough to meet her lips again. His breath catches in his throat and the world isn't just spinning because of the alcohol anymore. His hands drop to her hips, then skate up her sides to sneak in where her dress hangs open. Her bare skin is soft and a little damp and he can't seem to touch enough of it. He's a nice boy, he reminds himself. He's twenty-one and he's gone with modern girls before, but he's never found someone as hard to read as Polly. The noises that she makes are the barest of sighs, a sharp breath revealed only by the slight rise and fall of her chest when he kisses the hollow of her collarbone. "What do you want?" He says it against her breast and she shrugs out of her dress, letting it flutter to the tile floor. "Tell me—"

"I should think it was obvious." Polly unzips his jumpsuit down to his waist and slides her hand inside to cup him through the fabric of his briefs, and the back of his head hits the door with a *thunk*.

"Pol," he says, because he's having trouble with words now, his hips hitching forward against the warmth of her hand. God. "I don't—" Nice boys are careful, careful never to get a girl into trouble (all right, *nice* boys don't have to worry about that at all). Her hand is searing but he wants to see more of her if she'll let him. His fingers find the clasp of her bra and— "Christ, you're beautiful," the words just spill out of him and he winces internally, Lord's name in vain and all but he'd happily go to hell for this.

"Your mouth could be put to better use," she tells him, in that stern unimpressed way she has. He surges forward and half-carries her to the bed so he can lay her down. The noises she makes now are a little less quiet and her fingers slip inside his briefs to find bare skin. He's half curved over her so that he can lick at her nipples, his jumpsuit trapped on by his boots, and if she keeps stroking him he'll make a mess of himself. As though she can hear him, she releases him—he takes it back, all he wants is her hand back, he'll happily make a fool of himself—and touches her hand to the top of his head, just lightly enough to tell him exactly where she wants his mouth. He leaves her garter belt in place, hooks his finger into one strap just enough to snap it a little, and tugs her panties out of the way. He's a little sloppy, uncoordinated with whiskey and adrenaline, but she tightens her fingers in his hair even if she won't make more than the slightest noises in the back of her throat. She's so quiet that he almost misses it until she stiffens like she's been shocked and pulls his hair hard for a moment. There, he wants that, more of that— She pulls him back up and half-rolls them both over and grips him tight, and Trip is twenty-one years old and it doesn't take much more than that to set him off.

He lies on the narrow bed, gasping in long breaths, while Polly stands and retrieves her dress. He likes to think it's a mark of how unsettled she is that she buttons it back up without putting her bra back on, as though she's about to go back out into the world. "Pol," he says, and he

doesn't quite know what he wants to say from there. *Marry me* would be especially funny, considering the ring on her finger. It's nothing he hasn't done before, but somehow his skin feels strange all over. He remembers there was a day in Alaska, during the war, when they'd been out in knee-deep snow for hours and then he'd gone inside to sit by a fire, and the heat had been an almost painful relief. It's like that, this feeling.

"You should get back," Polly says, as though it's been just another of their debriefing sessions. "They'll notice you've been gone."

"No one is noticing a damn thing tonight." He'd wager his life—no, he's wagered his life before, not that but a lot—that the bunkhouse is either empty or very, very loudly occupied right now. "You want me to leave, Pol?"

The stiffness is back. "Is there further information that you need to share?" She raises an eyebrow as though that's the only reason he might stay. Not to kick off his boots and lie down in bed with her, not to feel her body pressed against him again, not to kiss her in the sticky heat.

Trip swallows the slight hysterical laugh bubbling up in his throat. "No," he manages to say. "No, I'll let you know if I think of anything." And look at that, he never even took off his boots—it's easy to reassemble himself well enough. He stumbles his way back through the desert to Muroc in the predawn light. It would be humiliating to step on a rattlesnake and die now, in these days of miracles and wonder.

Polly leaves two days later. "You better marry that girl," Georgie teases him, "before she gets sick of waiting."

"Gotta talk her folks around," Trip says. Lord, but he can't imagine the kind of people who would've produced Polly. "Catholics," he improvises. "Real religious types."

Georgie groans and Trip laughs and shoves him and they wrestle a little, still high on their own success.

Polly has her suitcase packed the next time he visits her. The bus only runs every week, and she's already stayed for two. "Garak will contact you," she says. "When it's time to leave." He knows—can feel it in his bones—that Captain Yeager's flight means the end of his own time working on the X-1 project, at least if he stays with Garak and whatever, exactly their plan is.

"Not you?" It's strange to look at her now, knowing what's under all the buttons—knowing what her face looks like when she's not quite so careful.

"I believe our pretense will no longer be required." Polly doesn't quite fidget with the ring on her finger, but she comes close.

"The fellas will be disappointed," he says. "They all warned me to marry you before you get tired of waiting around." He doesn't know why he says it. This was never a complicated deception. They only ever had that one night, whatever it was. He spent more time half-naked with Amanda Cole than he has with Polly.

Polly frowns. "If you feel that would add verisimilitude—" She moves as though she's going to pull the ring off.

"Christ, no." He grabs her hands to stop her, and it feels *right*, her hands in his. He rubs his thumb across the plain metal circle. "Just—we might need it again later," he says weakly. "No reason to throw it away now."

"I did not intend to dispose—" She stops. "I suppose you are correct."

Trip carries her bag to the bus station in the October heat and waits with her. They don't talk much, standing there—what's there to talk about that they could say freely aloud? When the bus wheezes up in a cloud of dust, Trip hands Polly her bag. "Goodbye," she says.

Trip cups her face in both hands and kisses her in defiance of propriety and good sense and everything else in the world. When he releases her, she stares at him, expressionless, for a minute, and then boards the bus.

He spends another eight months at Muroc, helping to examine the X-1 and carefully not thinking about whatever it was between him and Polly. Mach 2 is the next step, he knows. There are a dozen new wanna-be-Yeagers arriving in town every day, all ready to face that demon in the sky. It's nearly Christmas when Georgie tells him, "You could get yourself transferred here, if you wanted." Georgie's the wrong color to be in charge of any project, at least now, but no one goes up in a plane that he hasn't looked over with his sharp eyes first. "You're good, everyone's seen it." When Trip starts to answer, Georgie puts a hand on his shoulder and says quietly, "Think about it."

Trip does. He thinks about the feeling of an engine beneath his hand, about the way he used to solder parts from different machines together to see if he could make them do something else entirely. He thinks of the Sabre XP-86 that flew two weeks before Yeager—and then, of his father, the bleak expression he'd get on his face sometimes, like he was somewhere else entirely. The way that America and the Soviet Union have been squaring off against each other since before the war ended, and the things that President Truman said more than a year ago and has been saying ever since while people kill each other in Greece and Turkey. The B-29 bomber that dropped Glennis in the first place, and the Sabre's bomb bays that he knows are meant to hold napalm. "No," he tells Georgie, and then he picks up the telephone and dials the secure phone number that will connect him to Katie and Chakotay's. "I've been pretty homesick lately," he says, and by Easter he's back at their ranch.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

“I’ll take your entire thought process over not having an inkling of what’s in your head any day, Pol,” Trip says.

“You persist in calling me that. Is my two-syllable name too complex?”

Trip squeezes her tight against him. “I like having something to call you that no one else does.” If she sounded honestly angry about it, he wouldn’t, of course. “Does it bother you?”

In the near-dark of the plane, he can’t see her face. “No,” she says finally. “It is acceptable.” She tucks her forehead beneath his chin and curls a little closer. “We should attempt to sleep.”

