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## **THE BRONZE JULIUS**

A Short Story

Prologue for the Novel

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Shouts from below. Franco bolted to the library window. University students spilled into the cobblestone street, pushing toward the main square. He threw open the window and strained to recognize someone in the crowd.

The biting chill of the last few days had passed, and the air on Franco Asinelli's face felt cool and damp. On this December day, dense low-lying clouds drifted over the tops of the towers. Townspeople joined the students, the horde now surging past the University. San Petronio's bronze bells began to peal.

A classmate darted into the street beneath him. "Luigi, *fermati!* Stop!" Franco called. "What's happening? The Pope – he's back?"

Franco feared Pope Julius had returned with his army and would try retaking Bologna. As long as the Pope had breath in his lungs, he would strive to force the French out of Italy.

"No, *amico mio*," Luigi Garisenda shouted. "Duke Alfonso came to make a proclamation. Now, at Piazza Maggiore."

"*Se' sicuro?* Is it safe?" Franco called back. "Are many soldiers with him?"

"You can stay and read your poems." Luigi threw his arms in the air. "I'm not waiting for you this time." He turned and ran.

Franco shut the leather-bound volume of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, grabbed his wool coat and rushed down the stairs and into the street. He ran past the bankers' houses, trying to catch Luigi.

A gust of wind blew Franco's thin chestnut hair into his eyes. He raked it back with his fingers. He prayed for good news, not more upheaval.

Five years earlier, in 1506, Pope Julius II had conquered Bologna. Leading an army of eight thousand Italian troops and half again as many Swiss mercenaries, Pope Julius took the city without firing a single cannon and ousted the Bentivoglio family, who had ruled for a century.

But the warrior Pope's fortunes in battle, like his health, suffered in his declining years. The Pope had lost his dominion over Northern Italy to the French, who held Milan and enjoyed a powerful ally in the Medici of Florence.

By the spring of this year, 1511, his neglected garrison in Bologna had dwindled. With Julius's attention on his many problems elsewhere, the army of Duke Alfonso of Ferrara, reinforced by French soldiers, stormed through the city gates and drove off the papal occupiers.

Duke Alfonso and the French restored the Bentivoglio princes, at least for appearances, and Bologna once again had the air of stability. Franco Asinelli's family, long ago aligned with the Ghibelline political party, showed no loyalty to the Pope. Yet Franco found little joy in the Bentivoglio's return. He just wanted to finish his studies without any more disruption.

Franco slowed his pace and cast a glance over his shoulder. Too late to turn back. No way to retreat against the crush of the crowd.

The tide of people filled the wide street and also the colonnades topped with red-bricked arches that formed covered passageways lining both sides. Under the arches, frantic shopkeepers locked up.

The cheese shop and bakery, both shuttered. The butcher left his two sons arguing over who must stay behind. Only the wine merchant, who stood in his doorway with his arms folded across his chest, showed no sign of abandoning his store.

“*Attento!* Watch where you’re going!” a woman screeched as she jostled into Franco’s path. “*Scusi,*” he started to apologize, but she disappeared back into the flood.

Franco reached the piazza where *La Torre degli Asinelli*, the tallest of the two hundred towers in Bologna, stretched up into the cloud cover. His ancestors had erected it for military observation, to guard against invaders. In times of peace, torches at the top guided travelers at night. Still serving its dual civic purposes after four centuries, the tower remained the pride of the Asinelli family.

Stopping to catch his breath, Franco leaned on stacks of square-cut foundation stones the masons had brought to expand the loggia around the tower’s base that housed guards and a blacksmith. Next to Torre Asinelli, *La Torre della Garisenda* reached only half as high. Constructed on a poor base, Garisenda was shortened long ago to keep it from toppling.

Franco pulled himself onto a stack of stones and sat for a moment gazing at the sky. Torre Asinelli loomed above him. Like Garisenda, it did not stand on firm ground. After so many years it too struggled with a pronounced list.

As the low clouds moved over the crenelated top, heading in the opposite direction of the tilt, Torre Asinelli appeared to be falling to the ground.

Franco’s shoulders slumped. *Basta.* Enough. No farther.

He stretched his legs over the side of a broad excavated trench. If only he could wall himself in the foundation and hide until the turmoil ended.

As Franco looked back to see if the crowd behind him had thinned, his brother Giuseppe burst from their home next to Torre Asinelli. “Franco, we must hurry!”

Franco started protesting, but Giuseppe jerked his arm. “Let’s go!” he shouted. “We will find no room in the square!”

Franco tried to pull free. “My little brother shouldn’t tell me what to do.”

