Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Silk Tree

Written by Julian Stockwin

Published by Allison & Busby Limited

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.



THE SILK TREE

JULIAN STOCKWIN

Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2014.
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2015.

Copyright © 2014 by Julian Stockwin

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-1753-8

Typeset in 10.5/15.5 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

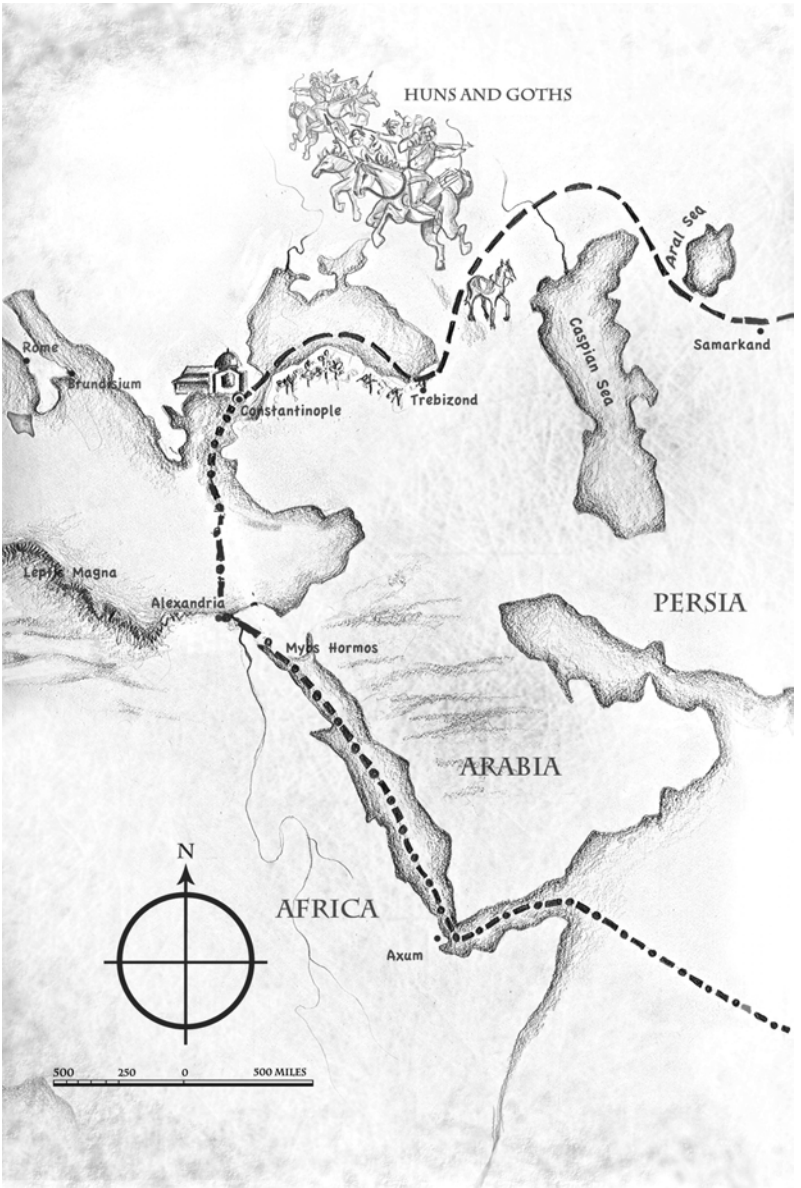
The genesis for *The Silk Tree* came when my wife, Kathy, and I were in Istanbul doing location research. She discovered a rather lovely silk scarf in the Kapali Çarşi, the ancient Grand Bazaar. While she was chatting with the merchant I idly wondered how silk had been brought from China to the West. Intrigued, I did some research on the subject and the creative juices started flowing – I knew I had a story I had to tell! Part of the task of a writer of historical fiction is to recreate city landscapes of the past in his mind's eye and for *The Silk Tree* this meant sixth-century Constantinople (as Istanbul was called then).

