

THE TALE OF KRISPOS

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The
TALE OF KRISPOS

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MAP



AUTHOR'S NOTE

The three books that comprise *The Tale of Krispos* are set in the same universe as the four books of *The Videssos Cycle*: *The Misplaced Legion*, *The Legion of Videssos*, *An Emperor of the Legion*, and *Swords of the Legion*. The events described in *The Tale of Krispos* take place about five hundred years before those chronicled in *The Videssos Cycle*. Thus the preceding map is different from the one in front of the books of *The Videssos Cycle*. So, too, are some of the customs that appear here: nations, even imaginary ones, do not stand still over five hundred years.

Book I
KRISPOS RISING



This one is for Rebecca
(who arrived during Chapter V)
and for her grandmothers,
Gertrude and Nancy.

Chapter I



THE THUNDER OF HOOFBEATS. SHOUTS IN A HARSH TONGUE.

Krispos opened one eye. It was still dark. It felt like the middle of the night. He shook his head. He did not like noise that woke him up when he should have been asleep. He closed the eye and snuggled down between his mother and father on the straw palliasso he and they and his little sister used for bed.

His parents woke, too, just when he was trying to go back to sleep. Krispos felt their bodies stiff on either side of him. His sister Evdokia slept on. *Some people have all the luck*, he thought, though he'd never thought of Evdokia as particularly lucky before. Not only was she three—half his age—she was a *girl*.

The shouts turned to screams. One of the screams had words: “The Kubratoi! The Kubratoi are the village!”

His mother gasped. “Phos save us!” she said, her voice almost as shrill as the cries of terror in the darkness outside.

“The good god saves through what people do,” his father said. The farmer sprang to his feet. That woke Evdokia, where nothing else had. She started to cry. “Keep her quiet, Tatze!” Krispos’ father growled. His mother cuddled Evdokia, softly crooned to her.

Krispos wondered whether he’d get cuddled if he started crying. He thought he’d be more likely to get his father’s hand on his backside or across his face. Like every farm boy from anywhere near the town of Imbros, he knew who the Kubratoi were: wild men from north of the mountains. “Will you fight them, Father?” he asked. Just the other day, with a stick for a sword, he’d slain a dozen make-believe robbers.

But his father shook his head. “Real fighting is for soldiers. The Kubratoi, curse ’em, are soldiers. We aren’t. They’d kill us, and we couldn’t do much in the way of fighting back. This isn’t play, boy.”

“What *will* we do, Phostis?” his mother asked above Evdokia’s sniffles. She sounded almost ready to cry herself. That frightened Krispos more than all the racket outside. What could be worse than something bad enough to frighten his mother?

The answer came in a moment: something bad enough to frighten his father. “We run,” Phostis said.

grimly, “unless you’d sooner be dragged north by the two-legged wolves out there. That’s why I built the door close to the forest; that’s why I built the door facing away from most of the houses: to give us a chance to run, if the Kubratoi ever came down again.”

His mother bent, rose again. “I have the baby.”

In her arms, Evdokia said indignantly, “Not a baby!” Then she started to cry again.

No one paid any attention to her. Krispos’ father took him by the shoulder, so hard that his flimsy nightshirt might as well not have stood between man’s flesh and boy’s. “Can you run to the trees, so fast as you can, and hide yourself till the bad men go away?”

“Yes, Father.” Put that way, it sounded like a game. Krispos had played more games in the forest than he could count.

“Then run!” His father threw open the door. Out he darted. His mother followed, still holding Evdokia. Last came his father. Krispos knew his father could run faster than he could, but his father didn’t try, not tonight. He stayed between his family and the village.

Bare feet skimming across the ground, Krispos looked back over his shoulder. He’d never seen so many horses or so many torches in his life before. All the horses had strangers on them—the fearsome Kubratoi, he supposed. He could see a lot of villagers, too. The horsemen rounded up more of them every second.

“Don’t look, boy! Run!” his father said. Krispos ran. The blessed trees drew nearer and nearer. But a new shout was up, too, and horses drummed their way. The sound of pursuit grew with horrible quickness. Breath sobbing in his throat, Krispos thought how unfair it was that horses could run so fast.

“You stop, or we shoot you!” a voice called from behind. Krispos could hardly understand it; he had never heard Videssian spoken with any accent but the country twang of his own village.

“Keep running!” his father said. But riders flashed by Krispos on either side, so close he could feel the wind from their horses, so close he could smell the beasts. They wheeled, blocking him and his family from the safety of the woods.

Still with the feeling it was all a game, Krispos wheeled to dash off in some new direction. Then he saw the other horsemen, the pair who had gone after his father. One carried a torch, to give them both light to see by. It also let Krispos clearly see them, see their fur caps, the matted beards that seemed to complement those caps, their boiled-leather armor, the curved swords on their hips, the way they strode their mounts as if part of them. Frozen in time, the moment stayed with Krispos as long as he lived.