“When did you last beat me at wrestling?” Giuseppe laughed.

Franco stared at Giuseppe, who tightened his grip. His beard came in thicker than Franco’s. He would gain nothing by struggling now.

The brothers raced to Piazza Maggiore, the grand public plaza, where the entire town converged. Alfonso d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, Modena and Reggio, stood in front of Palazzo Comunale, the seat of government. On his arm clung his notorious wife, Lucrezia Borgia, now on her third husband.

Around them the Bentivoglio clan swaggered among other members of the Sixteen Reformers of the Free State, who had governed Bologna before Pope Julius’s invasion. Behind them sashayed several women, their silk gowns and curled tresses showing off the latest French fashion. The surrounding troops, outfitted in bright parade uniforms, held pikes with Ferrara’s scarlet and green banners snapping in the wind.

Franco recognized Signor Aldovrandi standing behind the Duke. An intimate friend of the Asinelli family, he managed to remain in the favor of both Pope and Duke. Signor Aldovrandi gave a furtive nod in reply to Franco’s wave.

Franco and Giuseppe located a place to stand at the side of Palazzo Comunale, near the great church of San Petronio. They arrived just in time to take the space vacated by a pony cart, filled with squealing piglets for sale, being pulled beyond the reach of the pressing mob.

Trumpets blared, and Duke Alfonso began in a booming voice, “*Ai buoni cittadini del Comune di Bologna*, I have news about Pope Julius.”

The Duke enjoyed the hisses and whistles, then waved his hand. “As you know, we drove Julius from Ferrara and Bologna. After those victories, we routed his troops in Modena and Perugia.”

Duke Alfonso shouted over the cheers. “Thanks in no small part to King Louis XII and our friends from France, Julius fled back to Rome in disgrace. On his way, he found a notice posted at the cathedral in Rimini. The Cardinals of Northern Italy met at Pisa to condemn the Pope’s abuses. Julius got so sick with gout he had to be hauled back to Rome in an oxcart.”

The people cheered loud and long, many in earnest and others hoping to appear to be.

“Our spies inform us,” the Duke went on, “Julius pawned the jewels from his tiara to pay for more Swiss mercenaries.” Duke Alfonso swung his arm and pointed above San Petronio’s entrance to the huge statue of Pope Julius. “Does not Julius himself deserve excommunication?”

As the crowd jeered, Franco gazed at the marvelous bronze statue. Within weeks after conquering Bologna, Pope Julius summoned Michelangelo to create the heroic portrait statue. Word traveled that the commission paid a thousand gold ducats.

Franco admired this statue as the greatest work of art in Bologna, far surpassing the wondrous Jacopo della Quercia marble bas-reliefs of scenes from Genesis that framed the church portal. Like many, Franco thought the Bronze Julius rivaled Michelangelo’s giant David in Florence and his *Pietà* in Rome. Franco had traveled to study both of those marble statues. While they exceeded the work of any contemporary sculptor, Franco found the Bronze Julius just as impressive.

The statue reached at least five *braccia* – over ten feet in height – and must have weighed close to three tons. The seated Pope, wearing his triple crown and facing down and left, struck a dynamic pose. The left leg stretched to the side, and the right leg, bent at the knee and cocked backward, made him appear ready to leap from his throne.

The Pope’s torso twisted, with his right arm swung back, like Zeus about to hurl a lightning bolt down from Olympus. Two fingers of his right hand rose in benediction, but the other two fingers and thumb clenched into a fist, as if threatening to strike a blow.

With its long nose and strong bearded chin, the Pope’s face expressed determination, somehow looking simultaneously indulgent and intimidating. From the uplifted right arm down to the shoes, the bronze robes draped and flowed with folds that looked as if they would ruffle in the breeze. As Franco stared in awe at the statue, Julius almost began to breathe.

The artist drove himself to exhaustion, working, eating and sleeping in his studio, a converted carriage house behind San Petronio. Franco visited the studio on many occasions, arranged by Signor Aldovrandi, who had befriended Michelangelo over a decade earlier at Lorenzo de’ Medici’s court in Florence. Although Franco was reluctant, worried he would become a nuisance, Aldovrandi insisted.

“Michelangelo has allowed you to watch him work,” Signor Aldovrandi assured him, “as long as you remain unobtrusive.” Whether friendship alone or one of Aldovrandi’s well-placed bribes afforded his access, Franco knew to make no inquiry.

For over a year, he watched Michelangelo toil on the full-size wax model, cast the bronze and then burnish the statue. First, assistants formed the interior clay, reinforced with horsehair and packed onto a wooden armature. Over the clay core they layered seven hundred pounds of beeswax.