Attempt. That’s the real trick of it.

It’s easy to fall back into the old rhythm with Garak. Their little group has a running account with Mayweather Aviation Service, two civilian pilot brothers who fly in and out of San Francisco, to take them around the state without asking questions. Travis, the older, is a black man a couple years older than Trip, and he’s even willing to let Trip poke around his modified Cessna 140 sometimes just for fun. Reed is on every mission with Trip and Garak now, and they never know exactly what they’ll be doing until they get wherever they’re going and Garak tells them. Trip is the one who fixes things and Reed is the one who shoots things. It’s tense at first, squaring off over who’s more important, but they find their own peace. The bickering turns good-natured, most of the time, and Reed teaches him to hold his own in a fight in a very different way than Garak ever did.

They’re in Karachi, invisible in the mass exodus and influx that’s underway thanks to Partition, waiting for Garak to return from a meeting to accomplish God knows what. Reed has acquired a few bottles of Murree beer, miraculously cold, and they’re entertaining themselves when Reed says, “You ever notice what a nice bum Polly has?”

Trip chokes on his beer. “Don’t talk about her that way,” he snaps, and some part of him is surprised at the violence of his reaction. “She’s a nice girl.” Of course he’s noticed. She’s been off on some mission for the last six months now—he hasn’t seen her alone since he kissed her at the bus stop. Not that he spends a lot of time thinking about it or anything.

Reed stares at him. “I don’t know what you call a nice girl in *Florida*,” he says, “but I doubt Polly fits.” He lifts his beer and gestures at Trip’s. “Have you ever asked her what she did during the war?”

“No.” Trip takes an uncomfortable sip. Embarrassment simmers in his stomach. “I just figured. You know. Like Katie.” Running a bar, passing information. “You’re saying she was some kind of—Mata Hari?”

Reed snorts into his beer. “Our Polly, seducing German officers?” He shakes his head. “Tucker, I’d wager you a case of beer that she’s killed more Germans than you.”

“I wasn’t ever really on the western front,” Trip says absently. “Or any front.” Reed has never been explicit about what exactly *he* did with the OSS, and Trip has never asked.

“You don’t know very much about her at all, do you?” Reed raises an eyebrow. “What did you even talk about when you were pretending to be—” There must be something on Trip’s face, because he stops. “She was in the Resistance, Tucker. Sleeping in barns and basements, kidnapping Nazi officers and blowing up railroad tracks—even married a Frenchman for a little while, Cosse or something like that. I never knew if that was part of her cover or not.”

The thought of Polly *married* makes Trip squirm a little. “She’s not exactly—chatty about her personal life. Or her history.”

“I do appreciate that about her,” Garak says, dropping onto the balcony from somewhere unseen, and both Trip and Reed startle so much that they almost knock over their beers. No matter how good either of them gets, they’ll never be able to spot Garak. Garak tosses a package to Trip. “Pack it all up,” he says. “There’s a boat in port, and we’ve got 12 hours to get it to Assab.” For a little while, at least, that puts an end to all thoughts of Polly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Almost two years slip by, just like that. It’s a quiet week between assignments, so he’s helping Chakotay weatherproof the latest addition to the house. There’s the noise of tires on gravel, and Chakotay says, “That must be Polly. She said she would be getting in tonight.” He probably says something else, but Trip is already scrambling down from the ladder.

Polly looks—well, all right, Polly looks like she always does, vaguely unimpressed with everything and just a little bit elfin. Her hair’s a little longer, almost brushing the back of her collar, and when he says “Hey, Pol,” one eyebrow goes sharply up.

“Mr. Tucker,” she says. Her voice is perfectly even and she offers him an envelope. “This letter was at the post office when I arrived.”

As quick as his heart rose to see her, it drops now. He gave out the post office in town as his mailing address to his momma and just about nobody else. Chakotay is greeting Polly too, asking her how the assignment went and if she wants anything to eat, but Trip just stands there in the hallway and opens the letter.

Trip, it says, *I hope you get this letter in time. Your grandfather is very ill and asking for you. Please come home.*

“Chakotay.” He tries to keep himself from going shaky. “I need to make a long-distance call.”

“Trip!” His momma’s voice sounds strange over the crackly long-distance call. “Where are you?”

“Never mind, is he still alive? I can be there tomorrow, maybe day after—”

“You should come quick,” she says. “He’s been asking for you.”

“Can you put him on the phone? I just want to tell him myself—”

There’s a long silence, and then the sound of labored breathing. “Charlie?”

“Yeah, Grandpa, it’s me—I just wanted to tell you I’m coming home, all right, so you better hang on a little while longer.” Trip digs his thumbnail into the pad of his finger to keep his voice even.

His granddaddy laughs, and it turns to harsh coughing quickly. “Better hurry up, son,” he says. “Tell that bus driver to step on the gas.”

Trip hangs up the phone and says, “I’ve got to get to Florida, as quick as I can.”

“We surmised from your telephone conversation,” Polly says. “It will take more than a week if you attempt to travel as a member of the public. Katie has contacted Garak to investigate alternative options.” She actually puts a hand on his arm to reassure him. “He will find a manner of transportation.”

\* \* \*

It’s Mayweather Aviation Service that makes it happen. “It’s going to be a long flight,” Travis warns them. Apparently his father’s old friend runs cargo flights from San Francisco to Miami and is willing to refuel in Panama City, Florida instead of his usual stop, for a good enough price.

“I don’t care,” Trip says. He’s been on long flights, slept against the walls of troop carriers and cargo ships before. “*Thank you, Travis.*”

“Sure.” Travis looks a little uncomfortable. “So it’s going to be—the two of you?”

“Yeah.” Trip doesn’t know what urgent security need could possibly justify sending *Polly*, of all people, along with him on this journey, but Garak had claimed—convincingly, though Garak was always convincing—over the phone that there really was a mission for her.

It’s a silent, uncomfortable flight to the airstrip outside of San Francisco where a good old DC-4 is waiting. Travis speaks softly to the pilot, who gives a thumbs-up and gestures Trip and Polly into the cargo bay. The cargo bay appears to be fully loaded, the plane’s propellers already running, and it’s a terrific noise until the door shuts.

The plane has been modified for more cargo capacity, Trip sees. The passenger seats have been stripped out, leaving only two long low benches bolted to one wall and a stack of blankets between them. There’s a radio by the benches and someone—the copilot, Trip presumes—says, “We’re a little behind schedule, waiting for you, so hold tight. Might try to skip a refuel stop to make up the time.” The crates in the cargo bay shake and groan as the plane rolls forward into takeoff.

“Nice that they left the windows,” Trip tells Polly, more for something to say than anything else. He braces himself against the wall and presses his face to watch the ground fall away from them. The metal rattles hard as they climb up into the clouds. “I’m sorry you got roped into this.”

Polly sits down on one of the benches. “I was not ‘roped’ into anything, Mr. Tucker. I have a task to perform. Accompanying you to your family home provides cover for that task.”

Trip sees her shiver a little, and he unfolds one of the blankets and offers it to her. “Wrap up,” he tells her. “It’s only going to get colder.” Polly accepts the blanket grudgingly and drapes it around her shoulders. He sits down next to her. “What’s your task?” When Polly glances pointedly at the radio speaker, Trip lowers his voice. “Come on, Pol,” he whispers. “No chance anyone can hear anything over all the noise in here.”

Polly leans close against him until her lips are almost at his ear, and he shivers hard when she speaks. “Tyndall Air Force Base,” she says, and her voice is so soft that he can barely hear it.

