

# The Karnival of Seraphic Knights

by Marcon De Giorgio

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*A knight must be respectful, selfless, open, devoted, and, above all, they must exude excellence.*

It was 1639, and Grandmaster Giovanni Paolo Lascaris was by far the most hated man in Malta. The locals had already disliked the man, but the carnival ban he imposed made them hate both him and the Jesuit Father Cassia, whom they blamed for Lascaris' change of heart. Nadette Abrignano could not go one moment without hearing someone curse one of the two men. Leader of the knights or not, the Grandmaster was neither respectful of the people's wishes, nor selfless in enacting the ban. At least, that was what was on everyone's mind.

The bells tolled atop St John's Cathedral. Nadette could hear it from her home in the heart of Valletta. Her friend, Elinora Blaauwgeers, had come to her home that morning holding a large chest full of clothing, which were their costumes for the evening. They were as marvellous as Nadette had expected. She was forever used to the red of her knight's frock, so the dress she wore, with its large circumference, was uncanny. She wore similar clothing during official meetings, where a lady was expected to attend as opposed to a knight, but this was a costume. Everything about the dress was exaggerated. As she examined herself in the mirror, she could feel the hoop skirt move with each turn she made. Her dress was a pearly shade with a slight pink hue, a nice contrast with the tanned sheen of her skin, courtesy of her Mediterranean mother. Elinora chose well.

When her dear friend had suggested they go to *karnival* despite the ban, Nadette was not at all surprised. Her newfound friend had, after all, initially come to the island in search of *sirens*. The thought was ludicrous to her, that sirens roamed their waters,

but Elinora was convinced of the colony's existence. Seeing how her friend was so ready to leave home in search of something that may or may not exist, it did not seem too far-fetched that she would also suggest they ignore the ban and go to *karnival*. Nadette was against it. The rules forbidding participation mostly applied to women, and, seeing as they were both women, it seemed likely they would get in trouble for it. Nadette was also a knight, whose father served as an engineer to the same order she vowed to follow, she had much more to lose than Elinora the foreigner. Despite Nadette's protests, *Mademoiselle* Elinora was persuasive. That woman seemed to constantly run towards the serpent instead of avoiding it. *Karnival* was banned in her country as well, so this was her chance to finally experience it, especially after she had heard tales of the Venetian Carnivale. Nadette felt her chest constrict with the decision. She couldn't just break the law and shame her family, but Elinora was right, the other knights would be there too, so she should join them. It was eating at her. She didn't want to disappoint anyone.

Elinora cupped her cheeks, she assumed it was done in an attempt to hoist her out from the sea of internal thoughts she found herself in. She knew that the distress she had felt in her heart was as visible as a painting on her face.

"Nad," she said, so sweetly that Nadette's mind was swayed in that instant, "it will be fun."

It was only the eleventh hour of the night, yet she could already hear the crowd gather in the streets. Elinora had let her go and proceeded to hunch over her French heels to tie off the laces securely. Unlike Nadette, Elinora wore what she called the attire of a *Karnival Prince*. For someone who had never attended a *karnival* feast before, Elinora was very knowledgeable. She came from the Republic of Seven United Netherlands, a country too far from the quaint islands for Nadette to comprehend. She spoke in a language they both knew: French. It's one of the things Nadette liked about her. The Dutch girl was so well travelled that she didn't need to go to places to learn about them, she had enough friends to tell her about them. Meanwhile, Nadette had never left the confines of her father's villa and the protection of the sea that surrounded them.

Elinora straightened up and turned to face Nadette. They stared at each other in silence, which made Nadette nervous. Clutching her skirts, she waited for her to say something, but all Elinora did was smile and eye her like one would eye a seven course meal. Nadette felt her face heat up in response.

How embarrassing.

Elinora's coat was a dark and deep red, with gold embroidery all over it. The outfit was so absurd you could tell it was a costume. No one would dare walk out of their house in such a loud outfit. They weirdly matched and didn't at the same time.

"*Mademoiselle,*" Nadette found herself saying. She secured the sword she had hidden under the layers, its vague form a comfort to her. She gathered her courage; a sword fight was much easier than this. "We should leave before my father returns from the palace."

Elinora nodded. She walked towards a wooden box, the one she brought in that morning with the costumes inside. She took out two masks: one pink and one red. She handed Nadette the red mask. The smile on her face was strange, and made Nadette's palms sweaty.