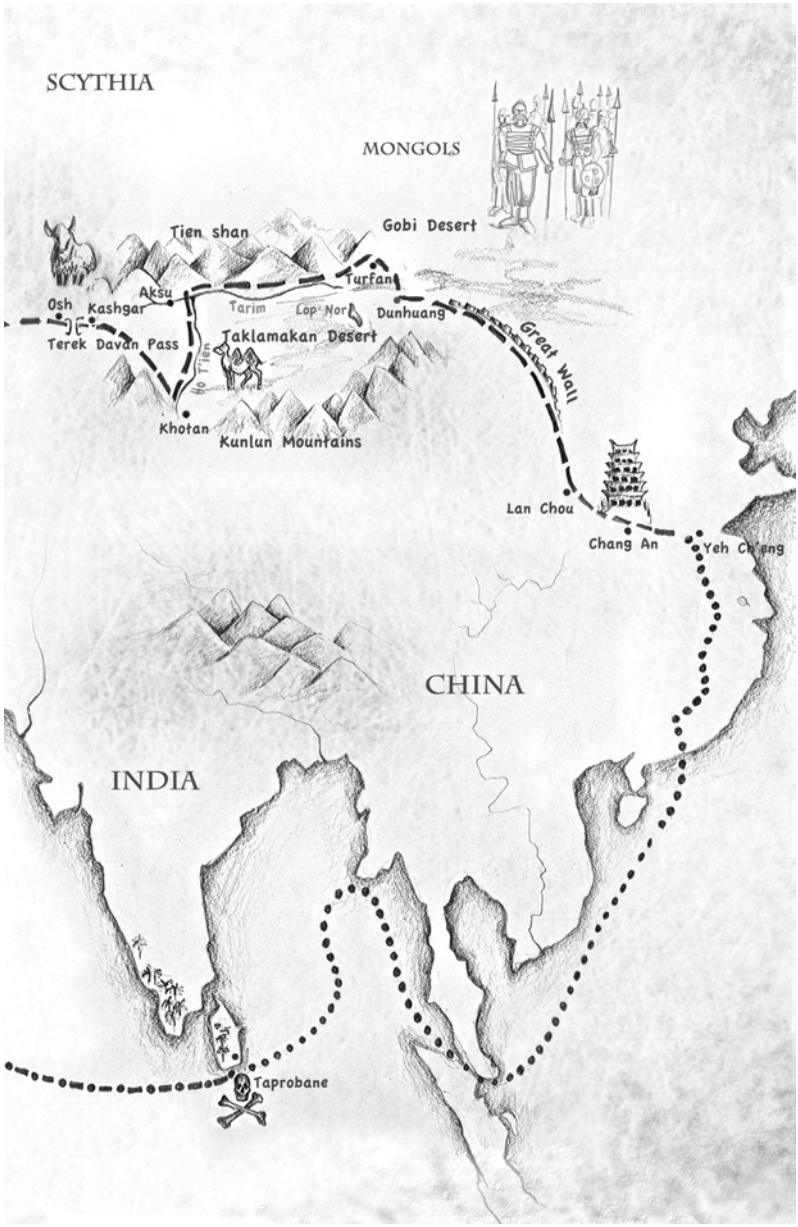
So, what is known about the secret of silk? China kept the secret for over 1000 years and legend there tells of a princess who smuggled eggs out in her headdress when married to a prince of Khotan. In the West, accounts generally agree that it was two monks that returned from China in 551 ad with the secret of silk, and although documents vary in their details – each providing tantalising references and with no one version standing out as definitive – I have based my novel on these. Many of the characters in the book did exist and it was fascinating researching their lives.

Top of a novelist's desire when writing is that his readers enjoy the book, but I also hope *The Silk Tree* has opened a window to a world that we in the twenty-first century can only wonder at.

At about the same time there came certain monks. They promised Emperor Justinian Augustus that they would provide the means for making silk from Sinae where they had learnt the art. After they had announced these tidings, they returned thither and brought back eggs of a worm that feeds on leaves of the mulberry. Thus began the art of making silk in the Roman Empire.

Procopius, Byzantine scholar and historian
– Ὑπέρ τῶν πολέμων λόγοι


HUNS AND GOTHS
Aral Sea
Samarkand
Caspian Sea
Rome
Brundusium
Constantinople
Trebizond
Leptis Magna
Alexandria
Myos Hormos
PERSIA
ARABIA
AFRICA
Axum
N
500 250 0 500 MILES


SCYTHIA
MONGOLS
Tien shan
Gobi Desert
Turfan
Aksu
Osh
Kashgar
Tarim
Lop Nor
Dunhuang
Great Wall
Terek Davan Pass
Taklamakan Desert
Ho Tien
Khotan
Kunlun Mountains
Lan Chou
Chang An
Yeh Ch eng
CHINA
INDIA
Taprobane

