The Da Vinci Quest Mystery

By
Graham B. Milne
The scent of rain drifted over the unfinished dome of St. Peter's Basilica as the sun vanished in a haze of scarlet. In a lonely apartment far from the center of Vatican City, settled atop a wooden bureau, the cat called Sophie pricked up her ears at the racket made by the maestro as he bustled about his study. A tall, robed and bearded figure, imposing and immaculate despite his seventy years, he beamed with a glee the cat had not seen in a good while. Sophie glared at him for a moment and then settled back into the task of licking her paws. Such was life with a man as irrepressible as Leonardo da Vinci.

"A magnificent disaster," announced Leonardo with a grin. "What I would not have given to see the faces of those strut ting fools when the first drops struck their heads."

Sophie yawned and rolled onto her side. The celebration of the feast day of St. Mary of Magdalene had gone wonderfully until the dome of St. Peter's sprang a leak shortly after the outbreak of a thunderstorm, turning the faces of the cardinals as red as their drenched vestments. Leonardo had suspected something like this might happen the first time he had seen the roof for himself, so he bore no sympathy. It was a just reward for the Vatican's decision to retain the services of the young upstart who had designed the dome, the stonercutter himself—Michelangelo.

Leonardo bore at best a grudging admiration for his young rival as Michelangelo often became the embodiment of his frustration with the Holy See. Ever since the death of Pope Julius II and the ascension of his successor Leo X, Leonardo's ideas and inventions were frequently pushed aside. Leonardo suspected that Michelangelo escaped persecution simply because he was more skilled in wrapping his works in professions of faith.

Leonardo swept a pile of papers aside. "Ah, there it is," he said, focusing on a scroll of parchment stamped with a red royal seal. "You see, dearest Sophie, here is one whose views are not colored by age or faith." It was a letter from King Philip of France, a cordial invitation to visit the court, which in truth was a ploy by the French monarch to steal Leonardo and his works away from the reach of the Vatican's masters. Not that Leonardo minded overmuch—he was intrigued by the prospect of working at whatever struck his fancy without the Church looking over his shoulder.

Two days hence Leonardo was scheduled to depart, yet despite his enthusiasm he had made little effort to pack. As with so many things in his life, it was difficult to complete. No sooner had he begun a new project was he immediately conceiving of another, and another. The beautiful lady on the unfinished wooden canvas in the corner of his study was a testament to his inability to follow things through to their conclusion. There were just too many ideas in his powerful and insatiable mind for his body, for anyone's body, to keep to the pace it set. For every work hailed as genius by the world there were a hundred no other eyes had ever beheld. The restrictions imposed by the Vatican only compounded Leonardo's frustrations; Philip's invitation could not have come at a better time.

"I am afraid, dearest Sophie, that you may have to find a new home," Leonardo said to the cat, which gave no heed of hearing. "I have cherished your company, but I think you would find the journey to France not to your liking." He sat at his writing table, plucked a fresh piece of paper from the pile and dipped his quill in the inkwell, then began to compose a brief request to a Florentine cobbler friend, Signore Santalucio,
whom he believed would be able to give Sophie a cozy spot by the fire and plenty of mice to catch once he had gone.

Abruptly, loud and impatient banging rattled his door, sending a tremor through the walls and causing a startled Leonardo to knock over his inkwell. Sophie snapped awake. The noise ceased just as suddenly, and then began again after a moment’s pause. And a booming voice added its own thunder to the unwelcome cacophony. “Open up, old man!”

“Great heavenly spheres,” said Leonardo. “Who visits me at this unholy hour?”

Leonardo rose from his chair, selected a candle from the desk and descended the stairs to the entrance to the small apartment. There was a disturbing familiarity to the inquiring voice at the door, but Leonardo could not imagine any circumstance in which that person might come to see him. It had to be someone else. Sophie hopped off the bureau and followed, her only hope that the visitor might be bringing a fresh fish.

