

## **Fool's Gold** **by Brenna Garcia**

My father was never a warm man. He didn't have to be; his exuberant wealth seemed to many an adequate substitute for his lack of personality. I was a child of privilege, tutored at home and spared the grueling trudge to and from the school house during the fierce Virginian winters, doted upon by a mother who had very little left she cared to accomplish after marrying a wealthy man, and tended to by a number of servants. So went the bleak and dreary years of my childhood, all the way up to my tenth winter, when my lucky lot in life changed entirely.

I remember I was riding in the carriage with my father. It was arctic outside, and the windows were frosted over. I longed to press my nose against the glass, to watch the ice shrink away from the warmth of my breath, but my father's gaze prickled at my side. I set myself instead to picking apart the peeling leather cushion beneath me.

"Your tutor tells me you were disinterested in this morning's lesson." I kept my gaze fixed pensively out the window, though I could see nothing through the frost but a green-grey blur of countryside. "What was the topic?" The carriage wheels caught a bump and we swayed.

"Gettysburg." I replied firmly, for this was a topic I needed not to have paid attention in lessons to know; the famous battle was common knowledge to anyone old enough to hear and understand. My father nodded sagely.

“When General Lee won he pushed his troops decisively north, reducing its major cities to rubble. The North finally relented, calling for peace and allowing us to remain a separate nation.”

“Not before the North had been completely destroyed, though.” I quipped, hoping to prove to him I was at least somewhat informed on the matter, and didn’t need another lecture.

“Correct.” My father replied sternly. My fingers snagged on a strip of the leather seat and tore it loose.

“Father... someone told me that during the war the Confederacy was... at a disadvantage. That they couldn’t have won so easily.” I turned to face him and immediately wished I had not. He leaned towards me, his eyes dark as coals as they peered into mine.

“Who told you that?” he said quietly. I hesitated, a name hovering on my tongue, the name of our serving maid at home, muttering as she bent over the dishes, her dark hands scrubbing at the rim of a plate. I swallowed that name down.

“Just... a man on the street, when I was walking with mother.” He watched me carefully before sitting up and turning his attention back to the window.

“Pure nonsense. There’s nothing left up there but vagabonds living in crumbling towns.” We didn’t speak again until our pace slowed and the horses came to a stop. I heard the crunch of gravel outside as our coachman leapt from his seat.

“Where are we?” I hadn’t bothered asking; it made little difference. My father smiled at me, a very small one, and probably the best he could muster. The door opened and a blast of

wet air hit me, muddied with the smell of salt and wood and rust all swirled into one heady aroma.

“A boy of ten should know his father’s line of work.”

I stepped from the carriage and into the maw of the dockyards. Men swept past us, massive men supporting burlap sacks with arms thick as the ropes that held the swaying ships in the bay. My father’s hand, warm and firm at my shoulder, guided me forward down the well-beaten road that ran between the bay on our left and the large brick storehouses to our right. We passed through the shadow of a frigate, its pale wood hull glossy with salt water. There was a raised voice, a clamor from above our heads, and I craned my neck back to see a sailor scampering to the top of the mast, his body swaying from side to side as his long legs propelled him up the shroud. I did not realize I had stopped in the path until my father gave me a firm shove to move along.

We came to a stop before a thin, empty stretch of water, a niche waiting to be filled. I glanced back at my father, whose mouth was puckered in a familiar, unhappy way. I followed his darting gaze out over the water. At first I saw only a small, wooden dingy, close enough I could hear the splash of the oars churning the waves. Then I saw that there were other small boats about it, and there, sawing through the distant waves was a massive ship. Long, heavy ropes pulled at the tremendous bow, towing it slowly into the harbor. I might have laughed at how preposterous the scene was, had my father’s cheeks not been so puffed with anger.

“They should have arrived much earlier. They should be unloaded.” He muttered.

“I would assume they ran into a bit of trouble getting the cargo out safe. The winds are treacherous; delay a week and the ocean’s no longer your ally.”

I jumped at the voice, whirling to see an enormous stranger standing beside my father. His sinewy arms were crossed over his chest, skin burnt red from the sun. My father turned to him calmly.

“We’ll have to do something about this constant British interference.” His eyes glinted sharp and dangerous, the look he gave our serving woman when she dropped a tray of cookies during mother’s last dinner party.