The second rider, the one without a torch, held a bow. It had an arrow in it, an arrow drawn and pointed at Krispos’ father. That was when it stopped being play for the boy. He knew about bows, and how people were supposed to be careful with them. If these wild men didn’t know that, time someone taught them.

He marched straight up to the Kubratoi. “You turn the aim of that arrow aside this instant,” he told them. “You might hurt someone with it.”

Both Kubratoi stared at him. The one with the bow threw back his head and howled laughter. The wild man *did* sound like a wolf, Krispos thought, shivering. He wished his voice had been big and deep like his father’s, not a boy’s squeak. The rider wouldn’t have laughed then.

The rider probably would have shot him, but he did not think of that until years later. As it was, the Kubrati, still laughing, set down his bow, made an extravagant salute from the saddle. “Anything you say, little khagan, anything you say.” He chuckled, wiping his face with the back of his hand. Then he raised his eyes to meet those of Krispos’ father, who had hurried up to do what he could for the boy. “Not need to shoot now, eh, farmer-man?”

“No,” Krispos’ father agreed bitterly. “You’ve caught us, all right.”

Along with his parents and Evdokia, Krispos walked slowly back to the village. A couple of horsemen stayed with them; the other two rode ahead so they could get back to doing whatever the Kubratoi did. That, Krispos already suspected, was nothing good.

He remembered the strange word the rider with the bow had used. “Father, what does ‘khagan’ mean?”

“It’s what the Kubratoi call their chieftain. If he’d been a Videssian, he would have called you ‘Avtokrator’ instead.”

“Emperor? That’s silly.” Even with his world coming apart, Krispos found he could still laugh.

“So it is, boy,” his father said grimly. He paused, then went on in a different tone, as if beginning to enjoy the joke himself: “Although there’s said to be Vaspurakaner blood on my side of the family, and the Vaspurs all style themselves ‘prince.’ Bet you didn’t know your father was a prince, eh, son?”

“Stop it, Phostis!” Krispos’ mother said. “The priest says that nonsense about princes is heresy and nothing else but. Don’t pass it on to the boy.”

“Heresy is what the priest is supposed to know about,” his father agreed, “but I won’t argue about the nonsense part. Who ever heard of a prince going hungry?”

His mother sniffed, but made no further answer. They were inside the village by then, back where other people could hear them—not good, not if they wanted to talk of heresy. “What will they do with us?” was a safer question to ask, though not one, necessarily, with a surer answer. The villagers stood around under the bows of the Kubratoi, waiting.

Then more riders came up, these leading not people but the village’s herds and flocks. “Are the animals coming with us, Father?” Krispos asked. He had not expected the Kubratoi to be so considerate.

“With us, aye, but not for us,” was all his father said.

The Kubratoi started shouting, both those who spoke Videssian and those who did not. The village looked at one another, trying to figure out what the wild men meant. Then they saw the direction which the cattle and sheep were going. They followed the beasts northward.

FOR KRISPOS, THE TREK TO KUBRAT WAS THE BEST ADVENTURE he'd ever had. Tramping along all day was no harder than the chores he would have been doing had the raiders not descended on his village, and he always had something new to see. He'd never imagined, before, how big the world was.

That the march was forced hardly entered his mind. He ate better on it than he had at home; the Kubrati he'd defied that first night decided to make a pet of him and brought him chunks of roast lamb and beef. Soon other riders took up the game, so the "little khagan" sometimes found himself with more than he could eat.

At his father's urging, he never let on. Whenever the Kubratoi did not insist on having him eat in front of them, he passed their tidbits on to the rest of the family. The way he made the food disappear earned him a reputation as a bottomless pit, which only brought more his way.

By the end of the third day on the road north, the raiders who had descended on his village met with other bands bringing captives and booty back to Kubrat. That took Krispos by surprise. He had never given any thought to the world beyond the fields he knew. Now he saw he and his family were caught up in something larger than a local upheaval.

"Where are those people from, Father?" he asked as yet another group of bewildered, bedraggled peasants came stumbling into the larger stream.

His father shrugged, which made Evdokia giggle—she was riding on his shoulders. "Who can say? Phostis answered. "Just another village of farmers that happened to be unlucky like ours."

"Unlucky." Krispos tasted the word, found it odd. He was enjoying himself. Sleeping under the stars was no great handicap, not to a six-year-old in summer. But his father, he could tell, did not like the Kubratoi and would have hit back at them if he could. That made Krispos ask another question, one he had not thought of till now. "Why are they taking farmers back to Kubrat?"

"Here comes one." His father waited till the wild man rode by, then pointed at his back. "Tell me what you see."

"A man on a horse with a big bushy beard."

"Horses don't have beards," Evdokia said. "That's dumb, Krispos."