“What do you think, Sophie?” Leonardo asked. “Has the Holy Father finally come to put an end to Leonardo da Vinci?” Leonardo reached for the latch and began to open the heavy wooden door. “Pray announce thyself, wary traveler, and do make your business brief lest my boot find your backside.”

The visitor was dressed in a shabby leather topcoat, chosen for practicality rather than any sense of fashion, a sharp contrast to the long and formal loose robes Leonardo customarily draped himself in. His beard was disheveled, but he still retained an air of resolve that belied the disarray with which he clothed himself. The kind of resolve that could give a man the patience to lie on his back beneath the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in suffocating heat with dust and paint falling all over him for four long years. Michelangelo Buonarotti.

“I see that old age may bring wisdom but not better manners,” said Michelangelo.

The elder maestro was struck silent, but only for a moment. “Brave of you to make yourself seen in this place this evening,” Leonardo told his visitor. “I am told a number of cardinals would seek to have you caned.”

If Michelangelo was embarrassed, he showed no sign. “How frightened you must be of my position that you would seek any opportunity to mock my work,” he replied. “The fault was not in the design, but in the plaster.”

“A lesser man blames his materials. A greater man admits the fault in himself.”

“And how often does the famed Leonardo da Vinci admit his own faults?” Leonardo grinned. “I would be the first, had I yet discovered one.”

Michelangelo looked down at Sophie, who sat at her master’s foot glaring up at the stranger. “How odd that so many wonder why only your cat can endure you.”

“Between her purring and what passes for the exchange of ideas in this place, I find it a simple choice.” Leonardo sighed. “Have you any business with me this evening or shall we go on trading invective?”

Only then did Michelangelo reveal the small box he had tucked under his arm. “I need your help,” he said.

* * *

“A deeply cold day in the depths of Lucifer’s pit it must be,” Leonardo said with a grin as he pushed aside a pile of parchments and laid the box on the table.
“Do you ever tire of the sound of your own voice, old man?” Michelangelo asked as he cast a glance over the disorder of the study. He wandered over to the unfinished portrait of the beautiful lady as Sophie climbed onto the table to keep a close watch on the proceedings. Michelangelo smirked at the portrait as he looked into the painted eyes. “Perhaps if you spent less time talking you might find the time to finish some of these creations. I am told you have spent twelve years on this woman’s lips; I finished the whole of the Sistine in a third of the time, and I am not even a painter.”

“Of that there is no doubt,” Leonardo said. “Your ceiling bears all the flaws of one accustomed to smashing apart stone rather than wielding the delicate strokes of a brush. Now what have we here?” He lifted the lid of the box, revealing a rolled scroll nestled in a cushion of velvet.

“Be careful, will you,” Michelangelo said, stepping over to join him. “This has the highest value to the Holy Father.”

“How unusual then that he would entrust it to me,” Leonardo commented.

“To both of us,” Michelangelo informed him.

“Surely you jest,” the elder maestro said, shaking his head. “Your esteemed Pope Leo has little regard for my work, indeed for anything he cannot have explained to him in simple terms.”

“I speak of his predecessor,” Michelangelo said. Leonardo raised an eyebrow. “Julius?”

Michelangelo produced a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket. “This was part of His Holiness’ will. He requested that it be held by me but that it not be opened until the feast day of St. Mary of Magdalene.” He unfolded the paper and read aloud.

“Michelangelo, my friend, time grows short and enemies abound. Again I find you are the sole heir to whom I can bequeath a secret I fear might be uncovered by the unrighteous and unworthy. Let no one know of this, the last task to which I charge thee. Trust only your compatriot in the arts Leonardo, for only he shall know how to read the path that will lead the way to illumination. As that which wounds us guards our fortunes and condemns us to destruction, may our Lord in Heaven be with you both.”

“So within the warrior pope beat the heart of a poet,” Leonardo said.

