

Dirt on Their Hands

A Lands Vin Story
By Laura Anne Gilman

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The mare never kicked him. She let him brush her sides, as high up as he could reach, and lowered her neck so that he could tangle his fingers in her short, coarse mane and talk nonsense into her ears. And because she tolerated him, so did the rest of the herd, grazing peacefully in the winter pasture.

In the summer, when he was younger, his father had put him into the mare's saddle, and they had raced across the steppes, the thunder of hooves and the heat of the sun the sum and total of the world.

When the cold rain came, his father went away. Away forever, his mother told him. The mare still let him brush her, but nobody would let him ride in their saddle, and nobody gave him a pony of his own, the way they should have, when he turned five.

He had eleven brothers, and they all had ponies, or mares of their own. If he waited, if he was patient, his mother would find another man. She told him that each night, the fire burning low and smoky in their kephir, their beds pulled close to each other for warmth. Another man who would see how strong and brave he was, and adopt him, and teach him all a man of the horse needed to know.

But now, he was alone. He reached down and pulled a handful of grass for the mare, letting her take it from his hand. The dry soil itched his skin, the way it always did, and he rubbed it into his palm, half-expecting it to sink into his flesh, the way water went into the ground.

It never did. But the itching remained.

He shrugged. The ground was for riding on, and building firepits in. Sky and skin were what mattered. Everyone knew that. But still, the urge to touch it remained. He let the impulse rule him, but the dry, scratchy grains did not satisfy whatever drove him.

"Boy."

He jerked his hand out of the ground and looked around, then ducked under the mare's neck to see who was calling him. Two men stood there, and one of his brothers – Alojzy, third-eldest. Alojzy was ready to leave their herd, waiting to be chosen. He never had anything to do with the youngers, not willingly.

The two men were strangers.

"Jerzy." His brother called him, impatiently. "Come here."

He presented himself, looking curiously at the two men, who studied him almost as intently.

"This is he."

"How old is he?"

"Six."

He was almost seven. He didn't mention that fact; a boy almost seven without his own pony was nothing to brag about.

"Come here, boy. Give me your hand."

He placed his own hand, dirt-dusted, in the stranger's hand. There were callouses there, but not from holding reins or grasping manes; they were in the wrong place, and too soft. The stranger pressed his two hands flat around Jerzy's smaller one, and stared down at them. The other stranger waited, and his brother took a step back, as though he didn't want to be too close to any of them.

"Well?" the first one asked.

“He’ll do,” the man holding his hand said, and let him go. Jerzy took a step back too, suddenly uncertain. He’d do? For what?

“Where is his father?”

“Dead.”

“And his mother?”

“Too busy chasing after a new man to worry about him. He’s a hindrance to her, now.”

That wasn’t true! His mother loved him. She had promised him they’d...something. He frowned, trying to remember. That he would have a pony, soon. But it hadn’t been soon. It had been a long time.

“You seem awful eager to have him gone,” the first man said to Alojzy.

“He has no place here. If you think he is worth something, let him find that worth.”

A man was measured by his horses, his tents, and his children. Jerzy felt a glimmer of hope inside him: maybe they were here to give him a pony, finally? In his mind he could see her, red-brown like the dirt, with a knowing eye and a thick neck that curved when he came to see her in the morning, warm breath on his neck and an eager mouth that took grass from his hand.

Instead, they took him beyond the encampment, past the ring of trees that grew around the waterhole, to the wide, dusty road the traders used. A wagon waited there, large as a caravan, drawn by four horses, too muscled for anything but pulling things. The People did not use wagons except for the babies, and the ones too old to ride, who hadn’t found the honor to die yet. He stopped, unsure – surely this couldn’t be right? There were others in the back of the wagon, boys old enough to have ponies of their own. They stared at him, their gazes vacant, their skins all the colors of dirt, their eyes round or flat, their hair all cut to the scalp. His own scalp, underneath his tasseled scarf, prickled.

“Alojzy?” His voice didn’t quaver, but his hands shook, a little.

His brother wouldn’t look at him, standing back several paces, as though he were not part of their little group. “Go. There’s nothing for you here, Jerzy.”

“But...”

“You don’t belong here. You never did. Everyone knows it. Father knew it.”

Jerzy’s heart squeezed tightly in his chest. “I’m of the People.”

