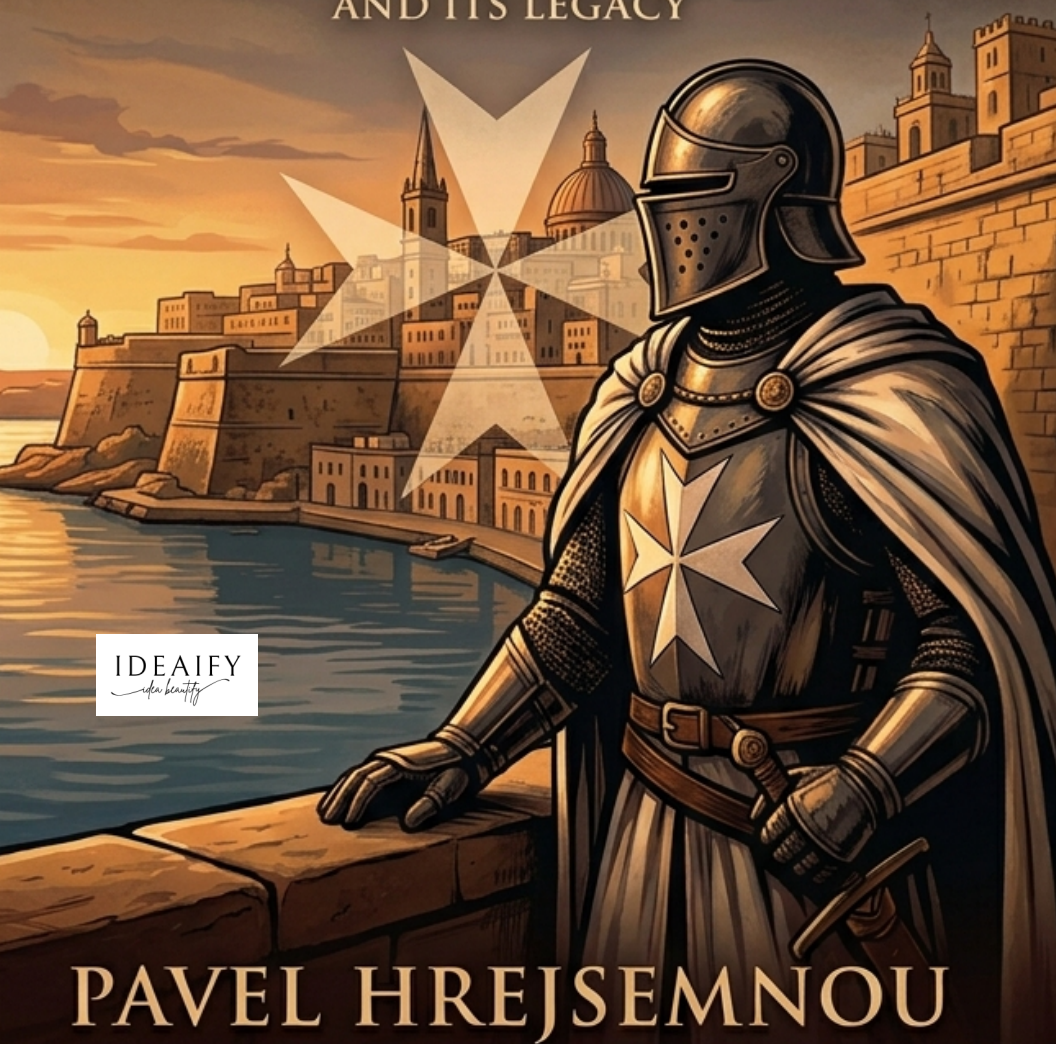


# THE LAST KNIGHTS OF MALTA

A NOVEL OF THE GRAND SIEGE  
AND ITS LEGACY



IDEAIFY  
*idea beauty*

PAVEL HREJSEMNOU

# The Last Knights of Malta

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*Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette, 49th Grand Master of the Order of Malta (Order of St. John)*