Michelangelo nodded toward the table. “I have no doubt in the Father’s sincerity in keeping this hidden from all but myself, and in his belief that you are the sole man to decipher the coded writing upon the scroll.”

“The last words of his note are perplexing,” Leonardo said. “As that which wounds us guards our fortunes and dooms us to destruction. What is it that can at once wound, guard and condemn?”

“My temper, should you fail to make haste,” the young sculptor replied. “Did you fail to comprehend the urgency with which His Holiness desires us to complete this task?”

Leonardo smiled. “Patience is what elevates masterpiece from mediocrity. Let us have at it, then,” he said, and proceeded to lift the scroll from the box with a pair of metal tweezers.
Curious as to what compelled the two men so greatly, Sophie pranced across the unrolled scroll. Michelangelo grimaced in horror while Leonardo smiled and gently lifted his cat from the table to set her on the floor. The maestro squinted and held the candle closer to the scroll. At first glance the calligraphy seemed a meaningless scramble of strokes and whirls. But the longer and closer Leonardo looked, the more a great familiarity asserted itself.

“This is my codex,” the maestro said. “So that is why…”

“That is why what?” Michelangelo asked.

Leonardo sat back. “Julius asked me to share the secret with him many years ago. He assured me he would only use it in the direst hour of need.”

“But what does it say?” Michelangelo demanded.

“Hand me that piece of paper.” Leonardo began to write out his translation of the text. As Michelangelo watched over the maestro’s shoulder, he felt a furry body brush against his arm. He looked down to see Sophie climbing up on the table again, trying to get a better look at the work in progress. Frowning, Michelangelo brushed her aside. Sophie emitted a grumpy squeak as she landed on the cold floor again.

Finally, after what seemed like hours to both the young sculptor and the inquisitive cat, Leonardo penned the last letter. “So, this is what the codex reveals.”

My friends, I make this confession in the hopes that you may someday forgive me for the great burden I am to lay upon your shoulders. It came to me in the bloody fields of Agnadello, and for four long years it has weighed on my heart. Like Abraham, commanded by the Lord to take the life of his child for reasons he could not understand, I find myself at a crossroads with my very soul in the balance. And as the days of my life draw to a close, I must pass on this secret. Because it is something of deep importance to the faith, I cannot trust those who might put their own ambitions ahead of the well-being of the Church. Instead I pass it to you, men who see the greatness of God through the great mysteries of His creation. In your hands and in your hearts I am confident the decision will be the right one.

At the close of the campaign in Agnadello in May of 1509, I was visited by a wounded man, a knight Templar of unknown origin who had sold his services to the French. Knowing he was soon to perish he asked to make confession for his sins. Together we spoke of the glory of the divine kingdom, the suffering of our Lord on the cross for mankind’s misdeeds and the miracle of His resurrection. It was the Crucifixion itself that particularly compelled the knight, and he was eager to discuss it in great detail. His scrupulous knowledge of that event came to impress even myself; he spoke of things as though he had watched with his own eyes. I became enraptured by the knight’s words as he spoke of the images that have been burned into all our hearts; the agony of our Lord on the cross, the tears on the face of His mother and of the Magdalene who walked with Him, our Lord’s plea to His father and His final breath of mortal life. And of the Roman soldier, Longinus, who cast the final stroke in His side.
It was then that the knight’s words grew somber and cold, as though he could not bring himself to speak a terrible secret. We are all responsible for the suffering of our Lord on the cross for our sins, but the knight spoke as though he carried a greater guilt than any other, as though he himself had thrust the spear into the Christ’s side. Surely, my son, I told him, you cannot have been the one to cast the final blow, for our lives are but fleeting lights in the long night. “No,” the knight replied, “I did not cast the final blow. But I have held the vile weapon that did, I have felt the awesome power of its darkness, and I have felt ashamed. I have wanted to cut out the heart that would dare to feel such ecstasy at the touch of such unspeakable evil. Because I betrayed our Lord,” he said, “I have become Judas in my life, fighting only with those who would pay me my thirty pieces of silver. I shall not know Heaven,” he said, “the least I can do is offer my contrition and accept whatever fate the Lord sees fit to bestow upon me.”

