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The Fallen Blade

Written by Jon Courtenay Grimwood

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JON COURTENAY
GRIMWOOD
THE FALLEN
BLADE

Act One of THE ASSASSINI



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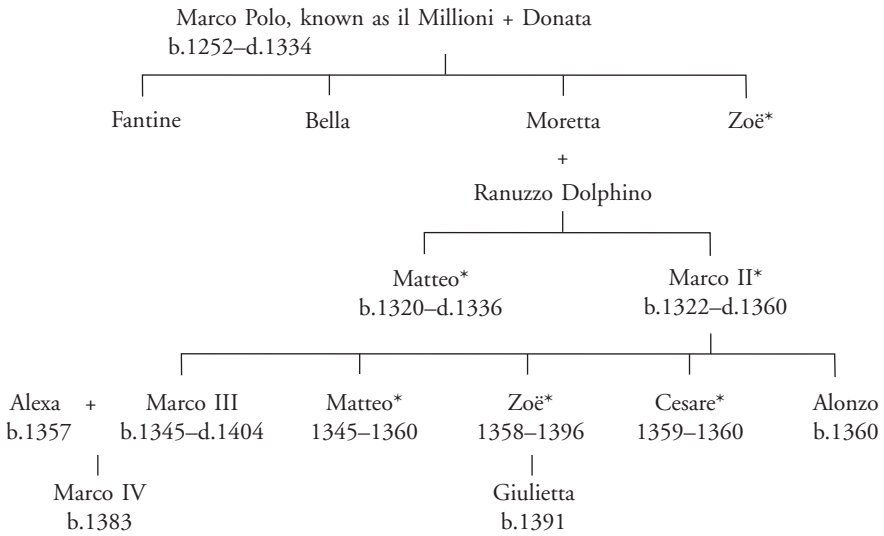
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*For Sam,
who found Venice stranger than she imagined . . .*

The Millioni family tree



* Murdered

First Republic
1336-1348

Second Republic
1360-1362

Dramatis Personae

Tycho, a seventeen-year-old boy with strange hungers

The Million

Marco IV, known as Marco the Simpleton, Duke of Venice and Prince of Serenissima

Lady Giulietta di Million, the fifteen-year-old cousin of Marco IV

Duchess Alexa, the late duke's widow, mother to Marco IV, sister-in-law of Prince Alonzo

Prince Alonzo, Regent of Venice

Lady Eleanor, Giulietta's cousin and lady-in-waiting

Marco III, known as Marco the Just. The late lamented Duke of Venice, elder brother of Alonzo and godfather of Lady Giulietta

Members of the Venetian court

Atilo il Mauros, ex-Lord Admiral of the Middle Sea, adviser to the late Marco III, and head of Venice's secret assassins

Lord Bribanzo, member of the Council of Ten, the inner council that rules Venice under the duke. One of the richest men in the city

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- Lady Desdaio Bribanzo**, his daughter and sole heir
Sir Richard Glanville, Cypriot envoy to Venice and knight of the Order of White Crucifers
Prince Leopold zum Bas Friedland, the German emperor's bastard. Secret leader of the Wolf Brothers
Patriarch Theodore, Archbishop of Venice and friend of Atilo il Mauros
Dr Hightown Crow, alchemist, astrologer and anatomist to the duke
A'rial, the Duchess Alexa's *stregoi* (her pet witch)

Atilo's household

- Iacopo**, Atilo's servant and member of the Assassini
Amelia, a Nubian slave and member of the Assassini

The Customs Office

- Roderigo**, Captain of the Dogana, penniless since he refuses to take bribes
Temujin, his half-Mongol sergeant

Street Thieves

- Josh**, fifteen-year-old gang leader
Rosalyn, his thirteen-year-old companion
Pietro, Rosalyn's young brother

PART 1

“ . . . what a hell of witchcraft lies
In the small orb of one particular tear . . . ”

A Lover's Complaint, William Shakespeare

1

Venice, Tuesday 4 January 1407

The boy hung naked from wooden walls, shackles circling one wrist and both ankles. He'd fought for days to release his left hand, burning his skin on red-hot fetters as he worked to drag his fingers free. The struggle had left him exhausted and – if he was honest – no better off than before.

“Help me,” he begged, “I will do whatever you ask.”

His gods stayed silent.

“I swear it. My life is yours.”

But his life was theirs anyway; even here in an enclosed space where his lungs ached at every breath and the air was sour and becoming sourer. The gods had abandoned him to his death.

