

THE EMPEROR'S NEW ART

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

CHALMERS	Chamberlain to King Henry VI, a servant grown weary and jaded from trying to help people interact with His Majesty during his... difficult times.
DONATELLO	A renown sculpture who has been summoned all the way from Florence.
HENRY	King Henry VI, who has retreated to a rather unusual mental space while trying to come to grips with having lost Bordeaux.

SETTING

The royal receiving antechamber in the spring of 1454.

SCENE

(Donatello has just entered the audience chamber of King Henry VI. He is greeted by the chamberlain, Chalmers, who has just finished attending some other task.)

CHALMERS

Very nice to meet you, mister *(glancing at a cheat sheet)* di Niccolò di Betto Bardi...

DONATELLO

Please, everyone calls me Donatello.

CHALMERS

Very well, mister Dona—

DONATELLO

Just Donatello.

CHALMERS

Just the one name?

DONATELLO

Like Madonna.

CHALMERS

Well, you artists certainly are a curious breed. You may call me Chalmers. I'll be serving as your liaison to his Majesty, King Henry the Sixth.

DONATELLO

A liaison? I don't understand. He won't be here himself?

CHALMERS

Oh, no. He'll be along momentarily. It's just that... Well, ever since last August, his majesty—

DONATELLO

Last August? Please forgive me, the Florence Gazette doesn't always cover...

CHALMERS

That's when he lost Bordeaux to—

DONATELLO

The wine?

CHALMERS

The city. Anyway, ever since his... metamorphosis... let's just say that visitors these days find it useful to have translator on hand.

DONATELLO

I've been speaking English since I was as high as your knees. I do not need a *translator*.

(A door opens to admit Henry VI...)

You can go.

(Chalmers turns, and starts to leave.)

CHALMERS

As you wish.

(Henry VI enters. He is wearing a feathered cape, which he is flapping gracefully to "fly" into the room. During the next few lines, he "perches" himself on a throne-like chair, preens for a moment, then plops to sit properly and faces Donatello.)

DONATELLO

Actually...

CHALMERS

(Pausing, not surprised at the change of heart...)

Yes?

DONATELLO

Maybe you...

CHALMERS

An excellent choice, Mr. Donatello.

HENRY

So... This is the estranged Donatello.

DONATELLO

Estranged?

CHALMERS

He means “esteemed”.

DONATELLO

At your service, your Majesty.

HENRY

Please, call me Hank.

CHALMERS

Do *not*, I repeat *not*, call him Hank.

DONATELLO

Of course, your... (*looking back and forth between the two, and finally giving up on the unwinnable situation*) What a lovely palace you have here.

HENRY

Isn't it grand? Did you know that each and every stone in these walls was stacked on top of one another as the palace was being built?

DONATELLO

You don't say.

HENRY

Oh, but I do say. I said it just now, didn't I? Chalmers, I did just say that, didn't I?

CHALMERS

Absolutely, your Majesty.

HENRY

I thought as much. You're not trying to make me think I'm losing my mind, are you?

(Confused, Donatello looks at Chalmers, who subtly shakes his head 'no'.)

DONATELLO

No, your Majesty.

HENRY

Please, call me Hank.

CHALMERS

Do *not* c—

HENRY

I do so appreciate you coming all the way here from Wales.

DONATELLO

Florence.

HENRY

Oh, how lovely. How is the old lady? Such a dear. Does she still have that precious little tea set with the fornicating leprecha—

DONATELLO

Florence, Italy, your Majesty.

HENRY

Oh? Do they have one too? How nice. Well, I trust your journey was indivisible?

CHALMERS

(Whispering...)

Unremarkable.

DONATELLO

Uhhh, yes. It was fine, thank—

HENRY

Excellent. Jolly good. Well, before we get down to business can I offer you a chikka-chikka-boo-chikka bwaaakkk!!!

(Donatello is, naturally, taken aback, and looks to Chalmers.)