"Hush," their father told her. "That's right, son—a man on a horse. Kubratoi hardly ever come down from their horses. They travel on them, go to war on them, and follow their flocks on them, too. But you can't be a farmer if you stay on your horse all the time."

“They don’t want to be farmers, though,” Krispos said.

“No, they don’t,” his father agreed. “But they need farmers, whether they want to farm themselves or not. Everybody needs farmers. Flocks can’t give you all the food you need and flocks won’t feed your horses at all. So they come down into Videssos and steal folk like—well, folk like us.”

“Maybe it won’t be so bad, Phostis,” Krispos’ mother said. “They can’t take more from us than the imperial tax collectors do.”

“Who says they can’t?” his father answered. “Phos the lord of the great and good mind knows we have no love for the tax collectors, but year in, year out they leave us enough to get by on. They shear us—they don’t flay us. If the Kubratoi were so fine as all that, Tatze, they wouldn’t need to raid every few years to get more peasants. They’d be able to keep the ones they had.”

There was a commotion among the captives that night. Evidently a good many of them agreed with Krispos’ father and tried to escape from the Kubratoi. The screams were far worse than the ones in the village the night the wild men came.

“Fools,” Phostis said. “Now they’ll come down harder on all of us.”

He was right. The men from the north started traveling before dawn and did not stop to feed the peasants till well after noon. They pushed the pace after the meager meal, too, halting only when it got too dark for them to see where they were going. By then, the Paristriian Mountains loomed tall against the northern skyline.

A small stream ran through the campsite the Kubratoi had picked. “Shuck out of your shirt and wash yourself,” Krispos’ mother told him.

He took off his shirt—the only one he had—but did not get into the water. It looked chilly. “Why don’t you take a bath, too, Mama?” he said. “You’re dirtier than I am.” Under the dirt, he knew, she was one of the best-looking ladies in his village.

His mother’s eyes flicked to the Kubratoi. “I’m all right the way I am, for now.” She ran a grimy hand across her grimy face.

“But—”

The swat of his father’s hand on his bare behind sent him skittering into the stream. It was as cold as it looked, but his bottom still felt aflame when he came out. His father nodded to him in a strange new way, almost as if they were both grown men. “Are you going to argue with your mother the next time she tells you to do something?” he asked.

“No, Father,” Krispos said.

His father laughed. “Not until your backside cools off, anyway. Well, good enough. Here’s your shirt.” He got out of his own and walked down to the stream, to come back a few minutes later wet and dripping and running his hands through his hair.

Krispos watched him dress, then said carefully, “Father, is it arguing if I ask why you and I should take baths, but Mama shouldn’t?”

For a bad moment he thought it was, and braced himself for another smack. But then his father said, “Hmm—maybe it isn’t. Put it like this—no matter how clean we are, no Kubrati will find you or me as pretty. You follow that?”

“Yes,” Krispos said, although he thought his father—with his wide shoulders, neat black beard, and dark eyes set so deep beneath shaggy brows that sometimes the laughter lurking there was almost hidden—a fine and splendid man. But, he had to admit, that wasn’t the same as pretty.

“All right, then. Now you’ve already seen how the Kubratoi are thieves. Phos, boy, they’ve stolen all of us, and our animals, too. And if one of them saw your mother looking especially pretty, the way she can—” Listening, she smiled at Krispos’ father, but did not speak. “—he might want to take her away for his very own. We don’t want that to happen, do we?”

“No!” Krispos’ eyes got wide as he saw how clever his mother and father were. “I see! I understand. It’s a trick, like when the wizard made Gemistos’ hair turn green at the show he gave.”

“A little like that, anyhow,” his father agreed. “But that was real magic. Gemistos’ hair really went green, till the wizard changed it back to brown again. This is more a game, like when men and women switch clothes sometimes on the Midwinter’s Day festival. Do I turn into your mama because I’m wearing a dress?”

“Of course not!” Krispos giggled. But that wasn’t supposed to fool anyone; as his father said, it was only a game. Here, now, his mother’s prettiness remained, though she was trying to hide it so no one noticed. And if hiding something in plain sight wasn’t magic, Krispos didn’t know what was.

HE HAD THAT THOUGHT AGAIN THE NEXT DAY, WHEN THE WILD men took their captives into Kubrat. A couple of passes opened invitingly, but the Kubratoi headed for neither of them. Instead, they led the Videssian farmers down a forest track that seemed destined only to run straight into the side of the mountains.

But it did not run into the mountains—rather, into a narrow defile the trees and a last spur of hill screened from view. Though the sky stayed blue overhead, everything in the gorge was lost in shadow as if it were twilight. Somewhere a nightjar hooted, thinking its time had come.

Strung out along the bottom of that steep, twisting gorge, people and animals could move but slowly. True evening came when they were only part of the way through the mountains.