It would have helped if he could remember their names.

Some days he doubted they existed. If they did, he doubted they cared. The boy's fury at his fate had become bitterness and despair, and then turned to false hope and fresh fury. Maybe he'd missed an emotion, but he'd worked his way through those he knew.

Yanking at his wrist made flesh sear.

Whatever magic his captors used was stronger than his will to be free. The chains with which they bound him were new, bolted

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firmly to the wall. Every time he grabbed a chain to yank at it, his fingers sizzled as if a torturer pressed white-hot irons into his skin.

“Sweet gods,” he whispered.

As if flattering the immortals could undo his earlier insults.

He’d shrieked at his gods, cursed them, called for the aid of demons. Begged for help from any human within earshot of his despair. A part of him wanted to return to shrieking. Simply for the release it would bring. Only he’d screamed his throat raw days ago. Besides, who would come to his grotesque little cell with no doors? And if they did, how would they enter?

Murder. Rape. Treason . . .

What else merited being walled up alive?

His crime was a mystery. What was the point of punishment if the prisoner couldn’t remember what he’d done? The boy had no memory of his name. No memory of why he was locked in a space little bigger than a coffin. Not even a memory of who put him here.

Earth strewed the floor, splattered with his own soiling.

It was days since he’d needed to piss, and his lips were cracked like dry mud and raw from where he tried to lick them. He needed sleep almost as desperately as he wanted to be free, but every time he slumped his shackles burnt and the pain snapped him awake again. He’d done something wrong. Something very wrong. So wrong that even death wouldn’t embrace him.

If only he could remember what.

You have a name. What is it?

Like hope and freedom, this too remained out of reach. In the hours that followed, the boy hovered on the edges of a fever. Sometimes his wits were sharp, but mostly he inhabited a blasted wasteland inside his own skull where his memories should be.

All he saw in there were shadows that turned away from him; and voices he was unable to hear clearly.

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Pay attention, he told himself. Listen.

So he did. What he heard were voices beyond the wooden walls. A crowd from the sound of it, arguing. And though what he heard was little louder than a whisper it told him they spoke a language he didn't recognise. One voice snapped out an order, another protested. Then something slammed into the wall directly in front of him.

It sounded like an axe or a hammer.

The second blow was even harder. Then came a third, his wooden world splintering as sweet air rushed in and fetid air blew out. The light through the narrow gap was blinding. As if the gods had come for him after all.

2

Late Summer 1406

Almost four months before the boy woke to find himself trapped in an airless wooden prison, a young Venetian girl hurried along a ramshackle *fondamenta* on her city's northern edge. In some places in that strange city the waterside walkways were built from brick or even stone. The one here was earth, above sharpened logs driven into the silt of the lagoon.

After sunset everywhere in Venice was unsafe, particularly if you were fifteen years old, unmarried and out of your area. But the red-haired girl on the *fondamenta* hoped to reach the brine pans before then. She planned to beg passage on a barge carrying salt to the mainland.

Her burgundy gown was already dusty and sweat stained.

Despite having walked for only an hour, she'd reached another world entirely. One where silk dresses attracted envious glances. Her oldest gown was still richer than the *campo ghetto's* best. Her hopes of passing freely ended when a small group of children stepped out of the shadows.

Opening her cloak, Lady Giulietta yanked free a gold locket from around her neck. "Take this," she said. "Sell it. You can buy food."

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The boy with the knife sneered at her. “We steal food,” he said. “We don’t need your locket for that. Not from round here, are you?”

Giulietta shook her head.

“You Jewish?”

“No,” she said. “I’m—”

She was about to say . . . something stupid, knowing her. It was a stupid kind of day. Being here was stupid. Stopping was stupid. Even treating his question seriously was stupid. “I’m like you,” she finished lamely.

“Course you are,” he said. On either side, others laughed. “Where did you get this anyway?”

“My m . . .” She hesitated. “Mistress.”

“You stole it,” a smaller boy said. “That’s why you’re running. Nasty lot, the Watch. You’d be better coming with us.”

“No,” Giulietta said, “I’d better keep going.”

“You know what happens if the Watch take you?” a girl asked. She stepped forward to whisper in Giulietta’s ear. If even half were true, someone of Giulietta’s age would be better killing herself than being captured. But self-murder was a sin.

“And if the Watch don’t get you, then . . .”