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

* indicates fictional character

*Aldar	caravan escort soldier
Antonina, Lady	wife of Belisarius
*Arif	young cameleer
Barsymes, Peter	Count of the Sacred Largesse under Justinian
Belisarius	Roman general under Justinian
Chang Le, Princess	wife of Gokturk Lord Bumin
*Dao Pa	mystic
*Grotius	Nabatean merchant
Hao	chancellor at court of usurper Wen Hsuan of Northern Ch'i
Hsiao Ching	Emperor of the Eastern Wei, overthrown by warlord Kao
John the Cappadocian	disgraced former tax collector for Justinian
Justinian	Justinian I, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, ruled 527–565 AD

Kao Yang	warlord who usurps emperor, becomes Emperor Wen Hsuan
Kao Yeh	Crown Prince of Ch'i
*Khosrau	torturer in employ of Marcellus
*Korkut	Rouran silk merchant
*Kuo	Ying Mei's uncle in Chang An
*Kuo Ming Lai	chancellor and grand chamberlain to Emperor Hsiao Ching
*Kuo Ying Mei, Lady	daughter of Kuo Ming Lai, aka Lady P'eng, aka the Ice Queen
*Lai Tai Yi	Gold Lily lady-in-waiting to Ying Mei, Ah Lai familiar name
*Liu	court eunuch
Lord Bumin	the Khagan of the Gokturks
*Mansur	caravan master and trader with the barbarians
Marcellus	Count of Excubitors at court of Justinian
*Marius	Quintus Carus Marius, Roman legionary, aka Brother Matthew, aka Ma Lai Ssu
*Master Feng	torturer
*Messalia	merchant in Constantinople
Narses	grand chamberlain to Justinian
*Nemasus	compulsor (tax extraction agent) of Justinian
*Nepos	chariot driver for Blues faction

*Nicander	Nicodorus of Leptis Magna, Greek incense merchant aka Brother Paul, Ni K'an Ta
Peter the Patrician	Master of the Offices, the court of Justinian
*Priscus	chariot driver for Greens faction
Procopius	Byzantine scholar and court historian at the time
*Su Li	Sogdian caravan master based in Chang An
*Sueva	Spanish cargo agent in Brundisium
*Taw Vandak	Tibetan lama of the oasis kingdoms
Totila	leader of Ostrogoths
Ts'ao Fu	court poet
*Velch	compulsor (tax extraction agent) of Justinian
*Wang	chief scribe to Kuo
Wen Hsuan	new Emperor of Northern Ch'i; overthrew Hsiao Ching of Eastern Wei
Wu Kuo Chin	general of Imperial Bannermen
*Wulfstan	northern barbarian guard, John the Cappodician residence
*Ya	Uighur commander of caravan escort
*Yi	beastmaster at court of Emperor Wen Hsuan
*Yuan	court eunuch
*Yulduz	caravan master
*Zarina	Korkut's wife

CHAPTER ONE

The dilapidated building on the outskirts of Rome stank of farm slurry – and rank fear hung heavily on the air. Nicander's stomach contorted painfully with hunger. He rubbed his legs, cursing the sparse, angular timbers of the hayloft where he had been hiding since the day before.

He glanced below. In the fitful moonlight coming through the holed roof he could see the three farmhands still cowering in a corner. Next to them a mother rocked her infant. An older child stood close, her eyes flashing fearfully at every sound.

Now the old man was dead. His two slaves squatted next to the body, sunk in a stupor of misery. At least there would be no more of his tortured whimpering. He wore a toga, making him out to be a patrician of sorts, but it hadn't saved him from a brutal, casual hacking by the invaders before he had managed to flee.

Outside in the darkness a distant wolf howled. A mourning for the travails of a proud city falling to the forces of darkness. Nicander shivered at the flesh-crawling sound. In the Year of Our Lord 549 a great empire was now meeting its end.

He hadn't heard any drunken laughter or sounds of rampaging destruction from the farmhouse for some time but the nearby villa

was a different matter. The Ostrogoths were again busy at their plunder there, but if they heard noise they would come looking . . .

He eased more into the shadows. If they broke in, would they be content with butchering the half a dozen below and not glance up? He caught himself – the little group were fellow human beings. But what could he do? He was just one man without so much as a knife. They were strangers; did he owe them anything? Coldly, he concluded that they were in no different position to himself, helpless before the flooding tide of barbarians. Therefore, like him, they must take their chances with whatever scraps of fortune the gods threw their way.