For my friends, he then revealed to me the place in which the Spear that pierced the Lord’s side resides, after centuries of passing from one conqueror to the other. This terrible weapon that both protects and condemns, and has bathed the centuries in the blood of both those who wield it and those who fall in its path. My time is short, I know. I shall not live to see this task accomplished. Nor would I wish to undertake it, for I fear that I might also fall beneath its sway and seek to use the Spear’s terrible might. For all who wield power desire more, whether to further innocent means or realize dreams of conquest. None can be so trusted. So it is the artists whose hands I encumber. The men for whom power is found only in beauty and knowledge. If you would seek the Spear, do so only to protect mankind from its darkness. Look to the place where Moses sits among the slaves and to the seat of his wisdom, for the guide that will lead you there. In the Lord you will find your illumination, but only in the words you will know the way. May God be with you both.

Julius

“The Spear of Destiny!” Michelangelo said, recoiling from the table. “As that which wounds us guards our fortunes and condemns us to destruction.” The weapon used by the Roman sentinel Longinus to pierce the side of the Lord. Is it truly possible?”

“There have always been legends of such a thing,” Leonardo said. “Across the world, empires raised to greatness by the spear’s power and then broken on the rocks by its loss permeate the history of civilization. Perhaps Julius hoped the Church would be the exception to the rule.”

Michelangelo shook his head. “You translated the words but you missed the meaning. He did not want the Spear found. He knew it would bring destruction.”

“He said only he did not trust himself to the undertaking,” Leonardo corrected. “Perhaps it is his wish that we should become as Joseph of Arimathea, guardians of a relic as sacred to the Church as the Holy Grail. Why leave these clues if he did not want the Spear found? Would it not be better to say nothing at all?”
“His Holiness tasked us to keep the secret. We may know where the Spear is to be found so to better protect it from those who would seek it to evil ends.”

“Do you fear it?” Leonardo asked.

Michelangelo hesitated before answering. “There are many things in this world we are not meant to understand. Things we are to accept as the will of God, for a divine purpose beyond our comprehension. The Spear is one such thing.”

“The Spear is nothing but that,” Leonardo said dismissively. “A mortal weapon, made by mortal hands. Coincidences do not grant an object supernatural ability. In any case, it is a futile argument to make. Without the funding of the Vatican, neither you nor I have the resources to voyage to Egypt to begin the search.”

“Egypt?”

“The place where Moses sat among the slaves,” Leonardo pointed out.

Michelangelo stared at the translation of the codex. “Where he sits among the slaves,” he corrected. Realization brightened his eyes. “Not Egypt. Much closer. And we will not require a single ducat to make the journey.”

Leonardo frowned. “What is it now, stonemaster?”

“Come,” the young man told the elder maestro, moving towards the stairs with a renewed enthusiasm framing his face.

Leonardo sighed and looked over at his cat. “Mind our home, dear Sophie,” he said. “Perhaps I shall return with a mouse for you. Or a wild goose, since that will be all we shall be chasing this evening.”

Sophie cast a sleepy eye towards them as they exited. As soon as the door clicked shut, she sprang to her feet and hopped over to the open window. It was so like the maestro to leave her behind, to make her miss out on the adventure. The way she saw it, she was as much a part of this quest as they were. She crawled outside and carefully made her way down to the street, leaping onto awnings and window ledges, and waited in the shadows until they emerged. As Leonardo and Michelangelo wandered away into the night, the inquisitive feline pursued at a safe distance.

* * *

“Slow your steps,” Leonardo said as he followed Michelangelo through the dark and wet stone streets of the Vatican. “Would you seek to be rid of me by causing my heart to fail?” Michelangelo moved with the stealth of a panther from shadow to shadow, keeping abreast of the movements of the Swiss Guard, hard to miss in their colorful cloaks.