“It’s a good trick,” Krispos’ father said grudgingly as they settled down to camp. “Even if imperial soldiers do come after us, a handful of men could hold them out of this pass forever.”

“Soldiers?” Krispos said, amazed. That Videssian troopers might be riding after the Kubratoi had

never crossed his mind. “You mean the Empire cares enough about us to fight to get us back?”

His father’s chuckle had little real amusement in it. “I know the only time you ever saw soldiers was that time a couple of years ago, when the harvest was so bad they didn’t trust us to sit still for the tax collector unless he had archers at his back. But aye, they might fight to get us back. Videssos needs farmers on the ground as much as Kubrat does. Everybody needs farmers, boy; it’d be a hungry world without ’em.”

Most of that went over Krispos’ head. “Soldiers,” he said again, softly. So he—for that was how he thought of it—was so important the Avtokrator would send soldiers to return him to his proper place. Then it was as if—well, almost as if—he had caused those soldiers to be sent. And surely that was a dream, if—well, perhaps as if—he were Avtokrator himself. It was a good enough dream to fall asleep on, anyhow.

When he woke up the next morning, he was certain something was wrong. He kept peering around trying to figure out what it was. At last his eyes went up to the strip of rock far overhead that the rising sun was painting with light. “That’s the wrong direction!” he blurted. “Look! The sun’s coming up in the west!”

“Phos have mercy, I think the lad’s right!” Tzykalas the cobbler said close by. He drew a circle on his breast, itself the sign of the good god’s sun. Other people started babbling; Krispos heard the fever in their voices.

Then his father yelled “Stop it!” so loudly that they actually did. Into that sudden silence, Phostis went on, “What’s more likely, that the world has turned upside down or that this canyon’s wound around so we couldn’t guess east from west?”

Krispos felt foolish. From the expressions on the folk nearby, so did they. In a surly voice, Tzykalas said, “Your boy was the one who started us hopping, Phostis.”

“Well, so he was. What about it? Who’s the bigger fool, a silly boy or the grown man who takes him seriously?”

Someone laughed at that. Tzykalas flushed. His hands curled into fists. Krispos’ father stood still and quiet, waiting. Shaking his head and muttering to himself, Tzykalas turned away. Two or three more people laughed then.

Krispos’ father took no notice of them. Quietly he said, “The next time things aren’t the way you expect, son, think before you talk, eh?”

Krispos nodded. He felt foolish now himself. One more thing to remember, he thought. The bigger he got, the more such things he found. He wondered how grown people managed to keep everything straight.

Late that afternoon, the canyon opened up. Green land lay ahead, land not much different from the fields and forests around Krispos’ home village. “Is that Kubrat?” he asked, pointing.

One of the wild men overheard him. “Is Kubrat. Is good to be back. Is home,” he said in halting Videssian.

Till then, Krispos hadn't thought about the raiders having homes—to him, they had seemed a phenomenon of nature, like a blizzard or a flood. Now, though, a happy smile was on the Kubrati's face. He looked like a man heading home after some hard work. Maybe he had little boys at that home or little girls. Krispos hadn't thought about the raiders having children, either.

He hadn't thought about a lot of things, he realized. When he said that out loud, his father laughed. “That's because you're still a child. As you grow, you'll work through the ones that matter to you.”

“But I want to be able to know about all those things now,” Krispos said. “It isn't fair.”

“Maybe not.” No longer laughing, his father put a hand on his shoulder. “But I'll tell you this—chicken comes out of its egg knowing everything it needs to know to be a chicken. There's more to being a man; it takes a while to learn. So which would you rather be, son, a chicken or a man?”

Krispos folded his hands into his armpits and flapped imaginary wings. He let out a couple of loud clucks, then squealed when his father tickled his ribs.

The next morning, Krispos saw in the distance several—well, what were they? Neither tents nor houses, but something in between. They had wheels and looked as if animals could pull them. His father did not know what to call them, either.

“May I ask one of the Kubratoi?” Krispos said.

His mother started to shake her head, but his father said, “Let him, Tatze. We may as well get used to them, and they've liked the boy ever since he stood up to them that first night.”

So he asked one of the wild men trotting by on his pony. The Kubrati stared at him and started to laugh. “So the little khagan does not know of yurts, eh? Those are yurts you see, the perfect homes for following the flocks.”

“Will you put us in yurts, too?” Krispos liked the idea of being able to live now one place, now another.

But the horseman shook his head. “You are farmer folk, good only for raising plants. And as plants are rooted to the ground, your houses will be rooted, too.” He spat to show his contempt for people who had to stay in one spot, then touched the heels of his boots to his horse's flanks and rode off.

Krispos looked after him, a little hurt. “I'll travel, too, one day,” he said loudly. The Kubrati paid no attention to him. He sighed and went back to his parents. “I *will* travel!” he told his father. “I will.”