Michelangelo grumbled as he tooled every detail in the wax. “A sculpture should emerge from carving marble to reveal the figure hidden within,” he often complained under his breath, “not by shaping wax.”

While his words expressed constant frustration, Michelangelo approached his task with the tenderness of a loving father caressing his newborn infant. The wax model complete, he applied moistened ash mixed with burnt ox horn and iron filings. First using sable tails, he dabbed the solution onto the model to avoid altering any detail.

Then with hog bristles he applied layer after layer of saturated clay, allowing each investment to dry before beginning the next. After nearly a month, the thick outer clay encased the carved wax.

Pope Julius first directed melting church bells for the bronze, but he reconsidered when Signor Aldovrandi interceded. Providing the needed bronze from broken cannons, Aldovrandi accepted payment in ducats to cover his expenses but without profit. As the assistants heaved cannon fragments into the furnace, he confided to Franco, “Splintered cannons are salvaged after most battles. These days, you can get bronze easier than beeswax, if you know the right people.”

Franco volunteered to collect wood for the enormous brick oven built over the finished clay mold, then helped fire the oven to bake the clay into a hard terra cotta. After the wax model inside melted and drained from vents at the bottom of the mold, Michelangelo’s assistants plugged the vents. Then they funneled the molten bronze into the top of the mold from the furnace next to the oven. The liquefied metal began filling the gap in the terra cotta left by the lost wax.

But the first casting did not go well. The statue formed only up to the waist. Somehow half the bronze caked and lodged in the furnace.

Michelangelo did not speak for days, other than once raising his head to say, “He who tries may fail.” Franco suggested keeping the mistake secret, but word already had spread.

“The statue is too big to cast,” many Bolognesi declared. “As big as the sculptor’s ego,” others said. “If Leonardo da Vinci failed casting his equestrian statue in Milan, what makes this Florentine think he could do better?”

Bruised by the gossip, Michelangelo refused to leave his studio, sending Franco for food. Yet the artist remained intent on trying a second casting. “I know I can do it,” he said.

“But how?” Franco asked. “Half of the bronze is already in the mold.”

“Bertoldo taught me to cast bronze when I was a boy, as Donatello had instructed him.”

“But won’t a fissure encircle the waist,” Franco asked, “after you pour the rest of the bronze?”

“Bertoldo once shocked me by breaking a bronze statuette in half, to show me how to fuse the metal back together. The girdle will have a seam, but after we’re finished, no one will see it.”

It took a week to rebuild the furnace and pour the remaining bronze. When finally the casting cooled, Michelangelo chipped away the clay mold to reveal the statue. The bronze casting came out copper red and jagged, covered with countless shards of metal that had crept into cracks in the terra cotta. He chased the shards and burnished the statue for months, until the finished bronze was as perfect as his original wax model. Only then could Franco touch the statue.

“You may rub oil,” Michelangelo said, “until the bronze glows with a rich auburn sheen.”

Even when the completed statue at last received lavish praise, the exhausted master looked not so much pleased as relieved and anxious to leave Bologna, like a convict paroled after a year-long prison term at hard labor.

The Bolognesi celebrated with fanfare and fireworks when they hoisted the sculpture onto the portico over San Petronio’s entrance. A tabernacle built against the façade supported the massive statue.

For nearly four years, the Pope’s figure lorded over all who entered. His left hand held the keys of St. Peter, a reminder that the heavy papal taxes would go toward reconstruction of the Basilica in Rome. But the priceless value of the work lay in its artistry rather than its symbolism.

The statue installed, Julius called the artist back to Rome. Although the Pope retained the brilliant young Raphael as his court painter, he gave Michelangelo a commission others coveted.

At the command of Pope Julius, Michelangelo by now had worked for three years on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Rumors spread that his fresco looked as fine as his sculpture, and that the ceiling glorified both God and the man who created it. If the rumors were only half true, the ceiling was resplendent.

Everywhere, the people called him “*Il Divino Michelangelo*,” the greatest sculptor in the world. Yet among all of his masterpieces, Franco believed none more exquisite than Bologna’s own Bronze Julius.

Shrieks shattered Franco’s thoughts. “Pull down the statue!” someone cried. “Haul it down!”

Whirling in disbelief, Franco stared into a hulking chest. Looking up, he recognized Vincenzo, the son of a brick maker. This clod fancied himself an artist, having made some affected sculptures in terra cotta. His jealous criticism plagued Michelangelo since the Florentine first arrived.

“*Ma sei pazzo? Are you insane?*” The sound of his own voice surprised Franco.