“Silence, old man!” Michelangelo snapped. “Your tireless tongue will be the death of both of us!” He peeked around a corner. “This way.”

Deep into Rome they traveled, finding themselves, after an endless parade of blind turns and dark alleyways, before one of the oldest churches in the ancient city – the Church of St. Peter in Chains. It had been built in the 4th Century to honor the Christians persecuted by the Emperor Nero, and was a favorite of a little-known cardinal named Giuliano della Rovere, who would later become known to Leonardo and millions the world over as Pope Julius II.
The two men swung open the massive doors of the deserted church and stepped inside, failing to notice the third member of their party slipping between the heavy wooden doors before they could close.

Sophie did not like large buildings like these; they were far too cold and drafty for her taste, and poor hunting grounds for mice. She wondered what could be so important that her maestro and his rival would want to come here in the middle of the night.

“There,” proclaimed Michelangelo’s echoing voice. “There he is.”

He pointed to the far wall, at the tomb of Pope Julius II.

Leonardo squinted in the pale candlelight. Against the wall, sculpted from the finest marble in a niche between two other figures, sat Moses, a resplendent and majestic figure holding the plates of the Ten Commandments with one hand and stroking his beard with the other.

“Sitting amongst the slaves,” Leonardo said, eyeing the figures on either side of the central sculpture.

“The Holy Father commissioned me to create a fitting memorial but it is merely a fraction of what I had planned,” Michelangelo said, regarding his own work with disappointment. “It was meant to be a grand display, a wondrous monument to the life of Julius. Now it is hidden away and forgotten.”

Leonardo stepped past the railing dividing the sculpted wall from the rest of the apse and looked closer at the head of Moses. “Perhaps this is why,” he said. “Horns on his head? What foul spark led you to such a ghastly addition?”

Michelangelo rolled his eyes and joined Leonardo at the side of the figure. Indeed, Moses’ head bore two small horns, protruding from his hairline. “It is as St. Jerome described in his translation of the Old Testament. Exodus 34:29. The horns appeared around Moses’ face after God spoke to him upon Mount Sinai.”

“They meant ‘rays of light,’ stonecutter. The Hebrew word for both ‘rays of light’ and ‘horns’ are the same. Jerome was foolish not to know the difference.”

“He made no error and nor did I,” insisted Michelangelo. “Horns symbolize power and might. For all your disdain of sculpture, pray tell how would the mighty Leonardo da Vinci sculpt a ray of light?”

Leonardo shook his head. “Were not you the one who insisted on haste in this endeavor? Perhaps it is better that we search for whatever is hidden here rather than arguing over its aesthetics.”

Michelangelo frowned. “You started it,” he said.

For the next hour the two men examined every nook and peered into every cranny, scrutinizing floor tiles, studying archways, pondering pillars. Michelangelo even climbed on top of the sculpted figures to get a closer look. “There is nothing here,” he called out to Leonardo.

“Patience,” the maestro reminded as he nosed about the narthex.

“Patience, yes,” said Michelangelo to himself. “One cannot expect inspiration to simply fall from the sky.”

He had no sooner finished the words than a screeching ball of fur and claws burst from the darkness of the rafters and dropped onto Moses’ head, startling Michelangelo and knocking him to the floor. “Sophie!” Leonardo cried. The cat posed triumphantly upon the head, a mouse in her mouth. As Michelangelo hurled a stream of curses at her, Sophie leaped off, brushing her hind paw against one of the horns.
The horn clicked.

The entire wall began to rumble. Dust and dirt flaked and fell from the wall as the panel above Moses began to move. The men watched in amazement as the sliding panel slowly revealed a concealed mural.