He huffs out a laugh when he realizes what she’s talking about. “What, the gunnery school? They turned Tyndall Field into an Air Force base?” He feels, rather than hears, her sigh. “Whenever it thunderstormed, my momma used to say that the boys at Tyndall must be practicing with mortars. She always wanted to meet Clark Gable.”

“It is a pilot training school now,” Polly says, and her lips do brush her ear. The press of her shoulder is warm against his. “I plan to acquire information regarding the individuals to be trained there.”

When he turns, his nose brushes hers and she starts back a little. “Do you know,” he says, “I don’t think we’ve been on any kind of mission together since Muroc.” He knows very well that they haven’t.

“I assumed we would employ the same deception in this circumstance,” Polly says. When he stares at her, she lifts her hand and he catches it in his own. He runs his thumb over the cold circle of metal on her ring finger.

“You want to tell my dying granddaddy that we’re engaged?”

“Actually,” Polly says, and she doesn’t pull her hand away, “I believe we should tell him that we are married.”

A mildly hysterical laugh escapes Trip. “Unless I missed something—”

“We are unlikely to be afforded any meaningful privacy during which to discuss other matters unless we share a room.” He can’t help the way that his hand twitches a little at the sound of that. “It is logical that we present ourselves as husband and wife.”

“And let them all think we got married without so much as sending a telegram?”

“Do you have a better idea?” Polly sounds genuinely curious, which is damn annoying because no, he doesn’t, it hadn’t occurred to him because he hadn’t known there was going to be a *mission* at all.

“No.” Trip releases her hand. “Just—we’ll say it was recent, all right?”

“Very well.”

When she shivers again, Trip sighs. “C’mere,” he says, and lays another blanket across both of their laps.

“What does your family know about your current circumstances? I do not wish to cause difficulties.” He tries to imagine how his momma will look at a woman who can’t use a contraction, and winces.

“Not much. I send money home. No one’s much of a letter-writer, or reader.” His momma knows how to read and write, enough, but she’s never been the kind to sit at a table with a pen and paper.

“When were you last home?”

Trip winces at that. “Before the war.” He thinks he hears the slightest noise of surprise in her throat, quickly stifled. “I meant to go visit, after the war was over, but then all the security agencies were taking over everything and it felt like I had to get out quick.” And because he knew that if he went home and found his father gone and his granddaddy getting older, he might feel so guilty that he would stay, and never escape.

“Tell me about your—granddaddy,” Polly says, and he hears her struggle to say the last word.

“He’s—” Trip doesn’t know how to describe him. It’s the exhaustion and this close darkness and Polly’s soft voice in his ear, all together, that makes him say, “He’s been more my father than—” He hesitates. His momma would be horrified to hear him talk like this. “He’s the reason we’re in Florida,” he says instead. “He worked at the Pensacola Navy Yard during the war—the Spanish-American one, I mean—and then moved out to Panama City to open up the repair shop a couple years before the canal opened and everybody was moving there.”

“He is the person who taught you to repair broken things,” Polly says. She rests her head very gently on his shoulder, and when Trip nods, his chin brushes her soft hair.

“Yeah. Since I was little. Always knew I’d take over the shop when I grew up, because my father—” The man’s dead now anyway. “My father was good at fixing stuff but not with anything else.”

“You have difficulty speaking about your father.” Polly presses a little closer and he adjusts, wrapping his arm and the blanket tighter around her.

Trip shrugs. “I never knew him when he was himself. My momma said he came back a little wrong from the war—the Great War, I mean—and he never talked very much, or did anything but tinker. He—died, five years ago. During the last war.”

“There seems to be one for each of you,” Polly says, and it hits brutally. He’s not going to admit that he’s shit-scared about Bert getting drafted and sent to Korea now, or that he’s thought about asking Garak if there’s a way to make sure that doesn’t happen.

“Yeah.” The plane hits a pocket of rough air and drops what feels like ten feet, and Polly nearly falls into his lap. He catches her and pulls her closer. Her face is tilted up now, watching him, and he leans down to kiss her in the dim cargo bay because he can’t think of a single good reason not to. Polly hooks her arm around the back of his neck and inhales unsteadily. “Tell the truth,” he says, and kisses her again, longer this time. “We don’t need to spend the night together every night just so you can—update me about what’s happened on this mission of yours—” She holds him there and kisses him when he tries to keep talking, long enough that he forgets what he was going to say.

“We need some explanation for my presence,” Polly says, and when she kisses his pulse point, he hisses in a breath. “Based on cultural norms, a romantic attachment will be accepted most readily. A wife would be more likely to accompany you than a fiancée. I simply”—she doesn’t quite squeak when he kisses the shell of her ear “—did not believe it was necessary to explain my entire thought process.”

He sits back just enough that she’ll take him seriously. “I’ll take your entire thought process over not having an inkling of what’s in your head any day, Pol.”

“You persist in calling me that,” she says. “Is my two-syllable name too complex?”

Trip squeezes her tight against him. They can’t do much more than kiss here, probably shouldn’t even do too much of that, but it’s a lot more pleasant than contemplating what’s waiting at home. “I like having something to call you that no one else does.” If she sounded honestly angry about it, he wouldn’t, of course. “Does it bother you?”

In the near-dark of the plane, he can’t see her face. “No,” she says finally. “It is acceptable.” She tucks her forehead beneath his chin and curls a little closer. “We should attempt to sleep.”

Attempt. That’s the real trick of it.

When they step out of the plane, the air is thick and wet—it's got to be nearly 90 out and it's only noon. Bert is waiting for them. He was only ten when Trip left, and Trip wouldn't recognize him except he's the only person there and he looks an awful lot like Trip's father might've, when he was young. "Bert, hey." He pulls Bert into a hard hug, because it saves him having to think of what to do next. "You should—this is my wife, Polly."

Bert cuts quick glances at them the whole long drive home, Polly wedged between them in the middle seat of the truck. "Momma's going to lose her mind when she finds out you went and got married." There's a hint of the little-brother mischief in his voice that Trip remembers.

"Yeah, well." Trip ducks his head a little and laces his fingers through Polly's. "It was a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing. I meant to write." The noise of the truck's engine drowns out anything else Bert might've said. It's a good thirty minutes' driving from the airfield to the garage and Trip spends it mostly staring out the window trying to catalog all the changes around him. He remembers Panama City as a town, a place with a couple stores and a schoolhouse and not much else, the air always humid and the dirt roads always muddy from the rain. It's been less than eight years, but still it seems like there are houses sprouting everywhere. "It got a lot bigger," Trip says stupidly.

"More'n doubled in size," Bert tells him. "The shop's busier than ever." The truck rumbles to a stop. Trip wouldn't even have recognized the place except for the TUCKER ENGINE REPAIR sign across the top, freshly painted. When he gets out of the truck, he almost stumbles and has to cover it by making as if to turn and help Polly out too. He's been around the world and no country has ever looked as strange to him as this place does.

Bert leads them back behind the shop, to the front door of the house, and a sharp pain lances through Trip's heart. The big front porch is all fixed up now, not sagging like Trip remembers, even if the paint is peeling off the siding of the house. An old man is sitting in a chair, tucked into a blanket. He's very frail, his skin stretched tight across his bones, but he lifts a shaky hand to wave.

Trip forgets Bert and Polly and everything else. He scrambles his way up the porch stairs and his voice breaks a little when he says, "Granddaddy."

"Charlie." His granddaddy's voice is thin and cracked, but somewhere behind it is the man that Trip knew. "Guess that bus driver was pretty quick after all."