“No, you’re not. You wear no hooves.”

It was the harshest thing to say, worse than telling a man he could not father children, worse than telling a woman she had no feel for the horses. It said he was not of the People, that in his veins the blood of the Thousand Herd did not thunder.

The squeeze became a full-blown panic. “I won’t go.”

“Jerzy.” His oldest brother pushed past the strangers, and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

Jerzy shifted, uncomfortable. He did not like to be touched.

“Jerzy, listen to me. I have no love for you.” Alojzy shook his head. “And I know you don’t love me. But you are the blood of my blood, even if you have no hooves. I will not see you die.”

Jerzy shook his head, not understanding. “But...”

His brother’s voice turned harsh as the winter’s wind. “No one will claim you. They know what you are. They see it. We all do. Your hands are filled with dirt.”

Jerzy’s gaze dropped to his fingers. They were clean, covered only in the sweat of leather, and a fine dusting of mares’ hair. Then he turned them, over, and the telltale grit under his nails told another story.

He couldn’t stop himself. As much as he craved the feel of a horse beneath him, he could not stop digging in the dirt, feeling it, even, on occasion, tasting it, looking for something.

“No one will claim you. You will never have a pony, you will never ride with the herd. And in the winter, when food grows scarce and an illness comes, no one will save a portion of feverbrew for you. Not even your mother, because she will have new young ones to care for.”

Jerzy forced himself to look up into his brother’s face, hoping and dreading an answer. “What am I?”

“A slave.”

And with that, his brother’s hands left Jerzy’s shoulders, and he walked away, the tassels of his headscarf fluttering as he followed the path back to the herd’s encampment.

Jerzy stood and watched, his throat sore and his eyes itching, until one of the strangers picked him up under the arms, and tossed him into the back of the wagon with the others.

No one moved to make room for him. No one spoke to him. It was just like the encampment – only these were strangers, not his kin.

No one will claim you.

He had no kin, now.

Jerzy wiggled to an empty space near the front, curled his arms around his knees, and put his head down. The tassels of his own headscarf brushed his forehead, and he reached up and pulled it off, letting his hair - a brighter red than the cloth - cover his face, like a man in mourning.

The wagon jolted forward with a start, and slowly rolled away.

For someone accustomed to movement, running alongside the herd, sitting all day in a wagon back, crowded by others, was agony. Each night, when the wagon stopped, they camped in the road, a fire built before and behind. The slaves slept in the wagon, or underneath it, some huddled together, others curled in on themselves. Jerzy’s calves contracted, his lower back ached, and no matter how he stretched, he could not loosen his body, or find a comfortable position for sleeping.

A child adapts, given time. The pain did not stop, his body did not adjust, but Jerzy noticed it less, each morning, until it became a thing that had always been.

After a tenday, the slaver's caravan left the open lands and ascended into the mountains, beyond which the People did not go. The road narrowed, until it was only just wide enough for the wagon, the slavers riding ahead and behind. The grass died out, the dry, stunted trees disappeared, until there was only gray rock, the only color a dusty red cutting through it.

The slavers beat them, occasionally, when the road was slow, or the food burnt, but otherwise ignored them, as though they were bales of hay or bundles of furs. Less so: they were not protected against the elements, nor given a chance to dry after the rains. Occasionally, a boy would begin to sneeze, or take the chills. The others would huddle away from him, some of them, making hand-signs against taking ill themselves. Either the boy recovered, or he died.

Bodies were tossed from the wagon. Sometimes the slavers did it, at the end of the day. Sometimes the slaves did it themselves.

Once, when a boy was ill but would not die, those nearest tossed him over the side anyway. His body hit the dirt with a softer thump than the corpses, and he rolled a little, and then lay still, face down and crumpled. Jerzy hugged his knees tighter, and rested his cheek against the scarf now wrapped around his arm, trying to remember the feel of the mare's flank under his hands, the cold dry air on his face.

They were fed each night, bread and greens, and an occasional watery stew flavored with whatever bones the slavers had eaten the day before. Jerzy ate, because he would not die, and walked when they prodded them out of the wagon, to stretch their legs and shake out their arms, but he did not speak, and no-one spoke to him. Few of the slaves spoke at all: there was a scattering of trade-tongue among them, a handful of other languages, but very little to say.