It was a marvelous work, rich in layered detail and mastery of form. The images were a collection of scenes of great spiritual meaning from across all of history, revolving around a central figure, one that was too familiar to Leonardo’s eyes. His Vitruvian Man stood in the middle of the mural, limbs outstretched to touch the vignettes in each corner.

“Is this yours, old man?” Michelangelo asked.

Leonardo shook his head. “Someone has obviously copied my work. I was about to inquire the same of you.”

“A skillful duplication,” the sculptor remarked. “But not by my hand.”

Leonardo gazed across the images. He was intrigued by the five panels at the bottom of the mural, each inscribed with a short but cryptic phrase. Leonardo recalled the advice of the late pontiff enclosed in his letter: In the Lord you will find your illumination, but only in the words you will know the way. Only in the words will you know the way.

In the words.

A grin spread across Leonardo’s face, puzzling Michelangelo. “What is it, old man? Whatever do you find so amusing?”

“Look at the five panels. Each phrase describes one of the images upon the mural. And the first letter of the name of each image is a piece of the key.”

“The key to what?”

“To where the Spear is to be found,” the maestro replied...
The Solution

“I am not sure I understand,” said Michelangelo.
“The clues are at the bottom of the painting,” explained Leonardo. “Each one a riddle leading to a name, each name a further piece of the final solution. Here, for example, the first riddle: *The first is she who walked with the One.*”
“The One... our Lord Jesus Christ,” Michelangelo surmised. “But those who walked with Him... the disciples... were all men.”
“But in all the tales of His life, but one woman could claim a place of honor. She who is depicted there,” Leonardo pointed out, “in the top left-hand corner. Clutching His cup, the Holy Grail.”
“Mary Magdalene,” Michelangelo said.
“Yes. She whose feast is celebrated on the very day we come upon her image.”
“So that is why Julius requested that his letter not be opened until today,” Michelangelo said. “Then the second riddle, *Then he who was told to sacrifice his son,* is that not meant to signify God Himself?”
Leonardo shook his head. “No, my dear stonemason, you forget the words of Julius in his letter to us. He spoke of the burden he bore that he could not understand, like he who was commanded by God to strike down his child.”
Michelangelo nodded. “Abraham.”
“Shown there at the right, his hand stayed by the angel. Do you see now the pattern that begins to emerge?” Leonardo asked.
“I must confess I do not,” Michelangelo replied.
“Then look at the bottom right and the third riddle.”
*The third is a soldier who thrust the Spear into His side...* Longinus, of course.”
“Of course,” the maestro said. “Go on.”
*Then follow the Knights who keep the legend as they ride.* Those knights in the center of the mural, they wear Templar crosses... Templar Knights?”
“Correct. And the last?” Leonardo prompted.
*At last the home of he who guarded the Grail.* Michelangelo looked at the elder man. “The answer to that is in your own words, old man. You said that it was the Father’s wish that we should become as guardians of the Grail. As Joseph of Arimathea. His home, Arimathea.”
“Now do you see?” Leonardo asked. *“Look at the words to find the trail.”* Michelangelo pondered the question for a moment. “Magdalene, Abraham, Longinus, Templar, Arimathea.” He gazed up at the Vitruvian Man in the center of the mural. It was only now that he noticed the shape behind the figure. Not a meaningless scribble as he had first surmised, but the outline of a place. An island.
Leonardo smiled. “Yes, my friend. The island of Malta in the Mediterranean Sea. Ruled by the monastic order of Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem after a long period of rule by Romans, Arabs and Normans. And thought to be the place where Saint Paul was shipwrecked in 60 A.D. The perfect place to hide the Spear of Destiny. Undoubtedly the cross there pinpoints its exact location.”
“If that is the case,” Michelangelo said, “then I have not a moment to lose.”
Leonardo looked askance at the young sculptor. "You mean to go after it, do you?"

"Yes. I must see it destroyed, so no hand may ever suffer beneath its evil again," Michelangelo replied.

"If that is your wish," Leonardo said with a sigh.