CHALMERS

That nearly always implies some kind of refreshment.

DONATELLO

Nearly?

CHALMERS

A month ago last Thursday the Duke of Wellington said yes, and was gifted with four bins of laundry and a fruit bat. But usually it's just pudding.

DONATELLO

(Back to Henry)

I'm fine, thank you. Let's get down to business. I was told that you wished to commission a work of art.

HENRY

Exactly! I'm very excited about this, so I asked around for the best, most celebrated artist in all the world, and as you may imagine, the answers were unanimous: it simply had to be that fellow Masaccio. Such a melodic name, isn't it? Mesaccio. Mesaccio. You can almost hear someone beating a trumpet. Anyway, I sent a missive to him, but after weeks of waiting for a reply—

DONATELLO

Mesaccio died. Like twenty-five years ago.

HENRY

There's no excusing rudeness, Donatello. Now, I thought about contacting Verrocchio, who is quite the respectable artist with really magnificent hips, but he lives in Italy, so that obviously wouldn't do.

DONATELLO

I'm from Italy.

HENRY

Isn't that just the oddest coincidence? Did you know him before he passed?

DONATELLO

I *do* know him. He's alive and well. In fact, we had lunch just—

HENRY

And then someone told me about you, and I thought, there's a fellow who could probably handle it. Anyone who could paint the Madonna and Child in the Cathedral of Pistola...

DONATELLO

That was Verrocchio, actually.

HENRY

--or the Sibiu Crucifixion...

DONATELLO

That was Antonello da Messina...

HENRY

That's the fellow I want, I said! And that's why you're here! (Suddenly shifting gears...) Cheese?

CHALMERS

(Cutting in urgently...)

Just say 'no thank you' and—

DONATELLO

Actually, a little cheese sounds delightful.

HENRY

Excellent. I'll have gruyere.

DONATELLO

What?

CHALMERS

You couldn't just listen to me, could you?

DONATELLO

But I—

CHALMERS

Now you're going to have to go through with it.

DONATELLO

G-go through with what?

CHALMERS

Go on then. You need to pretend to feed him some cheese.

DONATELLO

I don't have any cheese.

CHALMERS

Not real cheese, Mister Donatello. Just pretend.

(Donatello stares at him in disbelief.)

Go on. Oh, and it goes faster if you squeak like a mouse while you're doing it.

DONATELLO

I...

HENRY

Well? I'm waiting!

(Donatello, in utter disbelief, walks up to Henry VI and extends a non-existent plate of cheese. Henry opens his mouth in anticipation, and at the urging of Chalmers, Donatello puts a "piece" in his mouth.)

More.

(He does it again.)

More.

(Donatello looks back at Chalmers makes a little mousy gesture and mouths the word "squeak". Donatello squeaks like a mouse, and suddenly Henry is all business again.)

Right, so, that's why you're here. I want to commission a piece of art that will honor the memory of my beloved Bordeaux.

DONATELLO

(Considering what he might create for this...)

Yes. Alright. I think I can—

HENRY

I want something soft, but lyrical. And perhaps with a hint of—

DONATELLO

Excuse me. Lyrical?

HENRY

With a hint of lemon.

DONATELLO

Your Majesty—

HENRY

Call me Hank.

(Chalmers shakes his head 'no' rather vehemently.)

DONATELLO

Your Majesty, I'm a *sculptor*. I do not compose—

HENRY

I know that. You think I don't know that? That's why you're here. I want you to create a beautiful sculpture. Just... a lyrical one.

DONATELLO

A lyrical...

HENRY

With a hint of lemon. Just a hint.

DONATELLO

I don't understand.

HENRY

You're a sculptor, aren't you?

DONATELLO

Yes...

HENRY

So you make sculptures, yes?

DONATELLO

I do...

HENRY

So? Make one. A lyrical one. (*Just as the absurdity is sinking in...*) In B flat.