Trip laughs a little helplessly and grasps his granddaddy's hand. It's shockingly thin, the skin all too soft, and Trip squeezes too hard before he remembers himself. "Figured the bus would be too slow, so we hitched a ride on an airplane." When his granddaddy raises an eyebrow, Trip turns and finds that Polly is standing a few steps away, her face very even. "This is—Polly. My—wife."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Tucker," she says in that low sweet way she has sometimes, when she tries. "Trip has spoken of you a great deal."

His granddaddy smiles. "Polly Tucker, pleased to meet you." He holds out his other hand to Polly, and she takes it. *Polly Tucker*. Trip hadn't even thought about how that would sound. "Trip's momma is going to be awfully sore at him for not telling us about you."

"It was—" Polly's eyes find Trip's. "Unexpected."

Trip realizes how that will sound exactly as his granddaddy says, "If I'm gonna be a great-grandpa, it better be soon."

"No, not like that," Trip says. "Only we didn't—realize how it was, between us, until all of a sudden we did." He fumbles for the words. "Where's Momma?"

"Gracie!" His granddaddy finally releases their hands, and even with the heat, Trip wishes he hadn't. He looks like he's liable to fall asleep at any second and just—not wake up. "Gracie, Charlie's home!"

The next hour passes in a blur of tears (Momma's), a good hard smack upside the head (also Momma), and a fresh-baked pecan pie. Bert helps Granddaddy to bed not long after they go inside, and Trip and Polly eat pie with his momma. "You could've called to let me know," Momma says, still a little tearful. She's always been steely deep down, but she hides it around company. "There's a phone in the shop, you know."

"I'm very sorry," Polly says. She takes a very neat bite of pecan pie.

"Oh, honey, I don't blame you." His momma looks between them. "How did you meet?" She asks it a little carefully, like maybe she also thinks that Trip got Polly knocked up and they had to get married.

Trip is a little insulted. "At the end of the war," he says. "We were both—overseas. We've known each other for five years now." He glances at Polly and can't help smiling, for all that his insides feel like he's being cut up with knives. "It just took us awhile to figure ourselves out, and then we couldn't see any point in waiting." He swallows hard. "What's wrong with Granddaddy?"

Momma sighs. "When your father died—" She's clear-eyed about that. Trip still remembers the brusque message he'd gotten saying that his father had drowned in a boating accident, relayed overseas. He'd opened a bottle of amaro in his hideout with Garak that night and drunk most of it, and by the morning that was the end of it. "It was very hard on your grandpa."

"That was five years ago."

"Well, it does tend to affect a person strongly, losing a child," Momma snaps, and there's plenty behind that. Unspoken is what they all know, that his father grew up around boats and when they found his body two days later, his blood wasn't exactly clean. Still as far as Trip remembers, his father had been slipping away since before Trip was born. "He had a stroke then, the doctor thinks, and another one last month. But they don't really know, and I can't exactly take him to Sacred Heart in Pensacola—"

"If you need money—" Trip seizes on the only thing he knows that he can do. "I can pay—" He sends money home every month like clockwork, but it's not as though he needs much to live on.

Momma's laugh is short. "It's not about money. He wouldn't go, when he still could, and now he can't." She shakes her head. "I know you're born to fix things, Trip, but you can't fix him." She looks to Polly. "I made up the guest room for you and Polly. We got a shower put in, and a toilet—Bert said we should name the toilet after you." There's a slight smile on her mouth. None of this is new for her, Trip realizes. Granddaddy has been slowly dying in front of her for years and she's never said a word about it.

"I should've come home," Trip says abruptly, grabbing her hand. "I should've come home after the war—I should've known—" *Coulda, woulda, shoulda*, Granddaddy would say.

Momma squeezes his hand, but she doesn't tell him any different. "Go get settled in," she tells him. "Maybe you can take a look at the truck later."

"Yeah, it was rattling something awful," Trip answers automatically. Polly's fingers at his elbow urge him to stand up, and she stands as he does. "Okay, Momma."

He and Polly find their way to the guest room, a new bedroom built onto the back of the house—next to what must be the new bathroom—that's just big enough to hold a bed for the two of them. There's a big ceiling fan spinning in lazy rotations. "I'm gonna take a shower unless you want the first one," he tells Polly, abruptly too exhausted for good manners.

"You need it more," Polly says, and there's the slightest crinkle to her nose that means either he smells or she's joking or both.

"Pol—" He stands there a little helpless, wishing she'd hug him and not quite sure how to ask for it, until finally he just turns and walks out of the room and into the bathroom. The shower is a good hard spray and he scrubs away everything he can of what he's feeling with the same old harsh soap as when he was a kid. When he returns to the bedroom, towel wrapped tight around his waist, Polly is sitting on the bed a little stiffly.

"Your mother left clothing for you," she says. There's a neat stack on the small dresser. "I will shower now, if that is all right."

Jesus. "Pol," he says again, and this time he catches her shoulder, wraps his arms around her, and presses his face against her hair.

"You are much cleaner than I am," Polly says, but she holds him close as he struggles to get his feelings under control. It feels like he can't get enough air into his lungs no matter how deep he breathes. She strokes her hand across his back wordlessly.

"He's—God, he's so *old*, he's dying and I didn't know it—" He tries to time his breaths to the movements of her hand. "I'm all right," he lies, when he can breathe evenly again. "You should—go take a shower." He releases her, and Polly takes a little longer to unwrap her arms.

"I will not be long," she says, as though he can't keep himself together for five minutes alone.

Trip pulls on some of the clothes from the stack automatically and sits back down on the bed. It's all a little tight across his shoulders and arms and thighs; he's put on more than a little muscle since he was a kid living here. When Polly comes back in, hair slicked back wet and darker than usual, Trip looks at her and thinks she's the most beautiful woman he's ever met.

Polly raises an eyebrow at him, as though she can tell what he's thinking, and carefully drapes her towel so that it will dry before she reaches into her rucksack for clean clothes. "God," Trip says reflexively. He hasn't seen her naked since that night at Muroc, and never like this. She drops her clean clothes on the bed next to him and then walks right up to stand between his legs. Polly cups his face in her hands and Trip casts around desperately for something to do with his hands before settling his hands on the curves of her hips. When he kisses her, she tastes like water.

Polly pulls away very slowly. "We should not delay," she says, as though he's the one walking around naked, but her voice cracks a little. Trip can't think of anything he'd rather do than stay in this room with Polly and learn every single touch that she likes—forget all about his family outside, pretend that everything is fine—but he knows she's right.

"Yeah. I said I'd look at the truck." He clears his throat and stands up when she's stepped back. The clothes are tighter now. "Come on out when you're ready."

He goes out to the shop and stares at the telephone for a long minute. He could call Garak collect, could ask Garak to find a way to get his granddaddy to the big hospital in Pensacola to see a doctor. He even lifts the phone off the hook. Then he puts it back. He pulls on a jumpsuit over his clothes and gets up to his elbows in the guts of the truck, grease streaked across his face and a burn on his forearm, and it feels like he's sixteen all over again. There's something comforting about the internal combustion engine, something that lets his conscious mind go slack as he works. It must be nearly an hour before he hears Bert say, "Nobody ever made that truck run better than you did."

Trip closes the hood and wipes his hands on a shop rag, then pats the car affectionately. "First car I ever fixed, and the first one I ever drove."

"Momma taught me how to drive," Bert says. There's the slightest accusation in his voice. "Granddaddy's awake. He's asking for you."