The youngest shut his mouth at a glare from their leader. “Look around,” he snapped. “It’s getting dark. What have I said?”

“Sorry, Josh.”

The older boy slapped him. “We don’t use names with strangers. We don’t talk about . . . Not when it’s almost nightfall.” He switched his glare to the girl who stood beside him. “I’m going to cut him loose. I swear it. Don’t care if he is your brother.”

“I’ll go with him.”

“You’ll go nowhere,” Josh said. “Your place is with me. You too,” he told Giulietta. “There’s a ruined *campo* south of here. We’ll make it in time.”

“If we’re lucky,” the girl said.

“We’ve been lucky so far, haven’t we?”

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“*So far, and no further,*” said a shadow behind them.

Old and weary, the voice sounded like dry wind through a dusty attic.

Unwrapping itself, the shadow became a Moor, dressed in a dozen shades of grey. A neatly barbered beard emphasised the thinness of his face and his gaze was that of a soldier grown tired of life. Across his shoulders hung a sword. Stiletos jutted at both hips. Lady Giulietta noticed his crossbow last. Tiny, almost a toy, with barbed arrows the size of her finger.

With a sour smile, the Moor pointed his crossbow at Josh’s throat, before turning his attention to the young woman he’d been following.

“My lady, this is not kind . . .”

“Not kind?”

Bunching her fists, Lady Giulietta fought her anger.

She’d become used to holding it in in public, screaming about her forthcoming marriage behind closed doors. She was two years older than her mother was when she wed. Noble girls married at twelve, went to their husband’s beds at thirteen, sometimes a little later. At least two of Giulietta’s friends had children already.

She’d been whipped for her refusal to wed willingly.

Starved, locked in her chambers. Until she announced she’d kill herself. On being told that was a sin, she’d sworn to murder her husband instead.

At that, Aunt Alexa, the late Duke Marco III’s widow, had shaken her head sadly and sent for hot water to which she added fermented leaves to make her niece a soothing drink. While Uncle Alonzo, the late duke’s younger brother, had taken Giulietta aside to say it was interesting she should mention that . . .

Her world became a darker, more horrid place. Not only would she marry a foreigner she’d never met. She’d be taught how to kill him when the bedding was done. “You know what they expect me to do?”

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“My lady, it’s not my place . . .”

“Of course not. You’re just the cur sent to round up strays.”

His eyes flared and she smiled. He wasn’t a cur and she wasn’t a stray. She was Lady Giulietta dei San Felice di Millioni. The Regent’s niece. The new duke’s cousin. Duchess Alexa’s goddaughter. Her whole life defined by how she was related to someone else.

“Say you couldn’t find me.”

“I’ve been following you since I saw you leave.”

“*Why?*” she demanded. Only in the last half-hour had she felt herself watched. She couldn’t believe he’d let her travel right across Venice by herself, knowing he would stop her before she could escape to the mainland.

“I hoped you might turn back.”

Rubbing her temples, Giulietta wished they’d sent a young officer she could shout at, or beguile with her charms, meagre though they were.

“How can I marry a man I haven’t even met?”

“You know . . .”

Giulietta stamped her foot. She understood. All daughters were assets. Princely daughters more than most. It was just . . . Maybe she’d read too many poets. What if there was someone she was *meant* to marry? She regretted her words the moment they were spoken. The Moor’s quiet contempt for her question ensured that.

“And what if he lives on the world’s far edge or is not yet born? What if he died centuries ago? *What if he loves someone else?* Policy can’t wait on a girl’s fantasies. Not even for you . . .”

“Let me go,” Giulietta begged.

“My lady, I can’t.” He shook his head sadly, never letting his crossbow’s aim stray from Josh’s throat. “Ask me anything else.”

“I want nothing else.”

Atilo il Mauros had bought her her first pony. Dandled her on his knees. With his own hands he carved her a bear fighting a

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woodcutter. But he would return her to Ca' Ducale because that was his duty. Atilo did his duty without fear or favour. It had made him the late duke's favourite. And earned him Alonzo, the new Regent's, hatred. Giulietta had no idea what Aunt Alexa thought of him.

"If you loved me . . ." Her voice was flat.

Lord Atilo glanced at the bow he held, looked at the ragged thieves and shifted Giulietta out of their hearing, without letting his aim waver.

"My lady."

"*Listen to me.*" She felt sick in her gut. Tired and fed up and close to tears. "King Janus was a Crucifer. A Black Crucifer."

"I know."