“You’re right, of course.” The man set his hands firmly on his hips, where a glistening coil hung, a whip waiting to strike. “This is your son, then?” His face cracked into a smile, but it was unwholesome in the crude set of his face.

“That’s right.” I wished there had been some fondness in his voice. The two men watched me, seemingly expecting something.

“Then... you own that boat?” I asked my father cautiously, gesturing to the ship in the distance. The rowboats had just reached the end of the dock and were working carefully to wedge the huge vessel into the space allotted. My father and the stranger exchanged glances.

“I own this boat and every one down the way from it. I own the dock and the resources that pass through it. I own everything.” My father genuinely smiled. The two men strode to the edge of the dock deep in conversation, and I hurried after them. From between their coats I watched as the ship was moored in the harbor and the sailors scurried from the towing boats

and onto the deck. The gangplank struck the dock with a crash I felt through the soles of my boots.

“What’s in there?” I asked my father, but it was the man who responded.

“You wait and see. There’s not many of them left out there on the African coast; the Europeans have been trying to keep us out.”

I craned my neck forward eagerly. I hoped to see a zebra, the striped horse found only in etchings from school books, or perhaps even a lion. From up on deck I heard a rattling hiss, and I watched, my hands twitching in anticipation, as a shape crested the railing of the deck and started its journey downward.

It was not a zebra, or a lion.

It was a man, his feet scuffing the wood beneath him and his head bent down to the planks below. It was a slave in shackles. Chain hung from his manacled wrists and dragged between his legs. His skin was dark and shone with sweat. Another figure moved into view, this one a woman bound by the same snaking length of chain, and after her another and another. Somewhere on deck a whip licked through the air. The woman flinched at the sound. Soon they were so close I could smell them; sweat and iron and things too foul and bitter to bring to mind. I shrank back into the shadow of my father’s long traveling coat as the first of them walked past us, the man, whose skin I now saw was purpled and notched with pale scars. He was so close I could hear the ragged pants of his breath. His eyes flicked to the side, catching mine. Shivers coursed down my spine.

I looked sharply up. My father's grin was that of a wolf's.

At the prompting of whips the procession made its way inside one of the massive storehouses. When the last slave vanished inside the entryway the tension in my body left me, and I realized all at once that I had been clenching my jaw so hard my teeth ached. My father and the man made to follow after them, and I meant to move with them, only my feet would not venture any closer to those people in chains. I seized my father's sleeve and he turned, looking down at me through narrowed eyes.

"I'd like to look about the ship." I said quietly. My father raised an eyebrow, and I shrank under his skepticism. Then he nodded, slowly and thoughtfully, and dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

I fought the temptation to break into a run. The gangplank creaked under my feet, and looking down I realized that if it were to give way I would have a quick trip into the icy water below. I was so consumed in my thoughts that I didn't notice the sailor who had stepped in front of my path.

"Whoa there, boy. This isn't the place for you." I lifted my head, meaning to practice one of my father's glares on him, but something in his face stopped me. There was tension there, perhaps even a flicker of fear.

"My father owns your ship and sent me to take a look around." I said crossly. I extended my hand, gesturing to the man who was retreating into the storehouse, his bright, expensive clothes prominent among the grime of the sailors around him. The sailor shifted on his feet, a

thin bead of sweat trailing down his temple. I wondered briefly if my father truly had the power to inspire such fear in men. Finally he stepped aside.

“I’d make it quick if I were you.” Something in his voice made me pause, but as soon as he spoke he hurried off across the deck and was gone, and so I pushed him from my mind. The wooden deck moaned gently under my weight, its surface slick with a thin layer of dried salt. The mainmast rose up from the deck not thirty paces from me, so wide a grown man could scarce wrap his arms about the base. I craned my neck back and watched it soar dizzily into the blue sky. The sails were down, swelling with a fresh gust of wind, though I was sure they had been furled moments ago. A sailor stood some ways from me, busying himself with one of the massive ropes that held the boat anchored. His gaze lingered on me as I moved across the deck, but as soon as I caught his gaze he quickly continued his work. Perhaps I would have thought more of this, if I had not spied a trapdoor set into the floor and crept over to it. I soon managed to heave the entryway open with my thin arms, and peering into the darkness I descended a set of stairs into the ship’s belly.