Trip takes a deep breath and mops his face with the rag too, then peels himself gingerly out of the jumpsuit. "Okay."

Granddaddy is wrapped up in blankets again, sitting on the couch in the living room. "Charlie?" he asks.

"Yeah." Trip walks over and sits down next to him. Seven years ago, he felt small sitting on this couch with Granddaddy. "How you doing?"

He waves a shaky hand. "Been dying for awhile," he says. "Nothing much to tell. I want to hear about everything you've been doing, all out in the world."

Trip swallows hard against the ache in his throat. “I went to Africa,” he says. “Not when the Desert Fox was there, but after. A place called Asmara, in Eritrea.” Names with no meaning for his granddaddy, he knows, but they still conjure up memories for him and he thinks his granddaddy must be able to feel something of it. “It was high up, so high the air was hard to breathe sometimes, and you could almost see your breath in the morning and then you’d be sweating by dinnertime. Nothing like home,” he admits. He’s not supposed to talk in specifics about where he was, but he can’t see the harm in telling a dying man about it, and it still feels like a gut-punch to think of the man next to him as dying. “And New Delhi, in India—” He wishes he had the words to communicate it, to conjure even the slightest picture. “There were so many people, more’n you’ve ever seen in your life,” he says. “Garak—my commanding officer—if he hadn’t been there to steer me around, I never would’ve found my way.”

Granddaddy blinks slowly. “That where you met Polly?”

“What, India? No, that was—later.” Later, when they all fled from the new intelligence regime, because it was one thing in wartime and a very different thing when there was no war declared, only unending suspicion and hostility.

“You don’t wear a ring,” Granddaddy says. “She wouldn’t buy you one?” His laugh is choked, and it takes Trip a minute to realize he’s making a joke.

“I’m gonna make one,” he improvises. “While I’m here at home. It—seems right.”

“You make one,” Granddaddy agrees in a mumble. “Your father never had one, you know. I never did either.”

“Yeah.” Trip doesn’t think he’d want his father’s if there’d been one. Men’s rings are a new fashion anyway, one more relic of the war. Chakotay was the first man he ever met who was wearing one. “I’ll show it to you before I show it to her, okay? You tell me if it’s good enough.”

“Okay.” He can barely understand the word, and he realizes that Granddaddy is slipping off to sleep, his breathing hitched and uneven. A part of Trip is desperate to get away, to find something to occupy his hands and his mind, but there’s a voice in his head that there are only so many more moments like this, with this man who he thinks he must’ve believed would live forever. So he stays there on the couch, sweating through his shirt and watching the rise and fall of Granddaddy’s chest.

\* \* \* \* \*

It’s hard to say goodnight. Granddaddy barely eats dinner and it’s hard for Trip to swallow the fish that Bert brought home, watching Momma try to coax Granddaddy to eat a few bites of soup. After dinner, Trip spends a long time sitting on the front porch while Polly and Momma wash the dishes. It doesn’t hit him until after that, until he and Polly are alone in their room, that he’s never slept in a bed with her before.

She’s got some sort of nightgown that she brought with her, something filmy and white, and any other time Trip would appreciate it. But he’s too wrung out to do anything but lie in bed next to her, too wrung out even to say any of what he’s feeling again. She puts her hand on his shoulder, very gentle, and says, “Try to sleep, Trip.”

Something jolts him awake a few hours after he finally does, something that makes him scramble out of bed barefoot and run to his granddaddy’s room. When he gets there, everything is quiet, his granddaddy’s chest just barely rising and falling, and Trip takes his papery hand and holds it tight. “I came home,” he says absurdly. His granddaddy doesn’t squeeze back, but Trip sits there on the bed anyway, half-dozing, holding onto him. He doesn’t know if his granddaddy ever wakes up enough to feel Trip’s hand, because by the time it’s light, he’s gone.

Things blur a little from there. Momma and Bert are sad, but Trip sees a relief in their faces and eventually realizes, of course, they’ve been watching him die bit by bit for years. Trip’s the only one shocked, the only one who feels cheated somehow. Sixteen years he had his granddaddy, sixteen years and then just this one last day, and it’s unfair in a particularly bitter way because he knows it’s his own fault that he hasn’t been home. He wants to help, but he comes to realize that he’s mostly just in the way, that Momma and Bert have known what was coming for a long time.

The hearse is there half an hour after Bert calls, and they load what’s left into the back of the car and there’s something sour and acidic in the back of Trip’s throat. He wants to throw up, to get this sick feeling out of him, but instead he retreats to the garage. A ring, Granddaddy said. Trip was supposed to make a ring to wear himself. The worktables are full of jars of metal pieces, from nuts to washers to busted screws, everything anybody ever pulled out of a machine and didn’t put back in the last thirty-odd years. He picks through the jars with a kind of mindless desperation until he finds some of the bits he used to use in his own childhood constructions, buried deep. He solders and grinds until the tips of his fingers are burnt and prickly, and by the end of it he’s got a wide, flat steel band that will slide over his knuckle and rest easy at the base of his ring finger. He thinks Granddaddy would’ve approved—he was never much for decoration.

“Trip.”

His head jerks up from where he’s staring at the ring on the workbench. It’s Polly—of course it’s Polly. “They send you to find me, Pol?” She’s wearing a very severe dark green dress and he wants to pull her to him and never let go.

“Your mother told me that you would be in here,” Polly says. She approaches him slowly, like he might startle away. “She asked me to tell you that you don’t need to worry about anything. They have it all under control.” Trip looks away from her, back down to the ring, and she says, “What’s that?”

“Gr—” Trip has to clear his throat. “Granddaddy says it wasn’t right, you wearing a wedding band and me not having one. I told him I’d make one and show it to him first before I showed it to you.”

“May I?” Polly lifts the ring delicately between her thumb and forefinger to inspect it. “Should they match?”

“Should they—hell if I know,” he says, and there’s almost a laugh in there somewhere. “D’you want them to?”

Polly rubs her thumb along the smooth surface of the ring and her eyes flick to his. “Yes,” she says decisively. “They should match.” She puts his ring down and slips off the plain band that she wears. A part of Trip realizes that she’s probably trying to distract him—what better way, after all, than to give him a new project—but he wants to make something, something nice, something Polly will look at and think about him. She stays in the garage and doesn’t talk while he hammers out something new to match his own, something that will match the slim size of her old ring. He’s no jeweler, but he ends up with a ring that looks like his own, imperfections and all.

“What do you think?” he asks, offering it in his open palm. “It’s not as shiny as the old one, but—”

“Yes,” Polly says. “Are you going to give it to me?” That’s what I was doing, Trip doesn’t say. Polly offers her delicate hand, fingers spread, and Trip catches her hand and slides the ring he’s made onto her ring finger. He kisses it when he settles it at the base of her finger, and he can’t think too hard about what they’re doing, exchanging these rings. Polly picks up his ring from the workbench and slips it onto his finger, careful of the blisters on his fingertip, and for a minute Trip can’t breathe. Then she presses him softly back against the bench and tilts her head up for a kiss. Trip gives it to her, sweet as anything, and holds her to him tighter than he should. It’s hot in the garage, hotter even than outside, but he needs the contact desperately. Her mouth is soft against his and he turns them until he’s holding her gently against the bench, gathering her as close as he can with a hand on her neck and the other low on her back. Polly grips the back of his neck fiercely, opening her mouth to him, and he drags in a harsh breath and dives in for more. They’re out in the middle of the garage, he realizes, when he starts to fumble at the back of her dress, and half-walks, half-carries Polly a few feet into the old office. He lifts her to sit on the desk and finds his hands sliding up past her stockings, pushing the skirt of her dress up, and he hopes he locked the door behind them but it won’t matter if someone comes looking. Polly unclasps her dress herself, unzipping it behind her back as Trip kisses her neck, until it’s fallen down around her waist.