*To those who know that history is not merely a  
collection of dates and names,  
but a living story of flesh-and-blood people –  
with their courage, fear, mistakes, and triumphs.  
And to all lovers of the past,  
who can hear the echo of ancient footsteps,  
feel the chill of stone walls,  
and see in battles not just the clash of armies,  
but the hearts of those who stood within them.*

# Author's Note

*This novel is based on the true events of the Great Siege of Malta in 1565.*

*Every battle, every commander, and every significant moment has a real historical basis.*

*At the same time, however, the story follows fictional characters – Hasan and Marcus – through whose eyes the narrative unfolds.*

*These characters are not mere inventions, but a mosaic pieced together from the fates of dozens of anonymous fighters whose names never made it into the chronicles.*

*Every gesture, emotion, and decision is set within the framework of the era and grounded in contemporary records and eyewitness accounts.*

*My aim was not merely to describe what happened, but to allow the reader to feel what it was like to be there – in the heat of the August sun, in the breath of gunpowder smoke, in the moment when survival, faith, and honor were at stake.*

*History is more than the past. It is a story that lives within us.*

# Prologue

*Malta, Spring of the Year of Our Lord 1565*

*The wind from the sea was salty and heavy, carrying with it the smell of fish, seaweed, and distant fire. Above the rocky cliffs rose the towers of the fortresses, in whose shadows calm mingled with unrest, prayers with preparations for battle. The sky was the colour of lead, and on the horizon, where the sea met the sky, something stirred – a barely discernible line of dark sails.*

*Marcus di Valette, a young knight of the Order of Saint John, stood on the walls of Birgu and watched as that line turned into the gleam of metal and the murmur of human voices, reaching him like thunder before a storm. He did not know how many there were, but he knew what they meant. The Ottomans. They were coming like a wave that would swallow everything in its path.*

*Far on the other side of the sea, aboard the flagship of the Ottoman fleet, Hasan ibn Selim leaned against the railing and watched the same horizon, only from the opposite side. In his mind, this was not just another expedition – it was a debt that had to be paid. Malta was a thorn in the side of their empire, the last knightly*

*stronghold that still resisted. Everything that would happen in the coming weeks would decide who would rule the Mediterranean.*

*The sun was sinking toward the west, the sky bleeding into the sea. Silence fell over the walls, as if the entire island had held its breath. And then – the first strike of the bell from Fort Saint Angelo. Lookouts cried out from the towers, soldiers rushed to the ramparts.*

*The siege had begun.*

*And as one man swore an oath that the island would never fall, another vowed that it would become the gateway to the heart of Europe.*

# Chapter 1. – In the Shadow of the Cross and the Crescent

*Étienne de Corval – Malta,  
April 1565*

The wind carried the scent of salt, mildew, and dust. Above the harbour in Birgu, gulls circled, as if sensing approaching death.

“A land waiting for fire,” Étienne muttered, clutching the cross on his chest. Tall, exhausted, but upright, a knight of the Order of Saint John stood on the wooden pier, watching the coastline that was about to become the arena of two worlds.

Behind him, men returned from field drills, jaws clenched, eyes red from dust. Everyone knew that by summer, the island would be drenched in blood. The Ottomans were preparing. It was like the heavy sultriness before a storm. And the silence before a storm is worse than the storm itself.

“Étienne,” a deep voice addressed him. Grand Master Jean de Valette approached without armour, only in a black cloak with a white cross.

“My Lord,” the knight bowed.

“What did you see from the deck?”

“A hungry coast. Fortifications are inadequate, water is limited, the troops are exhausted. But the spirit... it burns.”

De Valette nodded. “Spirit is our shield. And faith, our sword.” After a moment of silence, he added: “Perhaps it will not be a battle. Perhaps it will be a Via Dolorosa.”

Étienne looked toward the Cathedral of St. Lawrence. The bells were silent. But in the men’s hearts, they were already ringing.