"And I had to learn it from servants' gossip. They're going to marry me to an ex-torturer, who broke his vows of poverty and chastity. Who abandoned *the purity of pain.*" Her lips curled in disgust at the words.

"To become king," Atilo said simply.

"He's a monster."

"Giulietta . . . The Germans want Venice. The Byzantines want it too. The Mamluks want your colonies. Even my people, the Moors, would happily see your navy sunk. King Janus was Black only briefly. Cyprus is an island we can use."

"*Use?*" she said in scorn.

"Venice's strength rests on its trade routes. It *needs* Cyprus. Besides, you have to marry someone."

"It might as well be him?"

The Moor nodded, and she wondered if he could read the fury in her eyes. Anger kept her fear at bay. Her fear of what being bedded by a Black Crucifer might involve.

"My lord," Josh interrupted.

Atilo raised his bow. "Did I tell you to speak?" His finger began tightening on the trigger.

"*Let him speak.*"

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“My lady, you’re in no . . .”

“. . . position to demand anything?” said Lady Giulietta bitterly. She’d never been in a position to demand anything as far as she could see. At least not since her mother was murdered. Giulietta was a Million. A princess. She had one of the most gilded childhoods in Venice. Everyone envied her.

She’d swap all of it for . . .

Lady Giulietta bit her lip so hard it bled. There were days when her self-pity nauseated even herself. This was turning out to be one of them.

“Let’s hear what he has to say,” she suggested.

Atilo lowered his tiny crossbow. A nod said the boy was reprieved, for now. “This had better be good.”

“We should get off the streets, my lord.”

“That’s it?” Atilo sounded astonished. “That’s your contribution? You’re a split second away from death. And you think we should get off the streets?”

“It’s almost dark.”

“They’re afraid of the Watch,” Giulietta said.

She wasn’t surprised. *Beat you and violate you, smash your face and twist your arms if you don’t do everything they want.* That sounded as if the girl spoke from experience.

“Not the Watch,” the younger boy said dismissively. “We ain’t afraid of them now. They don’t go out after dark.”

“They’re the Watch,” Giulietta said.

“Got more sense,” he told her. “Not with what’s out there.”

“And what is out there?” she asked. Perhaps the small boy didn’t see Atilo’s warning scowl. Perhaps he wasn’t bothered.

“Demons.”

“No,” his sister said. “They’re monsters.”

“Atilo . . .” She shouldn’t be using his name like that. Not without “my lord” or whatever title he held since the Regent had stripped him of Admiral of the Middle Sea, which had been his position

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under Marco III . . . The late, and very lamented Duke Marco III. Since his son, Marco IV, her poor cousin, was a twitching simpleton.

“What?” His tone was sharp.

“We can’t just leave them.”

“Yes,” he said. “We can.” Atilo stopped at an owl’s hoot, his shoulders relaxing slightly. When he hooted back, the owl hooted in return. “It’s you we can’t leave.” There was bitterness in his voice.

“But you would if you could . . . ?”

“I have fifteen blades out there. The best I’ve trained. My deputy, his deputy, thirteen others. Good soldiers. If half come through this alive I’ll be grateful.”

Giulietta didn’t recognise him as the old man who had carved her a wooden toy as a child. This was the Atilo people saw in battle.

“Are we heading for safety?”

He turned, looked at her. A hard glare that softened slightly. “There is no safety tonight, my lady. Not here and not now. The best I can do is hope to keep you alive.”

“And the children?”

“They’re dead already. Leave them.”

“I can’t . . . We can’t . . .” She plucked at his sleeve. “Please.”

“You want them saved?”

“Yes,” she said, grateful. Thinking he’d changed his mind.

“Then let them be. They stand a better chance of living if they hide now. Not much, admittedly. But staying with you will certainly get them killed.”

Lady Giulietta looked sick.

“It’s you our enemies want. Well, it is now.”

Taking a stiletto from his hip, he reversed it fluidly, offering her its handle over the edge of his forearm. *Sweet Lord*, she thought. *He’s serious*. From the knot in her guts, her body was ahead of her brain. She was afraid the knot would let go and she’d disgrace herself in front of the old man.

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“Find a tanner’s pit,” Atilo snapped at Josh’s group. “Shouldn’t be hard round here. Squat in it up to your necks. Don’t move. Keep silent until morning.”

“The demons hate water?”

“They hunt by smell. You stink of piss already. Find a tanner’s pit and you might get lucky.” Atilo turned without further thought. They were gone already as far as he was concerned.