“Pol,” he breathes, stroking one hand along her side as his fingers dare to dip into her underwear, and they both hiss in a breath at that. She unfastens his pants, dragging her fingers across the shape of him beneath the fabric, and when she pushes his pants down low on his hips, he nearly chokes at the feeling of the air on his bare skin. “I—”

She kisses him again, swallowing whatever he was going to say, and he lifts her enough for her to wriggle partway out of her underwear. When Trip slides inside her, she wraps her legs tight around his waist and for a moment they stay like that, as close as two people can get. Trip feels drunk on her, Polly all around him, her fingers tugging at the short hair at the back of his neck, the metal edge of her ring pressed against his skin. Then she rolls her hips a little and whatever peace he was feeling disappears as he matches her rhythm. He’s so lost in her that he barely manages to pull out in time, coming into his hand. Thank God, because if he’d come inside her he might’ve said all kinds of things, things he can’t say even though they’re both wearing the damn rings he made them.

Instead, he makes a kind of strangled noise and finds a shop rag to wipe his hand on. Then he returns to Polly, who’s already starting to reassemble her clothes. “Don’t,” Trip says, and he hears the pleading note in his voice. “Just—give me a minute more?” He pulls her back into his arms, tucking her head under his chin, and her fingers find their way beneath his shirt to press softly against his skin.

It’s a long time before Trip has composed himself enough to re-dress and emerge from the office with Polly. “Your mother intends to cook a great deal of food,” Polly tells him, and he likes to think he’s not imagining the unsteadiness in her voice. “I had planned to assist her, but I suspect she would welcome your presence.”

“Yeah,” Trip says. It’s late afternoon already—how is that possible? “Yeah, I’ll find her.” He pulls Polly to him one more time and kisses her, as though he can draw enough comfort from her now to last him through the next few hours. She cups his chin briefly and then breaks away with a little bit of a smile in her eyes.

The kitchen is like a blast furnace. Momma has a pie in the oven—pecan, by the smell of it—and three pots stewing on the stove. She’s kneading bread furiously. “We’ll hold the wake tomorrow,” she tells Trip. “Here, chop those onions.” Momma’s kindness since he was a child—it’s all right to cry as long as it’s over the onions.

Time runs in strange skips and jumps. Maybe they all eat dinner together, though he couldn’t say what it was. Bert disappears to see someone named Marie, and Momma says something about cleaning up, and before long Trip is in the bedroom with Polly, his hands pruny from washing dishes. He’s so tired he feels like he’s been hit by a truck—and that was only the once, in Karachi, when he didn’t jump out of the way fast enough. He curls his body around Polly’s, fingers laced through hers and joined hands pressed to her heart, and tells himself that he can feel her heartbeat through his entire body.

The wake is a blur. He recognizes the church, vaguely, but his childhood pastor has been replaced by someone new. There’s a dark-skinned girl setting out the food afterward, and Trip sees Bert’s head bent close to hers and feels a stab of fear. He squeezes Polly’s hand too tightly at the sight of it. He’s never worried about someone hurting Garak because he’s queer, but then, Garak isn’t his little brother, looking starry-eyed at a girl he’d go to prison for marrying. “Trip,” Polly says in her velvet voice, and she flexes her fingers in his grip. In bed that night, he curls close around Polly, tucking her against him despite the way that their sweaty skin sticks together.

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

“I need a change of scenery,” Trip tells Garak, when he can’t take it anymore. “Somewhere far away, somewhere different.” He liked New Delhi. Maybe Garak can find something for him to do there, half a world away from—everything. Where he won’t just be waiting for Polly to come home.

“I’ve been thinking of moving to New York,” Garak says instead. “Relocating my center of operations. Establishing a new cover. You and Mr. Reed could come with me.”

“A new cover?” New York isn’t exactly what he had in mind, but at least it’s on the other side of the continent from Polly.

“Yes. I think I’ll be a tailor,” Garak says. “I’m quite a good tailor, you know.”

### Chapter Notes

TW for pregnancy loss

When they get back to the ranch, things are different. Maybe it’s how Polly curled against him on the flights back, let him press his cheek to her short hair, but the next night, he goes to her bedroom door and knocks once, hardly loud enough for her to hear. She opens the door. “Trip?”

“Having some trouble sleeping,” Trip says. “Guess I got used to snuggling up with you at home. You mind humoring me?” He’s taken to worrying at the wedding band with his thumb. He should pull it off, now they’re not pretending for anyone anymore.

“That would be acceptable.” She steps aside to let him in and closes the door behind him, and he’s trying to figure out what he should say next when she pulls him close and kisses him, and there, that’s easy enough.

Nothing else about them is easy, though. They get three days together and then Garak wants Trip and Reed with him in New York City. There are big crowds outside the federal courthouse, cops hanging onto their batons a little too tightly, and Garak leaves Trip and Reed out there with a warning not to get arrested before he slips inside. He emerges that evening with his mouth very tight, the closest to genuinely angry that Trip’s ever seen him. “Don’t suppose you know what that’s about,” Reed says.

Trip’s been occupying himself talking to some of the protesters. “There’s a couple being tried for espionage in there,” he says. “Selling secrets to the Russians. Who knows, maybe they’re—like us, and Garak’s trying to help them.”

“Or testifying against them,” Reed says dolefully.

“No,” Trip says. “He’d never let his name get written down as somebody with something to say in an espionage trial.”

Whatever it is, it doesn’t last more than a day before Garak and Trip and Reed are halfway around the world. They spend nearly a month in Egypt, and when they fly back into Idlewild Airport, the New York Times for sale outside announces ATOM SPY COUPLE SENTENCED TO DIE. Garak’s expression never flickers, so either Trip was wrong or Garak already knew.

Polly’s just left for a different mission when Trip gets back to the ranch and he goes and lies down in her bedroom to sleep. She’s not sentimental, doesn’t keep much in the way of personal effects, but her clothes are in the dresser and the wedding ring he gave her is sitting on her bedside table. Lying in the bed is the closest he can get to her, anyway.

It’s five more months before they’re in the same place at the same time, long enough that Trip starts to wonder if he’s hallucinated all of it. But Polly knocks on his door when she gets back from wherever she’s been—somewhere sunny, from the shade of her skin—and says, “I hoped you would be here,” which is just about as much of a declaration as Trip could hope to get from her.

They manage to cross paths closer to once a month after that, though sometimes Trip thinks that that’s about as frequently as Polly would tolerate anyway. She gets twitchy if he’s too openly affectionate, even when there’s no one around but Katie and Chakotay. He does his best to respect it, but they have so little time together that he wishes he could at least say, “Pol, I’m headed to bed,” and get something other than a blank stare and “Good night” until she sneaks in later.

He almost ruins it. Garak sends the two of them out on a mission, simple retrieval, but Trip has the data in hand and the other man who’s after it gets the drop on Polly, holds a gun on her and says, “Give me the file or she dies.”

“Under no circumstances,” Polly begins.

“Let her go first, then I’ll give it to you.”

“Set down your gun and the file and back away. I’ll let her go when I pick them up.” The man knows he’s got Trip, too.

“Mr. Tucker—”

“All right.” Trip sets both down on the ground very carefully. “If you hurt her, you’d better kill me—” He steps back.