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps it is best left alone."

"You would give up your own designs on the Spear?" Michelangelo said.

"As you have said many times," Leonardo said, "I am an old man with naught but a cat for company." Sophie purred as she rubbed against his leg. "The temptation of such an adventure has lost its hold over me. I wish only to pursue my studies in France."

Michelangelo frowned. "Would that I could trust your sincerity."

Leonardo smiled. "Then trust my actions." He bent down, picked up Sophie and cradled her in his arms. "I leave the quest to you, stonecutter. May fortune always favor you."

With a flourish of his robes, Leonardo turned and made his way down the long hallway to the exit. Michelangelo remained, watching him go.

The sculptor turned to the mural once more. Everything he would need to find the Spear was here, it was only a matter of correctly interpreting the clues. He cast his glance down to the five inscribed panels across the bottom, going over the riddle in his mind. In the words will you know the way. Malta.

Something occurred to the young sculptor's mind just as abruptly, and he reached into his waistcoat for the folded piece of paper that bore Julius' original note. He glanced over it again, and laughed out loud. Very clever, Your Holiness. The way was truly within the words.

"Michelangelo, my friend, time grows short and enemies abound. Again I find you are the sole heir to whom I can bequeath a secret I fear might be uncovered by the unrighteous and unworthy. Let no one know of this, the last task to which I charge thee. Trust only your compatriot in the arts Leonardo, for only he shall know how to read the path that will lead the way to illumination. As that which wounds us guards our fortunes and condemns us to destruction, may our Lord in Heaven be with you both."

Michelangelo grinned in spite of himself and exited the church, his mind heavy with the task that lay ahead.
Epilogue

The weathered Captain Baragia of the Fortuna, a modest but speedy two-masted schooner, saluted Michelangelo as he spotted him on the dock, standing with a satchel slung over his shoulder. The captain crossed the plank to greet the sculptor, doing so with a broad smile and a firm handshake. "Good day to you, Signore," he said.

"And to you, Captain," Michelangelo replied. "How blow the winds this day?"
"Fairly and evenly," Baragia replied. "Neptune smiles upon us."
Michelangelo nodded respectfully but cringed inside at the mention of the pagan god of the sea. "And how long do you think the journey shall take?"
"Only a matter of days. It is becoming quite familiar to us."
"Familiar?" Michelangelo said.
"Only a fortnight past we sailed to Malta. A terrible voyage that was. Storms of such wrath. Many of my crew became ill. And with no cargo aboard, it was hardly worth the expense."

"No cargo? Then why make the voyage?"
"Ah, we were ferrying a passenger. He paid handsomely for his berth, and promised us greater reward upon our arrival in Malta. I should have known better than to trust such a suspicious character."
Michelangelo frowned. "Who was he?"
"He requested that he not give his name. I would not forget such a face though. An older man, robed and bearded. Ah, yes. And with him he had a cat."
"A cat?" Michelangelo felt the blood drain from his face. That old fool. Despite all his words to the contrary, he means to find the Spear.
"Do you know of whom I speak?" the captain asked.
"No," Michelangelo lied. "I do not."
From the deck, one of the captain's officers called out to him. Baragia acknowledged the report and turned to Michelangelo. "Your supplies are safe aboard, Signore. Is there anything else before we depart?"
The sculptor did not answer. Rather, he looked out at the sea, his mind reeling with possibilities, and terrors.
"Signore?"
Michelangelo snapped back to attention. "Yes, Captain," he replied. "Get me to Malta before the morrow and I shall double your fee."

Leonardo is out there, Michelangelo thought. He has two weeks' head start, and he means to use the Spear to bring down the Church. But I will stop him, for I have a greater weapon at my side and in my heart, one the maestro could never hope to match.
I have my faith.
Michelangelo watched the waters rush toward the bow of the Fortuna, and as the ship made for open seas, he bowed his head in prayer.

THE END... or is it?