She put the mask on. It was an unusual feeling on her face, very different from a visor. She watched Elinora put on the pink mask, watching it frame her face beautifully. Her grey eyes stared at her from beneath it. The pink feathers attached to it sprung high in the air, complementing the woman's strawberry blonde hair.

The streets were as lively as they sounded. The Maltese had no care for Lascaris's ban. Women and men alike wore masks and large, extravagant costumes. Some even wore clothes and makeup that suspiciously made them look like the old Grandmaster himself. The smell of food was strong, specifically the sweets she could see being sold around by a couple of local vendors. Elinora dragged Nadette through the drunken crowd in Strada San Giorgio. The streets were lit up with the lively excitement of people. Nadette could hear a man sing drunkenly to a band of instruments in the distance. Everyone began to dance in the plaza, their movements were messy and chaotic, but they were having fun so the lack of rhythm didn't matter. The atmosphere was infectious, and Nadette found herself smiling along with them.

An odd odour lingered with the smell of food; the weird arid scent fought for dominance against the sweet smell of pastry. Nadette had noticed it for a while but she hadn't figured out what it was. She wanted to believe it was piss. A lot of drunk men tended to relieve themselves in the dark, yet it wasn't as tangy.

It was metallic.

It hung heavy in the air, and she felt a strange presence around them, something unexplainable.

Elinora let her hand go and turned to face her, distracting Nadette from the smell. She bowed low. “Madame,” her accent thick as she spoke. “Shall we dance?”

Nadette returned the gesture with her own low bow and then offered her hand. Elinora took it, and in that moment Nadette’s mind expunged any thought of the strangeness that had worried her a mere moments ago. They spun and jumped along to the music. Nadette knew how to dance properly, and so did Elinora, but there were no rules in *karnival*. What they were doing was a bastardised waltz. It didn’t matter though; that was what the moment was supposed to be. They held hands the entire time, and at one point the crowd was so thick, they had no choice but to dance with their chests flush against each other. They laughed and laughed, they sang along with the drunken man, they didn’t know the words, and Elinora didn’t know Maltese, but watching her try was fun.

By the twelfth hour Nadette’s chemise was stuck to her back from the sweat that coated her skin. She had to take a step back from the sea of people and press her back to the cold limestone of one of the buildings that lined Strada San Giorgio. Elinora was beside her, watching the people still go about their dancing.

“We should eat something,” she said.

“What do you want?” Nadette adjusted her mask, as it had slipped down a little from all the dancing.

“Mmm, I don’t know. Something sweet?”

Nadette took her hand and led her to the food stand. She pointed at a couple of pastries on display.

Elinora shook her head. “I’ve had those before, is there anything else?”

Nadette led her towards the next stall, where a lovely *prinjolata* was on display. The sweet was white and dome shaped; whoever made it had covered it in cherries and melted chocolate. Nadette felt herself salivating just by looking at it.

“How about this?” she said while pointing at the pastry.

Elinora hummed in response. “Yeah, I’ll try it.”

Nadette exchanged a few words with the seller and paid for a slice. The vendor handed it to them in a cloth napkin and they found a little corner where they huddled close together, taking turns to bite the dessert. The *prinjolata* tasted just how she had remembered it. Her grandmother often used to make it at home as a *karnival* treat. It was the one thing she looked forward to. She missed it. Her grandmother was long gone, and so was the taste of her *prinjolata*, of which the nutty flavour seemed to signal the very nature of home. The one they had bought was a close second at least, she just wished she could have had Elinora taste her nanna's version. She hastily swallowed the upcoming emotions down her throat. Nadette hadn't expected to get so nostalgic over a simple sweet.

"I'd like to go walk around. Care to join me?" Elinora asked once they had devoured it. She got up from the ground and pulled Nadette up with her.

They walked away from the crowds. The loud roar of the drunken sea of people got quieter and quieter. The lamplighter had not bothered to light the lanterns around them, and so the roads got dark.

*That smell.*

It was there again.

This time, it was more pungent. She could feel the sting in her nostrils. That definitely wasn't piss... but what could it be? Nadette looked around. She took deep breaths, trying to inhale as much of the smell as she could, hoping it would trigger something, anything in her mind.

Her friend suddenly stopped, interrupting her frantic thoughts. Elinora moved slowly. Nadette couldn't see, darkness obscured her sight. She could feel a strange presence around them. She groped for her sword.

Nadette heard something come out of Elinora's mouth, and from the way she said it, resembled a curse word.