## ***Hasan ibn Selim – Istanbul, April 1565***

When Sultan Suleiman entered the hall, every Janissary bowed like grass before the wind. Only Mustafa Pasha remained upright. Hasan straightened and clenched his teeth. Not out of disobedience – but

out of pride that he, too, would be part of this expedition.

“Malta is the key,” Suleiman declared. His voice sounded like stone grinding against stone. “Whoever holds Malta, controls the sea. And whoever controls the sea, controls the world.”

Beside the Sultan stood Dragut – a grey-haired wolf, on whose face war itself was etched. Hasan looked up at him with sacred reverence. Legends surrounded him – how he sowed terror in Spain, how he sank Christian ships like children’s toys.

Mustafa Pasha crossed the room and stepped in front of Hasan’s unit. “This expedition will not be easy,” he said. “The enemy is tenacious. But faith is stronger than stone.”

Hasan swallowed. In his mind flashed scenes from Corfu, where he had last seen burning harbours. “Insha’Allah,” he whispered to himself.

After the audience, Hasan stood alone in the courtyard, watching the sunset over the Bosphorus. From here, they would soon set out westward. Toward an unknown island that was both a challenge and a temptation for his people.

Above him, the muezzin sang out. And Hasan knew that his life would never be the same.

## Chapter 2. – Forebodings

### *Isabella Farrugia – Birgu, Malta*

The Farrugia house stood on the slope above the harbour, offering a view of both the sea and the island's main fortresses. Since early morning, the streets had echoed with the clatter of wooden clogs, the thud of hooves, and the rough voices of soldiers. Isabella stood at the open window, watching young men carry barrels of water up to Fort Saint Angelo.

“So many faces... so much fear,” she whispered.

“You should be inside,” her older brother Tommaso called from the doorway. “Things are changing. And women ought to be safe.”

“Safe? Here on this island?” she replied calmly, turning to him. “This war won't stay behind the walls. When it comes, it will swallow us all – men and women alike.”

Tommaso fell silent. He knew Isabella wasn't speaking from some girlish whim. Their mother had died in an Ottoman raid years ago – and it had changed

Isabella. She had refused marriage, joined a lay women's order, and yet remained in her own home, ready to serve as a field healer.

That morning, she entered the local infirmary. It was dark, musty, but full of movement. Nuns were preparing bandages, distributing ointments. Isabella joined them without a word, as she had done for months.

When one of the nuns tripped over an empty barrel, Isabella caught her and quietly said, "Soon we won't even have that much."

Her hands already smelled of vinegar and thyme when a shout came from outside: "From the harbour! A ship! A ship!"

She ran out. On the horizon, several small fishing boats and one larger merchant vessel appeared. No reinforcements. No army. Only silence from Europe.

Isabella stood on the shore, clutching her rosary. "Lord, I do not ask for a miracle. Only for strength. That I may not let these people fall."

## *Hasan ibn Selim – near Rhodes, aboard an Ottoman galley*

The sea smelled of sulfur and fish. The sails snapped in the wind. The fleet stretched out like an endless serpent – galleys, warships, supply vessels, wooden floating fortresses.

Hasan sat by the railing, watching the figure standing on the quarterdeck. Dragut.

He was different from what Hasan had imagined. Shorter than Mustafa, wiry, with the eyes of a sea wolf. He spoke softly, but his words carried the weight of chains.

“Do you know who your enemy is, boy?” he asked suddenly, without turning.

Hasan stiffened. He hadn’t expected Dragut himself to address him.

“The Christians, sir...” he answered hesitantly.

“Wrong,” Dragut cut him off. “The enemy is faith without strength. Faith that fears blood. Faith that waits for a miracle instead of acting.”

Hasan swallowed. “And Malta...?”

“Malta is a hornet’s nest. Small, but deadly dangerous. And we? We are the flame.” Dragut finally turned. His face was scarred, his right eye slightly clouded. “We will burn that nest to dust.”

With those words, he walked among the officers. The soldiers stepped back, but with respect. Hasan felt a chill.

That night, as he gazed at the dark sea, he heard a whisper. Perhaps it was a prayer. Or a memory. Or a foreboding. But he knew that this man – Dragut – carried a fire within him that would consume even those who followed him.

