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Opening extract from

The Silver Blade

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THE SILVER BLADE

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Orion
Children's Books

Chapter One



Yann Margoza was dressed as a vagabond in an old greatcoat that had seen better days, with a muffler wrapped round his neck and a hat that had equally lived life to the full. Only if you saw his dark eyes with their unmistakable intensity would you ever have recognised him. His companion, Didier, was a huge bear-like figure of a man. Both had one thing in common: they possessed the ability to merge almost unseen with their surroundings.

They had been on the road now for three days and, although it was late March, they could still feel winter's bitter breath in the wind. By late afternoon, an eerie yellow light flooded the woodland path before pitch-blackness descended as if the sun had been snuffed out.

Thunder trumpeted in the approaching storm, a furious call to arms. Lightning tore at the fabric of the sky. Finally the heavens opened.

Didier once more had the feeling that had troubled him ever since they left Paris three days previously: they were being followed.

'Listen,' he said.

'It's the wind,' replied Yann.

'It sounded more like the howl of a wolf to me.'

Yann kept on walking, not listening, not looking, thinking only of Sido. The thought of her weighed heavily so that he barely noticed how cold, footsore and hungry he was. Or that Didier was right.

'Sido, Sido.' In his mind's eye he could see her oval face, her blue eyes, her mass of wavy dark hair. He knew there was no other road his heart would travel but the road that led to her.

His thoughts had been thus engaged ever since leaving Paris; a tangled knot of desires. His mind drifted back to when he'd first seen her, all those years ago, at the Marquis de Villeduval's château. A fateful night that had changed the course of both their lives. His employer, Topolain the magician, had been shot dead by Count Kalliovski, and in the space of a few hours he had not only met his greatest adversary, but a young girl destined to be his greatest love, the keeper of his soul.

Kalliovski was long dead and Sido free, safe in England. No harm could come to her there. Why then did he have this feeling of foreboding?

Balthazar had followed Yann. Keeping his distance he

was looking for telltale signs that he was on the right track. Mere mortals can't see in the dark without the light of a full moon or a lantern to guide them, especially not on such a stormy night as this, but the young man in the vagabond coat was different. Like his master he walked with an almost supernatural confidence, as if it were broad daylight. Balthazar watched his every move, could smell his blood, hear his heart beat, almost taste his flesh.

He longed to find his old voice. He had been robbed of it; the only sounds left to him were those of a wild beast. He gave a mournful howl, as hunger for the young man overcame him.

'I'm right, aren't I?' said Didier, water dripping miserably off the brim of his hat. 'There is something out there.'

'Let's just keep walking,' Yann shouted above the scream of the wind.

Didier, still feeling uneasy, reassured himself with the sound of his footsteps. One-two, one-two, the rhythm comforted him. He thought back to the time when Yann, spiriting a prisoner out of La Force, had left a silver blade from a street pedlar's toy guillotine suspended over the sleeping head of a corrupt corporal. The weasel-faced man, instead of keeping his foul mouth shut, had boasted to one and all that the next time the Silver Blade, as he called him, came into his prison he would have his guts for garters, so he would. Didier, even in this bitter wind and with a stomach like an empty larder, felt comforted thinking of it. The corporal's boasting

had backfired. He was sent to fight and was never heard of again, while the Silver Blade became a legend, a name whispered on the lips of despairing men, a name that brought hope to a city where hope had been banished.

No one who had been lucky enough to see Yann Margoza perform as the Harlequin in Paris at the Circus of Follies would ever in a thousand years of Sundays have suspected that the star of Monsieur Aulard's pantomime led a double life. But that is exactly what he did. The theatre was a smokescreen for an altogether more subversive operation, that of helping citizens escape from the guillotine. Every member of the theatre company played his or her part in this dangerous venture, all knowing that their lives depended on Yann's talent. Their backers were two English bankers: Charles Cordell, who lived in Paris, and Henry Laxton, with whom Yann had spent three years in London when younger. It was due to Laxton that he had received the education of an English gentleman. Both men had immediately seen the potential in Yann, demonstrated by the near-impossible feat of snatching Sido de Villeduval from the carriage of Count Kalliovski. Neither doubted that Yann could save many more lives, for he possessed courage and an ability to hold his nerve, no matter what situation he found himself in. That on its own would not have been enough, but Yann was of gypsy blood, and had unusual skills. He was able to read people's thoughts, and had a gift for making clients

forget quite how they ever came to be rescued in the first place, so his identity had remained something of a mystery. Without Yann's talents, the whole enterprise would have amounted to nothing more than a barrelful of good intentions, but with him it had proved to be one of the most efficient operations in Paris.

Têtu, the dwarf, and Citizen Aulard, the theatre manager, worked together behind the scenes. It was their job these days to make sure that Yann and Didier had everything they needed to make each assignment a success, and recently, with the rumours of impending massacres once more circulating in Paris, their workload had doubled if not tripled.



Their business, this time in Normandy, was to arrange the escape of the Duc de Bourcy and his family.