“You'll travel in a few minutes,” his father answered. “They're getting ready to move us along again.”

“That's not what I meant,” Krispos said. “I meant travel when *I* want to, and go where *I* want to.”

“Maybe you will, son.” His father sighed, rose, and stretched. “But not today.”

. . .

JUST AS CAPTIVES FROM MANY VIDESSION VILLAGES HAD JOINED together to make one large band on the way to Kubrat, so now they were taken away from the main group—five, ten, twenty families at a time, to go off to the lands they would work for their new masters.

Most of the people the Kubratoi told to go off with the group that included Krispos’ father were from his village, but some were not, and some of the villagers had to go someplace else. When they protested being broken up, the wild men ignored their pleas. “Not as if you were a clan the good god formed,” a raider said, the same scorn in his voice that Krispos had heard from the Kubrati who explained what yurts were. And, like that rider, he rode away without listening to any reply.

“What does he mean, gods?” Krispos asked. “Isn’t there just Phos? And Skotos,” he added after a moment, naming the good god’s wicked foe in a smaller voice.

“The Kubratoi don’t know of Phos,” his father told him. “They worship demons and spirits and who knows what. After they die, they’ll spend forever in Skotos’ ice for their wickedness, too.”

“I hope there are priests here,” Tatze said nervously.

“We’ll get along, whether or not,” Phostis said. “We know what the good is, and we’ll follow it.” Krispos nodded. That made sense to him. He always tried to be good—unless being bad looked like a lot more fun. He hoped Phos would forgive him. His father usually did, and in his mind the good god was a larger version of his father, one who watched the whole world instead of just a farm.

Later that day, one of the Kubratoi pointed ahead and said, “There your new village.”

“It’s big!” Krispos said. “Look at all the houses!”

His father had a better idea of what to look for. “Aye, lots of houses. Where are the people, though? Hardly any in the fields, hardly any in the village.” He sighed. “I expect the reason I don’t see ’em is that they’re not there to see.”

As the party of Kubratoi and captives drew near, a few men and women did emerge from the thatch-roofed cottages to stare at the newcomers. Krispos had never had much. These thin, poorly clothed wretches, though, showed him other folk could have even less.

The wild men waved the village’s new inhabitants forward to meet the old. Then they wheeled their horses and rode away...rode, Krispos supposed, back to their yurts.

As he came into the village, he saw that many of the houses stood empty; some were only half-thatched, others had rafters falling down, still others had chunks of clay gone from the wall to reveal the woven branches within.

His father sighed again. "I suppose I should be glad we'll have roofs over our heads." He turned to the families uprooted from Videssos. "We might as well pick out the places we'll want to live in. My eye has my eye on that house right there." He pointed to an abandoned dwelling as dilapidated as any of the others, set near the edge of the village.

As he and Tatze, followed by Krispos and Evdokia, headed toward the home they had chosen, one of the men who belonged to this village came up to confront him. "Who do you think you are, to take this house without so much as a by-your-leave?" the fellow asked. Even to a farm boy like Krispos, his accent sounded rustic.

"My name's Phostis," Krispos' father said. "Who are you to tell me I can't, when this place is falling to pieces around you?"

The other newcomers added their voices to his. The man looked from them to his own followers who were fewer and less sure of themselves. He lost his bluster as a punctured bladder loses air. "I'm Roukhas," he said. "Headman here, at least until all you folk came."

"We don't want what's yours, Roukhas," Krispos' father assured him. He smiled a sour smile. "Truth is, I'd be just as glad never to have met you, because that'd mean I was still back in Videssos." Even Roukhas nodded at that, managing a wry chuckle. Phostis went on, "We're here, though, and I don't see much point in having to build from scratch when there're all these places ready to hand."

"Aye, well, put that way, I suppose you have a point." Roukhas stepped backward and waved Phostis toward the house he had chosen.

As if his concession were some sort of signal, the rest of the longtime inhabitants of the village hurried up to mingle with the new arrivals. Indeed, they fell on them like long-lost cousins—a fact Krispos thought, a little surprised at himself, they were.

"They didn't even know what the Avtokrator's name was," Krispos' mother marveled as the family settled down to sleep on the ground inside their new house.

"Aye, well, they need to worry about the khagan more," his father answered. Phostis yawned an enormous yawn. "A lot of 'em, too, were born right here, not back home. I shouldn't be surprised they didn't even remember there *was* an Avtokrator."

"But still," Krispos' mother said, "they talked with us as we would with someone from the capital, not from Videssos the city—someone besides the tax man, I mean. And we're from the back of beyond."

"No, Tatze, we just got there," his father answered. "If you doubt it, wait till you see how busy we're going to be." He yawned again. "Tomorrow."