“Stay close,” he told Giulietta.

Atilo used a *sottoportego*, an underpass beneath a tenement building, to reach a tiny square. At its far edge, the square was prevented from crumbling into a narrow canal by oak stakes along its bank. Slicing a rope to a shabby gondola, Atilo kicked it away from the side to make a makeshift bridge. Once Lady Giulietta was over, he cut the remaining rope and jumped for safety as the boat drifted away.

“Where are we going?”

“I have a house,” he said.

“Ca’ il Mauros?” Her heart sank. To reach there from here, they’d need to cross the Grand Canal by gondola twice, or walk round it, which would double the distance and take them down one of the most dangerous streets in Venice.

“A different house,” he told her.

When he reached for her hand, it was not to comfort her, but to grip her wrist and start dragging. He wanted her to walk faster.

“Atilo, you’re . . .” Giulietta shut her mouth. The old man was trying to save her. He was furious, in a way she’d never seen, his face a battle mask, his eyes hard in the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He stopped, and Giulietta thought . . . For a second, she thought he’d forget himself and slap her. Then there was no time to think more of that, because a grotesque figure watched them from a square ahead.

“This way.”

A yank on her wrist hurled her towards an alley. Only that

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way out of the new square was blocked as well. As were the other two exits.

“Kill yourself,” Atilo said.

Giulietta gaped at him.

“Not now, you little fool. If I’m dead, and they’re dead . . .” He pointed to silhouettes appearing in the shadows. Some stood near the grotesques who blocked the exits, others stood on rooftops or balconies. “Don’t let yourself be taken.”

“They’ll rape me?”

“You can survive that. What the Wolf Brothers do you don’t survive. Although you might be more use to them alive and unharmed. Which means you must definitely kill yourself.”

“Self-murder is a sin.”

“Letting yourself be captured is a worse one.”

“To God?”

“To Venice. Which is what matters.”

Serenissima, the name poets gave to the Serene Republic of Venice, was an inaccurate term. Since the city was neither serene nor, these days, a republic.

In Atilo’s opinion, it was most like a bubbling pot into which some celestial threw endless grains of rice. And though each morning began with the bodies of beggars against walls, new born infants in back canals, paupers dumped to avoid the inconvenience of burying them – those unwanted, even by the unwanted – the city remained as crowded, and as packed, and as expensive, as he remembered it ever having been.

In summer the poor slept on roofs, on balconies or in the open air. When winter came, they crowded squalid tenements. They shat, copulated, fought and quarrelled in public, seen by other adults as well as by their own children. The stairwells of the tenements had a permanent odour of poverty. Unwashed, unloved, stinking of sewage, and a greasy misery that oiled the skin until it looked and smelt like wet leather.

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A dozen scholars had drawn maps of Venice. Including a Chinese cartographer sent by the Great Khan, who'd heard of this capital with canals where roads should be and wanted to know how much of it was true. None of the maps were accurate, however, and half the streets had more than one name anyway.

Running through what he thought of Venice, Atilo il Mauros wondered, in retrospect, why he felt reluctant to leave it and the life he'd made here. Was it simply that this was not the way he'd intended to die? In a squalid *campo*, near a ramshackle church, because every *campo* had one of those. Although not usually this run-down. A church, a broken wellhead, ruined brick houses . . .

He'd hoped to die in his bed years from now.

His wife, beautifully stricken, backlit by a gentle autumn sun; a boy at the bed's foot, staring sorrowfully. To have this, of course, he'd need a wife. A wife, a son and heir, maybe a couple of daughters, if they weren't too much trouble.

After the siege of Tunis, Duke Marco III had offered him a deal. The duke would spare the city and Atilo would serve Venice as Admiral. If Atilo refused, every man, woman and child in the North African city would be slaughtered; including Atilo's own family. The great pirate of the Barbary Coast could turn traitor to those he loved and save them, or stay loyal and condemn them to death.

Bastard, Atilo thought with admiration.

Even now, decades later, he could remember his awe at the brutality of Marco's offer. In a single afternoon Atilo uttered the words that divorced his wife, renounced his children, converted his religion and bound him to Venice for life.

In taking the title of Lord Admiral of the Middle Sea, he had saved those who would hate him for the rest of their lives. In public, he'd been Marco III's adviser. In private he'd been the man's chief assassin. The enemy, who became his master, ended as his friend. Atilo would die for that man's niece.