The stench nearly bowled me over. Below deck was a mass of wooden benches, rows on rows stretching back into the dark bowels of the ship. I took a halting step forward and the toe of my boot struck a shackle, unclashed and abandoned on the floor. I walked the length of a row, running my hand on the splintered wood. Filth clung to my fingertips. There was a creak from behind me. I whirled, bracing myself for a sailor with a sharp temper, but there was nothing. I turned my head to the staircase, anticipating someone’s arrival when a gleam of light caught my eye, a ray dancing off something hiding at the edge of my vision. I turned and my

gaze settled on the wide gaps in the floor beneath me. Gingerly I crouched on hands and knees, peering through one of the cracks.

I hoped to see a gleam of African gold.

The pale orb of a bloodshot eye stared back at me.

My breath caught in my throat. I jerked to my feet, eyes wide with terror. Noises came up from out of the darkness, cooing, calming murmurs. In a panic I fled, tumbling up the ladder on hands and knees. I had just reached the top when I collided head on with something hard and unyielding. Dazed, I looked up at the massive sailor that loomed over me.

“Slaves!” I gasped. “There are slaves hiding below!”

His arms stretched outwards, and I had only a moment of confusion before he seized me. One hand crushed itself over my mouth. The other circled both my arms and wrenched them behind my back. I was too stunned to react, but I was aware of something else; the ship was moving. The sterns of the vessels on either side of us were just slipping out of view, giving way to a distant tree line and hovering gulls. The sails on the mizzenmast above swelled with a strong breeze, the same breeze that had fought the tardy ship on its arrival. Now panic set in, and I snarled into my attacker’s hand, beating my heels against his knees. He forced me roughly back down the staircase and kept hold of me there at the base of the stairs. My head snapped up as I saw two more sailors descend the steps to face me. One was the man who had tried to stop me. The other was the man who had watched me on deck.

"I spotted him slipping below." That was the man holding me back, his voice surprisingly scared for the considerable strength he possessed.

"I know. I let him onboard." This was the man I had met before, his hands clenched into fists, thumbs scraping against his palms.

"You *let him?*" balked the third man, incredulous.

"I didn't have a choice, Jack. His dad's boss man. If I'd have kicked him off he would have raised a rabble and we'd be caught."

The strong man's grip on me loosened marginally, and I seized the opportunity to wriggle free of his crushing grip.

"Look, I'm trying to tell you there are slaves still on this ship!" I declared fiercely. "You've got to go back!" The two men in front of me chuckled, exchanging knowing glances. My face twisted up in a scowl. I despised being poked fun at. "Who are you?" I demanded.

"Cliff, Jack, Thomas." The first sailor said, gesturing first to himself, then the man beside him and finally the man behind me.

"Abolitionists. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" Jack jeered. I had never heard the word, but I never would have admitted it.

"Vagabonds." I said with disdain.

"Fighting words, and not wise ones. Not for someone in your position." Cliff said quietly. I swallowed.

“Look. I say we toss the boy in a dingy, hand him some oars and point him back to the dock. It’s not too late.” Jack interjected.

I wondered if father had noticed my disappearance yet or if he was still taking inventory. I wondered what he would do when he found out.

“That’s no good. He’ll rat on us and then we’ll be hunted down. His father’s reputation isn’t built on kindness.” The man behind me, Thomas, clapped his hand on my shoulder as he spoke. “What say you, Cliff?” I held the man’s gaze as he took me in.

“We keep him for now. If and when they come for us, he’ll make a good bargaining chip.”

Surprisingly, the other men didn’t argue. Jack and Thomas slunk away muttering to themselves, returning to whatever they were busying themselves with before my sudden arrival. Only Cliff remained, watching me keenly. I glared at the floor, angry but nervous under his eye.

“Here. I have a job for you.”

He turned, lifted a crate from behind the stairs and set it down on a bench. Gently he removed a loaf of bread and a skin pouch filled with some sort of liquid, and then proceeded to stamp loudly on the floor beneath him. I startled as the boards beside his feet swung upwards, a hidden hatch, and the shadowy figures below slowly surfaced. In the darkness of the ship I could see only the sheen of their skin as they propelled themselves upwards, the places where bone jutted out under thin flesh. There were five of them in all, whip-thin, clothed in rags. What

little light there was below deck shone off the sharp edges of their cheekbones where they stuck up from sallow skin. Their eyes were wide in the hollows of their sunken faces, but their gazes darted intelligently between Jack and me. I turned my face away, longing to clamber above deck and into the light once more. Jack reached out to them, and the food and drink were pushed into a skeletal hand. From the shadows I could hear the sound of bread cracking beneath hungry mouths.