It had all happened so fast. The capital had long moved to Constantinople while the ancient city of Rome had declined and decayed. However, the Emperor in the East, Justinian, had been increasingly successful in his bid to restore the old glories of Rome. He had unleashed the gifted general Belisarius on the Huns, Goths and Ostrogoths and other enemies until the populace felt they could breathe easily. But then he had unaccountably recalled his general, in a fit of jealousy, some said. The beaten hordes had seized their chance and struck back, the wild and cunning Totila of the Ostrogoths thrusting aside the leaderless army to take Rome itself.

Nicander would never forget that night. The rumour had spread that traitors had opened the gates to the Ostrogoths. Panic-stricken crowds scattered before crazed horsemen wielding axes and swords, screaming in bloodlust. An unstoppable flood came on and on, fanning out among the ancient magnificence to plunder and destroy. The wise had hidden. Those witless with fear who had not were mercilessly run down and killed. Females were raped in full view on the street.

Hoarse yells, screaming, flames; the reek of destruction drifting in a choking haze. The chaos and carnage had never abated.

Nicander had watched from his hiding place as his warehouse was set alight by the rampaging barbarians, two hundred thousand solidi worth of incense going up in thickly scented smoke. He was a merchant with a business in the old quarter of the city but now that was over – he was finished and he'd lost no time in fleeing for his life to the countryside while the Ostrogoths were greedily occupied in their looting.

He'd deliberately fled alone, fearing that groups of people would be more likely to attract attention. It had been a terrifying and exhausting struggle over the hills with his little bundle of possessions, avoiding scattered bands of marauders until daylight had threatened. He had looked for the nearest hiding place and found this ramshackle farm outhouse, but was taken aback to find it already occupied by others in the same dire need. They had spent the day in a trembling funk, waiting for who knew what. Towards evening a throng of Ostrogoths had cantered past to plunder the villa close by.

All night they had cringed at the harsh shrieks of the family there as they provided bloody entertainment for the conquerors. Bursts of noise and coarse laughter came on the air, along with periodic splintering crashes. The cries had fallen away in the daylight hours but who knew when they would emerge to come after fresh victims. Now the drunken revelry had begun again.

Italia was being overrun. Nicander knew he had to get out, quickly. The northern ports would all be taken but if he pressed on hard to the south he could probably make Brundisium, and there take ship, away from this madness.

He tried to shut out the unsteady maundering of the mother as she attempted to comfort her infant, the older child still standing by her side, mute and rigid.

He was not a warrior but a peace-craving merchant, certainly no hero. Should he go now, or hope the marauders would tire of their revelries at the villa and move on? Either way there was the prospect of stumbling on one of the murderous bands roaming the countryside.

There would be no mercy seen when—

A blow on the door sounded like a thunderclap, then came harsh, smashing hits. Cold fear gripped Nicander – it had happened and they were hopelessly trapped!

The door gave way, sagged and fell flat. With his heart in his throat he stared down and saw limned against the moonlight a single large figure, sword in one hand, a shapeless pack in the other.

There was a terrifying moment as the man looked in suspiciously then, in the same second that Nicander registered that his weapon was a regulation Roman gladius, the infant gave a loud shriek. The legionary dropped the pack and hurled himself forward. 'Shut it!' he hissed savagely to the mother, the sword threatening. She gripped the baby tightly, pleading with her eyes.

It was too much for the child, who began screaming hysterically. The soldier tore the infant from her, and in a practised sweep slashed its throat, the screech instantly turning to a bubbling sob. He dropped the limp body quickly. The sword flashed out again, stopping an inch from the mother's breast.

There was a petrified silence, then the woman fell on the dead child, her sobs muffled by its stained clothing. The soldier stood back, tightly alert, his sword still drawn while his hard eyes passed over them all. He let it fall to his side and went to the doorway and looked out, listening intently. Then he sheathed the weapon and returned.

'Who's to speak for you?' he demanded to the space in general. His Latin was crude and direct.

Nicander couldn't move. The ruthless execution had paralysed him with its lethal effectiveness.

But then a shameful thought crept in: if there was going to be any chance of survival, this man of inhuman decisiveness might be the means of achieving it.

'I will,' he found himself saying.

The soldier's eyes flicked up to the hayloft in surprise. 'Then get down and speak!'

Nicander dropped from his hiding place and tried to keep his voice steady. 'Nicodorus of Leptis Magna. Nicander.'