It had been Têtu's decision that Yann and Didier should not travel from Paris by coach or on horseback, for such things would be remembered and such memories could prove fatal. Instead he had insisted for their own safety that they take a boat up the Seine into the heartland of Normandy and go the rest of the way on foot.

What Têtu hadn't reckoned on was the weather. Originally they were only meant to be gone for five days, three of which had already passed and they were yet to arrive. The delay put their whole operation at risk, leaving poor Monsieur Aulard and the rest of the company to cover for the Harlequin's absence.

‘Did you hear it? Did you?’ asked Didier, desperate not to be the only one to hear the low, menacing growl. ‘Wasn’t it you who told me that a wolf at the beginning of a journey is bad luck?’

‘No,’ said Yann. ‘Russian gypsies believe it is a good omen.’

‘I hope to God they’re right,’ said Didier.

Lightning flashed, illuminating everything with looking-glass sharpness. They were in an abandoned graveyard, filled with silver birch trees which stood guardian over the crumbling tombstones and broken, wingless angels. In the middle were the skeletal remains of a church, its roof long gone, only three walls preventing it from total collapse.

Yann moved towards it, quickly followed by Didier, both glad at last to have some protection, feeble as it was, from the spiteful wind which hissed and wheezed round the masonry.

Looking into the bleakness of that devil-dark night, Yann heard no wolf howl, he heard nothing but his own gallow’s-bird thoughts.

Why hasn’t Sido replied to my letter? Three weeks and not a word. Perhaps I misunderstood her. What did she write?

> Oh Yann, I long for thee.
> Come back to me.

No, I didn’t misunderstand her. We have hidden nothing from each other. Nothing. Except I have never

told her I'm a gypsy. I will when the time is right. Now I have told her what I should have told her ages ago, that I love her.

In the dark of the forest, in the light of his imagination, he pictured Sido as they had stood alone in the garden two years before, the smell of sea and autumn in the air, that moment when he had kissed her and held her. Why hadn't he had the courage to tell her then he loved her? Instead he had given her his precious talisman to wear, an amulet, the *baro seroeske sharkuni*, the shell of the shells. She had held it in her hands and brought it to her lips as he turned and walked away. She had whispered into it and he heard her words, soft as the waves kissing the sea shore. Even then he could have changed everything. Why hadn't he? It was simple: he wanted to earn her love, to prove, despite his gypsy blood, he was worthy of her.

That was when he started writing to her, frightened he might have lost her altogether. Soon their letters, dangerous as they were, became their lifeline, each more poignant, yet still skimming over what they longed to say.

Why do I torment myself? I am a tightrope walker over the Valley of Death. If I lose my balance I am lost. Sido's feet are on the ground, she owns all her tomorrows, has all her years to be arranged. A suitable husband, children. She lives in another country, her time is measured by another clock, her life has longitude and latitude, mine has only now. If I live to see the end of the Terror, I will be a fortunate man.

He hit his hand hard against the side of the building. Didier looked at him.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' mumbled Yann.

I love her. What is wrong with that? Everything, and I know it. It will take more than a revolution before society smiles on a gypsy marrying a marquis's daughter.

'Can you hear it now?' said Didier.

Hell, why haven't I been paying better attention? Didier is right. And a wolf at the beginning of a journey is not a good omen to French gypsies.

'Yes,' said Yann.

Didier had started shivering. 'I don't like this place. It may sound daft, but my feet don't feel as though they're standing on solid ground.'

Yann had the same feeling.

'Is it man or beast?' asked Didier, blowing into his mittened hands.

'I'm not sure.'

Didier looked about nervously.

'That's not like you,' he whispered. 'Can't you see none of those threads of light thingumajigs you always see?'

The threads of light, thought Yann. Why are there no threads of light? Even tables, chairs, have straight ones. Everything has threads of light ... except the dead.

'Shh!' said Yann.

A twig snapped.

Didier stood stock-still, feeling the hairs prickle on the back of his neck. All around him was an endless, wet, smothering, velvety blackness.

'It's something evil, I feel it,' he whispered to Yann.

'It belongs to the darkness, not the light, that's all I know.'

They walked through the graveyard, Didier clinging to Yann's coat, fearful of losing him. They passed the broken remains of a large dovecote and emerged in the formal gardens of a château. The rain turned to icy sleet as they made their way up the stone steps. On either side of the front door stood statues of roaring lions, their mouths open, water dripping off their chiselled teeth.

Yann looked back the way they'd come. It was then he heard her voice, caught on the wind's breath.

'*Run. The devil's own is on your trail.*'

He knew that voice, a ghost calling to him on a soulless night.

At that moment he saw it on the gravel drive – a liquid black shape of a great dog or wolfhound. It stayed watching him before moving into the shadow of the gardens. Balthazar, thought Yann, Kalliovski's dog. But that was impossible for he, like his master, was dead, killed by the mob on the Pont Neuf.

He shuddered as he remembered what Têtu had told him. That was the day the devil had gone walking, searching for one irredeemable soul to blow his fiery life into. There could be no man more deserving of the devil's

attention than Count Kalliovski. If he was alive then no one was safe.

Sido was not safe.