Elinora pointed at the street, "Nad- it's blood."

Nadette didn't need to be told what the pool of dark red she saw was. There could be many explanations as to why there was a pool of blood in the middle of Valletta's roads, but all Nadette could think of was that it meant danger. She lifted her skirts

and grasped the sword at its hilt, ready to unsheathe it, when they suddenly heard loud screams. They both turned their heads in the direction the sound came from, which was back where the *karnival* was.

Elinora was the first to run. Sometimes it seemed like she was the one with the sword and not Nadette. She sighed and ran after her, heels be damned. She was ready for anything.

The crowd had gathered around a group of men. Nadette fought her way through their tentacle-like limbs, ready to break up whatever it was, until she saw what everyone was yelling about. She realised it wasn't screams that she had heard, but cheers. The man in the centre was dressed like a Jesuit of all things. He was covered in profanities and surrounded by men dressed as thieves. They pushed him around and pretended to beat him up. Everyone laughed and cheered in a drunken stupor at the scene. Nadette was enraged. It was neither at the people, nor at the stupid joke they were playing, but at the realisation that she was duped.

Was no one truly in danger?

Nadette looked around for her friend, but all she saw were masked strangers. Their voices were loud in her ear. She didn't understand.

Was the blood even real?

Did someone fall over and then get up before they had arrived?

It made no sense whatsoever. The blood puddle had been so large that... anyone who'd lost that much would have never been able to walk! She had to check again, to see if there was anyone near the scene. Nadette turned back, attempting to leave, but someone pushed her and she stepped on her skirt, causing her to fall over and land on someone's chest. Looking up she saw that it was Elinora.

"Are you all right?" She yelled over the crowd.

Nadette nodded. Was the blood just a false alarm?

Then they heard a hair-raising scream. This time, it was an actual scream. It was so loud in that moment that Nadette felt it pierce her ears like a sharp knife. No one

seemed to notice except for Nadette and Elinora, but they both gave each other a grave look and nodded in a silent agreement. Hands clasped firmly together, they pushed past the people and ran into the dark streets of Valletta.

The air was tense. Nadette could hear her breath come out in puffs to the accompaniment of her heels clicking against the stone.

“Maybe it’s another false alarm?” Elinora whispered, voicing Nadette’s recurring thoughts.

A young girl ran towards them. The mask on her face was broken. She was pale and trembling. Her dress was covered in *blood*. Upon further inspection, Nadette realised this was Genoveffa, a fisherman’s daughter from Marsaxlokk. She fell before them, speaking a mix of Italian and Maltese. Nadette couldn’t even understand her. She grabbed the woman’s arms and shook her back to sanity.

“*Calm down!*” She said firmly.

Genoveffa gave her a wide stare. She was still shaking, but at least her words were no longer frantic. She pointed behind her, in the direction she came running from.

“*M-mostru-!*” She said.

Recognition sparked on Elinora’s face. “Monster?” she said.

Nadette nodded. She took out her sword and proceeded to take a defensive stance.

Elinora took a deep breath. “Let’s go,” she said.

Nadette could tell this situation was unnerving for both of them, but she knew how to hold on to a sword even when her hands grew clammy and wet. Whoever it was, they were ready. They ran, in case some else had been with Genoveffa when when she was attacked. Elinora was beside her, and Nadette noticed the rapid rise and fall of her bust. She was relieved that Elinora was able to keep up with her, even though it was clear the run was a strain on her. Her mind raced with an influx of thoughts. What was happening? Why was that woman covered in blood? She had said she’d seen a monster but... could she be referring to something else? It was dark, people were drunk, the woman must have been attacked by a man or a thief. Maybe even some drunken knight who had forgotten his virtues.

She immediately stopped to a halt when they noticed the hunched figure that blended into the darkness before them.

It stood over the dead body of a man.

It looked like it was... *eating* him.

It was no man.

The large and ugly creature cocked its body as if it had heard them. It turned its head towards them; blood dripped from its mouth. It was large and scrawny, its skin a pale sickly grey, with sunken eyes staring at them all large and black, like the endless bottom of a well. Nadette almost soiled her loins. Which circle of hell did this monster crawl out from? She braced herself. She was a knight and her duty was to protect the people. Creature or not she would not let this *thing* run free.

The creature puffed up its chest and hissed at them. The half eaten body of that poor man was forgotten beside it in favour of new prey.