Vincenzo replied by shoving him hard onto the paving stones. “Pull down the Julius!” Vincenzo shouted.

Men rushed forward, nearly trampling Franco. “Bring it down! Bring down Julius!” they bellowed. “Get ropes and haul it onto the cobbles!”

Giuseppe tried to drag Franco aside as Luigi ran up to them.

“We must stop them!” Franco pleaded over the din.

“*Troppo tardi, fratello,*” Giuseppe said. “It’s too late.”

“No! It’s not!” Franco yelled and struggled to his feet. Giuseppe and Luigi seized his arms, but he broke away. Franco managed three steps toward Vincenzo before Giuseppe bear-hugged his chest and Luigi threw an arm around his neck.

“Stay back!” Luigi shouted into Franco’s ear, “or they will rip you apart!”

Dozens of angry men swarmed around Vincenzo and screamed, “Tear it down! Tear down Julius!”

Men arrived with ropes. They made failed attempts at throwing a noose around the head and raised right arm of the statue. Franco looked back at the beaming Duke Alfonso.

Pieces of brick flew off the wall behind the Bronze Julius. It took several seconds for Franco to realize men had entered San Petronio, climbed up behind the statue and started hammering through the wall. Two gaping holes appeared in the bricks. From behind the statue, men grabbed the ends of the ropes and looped them around the head.

Vincenzo and the mob strained at the ropes while the men inside the church shoved from behind. The statue began to tip.

“Clear out, *villani*!” Vincenzo shouted at people cowering in the church entrance. “*Eccola*! Here it comes!”

The statue toppled in slow motion, like Goliath stunned by a rock to the forehead. Franco could not bear to watch. As he turned his head, he heard the crash as the bronze cracked apart on the steps and cobblestones. The crowd roared approval.

As Franco looked up, he came face to face with the Duke.

“Stand back!” Duke Alfonso commanded a faction that rushed to the broken statue. They stopped and fell silent.

“*Come ti chiami, ragazzo?* Boy, what is your name?” The Duke stared at Franco.

He felt his throat constrict, as if he had just swallowed one of Lucrezia Borgia’s potions. “Asinelli Franco.”

“Asinelli,” the Duke nodded. “*Una buona famiglia.*” The Duke pointed at the broken pieces of the statue as he took inventory – only six large pieces from the base and torso, plus the right arm and the oversized head, which seemed to glare up from the cobblestones.

Franco watched as the Duke counted. No small fragments. Franco’s eyes traced the sharp edges where the bronze came apart.

“I will need four ox carts,” the Duke said, reaching into his purse. “Here are twenty ducats, Asinelli. Procure sturdy carts and strong beasts for my sergeant-at-arms.”

The Duke’s sergeant stepped forward. Andrea, Franco’s boyhood friend, winked at him.

Franco had not seen Andrea for two years since Franco enrolled in the University and Andrea joined the Duke’s army, but they had spent their adolescence together playing in the streets of Bologna.

Duke Alfonso stood on the steps of San Petronio and faced the crowd. “I have a grand idea. I will have this bronze taken to my cannon maker in Ferrara. I will melt it down and recast it into a cannon, which I shall name ‘*La Giulia*.’” Laughter rippled through the crowd.

“The cannon will go here, in the center of the piazza. Tell everyone. We will fire ‘The Julia’ at the Pope if the fool ever returns to Bologna.” The crowd howled.

“*Adesso, festeggiamo.* Now we shall celebrate. Bring your finest food and drink into the square. I shall pay for a night of feasting for you all.”

The crowd erupted. Many proclaimed the Duke the greatest among any man or saint.

“*Sergente*,” the Duke shouted to Andrea, straining over the pandemonium, “take the statue to my cannon maker, Quirino. All but the head. That I want delivered to my palazzo. Load the pieces tonight. I expect them well on their way to Ferrara before dawn. Asinelli will help you secure the ox carts.” With that, the Duke spun on his heels and rejoined his company.

The crowd thronged into the markets to get provisions for the festivities. Franco, Giuseppe and Luigi watched men pat Vincenzo on the back as he strutted away.

“*Che piacere rivederti*. It’s so good seeing you again,” Andrea grinned. He shook Franco’s hand and the two embraced.

Franco studied the crowd, already beginning its revelry. He had observed this same scene too many times. After victory feasts often followed more war, destruction and defeat. Could anyone stop Pope Julius from returning to Bologna? No one should plan living to an old age in such troubled times.

“Let’s get the ox carts and load them,” Andrea said, “before my men get too drunk.”

Franco squeezed the twenty gold ducats in his fist. His thoughts raced as he gazed down at the magnificent statue.