The day began at dawn, ended at moonrise. They slept, they rode, they stretched, and then, as night fell, they came down through the mountains, and entered a town.

And Jerzy discovered what it meant to be a slave.

They did not beat the slaves that day, but woke them early, pulling and shoving them out of the wagon. "Roust, you good for naughts! Roust and gather!"

The change in routine confused Jerzy, but the others seemed to know what to do, so he followed. They were taken away from the wagon, to a large kephir, larger than any he'd ever seen, and thrust inside.

There was cold water, buckets of it, and pots of harsh soap that smelled like something burnt, to scrub away the grime and sweat. Jerzy, observing the others, untied the filthy trou he'd been wearing and let them fall to the ground, then took the handful of soap, and let himself be chivied into a line. The others were already scrubbing themselves with the soap while they waited, so he did the same.

When he came to the head of his line, there was no warning before cold water was dumped over him, colder than the streams he used to bathe in. He spluttered, shaking his head to clear his eyes, his hair – uncut, yet – dripping into his face.

When a hand touched him, he flinched, but it seemed brisk enough, wielding a rough cloth, wiping away the water and soap, drawing away the grime. The next touch

was less impersonal, lingering on his back, the cloth not so much cleaning as caressing. He shuddered, and stepped away, only to be brought up short by that hand gripping his shoulder, hard enough to bruise the bare skin.

“Ohhhh, cleans up nice. Pretty thing, pretty hair. Like the pelt of a fox, and skin like beer. Two of my favorite things.”

The voice came from behind him: one of the slavers, not the ones who had taken him, but another, one of the older men who set up camp each night. He smelled of the pipe he smoked, always hanging from the corner of his mouth, and the rancid sweat of sick meat, but he gave generous portions of food, when it was his turn to distribute it.

The slaver holding the bucket laughed, and tossed the other man a length of cloth. “Feel free to do the honors. Just don’t damage him.”

Only babies let others dry them. But Jerzy stood still, the skin on his legs and arms prickling up, and let the slaver dry his skin, the cloth running up and down his back, from shoulder to buttocks, pressing more firmly with each stroke. The two men kept talking, casually, of things Jerzy did not understand. Then the hand abandoned the cloth, sliding down over his chest, over his belly, between his legs.

Jerzy, shivering, tried to pull away, and received a vicious twist to his sac that made his knees buckle.

The slaver chuckled, the hand on his shoulder now biting into the skin, hot breath in his ear. “Want to play, do you? We can do that, pretty red.” The lower hand reached up again, gripping his small cock, the thumb pressing hard enough to hurt.

“No damage,” the first man reminded him, before turning away to deal with another slave. “Remember what happened last time.”

Finally, his neck red from bites and his thighs and buttocks sore, Jerzy was given a tunic, cleaner than what they’d worn before, and brought to a pen with the others. The pen was made only of rope, two strands knee and hip-high, tied to stakes driven into the dirt every two paces. Had they pushed, the ropes would have fallen.

They stood, waiting.

Jerzy touched the scarf, now ragged and faded, still wrapped around his arm. The fabric tore a little, the last of the tassels dropping onto the hard-packed dirt. “What happens now?” he finally dared ask, when his teeth stopped chattering from a cold that seemed to rise from inside his bones.

“They look at you,” a voice said, anonymous in the crowd.

“And then?”

Nobody answered. Nobody knew.

Jerzy waited, his shivers finally replaced with a leaden sort of uncertainty. None of them sat, but were still in place like a herd before a storm, bracing themselves. As the day wore on, the slavers came in and took a few at a time, marking them off with a long stick that tapped them on the shoulder, cut them out and took them away.

Jerzy was not chosen.

The day stretched on into afternoon. Some of the slaves came back, others did not. None of them spoke of what had happened, and none of them asked.

At nightfall, they were stripped of their tunics, and put back into the wagon. The next morning, they were on the road again.

They moved on through the mountains, then down again, reaching flatter lands. But the grass was deeper green here, trees lining the road rather than open platter of the plains. Each night, it became harder to remember the smell of the mares, or the sound of hoof beats. Each morning, it became harder to remember anything other than the wagon, the press of the other slaves against him, the taste of boiled greens, and the utter boredom that carried them.

The slaver from the tent still set up camp and fed them, but although Jerzy cringed the first few times, the man took no special notice of him. Covered in dirt and sweat, his red hair matted and dusty, he was anonymous, safe. For now.