“I only wish I could speak their language.” Jack murmured. He turned to look at me and a smirk tugged at his mouth. “You’re frightened by them,” he pointed out. I tilted my chin up proudly and said nothing. Jack laughed but there was no humor in it. “You have servants, don’t you?”

“My servants are well-dressed and well-mannered. “ I said sharply.

“Don’t forget you’re the reason these people are rag and bones.” His voice was calm, but there was a thread of icy hostility in his tone.

I opened my mouth to speak against him, to protest that this had nothing to do with me, but the words died in my throat under the gazes of those who had sat cramped and cowering beneath us.

I could not find words again until we had climbed back up on deck, where the cool evening breeze settled my nerves.

“You may have ‘saved’ five slaves but you handed far more to my father.” Jack’s smile twisted into a crescent moon.

“Those five slaves will come back with us. Their story will make people feel for the hardships they have endured. Others will join our cause and help to save more lives. In that way five becomes ten and ten becomes a hundred.”

“And what if they don’t? What if they don’t join you?” I was eager to make this man who seemed so calm bristle.

He smiled again, but this time it didn’t reach his eyes. A moment later he walked briskly away.

I stood looking out over the water, shivering and alone. The sun sank lower, and passionate hues of pink and gold streaked across the clouds. I remember wishing fervently that I had paid attention to the maps waved in front of me during lessons; I was sure if I had I could make sense of the maze of inlets we sailed past. Something caught my eye, murky in the last bit of daylight. I squinted and saw at some distance ahead of us a log rising from the water, wrapped in a thick red cloth.

“That’s the border.” I leapt and turned to see Jack and the man who had restrained me at my shoulder. “And that over there, I assume, is your pa. Or one of his henchmen.” My heart leapt in my throat as I turned to look behind us. There in the distance was the foggy silhouette of a ship. “No matter though. Once we’re past that line, we’ll be in the North and safe from any of your dad’s men.”

“There is no North.” I said adamantly, but my gaze strayed to the red flag in the distance, chillingly real.

“Poor kid.” Jack murmured.

“It’s gonna be poor us if we don’t get him out of here.” The other man said gruffly. He reached for my arm. I struck him across the back of the hand. He recoiled, shooting me a dirty look.

“Look, kid, we don’t want any more trouble.”

“Fine. Tell me where to go but don’t touch me again.” I spat, watching them both narrowly should they come towards me.

“Enough. The kid isn’t going anywhere.” My head snapped to the right to see Cliff striding quickly toward us.

“What?” Jack croaked. “We can’t kidnap the boy!”

“We take him back to the North with us. It’s exactly what we need.” The three of us gazed at him with similar expressions of dismay. “It’s been too many years since the war ground to a halt. People have forgotten what we were fighting in the first place.” His gaze burned with manic purpose. “We’ve brought slaves back before, but they can only tell of their capture and their voyage. This boy could tell us everything about their society. He could be the spark that starts it all up again.”

“Starts what up again?” Jack asked nervously.

“The war.” His gaze sent daggers of ice shooting through my veins.

The three men burst into a violent argument but I was no longer listening. Time seemed to stand still for me. I had finally begun to realize that I would not be allowed to escape, that I would be trapped with these mad men in the butchered remains of the North for the rest of my life. I glanced up the river, at the border that was still some ways off. If the ship stopped moving now, my father would surely catch up to us. I gazed up at the sails, stuffed with a tranquil breeze. I gazed down at the hilt of a knife that jutted from Jack's belt. The rigging that scaled the mainmast was secured only ten or twelve paces from where I stood. This would be my only chance.

I coiled and sprang, seizing the knife from the belt, turning on the balls of my feet and bolting for the rigging. Jack let out a cry of alarm but I was long out of reach. I shoved the hilt of the blade between my teeth and launched myself up into the sky. The shroud shook and trembled beneath me with the weight of my pursuers. I could hear voices calling out for me but I paid them no heed; my whole being was focused on the painful precision of placing each hand in exactly the right place. As I ascended the deck fell away beneath me, and then the tops of the trees, until I found myself approaching and then climbing past the flowing white cloth of the top sails. I chanced a glance behind me and found Cliff looming in my vision, not fifty steps below me. In a panic I sped higher and higher, until I had grown dizzy with exertion and the whistling of the wind in my ears. Where I now stood the long wooden yard that held the sail aloft was strapped to the mainmast, and giving terror no time to push itself to the surface I clambered across the gap and found myself stretched out on my stomach for balance, wrapped about the length of the main-topgallant sail. Cliff had caught up to me but he didn't attempt to

span the gap between the sail's yard and myself. He stretched his hand out to me, fingers trembling with exertion.