Nadette raised her chest just the same. She gripped the sword but did not move. Was it going to attack? Would it run away? She knew she would be ready for anything. Elinora trembled beside her. Neither of them dared speak. At least the thought of sirens existing was much more believable now. Nadette resolved to apologise later; now, she needed to think. Was this a demon before them? Her grandmother used to tell her all sorts of tales about monsters to get her to sleep; could one of them have been based on fact? She stared at the creature's scrawny limbs. Its eyes were a cloudy white, like dead fish. They were soulless and yet bloodlust was written all over them.

It hit her then; the image as clear as the distance between her and the creature. She remembered what it was. Where she'd seen it, this exact creature. Her grandmother owned a book of beasts, which little Nadette had mistaken for a book of creepy stories. She had taken it to her grandmother, eager to listen to one of them, but the old woman had snatched the book from her hands and gave her a stern scolding. She was never allowed to touch that book. As her grandmother closed the book, her eyes had fallen on a singular page.

*Gadajdu.*

“Get behind me!” Nadette yelled. The creature prepared to lunge at them. Its hind legs were ready for the pounce. She held the sword before her and pulled Elinora

away. The gadajdu's speed was unlike anything she had ever seen. One moment it was beside the corpse, and the next its disgusting face was mere inches away from Nadette's face. It hunched over them, and she realised just how large this creature was when the back of her neck strained from looking up.

The creature swung its freakishly long arms at her throat and Nadette blocked with her sword as well as she could. She slashed her sword upwards, aiming for its neck, knowing that she had to be careful since she wasn't wearing any armour. One hit from that thing and she'd be joining La Valette under the Grandmaster's Palace.

Elinora had somehow snuck away from behind her, while she and the gadajdu were preoccupied with each other. She now stood on the other side of the monster.

"Over here!" She yelled.

Nadette wanted nothing more than to strangle her at that moment, not only for putting herself in danger, but also for being a genius. Elinora clapped her hands and made a copious amount of noise to get the monster's attention on her. She even bravely took off her mask and chucked it at the creature. That's when the gadajdu turned its head.

The creature took a deep haggard breath and screeched at Elinora, readying its hind legs, but before it could even pounce at her, Nadette slid under it and brought her sword up towards its neck. The blade came out the other end smoothly, and the gadajdu screamed in agony. Nadette removed her sword and plunged it into its heart, splattering black blood all over her. Her dress was no longer the hue it was before. Removing her sword and taking a step back, she watched the creature fall to its knees. Its eyes were still hollow and dead like a fish's as it stared at them. The girls watched as the creature's body contorted and disintegrated into ash, leaving a heap of black dust behind it. Sheer seconds of silence followed.

Elinora let out a tired laugh as she uttered that swear word again. "Of course it disappears!" She rested her hands on her hips as she looked down at the floor where the monster once was.

"At least it's gone." Nadette's shoulders sagged. She was never fighting in a dress ever again. She looked around and listened to the quiet. The creature seemed to have acted on its own. Nadette's skin prickled like a cactus at the thought of encountering another.

“What was that abomination?” Elinora asked, “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“A *Gadajdu*,” she replied, staring at the poor boy’s mangled corpse. He was unrecognisable. She had no idea how they were going to explain this to the other knights. “They’re creatures that hide in dark corners and wait for unsuspecting bystanders to pounce on. They’re... things of legends... I never thought they’d be real.”

“I told you these things aren’t just old wives’ tales, Nadette.” Elinora took her hand, the one that wasn’t holding a bloody sword. “These things are as real as us standing right here.”

The words sent a shiver up her spine, feeling as though a spider was softly crawling up her back.

*These things were real. There was no denying it. She had just killed one... and no one would ever know.*

Nadette took a deep breath. “Let’s return to Genoveffa. We need to tell her that... he’s gone.” She didn’t know who he was to her but if he was someone important, the poor girl deserved to know.

Elinora nodded and they started heading back. Their hands remained clasped together. *They’re real.* She couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Genoveffa was where they had left her, but she seemed to have calmed down. Her face was dry and red from her previous teary exchange. She stared at them with large eyes. She didn’t need to speak, none of them did. The silence was enough to tell Genoveffa what had happened to the man. Her wail echoed through the streets of Valletta. She clutched her skirt and sobbed his name loudly. Nadette felt numb as she stared down at the poor woman.

The knight’s oath rang in her mind.

*A knight must be respectful, selfless, open, devoted, and, they must exude excellence. But, above all... they must be able to slay monsters.*