LIFE ON A FARM IS NEVER EASY. OVER THE NEXT WEEKS AND months, Krispos found out just how hard could be. If he was not gathering straw for his father to bind into yealms and put up on the roof to repair the thatch, then he was fetching clay from the streambank to mix with roots and more straw and goat hair and dung to make daub to patch the walls.

Making and slapping on the daub was at least fun. He had the chance to get filthy while doing just what his parents told him. He carried more clay for his mother to shape into a baking oven. Like the one back at his old village, it looked like a beehive.

He spent a lot of time with his mother and little sister, working in the vegetable plots close by the houses. Except for the few still kept up by the handful of people here before the newcomers arrived, those had been allowed to run down. He and Evdokia weeded until their hands blistered, then kept right on. They plucked bugs and snails from the beans and cabbages, the onions and vetch, the beets and turnips. Krispos yelled and screamed and jumped up and down to scare away marauding crows and sparrows and starlings. That was fun, too.

He also kept the village chickens and ducks away from the vegetables. Soon his father got a couple of laying hens by doing some timber cutting for one of the established villagers. Krispos took care of them, too, and spread their manure over the vegetables.

He did more scarecrow duty out in the fields of wheat and oats and barley, along with the rest of the children. With more new arrivals than boys and girls born in the village, that time in the fields was also a time of testing, to see who was strong and who was clever. Krispos held his own and then some, even boys who had two more summers than he did soon learned to give him a wide berth.

He managed to find time for mischief. Roukhas never figured out who put the rotten egg under the straw, right where he liked to lay his head. The farmer and his family did sleep outdoors for the next two days, until their house aired out enough to be livable again. And Evdokia ran calling for her mother one day when she came back from washing herself in the stream and found her clothes moving by themselves.

Unlike Roukhas, Tatze had no trouble deducing how the toad had got into Evdokia's shift. Krispos slept on his stomach that night.

Helping one of the slower newcomers get his roof into shape for the approaching fall rains earned Krispos' father a piglet—and Krispos the job of looking after it. "It's a sow, too," his father said with some satisfaction. "Next year we'll breed it and have plenty of pigs of our own." Krispos looked forward to pork stew and ham and bacon—but not to more pig-tending.

Sheep the village also had, a small flock owned in common, more for wool than for meat. With so many people arriving with only the clothes on their backs, the sheep were sheared a second time this year, and the lambs, too. Krispos' mother spent a while each evening spinning thread and she began to teach Evdokia the art. She set up a loom between two forked posts outside the house, so she could turn

the spun yarn into cloth.

There were no cattle. The Kubratoi kept them all. Cattle, in Kubrat, were wealth, almost like gold. A pair of donkeys plowed for the villagers instead of oxen.

Krispos' father fretted over that, saying, "Oxen have horns to attach the yoke to, but with donkeys you have to fasten it round their necks, so they choke if they pull hard against it." But Roukhas showed him the special donkey-collars they had, modeled after the ones the Kubratoi used for the horses that pulled their yurts. He came away from the demonstration impressed. "Who would have thought the barbarians could come up with something so useful?"

What they had not come up with was any way to make grapes grow north of the mountains. Everyone ate apples and pears, instead, and drank beer. The newcomers never stopped grumbling about that, though some of the beer had honey added to it so it was almost as sweet as wine.

Not having grapes made life different in small ways as well as large. One day Krispos' father brought home a couple of rabbits he had killed in the field. His mother chopped the meat fine, spiced it with garlic—and then stopped short. "How can I stuff it into grape leaves if there aren't any grape leaves?" She sounded more upset at not being able to cook what she wanted than she had over being uprooted and forced to trek to Kubrat; it made the uprooting hit home.

Phostis patted her on the shoulder, turned to his son. "Run over to Roukhas' house and find out what Ivera uses in place of grape leaves. Quick, now!"

Krispos soon came scampering back. "Cabbage," he announced importantly.

"It won't be the same," his mother said. It wasn't, but Krispos thought it was good.

Harvest came sooner than it would have in the warmer south. The grown men cut first the barley, then the oats and wheat, going through the fields with sickles. Krispos and the rest of the children followed to pick up the grains that fell to the ground. Most went into the sacks they carried; a few they ate. And after the grain was gathered, the men went through the fields again, cutting down the golden straw and tying it into sheaves. Then the children, two to a sheaf, dragged it back to the village. Finally, the men and women hauled buckets of dung from the middens to manure the ground for the next planting.

Once the grain was harvested, it was time to pick the beans and to chop down the plants so they could be fed to the pigs. And then, with the grain and beans in deep storage pits—except for some of the barley, which was set aside for brewing—the whole village seemed to take a deep breath.

"I was worried, when we came here, whether we'd be able to grow enough to get all of us through the winter," Krispos' father said one evening, taking a long pull on a mug of beer. "Now, though, Pho the lord of the great and good mind be praised, I think we have enough and to spare."

His mother said, "Don't speak too soon."

