

## Gaden's Games

Mr Gaden sat at his desk - a behemoth structure made of expensive hardwood, polished to perfection. It was one of a kind, carved by a master craftsman for Mr Gaden personally.

The price he'd paid to have it constructed could have bought a small house or two, but he had no interest in real estate.

On his desk sat three portfolios, each one with an attached photo. Three women. All beautiful, all deliciously unique. His staff had done a spectacular job finding these candidates.

Now, all that remained was inviting the women to his inner-city mansion.

And then the games could begin.

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An eccentric billionaire, just what the city needed.

Janet DeSansa frowned at the building that had caused her so much grief over the last few months.

A mansion. Huge and unnecessary. Walls outfitted with high-tech gadgets and an army of private security workers to keep out anyone and everyone who hadn't been invited.

And there were many, many people who, uninvited, tried to get into that building. With all the wealth rumoured to be there, every thief and burglar around wanted in.

Which meant even more work for Janet and her colleagues.

Gaden's security detail might catch the would-be sneak thieves, but it was on the police force to pick up and book them.

How many calls had the station gotten this month alone? How many times had they been summoned by Gaden's chief of security to pick up some idiot caught sneaking about?

Too many, that's for sure.

And every time, they had to put their real job - keeping the streets safe - aside to deal with it. All because one rich asshole decided to set up shop in the middle of the cocking city.

The worst part of it was that many of her colleagues actually looked *forward* to being called to deal with trespassers. They were only too happy to not have to do their actual job and instead saunter around a billionaire's mansion.

Too many of them were jealous of her right now. Too many wanted to be in her shoes when she would have given almost anything to not be in them herself.

She'd been summoned, by name, to meet the asshole himself.

Why? Nobody knew.

Perhaps he wanted to apologise for all the trouble he'd caused.

Unlikely.

Regardless, here she was, being guided into the mansion by a security officer who seemed to think he was hot-shit. He was partly correct, but certainly not the 'hot' part.

These security staff were wannabes who didn't have the brains to be actual police officers. Nothing more. They weren't any less wannabes just because some guy with too much money decided to hire them.

She ended up in a large, bland room with two other women.

One had the palest skin Janet had ever seen, snow-white with matching white hair and icy blue eyes. An albino, she realised surprised. The girl was stunningly beautiful, in an almost otherworldly way. Thin and frail, like something out of a fairytale. Wearing two-tone clothing of stark, pure black or bleached white, with a total lack of any shades or

gradients in between.

The other was either a doctor or a scientist, given the white lab-coat and stethoscope. Judging from the bags under her eyes, Janet put her money on doctor. The woman was dark-skinned with chocolate brown eyes full of intelligence, face twisted into a visage of annoyance that reflected exactly how Janet felt. Her hair was black, cut short and professional.

Janet herself was dressed in her uniform. A practical blue exterior that said 'I mean business', complete with polished badge and personal radio. Her skin was lightly tanned, a mixed-race child of a Hispanic father and white mother. Light brown hair and dark green, almost black, eyes.

What drew Janet's curiosity the most was the room she was in.

It was empty. Utterly empty and perfectly square. The floor was tiled, alternating between black and white. Each slab was perhaps two foot by two foot, ten tiles by ten. The walls on one half of the room were plain white, the other half painted a colourless black.

The room was as two-toned as the albino girl.

What was the point in having all the money in the world if you weren't even going to bother actually decorating the rooms in your stupidly expensive mansion?

There was a door on either side of the room, though both were shut. No wannabes or assistants to escort Janet to the billionaire. Just the three of them, alone.

"Hello," the albino girl said brightly. "Are you here for the shoot, too?"

Janet raised an eyebrow at her.

Alba, that was the albino girl's name. A model, of course. Invited here for what she'd assumed was a photo-shoot. The doctor's name was Talia, and she'd believed she had been asked here to give Mr Gaden a check-up or medical examination of some sort.

Janet introduced myself as Officer DeSansa, told them that she had no idea why she was there either.