(Donatello turns to Chalmers, who shrugs a "this is new to me" back at him.)

DONATELLO

I mostly work in stone. And bronze. Sometimes in wood or clay, but—

HENRY

Yes, yes. Fine, fine. That's all fine. I'm not picky.

DONATELLO

So when you say 'lyrical'...

HENRY

Is this one of those jokes that ends in ‘knock knock’?

DONATELLO

What? No, please. I’m sorry. Perhaps we can start at the beginning, yes?

(Henry motions for him to proceed...)

You want me to make you...

HENRY

A sculpture...

DONATELLO

To capture the glory of...

HENRY

Bordeaux. Right. Brilliant. You’ve got it.

DONATELLO

And I can use stone... or bronze... or...

HENRY

Whatever you think’s best.

DONATELLO

(Hesitant, scared, but growing more hopeful as the king lets him continue...)

Alright. A sculpture. Yes. As luck would have it, earlier this year I obtained a beautiful piece of breccia. Pale pink, with the most delicate—

HENRY

In B flat.

DONATELLO

— veining that... What?

HENRY

I always loved B flat.

DONATELLO

I think there is some confusion. I do not compose music. I’m a sculp—

HENRY

A sculptor, yes. Yes, I know. We've covered this. I *want* a sculpture. I just want it in B flat. With a hint of lemon.

DONATELLO

I do not mean any disrespect, but your Majesty must unders—

HENRY

Call me Hank.

DONATELLO

Fine, Hank, but you must understa—

CHALMERS
Oh, God.

HENRY
Bwwaaakkk!!

(At the mention of 'Hank', Henry screeches and takes to flight, circling around Donatello and Chalmers, while...)

CHALMERS

What did I tell you? I thought I was very clear that under no circumstances—

DONATELLO

It was an accident!

CHALMERS

Well I hope you're happy.

DONATELLO

Will this go on long?

CHALMERS

Oh yes.

DONATELLO

What... what is he doing?

CHALMERS

We're fairly certain he's hunting.

DONATELLO

Hunting? Hunting what?

CHALMERS

Caribou, mostly.

DONATELLO

Is-Isn't there anything...

CHALMERS

No, nothing you can do. He won't accept any help with it. You just have to hope he finds one quickly.

(Suddenly Henry swoops down and tackles an imaginary deer to the ground.)

Well, look at that. Very fortunate. Last time it took nearly an hour, and the damn thing dragged him through the gardens before he finally took it down.

(Henry returns to his throne, ready to continue exactly where they left off.)

HENRY

So, are we clear?

DONATELLO

You want a sculpture...

HENRY

Right.

DONATELLO

To honor Bordeaux...

HENRY

Right.

DONATELLO

Made of marble...

HENRY

Yes.

DONATELLO

In B flat, with a hint of lemon.

Brilliant!

HENRY

And my commission...

DONATELLO

No, no. There's no commission.

HENRY

No commission?

DONATELLO

I'm going to offer you something much, much better than money.

HENRY

Caribou?

DONATELLO

Exposure!!

HENRY

Exp—

DONATELLO

World wide exposure! You'll be famous! Just imagine how you will zoom into popularity, renown for your lyrical, lemony likenesses!

HENRY

I think you're missing the point of sculpture. It's supposed to be—

DONATELLO

Look, Donny. It's very simple. Sculpture's an art, right? Music is art, yes? And cooking is art. So do your sculpture just as you normally would, except make it tasty music. Got it?

HENRY

Right.

DONATELLO
(Resigned...)

Well, if there are no other questions...

HENRY

DONATELLO

No. No other questions, good day your Maje—

HENRY

And try to have it done by Thursday.

DONATELLO

Of course...

(Glancing over at Chalmers, who grimaces because he suspects what's coming, and then back at Henry to say...)

...Hank.

(Henry screeches and takes to flight. Chalmers just shakes his head in bemused resignation, and Donatello exits. Lights out.)