'Greek!' grunted the legionary in contempt. His plumed helmet was missing but he wore body armour which was stained with blood over the right side.

'And running from the Ostrogoths – like you!' Nicander retorted.

A strong hand shot out and grabbed the front of his tunic. The man's hard face thrust into his, the expression merciless. But then he nodded. 'It's the truth of it, Greek. We're beaten, the fucking square-heads did it again and this time Rome itself pays.'

He made play of smoothing Nicander's tunic and added contemptuously, 'Who are your mates, then?'

'They're not my friends. They were hiding here when I took shelter.' He held the big man's eyes. 'You didn't say who you are, soldier.'

'Does it matter, Greek?'

'Just being polite, Roman.'

Unexpectedly, the big man smiled. 'Don't get your dignity in a twist, then, Greek.' He grunted. 'It's Marius, legionary of the Decius twenty-fourth Pannonian as no longer exists. Quintus Carus Marius,' he added, smacking a fist to his left breast in mocking salute.

Nicander inclined his head. Around them was the stillness of

horror, only the muffled distress of the woman audible. 'We have to get away from here. What's it like out there?'

Marius ignored him and pointed at one of the huddled farmhands. 'You! What did you hear outside?'

The lad stared back in mute despair.

Marius's hand dropped to his sword and he took a pace forward. 'Answer me, you fucking cowards!' he snarled.

'In the last few hours, sounds only from the villa,' Nicander said carefully.

Marius swung around to face him. 'Right. That's to the north.' He smiled mirthlessly and scooped up his pack. 'So I'm away to the south. Best of fortune, Mr Greek, you're going to need it!'

'Wait!' Nicander thought furiously. It would be daylight in a few hours and then his fate would be sealed. There was no way he was going to leave his bones in this godforsaken corner of a crumbling empire. He had moments only before the soldier left them to their doom.

It was a long shot, but the only card he had. 'Aren't you forgetting something, legionary?'

'What?' snapped Marius.

'Your duty as a Roman soldier!'

Marius stiffened. 'You dare to speak to me of such, you Greek swine!'

But Nicander sensed he had touched a nerve. 'Yes, you've surely not forgotten your sworn oath before the legate – to defend to the death Rome and its citizens!'

'Have a care, Greek! I'm not throwing my life away for this worthless rabble!'

Nicander's face hardened. 'You've lost a battle but this doesn't end your duty to your country.'

'What do you know of soldiering! I've a bigger charge – to preserve myself as a trained legionary for when we strike back.'

Nicander stepped between Marius and the doorway. 'These are Roman citizens. They've a claim to your protection. Are you going to turn your back on them all, each and every one, to save yourself?'

'Yes!'

Taking a deep breath, Nicander drew himself up. 'Then the glories of old Rome mean nothing to you. The wars against Hannibal and his cohorts when all was said to be lost, then brave legionaries turned the tide? Teutoburg Forest and three legions exterminated – but avenged? And you're going to—'

Marius's eyes had a dangerous gleam. He bit off savagely, 'Those times have gone, Greek! There's nothing now.'

But Nicander had seen something that might give him one last chance. He glanced at the single iron ring on Marius's hand. 'I doubt Mithras agrees,' he said, almost in a whisper. The cult of the bull had gone underground since Christianity had triumphed but still had adherents in the military.

'Is it not true the god smiles on those who hold honour more precious than life itself?' he went on.

He could see it hit home.

Marius recoiled. 'So what do you expect me to do? Take 'em all on myself?'

Nicander felt the tide turning in his favour, but he knew he needed to play it very carefully from now on; the Roman had taken the infant's life without a second thought. Would he kill him for his insolence?

Folding his arms he said, 'You're waiting for a centurion to tell you what to do? These people are looking to you, Mr Quintus Carus Marius, to think of something.'

The legionary strode to the doorway and looked out, seeming to be struggling for a decision. After a moment he turned back with a grim expression. 'You're a sad bunch o' losers – but for the honour of the twenty-fourth – there might be a way. When the square-heads find more loot than they can carry, they let out a wolf's cry to bring up their mates.'

'Yes, and—?'

'I'll go outside and draw 'em away like that. You and the others can then get clear.'

Nicander smothered a sigh of relief. With the attention of any wanderers out there elsewhere, he would lose no time in making off into the night and blessed safety. 'Yes, Mr Legionary. A fine plan, worthy of your calling.'

'You're just looking to save your own skin.'