The man steps forward, dragging Polly along with him. He scoops up the file first, and that’s his mistake, because Polly slips out of his grasp, snatches up Trip’s gun, and shoots the man twice in the head. “We need to go,” she tells Trip. “The sound will attract attention.” She tugs the file from the man’s limp grasp and they run like hell.

At the safehouse, Polly gives him her coldest stare. “That was unacceptable.”

“I knew you’d get the gun,” Trip says. “I never would’ve done it otherwise.”

She peers at him. “I don’t believe you.”

Trip doesn’t believe himself either, and that’s dangerous. “Information is—fungible. We aren’t. We go after so many things, and every one of them is important, but one of us is worth more than any individual target—”

“No,” Polly says. “That line of thought is unacceptable.”

“Losing you would be unacceptable,” he says without thinking, and steps toward her. “Pol—look, I’m just saying, I made a judgment call.”

“Your judgment was impaired,” Polly says, but she doesn’t pull away when he rests one hand on her shoulder and cups her cheek with his other hand. *ATOM SPY COUPLE SENTENCED TO DIE*, he thinks, and pulls her close against him.

“It won’t be,” he promises. “It won’t happen again.”

“You are less than convincing,” she tells him, and then she kisses him anyway.

After that, they don’t go on missions just the two of them—whether Garak realizes something or they’re just fortunate, Trip thinks it’s for the best. But it means more months with only a few days together here or there, until he’s starving for her every time they do get to see each other, until they start to get a little less careful—

“I’m pregnant,” Polly tells him one day. Her face doesn’t give away anything about how she feels about it.

Trip stares at her long enough for disbelief to give way to— “We’ll get married,” Trip says automatically, and there’s some relief in that, knowing exactly what to do in the circumstance. He wishes she weren’t so damn hard to read. “Pol, say something. Are you—happy?”

She exhales slowly, and the shakiness in that breath tells him that she’s about as shit-scared as he is. “About the thought of marrying you, Mr. Tucker? I’ve already lived for some time as your fiancée.”

“Ha, ha,” he says, and dares to pull her into a hug. It’s only been two months since they last saw each other, but his mind still tells her that she feels a little different in his arms. He doesn’t ask *how*—they were careless, the last time—or *are you sure*, because Polly never would have breathed a word if she wasn’t sure. He kisses the top of her head, just because he can, and slowly she wraps her arms around him too.

“I will endeavor to be,” she says against his neck.

“We’ll set up a place back home,” he promises. “My momma can help out, she’ll be over the moon to have a grandbaby—”

Polly stiffens in his arms. “Move to Florida?” He feels her draw in a long breath. “I am unwilling to commit to such a change.”

Trip releases her. “What—what did you think we’d do? Drag a kid around the world with us?” It’s not like it’s escaped him, what this will mean for Polly—for the work that both of them do. It’s not a good time to bring a baby into it, and he can’t help thinking, after all these years, he finally did get a nice girl in trouble.

“I think it unwise to make any rash decisions,” Polly says carefully. “Such as relocating a significant distance.” He can’t help feeling like she’s carefully not saying, *Or marrying you*.

He knows it’s the wrong thing to say, but he tells her, “I’m crazy about you, Pol. I don’t want to be—all over the place like this anymore, seeing each other a couple days at a time and then months in between. I want—” He can feel her closing off, drawing away from him. “Look, we don’t have to move to Florida, okay? We’ll figure something out. You and me and the baby.”

“We have time.” Polly’s voice is deeper than usual. “We have—months yet. There is no need to take action.”

“But you’re going to—take it easy, right? Nothing dangerous?” He can’t help saying these things that he knows she’ll hate.

“Trip.” She looks up at him with those steady dark eyes and something turns over in his stomach. It hasn’t escaped him that she hasn’t said anything about how she feels about him. She hasn’t even agreed to marry him. “I understand your concerns.”

He wants to find some way to insist that they figure it out now. Time has never been kind to them and by his count they have about six months before there’s a new person and it’ll be three of them, three of them against a whole world of all the terrible things humanity is busy dreaming up. He wants Polly to agree to marry him—she doesn’t have to take his name or anything, just marry him—and maybe they’ll stay on at the ranch, maybe Chakotay would help him build a little house for the three of them, and they’ll pick out a name for the baby. He wants, at least, to ask Garak not to send her out to do anything risky, full stop. “All right,” he says. “As long as you understand.”

Trip gets sent out again before he has time to work on convincing Polly. A couple weeks in Bolivia, no problem, except with how all he can think about is getting home to Polly. He almost screams in frustration when he gets back and Chakotay says, “She went out two days ago”

before Trip can even ask.

Polly's starting to show when she gets back. Maybe not to anybody who isn't quite as familiar with her body as Trip is, but he thinks he can see it. "How was it?" he asks that night, when they're in bed together.

"I took no unnecessary risks," she says stiffly.

"Thanks." He kisses the back of her neck and then asks, "Can I?"

"Can you what?"

He places his hand very tentatively on her abdomen, and after a moment, Polly's hand settles atop his. "Yes," she says belatedly. "I assume you wish to name the baby Charles, if it is a boy?"

"Charlie's nice for a girl." He feels—is she *laughing*? "Miss Charlie Tucker the Fourth? You don't like it?"

"Perhaps something more traditional," Polly says. "I am partial to the name Elizabeth."

"If I'd had a sister, my momma was going to name her Elizabeth." He thinks his momma would've liked having a daughter. "She'd be over the moon to have a granddaughter Lizzie."

"*Elizabeth*," Polly corrects.

"Sure, on her birth certificate—"

"Do you struggle with polysyllabic names? Pol, Trip—it's a wonder you don't refer to her as Liz instead."

"Lizzie is polysyllabic," he points out, and kisses the tip of her ear, which always makes her shiver a little. "It's settled, then. Charles for a boy, Elizabeth for a girl, we'll let Reed pick the middle name."

"We will not." Polly's voice is getting sleepy.

"How about Garak for a middle name. Never would've met each other without Garak."

"No," Polly murmurs.

"All right, all right, don't get so worked up about it," he teases, and he's probably imagining it but he thinks he feels a little kick beneath his hand.

\* \* \*

POLLY ILL RETURN IMMEDIATELY. Trip gets the telegram at the tail end of a mission and Garak and Reed get him all the way back to San Francisco, to the UC Medical Center, in a matter of hours. He stumbles into Polly's room to see perfect blankness on her face. "What happened?" he asks. When he grabs her hand, she doesn't squeeze back.

"Labor was premature," she says. "There was no a heartbeat." Her voice is flat.

"Jesus, Pol—" He presses her hand to his mouth to keep from saying anything else. There's a howling inside of him, a cry that started the moment he saw the telegram and has only grown louder since. There are tears on his face and he wants to crawl into the bed with Polly and hug her to him, tell her that she's not alone in this and that he's sorry and that he loves her and thank God he didn't lose her too. But he doesn't want to risk hurting her, so soon after, and he's never quite managed to tell her that he loves her, and so all he can do is hold her hand to his mouth, to his heart.

The Happy Bottom Riding Club burns down a month later. Polly won't talk to him or touch him and Trip has been climbing the walls at Katie and Chakotay's, and when he hears about it, he phones Mayweather in town and says, "Feel like flying someplace warmer?"

"For one of you folks, always," Mayweather says. People have been very gentle with Trip lately. "Let me get her fueled up. You want to take a look at the latest modifications?"

"Always."