# Chapter 3. – The Island That Must Not Fall

## *Étienne de Corval – Fort Saint Elmo, May 1565*

The stones beneath his feet were cracked, some damp. Fort Saint Elmo stood on the rocky spur of the Sciberras peninsula like a solitary shield facing east. It was small, but it faced bravely all who came from the sea.

Étienne crossed the wooden bridge over the dry moat and called out to the guards. The men recognized him by his Order's cloak and let him inside. The smell of salt, dampness, and iron struck his face. This was not a fortress – it was a trap.

“Undermined foundations. Shortage of ammunition. Supplies for ten days, no more,” summarized Captain Del Rio, who commanded the garrison.

“How many men?”

“One hundred and thirty. But half are civilian auxiliaries.”

Étienne walked to the eastern rampart. From there, he could see the open sea – and somewhere beyond the horizon, the ships of Mustafa Pasha were already sailing. The knight gripped the railing and prayed silently.

“The fort must hold as long as possible,” he said quietly. “When they come...”

“...they will crush us like an eggshell,” Del Rio interrupted. “But they will crush us slowly. And that will cost them time.”

Étienne returned to Birgu at dawn. In the streets, people were already cooking, women were sewing, children were carrying water. Isabella spotted him and came over with a bowl of warm goat’s milk.

“You made it all the way to Saint Elmo?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Beautiful view,” he smiled. But his eyes were clouded. And in his head, numbers: 130 men. Ten days. One hope.

## *Hasan ibn Selim – South of Malta, at sea*

“THERE!” someone shouted from the lead galley. Soldiers rushed to the port side. Hasan pressed against the railing, and then he saw it. The island. Barren, rocky, like a clenched fist thrusting out of the sea.

It was Malta.

“That’s all?” sneered an officer beside him. “Are we going to spend a month conquering this?”

Hasan stayed silent. In the distance, towers and walls rose. Not large, but sharp. And the sea around them sang a song of ancient spirits.

Dragut stood at the prow like a statue. While everyone whispered, he remained silent. Only when the fleet drew closer did he turn to Mustafa, who had come over from another ship.

“The island is ready,” Dragut said. “The question is whether we are.”

Mustafa was not thrown off balance. “We will come as fire. And leave as rulers.”

“Fire often burns the one who carries it,” Dragut replied, and then walked away without another word.

Hasan felt a strange pressure on his chest. It was not just the expected battle. It was something deeper. The island drew him in, yet repelled him. As if it knew that here, boys become shadows.

That evening, he wrote a short sentence in his journal: Malta is near. And with me is a silence that has never before been so loud.

# Chapter 4. – First Shot

## *Étienne de Corval – Fort Saint Elmo, late May 1565*

The morning began like any other – mist over the sea, the cries of gulls, the smell of salt. But then it changed.

First, silence.

Then a flash on the shore. And in the next second – a blast that shook the entire fortress.

Étienne grabbed his helmet and ran up to the ramparts. A cannonball had pierced the southern wall and torn out a section of masonry. Soldiers ran with shovels and timber. Dust choked their lungs.

“This is the beginning,” Étienne said aloud, more to drown out his own fear.

Another shot – closer this time.

Del Rio rushed to him. “They have at least ten batteries. And they’re firing in coordination. This is an art.”

Étienne nodded. But under his helmet, he was sweating. Every artillery blast took away a piece of their time. And time was the only thing they had.

Inside the fort, a staircase collapsed. A wounded young man writhed beneath the stones. Étienne grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to the chapel. A nun was washing his wound, while another offered a wooden cross. Everyone knew this was only the beginning.

By evening, the bombardment ceased. But Étienne knew it wasn't over. It was just a breath. And then the strike would come.

## ***Hasan ibn Selim – Ottoman Artillery Position below Saint Elmo***

Hasan ran with a sack of gunpowder. It was heavy and hot, sweat poured down his back, but his heart beat faster than ever before – you're pounding for war, he told himself.