The weather warmed, and the wagon moved slower, occasionally caught in mud. More often, the slaves were thrown off the wagon to make it lighter, walking alongside the wheels. During one such period, Jerzy stumbled and fell. His palms landed down on the ground, saving him, and his fingers curled down, instinctively. Grains of soil bedded under his fingernails, and he pushed harder, his palms abrading themselves on the rock-strewn road. Nothing grew there, and yet... for a moment, he almost felt it. A reminder, a promise, like the whicker of a mare, or his mother's heartbeat, as she slept beside him.

Then he was hauled up, put back on his feet, and that brief moment was lost, gone, forgotten.

They passed through another village soon after, but did not pause, nor for the next one after that. A few days later, though, they came to a wide field, where those large cloth structures had been built, and they stopped there.

The routine was the same: hauled out at dawn, stripped down, and washed. The slaver's hands, again, touching him. He knew better than to resist, this time: He was a slave. There was nothing he could do.

This time, though, when it was done, he was tapped on the shoulder, and taken from the rope pen.

A man waited. No, two men: One of them standing, the other seated. He halted, just inside the tent's entrance, blinking in the dimness after the morning's bright sunshine, unsure of what was expected.

"Here," the standing one said. One of the slavers, he knew the voice.

He walked forward, trying to watch where he stepped as well as the movements of both men, and the space around him, in case a blow or touch came from nowhere. Not that he would do anything, should that happen. He just wanted to know.

"Closer." That was the man who was seated. He walked forward, and the man raised his hand. Light appeared, bright enough to blink at.

The man stared at him, starting at the crown of his head and moving to his feet.

“No.”

That was it. The slaver yanked him out with a rough hand, leaving him blinking again in the sunlight, where he was put back into the first tent with the others. That night, it was back on the wagon, and on the road again. Nobody disappeared, that time.

As they jolted down the road, the slavers shouting to each other, in foul moods, he thought about the light that had appeared in the tent, and the way the stranger had looked at him. Not a bad look, he finally decided. Evaluating, like the man was lead mare deciding if another would be allowed into the herd.

The thought left a faint pang in his chest, and he rubbed at his breastbone fretfully, trying to make it go away. Then both pang and thought faded, and he curled up on a bit of blanket, and went to sleep.

The days began to slide into each other, and he learned how to rock with the motion, to pee from the side rather than trying to wait until they stopped, to make his food last without having another slave steal it while he slept, until it became routine, and he no longer had to think.

The road went from wide to narrow, the lands from plains to hills again, and the weather turned warmer, so that rather than huddle for warmth at night, they shifted away from each other, trying to keep their skin cooled. Three more stops, this time losing five slaves. The food got better, the occasional fresh vegetable added to the soup, and once a half-dozen loaves of bread, still edible, shared out among the remaining slaves.

They paused that night in an open field, pulling the wagon onto the grass, and leaving the horses in a makeshift rope pen, to graze freely. The slaves were likewise contained, markers placed to show where they could not go, but otherwise unwatched.

Some still bedded down close to each other, out of habit if not comfort. Others went to the furthest ends of the barriers, guarding their own personal space fiercely. He wavered, uncertain, then found himself claiming a patch of grass closer to the main group, close enough to hear their breathing as they settled down, but distant enough that he smelled the grass and dirt, rather than their sweat.

The ground was soft, and when his fingers dug into it, he felt a granular texture against his skin; not thick and hard, but as though it was a living thing, moving as he moved. The sensation tickled, and a shudder ran down his spine, as though he had sat down too fast on something hard. He pulled his fingers up out of the dirt, and rubbed them against his leg, heedless of the fact that the cloth was filthier than his hands, at that point.

He looked up, and tried to count the stars off, the way his mother had taught him, but nothing looked right, and he kept forgetting what each figure meant. Finally, he curled up on his patch of grass, tucking his arms around his knees, and went to sleep, the smell of the dirt still tickling his nose.

The market this time was in a larger town, the market itself too large to take in. They were in the center of it all, with other booths and tents set up around them, people calling out and offering things to the folk walking by. The cleaning-tent water was warmed, almost unpleasantly so, and the tunics they were given didn't scratch at his skin. He submitted to the handling, then waited patiently while one of the slavers clipped his hair close again, the strands having grown out since last time.