"Come on, Tatze, what could go wrong?" his father answered, smiling. "It's in the ground and safe."

Two days later, the Kubratoi came. They came in greater numbers and with more weapons than they'd had escorting the new villagers away from the mass of Videssian captives. At their shouted orders, the villagers opened one storage pit in three and loaded the precious grain onto pack-horses that the wild men had brought with them. When they were done, the Kubratoi trotted off to plunder the neighboring village.

Krispos' father stood a long time, staring down into the empty yard-deep holes in the sandy soil at the back of the village. Finally, with great deliberation, he spat into one of them. "Locusts," he said bitterly. "They ate us out just like locusts. We would have had plenty, but we'll all be hungry before spring comes."

"We ought to fight them next time, Phostis," said one of the younger men who had come from the same village as Krispos and his family. "Make them pay for what they steal."

But Krispos' father sadly shook his head. "I wish we could, Stankos, when I see what they've done to us. They'd massacre us, though, I fear. They're soldiers, and it's the nature of soldiers to take. Farmers endure."

Roukhas was still Phostis' rival for influence in the village, but now he agreed with him. "Four or five years ago the village of Gomatou, over a couple of days west of here, tried rising up against the Kubratoi," he said.

"Well? What happened to it?" Stankos asked.

"It's not there anymore," Roukhas said bleakly. "We watched the smoke go up into the sky."

No one spoke of rebellion again. To Krispos, charging out against the Kubratoi with sword and lance and bow and driving them all back north over the Astris River to the plains from which they come would have been the most glorious thing in the world. It was one of his playmates' favorite games. In truth, though, the wild men were the ones with the arms and armor and horses and, most important still, both the skill and will to use them.

Farmers endure, Krispos thought. He didn't like just enduring. He wondered if that meant he shouldn't be a farmer. What else could he be, though? He had no idea.

THE VILLAGE GOT THROUGH THE WINTER, WHICH WAS FIERCER than any Krispos remembered. Even the feast and celebrations of Midwinter's Day, the day when the sun finally turned north in the sky, had to be forgotten because of the blizzard raging outside.

Krispos grew to hate being cooped up and idle in the house for weeks on end. South of the mountains, even midwinter gave days when he could go out to play in the snow. Those were few and far between here. Even a freezing trip out to empty the chamber pot on the dung heap or help his father haul back firewood made him glad to return to the warm—if stuffy and smoky—air inside.

Spring came at last and brought with it mud almost as oppressive as the snow had been. Plowing, harrowing, sowing, and weeding followed, plunging Krispos back into the endless round of farm work and making him long for the lazy days of winter once more. That fall, the Kubratoi came to take the unfair share of the harvest once more.

The year after that, they came a couple of other times, riding through the fields and trampling down long swathes of growing grain. As they rode, they whooped and yelled and grinned at the helpless farmers whose labor they were wrecking.

“Drunk, the lot of ’em,” Krispos’ father said the night after it happened the first time, his mouth tight with disgust. “Pity they didn’t fall off their horses and break their fool necks—that’d send ’em down to Skotos where they belong.”

“Better to thank Phos that they didn’t come into the village and hurt people instead of plants,” Krispos’ mother said. Phostis only scowled and shook his head.

Listening, Krispos found himself agreeing with his father. What the Kubratoi had done was wrong and they’d done it on purpose. If he deliberately did something wrong, he got walloped for it. The villagers were not strong enough to wallop the Kubratoi, so let them spend eternity with the dark gods and see how they liked that.

When fall came, of course, the Kubratoi took as much grain as they had before. If, thanks to their less was left for the village, that was the village’s hard luck.

The wild men played those same games the next year. That year, too, a woman who had gone down to the stream to bathe never came back. When the villagers went looking for her, they found hoofprints from several horses in the clay by the streambank.

Krispos’ father held his mother very close when the news swept through the village. “Now I will thank Phos, Tatze,” he said. “It could have been you.”

One dawn late in the third spring after Krispos came to Kubrat, barking dogs woke the villagers even before they would have risen on their own. Rubbing their eyes, they stumbled from their houses to find themselves staring at a couple of dozen armed and mounted Kubratoi. The riders carried torches. They scowled down from horseback at the confused and frightened farmers.

Krispos’ hair tried to rise at the back of his neck. He hadn’t thought, lately, about the night the Kubratoi had kidnapped him and everyone else in his village. Now the memories—and the terror—that night flooded back. But where else could the wild men take them from here? Why would they want to?

One of the riders drew his sword. The villagers drew back a pace. Someone moaned. But the Kubratoi did not attack with the curved blade. He pointed instead, westward. “You come with us,” he said in a gutturally accented Videssian. “Now.”

Krispos’ father asked the questions the boy was thinking: “Where? Why?”

“Where I say, man bound to the earth. Because I say.” This time the horseman’s gesture with the sword was threatening.