'Not at all,' Nicander came back. 'These people will need a leader in the days to come.'

'And that's you?'

'Can you think of anyone else?'

Marius glanced around the forlorn group. 'No,' he agreed, with a sour smile. 'Get 'em on their feet.'

Nicander motioned to his sorry charges then said, 'I wish you well, Marius.'

The Roman did not reply, but gave an ironic army salute. He turned and loped noiselessly out into the night.

Some minutes later the call of a wolf sounded in the darkness.

'Get ready!' hissed Nicander.

Another howl rose further out, long and insistent. Nicander listened intently. Excited shouts came from the villa, no doubt men streaming out toward the call.

'Go!' he said urgently. The slaves would not leave their master

and in a fury he kicked at them until they obeyed, followed by the listless farm workers, pushing them out bodily into the cold night air.

'Where's the woman?' His voice was taut with nervous tension.

She was still inside, crouched over the body of her infant. He tugged roughly at the older child. 'Get her out of here – if she's not with us, you're both dead! Understand?'

He didn't wait for a reply and returned to the doorway, listening. The cries were now off to the right and distant. They had to make their move – fast!

Pulled by the older child the mother emerged slowly, holding the dead body to her breast, her ragged sobs distracting. Nicander cursed under his breath but wheeled about and led off to the south, a line of dark woods beckoning in the dull moonlight from beyond the fields.

He moved quickly, through a patch of clinging undergrowth and then on to the bare earth of a ploughed field, stumbling forward, propelled by the sick fear of what might happen to them, discovered in the open.

Panting, he made the edge of the woods and crashed on through into the gaunt shadows and the cold stink of forest litter. He turned and looked back, the others were in a slow, straggling line and this pointed like an arrow to where he was. Distraught, he beckoned them on. One by one, they lumbered in, the mother last of all, still clutching the dead child to her breast.

'Quickly!' he urged, then lunged deeper into the forest gloom.

At a small clearing he stopped to catch his breath. How could they carry on like this?

He spared a thought for the legionary. He would be dead by now, overwhelmed by vengeful Ostrogoths, but it would have been

a quick end. That such a brave man had to be sacrificed was a pity, but now he had bigger problems.

He knew vaguely where south was, but this would lead them into the densest part of the woods. His thoughts raced – did he let on about his plan to make for Brundisium? There were only so many ships and the more that tried to crowd into them, the less his chance of getting away.

And surely it was insane to think this sorry crew could keep up for the many days' slog there, anyway. What were—

'I'm h-hungry,' the small voice of the older child broke in.

'Shut up!' he snarled.

He tried to bring to mind the teachings of the ancient Greeks that he was made to learn in his youth. Did the Stoics or the Cynics have anything to say about any moral necessity for the fittest to sacrifice their chances for the sake of the weak?

'I want s-something to eat!' moaned the child. Her mother was no longer in touch with reality; her eyes empty and, slowly rocking, she dangled the dead baby's body listlessly.

He needed more time to think, to decide what to do.

'Now!' the child wailed. 'Someone give me a little piece of bread, anything.' She started to cry.

'Hold your noise!' Nicander spat. 'I'll go find something, just shut up!'

He struck out into the woods, eager to be away. Quickly he was deep into it, pushing through the thickening undergrowth between the trees until a broad track crossed his path at an angle. At last he could move freely – but to where? And how could he find food in a ruined countryside seething with barbarians? Perhaps this track led somewhere or – a chilling thought came. If it did, then it was more than likely . . .

Suddenly he felt hoof-beats through the ground and in a paroxysm of terror threw himself into a thicket, scrabbling at the leaf litter and thorns, desperate for concealment. The first riders came around the bend and he froze, praying they were not looking down. The horses thudded nearer in a gallop, then, just inches away, thundered past, the displaced air of their passage buffeting him. He was left with the stomach-churning reek of Ostrogoths on their way to plunder.

When they had passed he got up, trembling. The track in fact curved further and in sickening realisation he saw that it must pass close to where he had just left. However there was no slackening in the hoof-beats as he heard them die away on leaving the confines of the wood.

He straightened and tried to gather his wits. But before he could focus, in the distance, from the direction of his little group, he heard shouts, hectoring and triumphant. Instantly he realised what had happened. The Ostrogoths had seen footprints in the moonlight on the bare field and these had led unerringly to their victims.

As the first unhinged shrieks came, Nicander could do nothing but stand dully, listening as it grew into a hellish chorus as the slaughter began.