"Take it!" he hollered over the whipping wind. Taking the knife from between my teeth I reached down to where the sail was secured to the post and set the serrated edge of the knife to the bindings. The blade was sharp but the rope was strong. Cliff swung forward to snatch at me but couldn't reach.

"Come on boy! You're gonna get yourself killed!" he barked. At long last the rope snapped and fell loose to the deck. I watched it drop down, down, down, and tried not to imagine what I would look like in its place. I quickly realized that severing the ties would take far too long to stop the ship; there were seemingly hundreds more down the length of the post and every moment I spent the border loomed closer. I hesitated, and Cliff saw it. He leaned forward and swung his arm out, nearly seizing me by the sleeve. I scabbled farther towards the edge of the sail, leaving him spitting and cursing. There was a long length of rope beside me, one secured out of sight above me and at the base of the mast below. I eyed its course downward, running just parallel to the sail. *I could slash it, I thought. I could slide down the length and cut it clean in two.* I reached out with one hand and seized the fluttering cord.

"Look!" Cliff shouted fervently, but I was busy gauging how I might slow my fall, and how best to jump the gap and wrap myself about the thin length of rope. I wobbled slowly to my feet, the strong wind rocking me back and forth on my heels.

“No, please, would you just look!” he sounded desperate, but I feared if I met his gaze he would somehow sway me from my course. I tensed, preparing myself for the descent, my heart pounding wildly out of control.

“Listen to me. If you look, and if you still want to go back, I will turn this ship around.”

I hesitated again, and in that moment clarity struck me. I would never have survived the journey downward in one piece. I gnawed my lip thoroughly, and then finally jerked my chin up, glaring at Cliff defiantly. I was puzzled to find that he wasn't looking at me, but to his left, and his arm was outstretched, pointing to something in the distance. I followed his gaze across the tops of the trees and the dusky sky. There, nestled in a valley beside the open water and just around the edge of the border, was a place unlike any other I had seen.

The buildings were goliaths, taller than any in my own town and with scarcely any room between them. The roofs jutted out above massive brick structures that sat just on the shore, dark smoke pouring from their thin concrete smoke stacks and powerful wooden wheels churning the water below. A multitude of ships rested in the harbor, bobbing just visibly in the breeze. I could see movement in the streets, people so far away they appeared a column of ants darting to and fro. At that very moment lights flickered on in the streets and in the windows of the houses as the citizens began to fend off the darkness of night. It was unlike any place I had seen before. It was beautiful.

“What kind of town is this?” I said, my voice hushed, my eyes pasted to the scene before me.

“It is not a town, it’s a city. It’s the North.” There was pride in Cliff’s voice, a fierce loyalty apparent in each word.

“How could we not have known of this? How could they not see that the North is still alive when a place as large as this exists?”

“They do know. They just never told you.” I glanced over at him but in the face of what I had just seen I could not bring myself to argue against him. “When Robert E. Lee won the Battle of Gettysburg he succeeded in inflicting some damage on the North, but by then the Confederate army was hopelessly low on troops and supplies. No one really won the war; both sides decided they couldn’t continue the effort without causing irreparable harm to their people. Stalemate.” I was silent as the grave, my eyes pouring over every facet of the city in the distance.

“So it seems to me...” Cliff began, settling himself against the ropes of the rigging, “you have a choice to make. I wasn’t lying when I said I’d take you back. I only wanted you to know the truth of the matter.” He hesitated. “What’ll it be?” I looked back once over the waterway from which we came, where my father’s ship still followed at a distance. I thought of his cold smiles and his steely gaze, and his apparent lies. I looked at Cliff, who smiled that infuriating smile once more. Only I realized it wasn’t a smile like my father’s; cold and mirthless. It was a real smile, unlike anything I had seen before.

He extended a hand towards me, an open invitation.

I took it.