At nine, Krispos knew more of the world and its harsh ways than he had at six. Still, he did not hesitate. He sprang toward the Kubrati. His father grabbed at him to haul him back, too late. “You leave him alone!” Krispos shouted up at the rider.

The man snarled at him, teeth gleaming white in the torchlight’s flicker. The sword swung up. Krispos’ mother screamed. Then the wild man hesitated. He thrust his torch down almost in front of Krispos’ face. Suddenly, astonishingly, the snarl became a grin. The Kubrati said something in his own language. His comrades exclaimed, then roared laughter.

He dropped back into Videssian. “Ha, little khagan, you forget me? Good thing I remember you, or you die this morning. You defy me once before, in Videssos. How does farmer boy come to have a Kubrati man’s—Kubrati man’s—spirit in him?”

Krispos hadn’t recognized the rider who’d captured him and his family. If the man recognized him, though, he would turn it to his advantage. “Why are you here? What do you want with us now?”

“To take you away.” The scowl came back to the Kubrati’s face. “Videssos has paid ransom for you. We have to let you go.” He sounded anything but delighted at the prospect.

“Ransom?” The word spread through the villagers, at first slowly and in hushed, disbelieving tones, then louder and louder till they all shouted it, nearly delirious with joy. “Ransom!”

They danced round the Kubratoi, past hatred and fear dissolved in the powerful water of freedom. It was, Krispos thought, like a Midwinter’s Day celebration somehow magically dropped in springtime. Soon riders and villagers were hoisting wooden mugs of beer together. Barrel after barrel was broken open. Little would be left for later, but what did that matter? They would not be here later. A new cry took the place of “Ransom!”

“We’re going home!”

Evdokia was puzzled. “What does everyone mean, Krispos, we’re going home? Isn’t this home?”

“No, silly, the place Mother and Father talk about all the time is our real home.”

“Oh.” His sister barely remembered Videssos. “How is it different?”

“It’s...” Krispos wasn’t too clear on that himself, not after almost three years. “It’s better,” he finished at last. That seemed to satisfy her. He wondered if it was true. His own memories of life south of the mountains had grown hazy.

The Kubratoi seemed in as big a hurry to get rid of their Videssian captives as they had been to get them into Kubrat in the first place. Evdokia had trouble keeping up; sometimes Krispos’ father had to carry her for a stretch, even if it shamed her. Krispos made the three days of hard marching on his own, but they left his feet blistered and him sleeping like a dead man each night.

At last the villagers and hundreds more like them reached a broad, shallow valley. With an eye rapidly growing wiser to the ways of farming, Krispos saw that it was better land than what his village tilled. He also saw several large and splendid yurts and, in the distance, the flocks by which the Kubratoi lived. That explained why the valley was not farmed.

The wild men herded the Videssians into pens much like those in which the peasants kept goats. They posted guards around them so no one would even think of clambering over the branches and sneaking off. Fear began to replace the farmer's jubilation. "Are we truly to be ransomed," someone shouted, "or sold like so many beasts?"

"You keep still! Big ceremony coming tomorrow," yelled a Kubrati who spoke Videssian. He climbed up onto the fencing of the pen and pointed. "See over there. There tents of Videssos' men, and Empire's banner, too. No tricks now."

Krispos looked in the direction the man's arm had given. He was too short to see out of the pen. "Pick me up, Father!"

His father did, then, with a grunt of effort, set the boy on his shoulders. Krispos saw the tops of several square tents not far from the yurts he'd noticed before. Sure enough, a sky-blue flag with a gold sunburst on it snapped in front of one of them. "Is that Videssos' banner?" he asked. Try as he would, he could not recall it.

"Aye, it's ours," his father said. "The tax collector always used to show it when he came. I'm gladder to see it now than I was then, I'll tell you that." He put Krispos down.

"Let me see! My turn! Let me see!" Evdokia squealed. Phostis sighed, then smiled. He picked up his daughter.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE PEASANTS GOT FAR BETTER FARE THAN they'd had on the trek to the valley. They ate roasted mutton and beef, with plenty of the flat wheatcakes the Kubratoi baked in place of leavened bread. Krispos ate till his belly felt like bursting from joy and he washed down the meat with a long swig from a leather bucket of mare's milk.

"I wonder what the ceremony the wild man talked about will be like," his mother said.

"I wish we could see more of it," his father added. "Weren't for us, after all, it wouldn't be happening. Not right to leave us penned up while it's going on."

A little later, the Kubratoi let the farmers out of the pens. "This way! This way!" the nomads who spoke Videssian shouted, urging the crowd along toward the yurts and tents.

Krispos spotted the wild men he had yelled at on the day he was captured and on the day he started back to freedom. The Kubrati was peering into the mass of peasants as they walked by him. His eye caught Krispos'. He grinned. "Ho, little khagan, I look for you. You come with me—you part of

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