It's a cool morning, fog hanging heavy. They drink black coffee as they wait for it to clear. "My brother wants to know if I'm going to go home and take over the garage," Trip says into the silence. "He's written me three letters hinting at it."

"Are you?" Mayweather is a year younger than Trip, safe from Korea thanks to some kind of medical condition he's never explained. "My father always thought he'd run the Mayweather Air Company with me and Paul, once we got old enough." Mayweather tells a lot of stories about his father, but they're always tinged with regret, like their final parting was pretty rough. Trip hasn't asked more than that.

"Leave Polly? Leave my work?" The irony doesn't escape him that not too long ago, he was telling Polly they should move to Florida. Mayweather is quiet, but Trip can almost hear the words he's told his own damn self too many times: there's no reason you can't get married anyway. She probably would've agreed to marry you eventually anyway, no reason this should change things. But it does, that's the hell of it—every time he looks at her, he sees the life they'd just started to dream up, the child they were going to be raising together, and it *hurts*. He thinks that maybe she hurts the same way when she sees him, because lately he never catches her looking at him at all. "Bert doesn't want me to move back, anyway," Trip says. "He just wants to know I'm not going to come back expecting to be the oldest son again."

Mayweather laughs quietly. "Should be easy enough to reassure him of that."

Trip looks down at his hands. He's picking up strange new calluses, living full-time on the ranch, working with Chakotay. He doesn't know how much longer he'll last here if Polly keeps making it clear she doesn't want him around. "Not as long as our momma is alive." The fog has cleared enough for them to take off, so he climbs into the passenger seat and watches Mayweather run the preflight checks. "How long d'you think it'll take us to get to Muroc?"

Mayweather gives him a sidelong look. "Edwards? Couple hours, if the weather holds." Shit, of course he knows it's Edwards Air Force Base now. Edwards died in one of those monstrous YB-49s just a couple months after he left. "Tucker—I don't know what's happening in your head, but you have to get it clear."

"Yeah," Trip says. "Yeah, I know."

There's not much left of the riding club but burnt-out husks of buildings. It's a cold day and Trip stands there with his hands jammed in his pockets and thinks of that first night with Polly, here, just after Captain Yeager broke the sound barrier.

"It's a damn shame," someone calls, and Trip turns, squinting behind his sunglasses. "You finally show up back here and you're just a little too late for another drink from Pancho."

"Georgie?"

"We were all wondering where you went," Georgie says. He looks exactly the same as Trip remembers him, down to the squared-off haircut and the funny reflective goggles he wears sometimes. "When the wonder boys disappear, people talk."

Trip shakes his head. He has four or five ready stories that he uses in circumstances like these, but somehow the only thing he can bring himself to say is, "Do you remember Polly?"

Georgie's silence is resounding, but Trip isn't fooled. Finally, he says, "That girl you kept putting off marrying?"

"Yeah," Trip says numbly. "She was pregnant." He's not sure he ever even said it aloud to anyone else. The others just sort of seemed to—know.

"Then? Or now?" Georgie's voice is kind, like he already knows the answer.

"Now." Trip's voice is strangely shaky. "She was. We lost the baby." There's a roaring in his ears. "We don't even really know what happened. One day she was fine, and the next day there was no heartbeat and Polly was in the hospital, and she won't talk to me—"

Georgie puts a hand on his shoulder and Trip leans into the firm point of contact. "I'm sorry," he says, and Trip realizes that he's half-crying in front of this man that he only ever knew as a lie. He wants to say "It's fine," but it's not. He can't help feeling like this is the end of something—not just his hopes for their daughter, but the end of whatever possibility there was for him and Polly. "There'd be a place for you here, if you wanted it," Georgie says. When Trip lifts his head in shock, Georgie squeezes his shoulder. "But I don't think you do."

"No." Trip drags in a deep breath and scrubs his face clean with one hand. "No, I'm going to spend the night here, and then I'm going to go home and—" And he doesn't quite know what, but he's going to fix things somehow. That's what he does, after all—he fixes things. He takes a bottle of whiskey out into the desert and finds a good rock to lean back against, and he stares up at the sky and watches Scott Crossfield hit Mach 2. He can imagine the cheers, the champagne, the dancing—wherever it happens now. The stars shine down bright on him and he thinks, we can work this out.

But when he gets back to Katie and Chakotay's ranch, Polly is gone.

"What d'you mean, you let her go?"

Katie's eyes go flinty when he yells at her. "I'm not her mother, Tucker. There's a job that needs to be done. She took it."

"She's barely recovered—"

"The doctor said she was fine for active fieldwork," Katie snaps.

"Polly needed to get out of here," Chakotay says. He's at Katie's shoulder, just a half-step behind her. What must it be like, Trip wonders, to always have someone there to depend on? Someone to back you up? "She wanted something to *do*."

"But I—" *was going to fix things* dies in his throat. "When's she coming back?" He knows he won't like the answer from the expression on Katie's face. "Did she leave a note for me or something?" He hates the way his voice sounds. Of course she didn't. Emotions aren't one of Polly's strengths, and she certainly wouldn't leave a soppy note behind for him.

Trip mopes around the ranch for almost five months, working on improving it more and generally getting in everyone's way, until he manages to provoke even Chakotay into snarling at him. "I need a change of scenery," he tells Garak, when he can't take it anymore. "Somewhere far away, somewhere different." He liked New Delhi. Maybe Garak can find something for him to do there, half a world away from—everything. Where he won't just be waiting for Polly to come home.

"I've been thinking of moving to New York," Garak says instead. "Relocating my center of operations. Establishing a new cover. You and Mr. Reed could come with me."

"A new cover?" New York isn't exactly what he had in mind, but at least it's on the other side of the continent from Polly.

"Yes. I think I'll be a tailor," Garak says. "I'm quite a good tailor, you know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Garak sets Trip up in a sixth-floor walkup in Spanish Harlem and says, “Who do you want to be?”

“I don’t need a story,” Trip says. “I’ll figure it out.” He meets the Puerto Rican family in the next apartment when he locks himself out and their teenage daughter Isa catches him breaking into his own apartment. He tells them that he’s a handyman—hardly needs to say that he was in the war, not when everyone was—and that his mother is back in Florida. He sets up a little refrigeration unit on Diego’s piragua pushcart, and that gets him a hearty dinner once a week and a friendly reminder not to get any ideas about Isa. “I’m working as a handyman,” he tells Garak, as they eat ajonjolí piraguas in the scant shade near the entrance to the marqueta. It’s too hot for enclosed spaces right now.

Garak nods. “A good choice,” he says, and takes another neat bite. Trip will never understand how the man can eat shaved ice without getting his face at least a little sticky. “Reed is arriving next week. I don’t suppose you have any ideas for him?”

Trip chose his new profession carefully—it gives him a good excuse to be just about anywhere, with any tools he’d like, and he can generally wrap up whatever he’s doing on short notice if Garak needs him somewhere. He tells the Reyes family that he has a sister in Virginia with a new baby, which gives him an excuse for his frequent disappearances, and his stories about the baby are all the things he imagined for his own little girl. “I’m sure he’ll find something,” Trip says.

Thankfully, Reed is the last of their group to follow Garak to New York. Katie and Chakotay are safe in California, of course, but for weeks after Reed arrived, Trip’s throat is tight at the idea that any minute, Polly might be the next to arrive. It still hurts to think about her, about the life they might have had if things had gone differently—he doesn’t even know which one of them to blame, but he suspects it might be him—and he doesn’t think New York City is big enough for the both of them, not right now.

Then.

Then Garak meets Julius.

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