"Pity we can't wave with that," one of them joked, giving him a proprietary stroke across the top of his head. "Color like that, the ladies would pay for it."

"So sweep the leavings," the other one growled. "But do it after."

Chastised, the slaver took him by the arm, and thrust him into the waiting pen, although he would have gone on his own, anyway. Cleanse, clip, wait; be shown, and return to the pen. He knew how it worked, now.

A larger market, and more than one man waiting, each in their own tent. He passed through the first with barely a pause; the man seated there seemed to barely notice his presence. Out, and then pushed into the next, scarce time to breathe.

The slaver presented him to the man waiting there; tall and lean even seated, his face in shadow despite the lamps that filled this tent.

"Closer."

Unlike the slavers, who smelled of sweat and tallow - by now familiar, almost comforting smells - this stranger reeked of something harder, sharper. He sniffed the air without thought, trying to identify the aroma. Had the other men smelled like that? He couldn't remember; he thought he hadn't been close enough.

"Show me your hands."

As bidden, he lifted his hands, showing them.

"Palms down."

The man stared at them, then laughed. "Yes, yes. He will do."

He did not react, had no idea how to react, when the slaver grabbed his shoulders, forcing his left arm forward. He tensed, fighting the need to struggle against that hold, not sure if he should be more worried about the man behind him, or the man in front of him; either way, there was nothing he could do.

"Relax, boy," the seated man said.

His muscles eased, waiting passively for what was about to happen.

The stranger picked up a silver cup, sipping from it as he watched the two figures, slaver and slave. Then the man nodded once, and the slaver pulled the scrap of cloth from his hand, dropping it to the floor. He scarce had time to mourn the loss - once gone, you did not get something back - before the stranger stood, stepped forward, and spat into the upraised palm.

It burned, searing agony so deep and sudden that he screamed, his voice high-pitched and wailing. He would have dropped to his knees, had he not been held upright, the slaver's knee to his back.

When the pain faded, and he could unscrew his eyes again, the slaver was gone, his arms free. He stared at the ground in front of him, a pair of feet in brown leather shoes inches from his face.

There was silence.

He sniffed back the tears, feeling his throat clog with gunk, and waited.

The man reached down, and took his hand, holding it up so that he could see. Where they had burned him, a rounded blotch now appeared, the size of a ripe berry.

“My name is Vineart Malech,” the man said, touching the blotch with his thumb. “You’re mine, now.”

His master had a smaller wagon, drawn by a slender brown horse that lowered its head for him to stroke its muzzle, and blow into its nose. His eyes prickled hot, and he tugged on the horse’s soft ear, and then climbed into the back of the wagon without being told. There were bundles in the wagon already, soft ones.

“Lean against them, and get some sleep,” the master said. “We’ll be home in a few hours.”

He was afraid to touch the bundles, afraid of doing something wrong, and so instead curled up against the bare side, wrapped his arms around his knees, and waited.

Slowly the land around them changed, the road becoming steeper, then evening out again, leaving the villages behind. They skirted a huge grove of trees, massive things that made him feel as though they were about to attack him, then curved over the hill, and down into a valley where buildings, light with soft light, waited.

The wagon pulled up, and the master got out and walked away, while someone began unhitching the horse, and unloading the bundles. A stranger, his broken face glum and sour, pulled him out of the wagon, and pulled him away, then threw him down onto the ground, next to a tangle of leaves and thorns.

“Master bought you, but he ain’t the one to decide,” a harsh voice said. “Vines’ll do that.”

He cringed, not understanding, but did not resist, listening to his breath, harsh in his chest, and waiting for whatever came next.

And, in the rising night breeze, something came. Deep and smooth, pungent and impossible, tickling the inside of his nose, the flesh of his throat, forcing its way inside until he choked on it, the leaves above him bending over, pressing against his skin and pushing at him, the thorns scraping and scoring flesh.

Then it ended, and he lay there panting, the vines above him unmoving, the sky clear over his head. His hand, without volition, stretched out, flexed, and dug fingers into the soil below him. The dirt worked its way under his ragged nails, embedded itself in the whorls of his fingertips, sang in his blood.

“Looks like you’ll live, then” the glum-faced man said.

Jerzy looked at his hands. Maybe he would.

Also by Laura Anne Gilman

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