The cannons were arranged in an arc around the peninsula. Many were new, cast-iron, adorned with reliefs. Each had its own crew – strong men with scarred arms and faces that never smiled.

Dragut himself oversaw the placement of the batteries. He measured distances, calculated angles. His voice was calm, but sharp.

“Don’t waste gunpowder. Every shot must have a purpose.”

Hasan knelt beside one of the cannons. The soldier next to him – an older man with one eye – leaned toward him.

“First time?”

Hasan nodded.

“Then keep your tongue behind your teeth, your eyes open, and your fingers away from the barrel.”

The order came. The first salvo. Then the second. The ground trembled. Stones from the fortress flew into the air like birds without purpose.

And then... a reply came from the fortress. A cloud of smoke and shot that flew over their heads.

Hasan pulled back into cover. His heart hammered like a drum. He wished he could be brave. But everything in him screamed: this is real.

At his feet lay a fragment of stone. He picked it up. It was warm – as if alive.

That evening, he sat once more with his journal.

The cannons are singing. Their song has no melody, but it has meaning. Every shot is like a signature – written in blood.

# Chapter 5. – Blood and Stone

## *Étienne de Corval – Saint Elmo*

The heat was suffocating. Dust from the rubble mixed with sweat and blood. Étienne could no longer tell the smell of sulfur from the smell of death. Only exhaustion – that was everywhere. But he had to keep going.

By the wall, a young knight named Jacques collapsed. “I can’t go on...” he whispered, eyes full of dust, not tears – there were none left.

Étienne knelt beside him. “You don’t have to be a hero. You just have to hold out until morning. Then just one more day. Then another. We’re not here to win. We’re here so they lose.”

Jacques nodded. Hesitantly. But he got up. And that was enough.

When Étienne reached the makeshift infirmary in the chapel, Isabella was just changing the bandage on an old one-armed knight.

“Is something wrong?” she asked when he entered.

“We just haven’t died today. Is that enough?” he smiled wearily.

She looked at him. For a long time. And then nodded. “It’s more than you think.”

## *Hasan ibn Selim – Ottoman Camp*

The soldiers were laughing. One of them had just kicked in the doors of an abandoned little church. Inside was a ruined shrine – and within it, a statue of Saint Agatha. A face of stone, hands raised to the sky.

One of the Janissaries threw his spear and split the statue’s face.

“A god of clay,” he roared.

Hasan stood apart. In his chest, he felt a chill that couldn’t be explained. He wasn’t a Christian, but this... wasn’t courage. It was arrogance. Arrogance invites God’s wrath, his father had once said.

Dragut watched from a distance. He stepped closer.

“Treat their sacred objects with more care,” he said quietly. “Do not underestimate the power of faith. Neither your own, nor another’s.”

But Mustafa Pasha held a different view. That evening, he delivered a speech.

“We will destroy everything that is theirs. Only the soil will remain. And above it, the crescent!”

The men cheered. Hasan did not.

Later, alone, he wrote: I do not know what is truth. But when we destroy, we destroy ourselves as well. We fire stones, yet we fall within.

# Chapter 6. – In the Shadows of the Wall

## *Étienne de Corval – Saint Elmo*

The night was quiet. Too quiet.

Étienne stood on the bastion, watching the dark coastline. Fire from their own gun tower illuminated the rubble, but in the distance – something was moving there. Shadows crawled across the strait between Saint Elmo and the mainland. Soldiers? Scouts?

Captain Turon came down to him with a grim face. “We heard digging. Beneath our walls.”

“Underground mines?” Étienne nodded. It was only a matter of time.

Before dawn, Isabella noticed a man she hadn’t seen before – lying among the wounded, his arms burned by gunpowder.

“You’re not from our garrison,” she said. “Where are you from?”

The man smiled, but it was a sad smile.

Vážení čtenáři, právě jste dočetli ukázkou z knihy ***The Last Knights of Malta***.  
Pokud se Vám ukázka líbila, na našem webu si můžete zakoupit celou knihu.