They didn't have to wait long for answers. After a few minutes, one of the room's doors swung open. And there it was, the face Janet had seen plastered on news articles and business magazines everywhere. Mr Gaden, in the flesh.

He was an older man, with greying hair and a few wrinkles here and there. Wearing an expensive-looking business suit and smiling ear to ear, he entered the room.

"You brought us here to play a game?" Janet asked, incredulous.

Both Alba and Talia looked unsure, exchanging glances. Though neither of them seemed as pissed as Janet felt.

"Yes," Mr Gaden said, beaming. "You see, when one has more wealth than sense and more time than work, one must find new and interesting ways to amuse oneself."

Janet fought down the urge to draw her taser and 'entertain' the pompous ass in the most amusing way she could think of.

"A series of games, truth be told," the billionaire continued, seemingly oblivious to Janet's outrage. "A baker's dozen or so. Dependant on how how well you fine ladies take to them, naturally."

"And why would we agree to this?" Jan said through gritted teeth.

This asshat was wasting police time. If he were anyone but who he was, she'd give him a verbal beat-down. Put him in cuffs. But money was power and this man was the wealthiest prick around. She couldn't risk offending him if she wanted to keep her job.

Knowing that only made it harder for her to keep her cool.

"Money," Gaden shrugged. "Influence. If you win my little series of games, the prize shall be ten million dollars. That applies to all you of you. Ten million dollars to the winner, and if there are multiple winners, they'll each get ten million."

His words were followed by silence.

"And," the billionaire added. "Even should you lose, I shall take the money you would have won, and donate it to a charity or organisation of your choosing."

Was this man really so desperate for female company, Janet thought to herself, that he'd set up this elaborate scheme? Hadn't he ever heard of prostitutes or escorts? Hell, with how much money he had, why not just get himself a few gold diggers instead dragging her and these other two into it?

Still, that was a fuck-ton of money.

Even if she lost, how many patrol cars would that buy? How many jobs would it save from spending cuts? How many new officers would the station be able to hire? So many problems would disappear overnight with that kind of funding influx.

Fuck.

"This first game is simple," Mr Gaden smiled. "Very simple indeed. Each person gets one ordinary playing card, an ace. All you have to do is correctly guess who has the ace of spades to win. The one who possesses the ace of spades wins if no-one else guesses they are the one who holds it. Simple, yes?"

He was holding three regular playing cards from a deck of fifty-two. All Janet and the other two women could see was the back of each card, there was no telling which was the ace of spades.

"Are we ready?" Mr Gaden asked.

Jan looked at the card in her hand, the ace of clubs, then around at the other two women. She was searching for any hint, any clue that might point out the one who had the ace of spades.

The doctor, Talia, was also examining her competitors. Their eyes locked, and both glanced at albino Alba.

Sure enough, she was standing there, looking at the card in her hand, a confused expression on her face.

Too easy, Janet smiled.

The room was silent for a minute before Mr Gaden spoke.

"Would anyone like to make a guess?" He asked the room at large.

"Yes," both the doctor and the police officer said in unison.

Alba still had that frown on her face.

"Well then ladies, who has the ace of spades?" Gaden smiled.

"Alba has it," Talia said. Jan nodded in agreement and repeated the name.

The albino girl looked offended that they'd named her.

"And you, Alba?" Mr Gaden asked. "Who do you think has the ace of spades?"

Alba said nothing for a moment, simply frowned down at the card in her hand, then at both Jan and Talia in turn. There was a thoughtful, uncertain expression on her face.

"But there's four," she said, voice soft.

Mr Gaden's expression shifted, landing somewhere between sudden interest and satisfaction. "Yes?" He urged.

Her face turned from white to pink. "Ace, hearts, diamonds and clubs. Four. But you only gave three cards."

She went silent again, brow furrowed in concentration.

Gaden beamed wider, waited.

With all the attention on her, Alba's face turned and even deeper shade of pink. "I don't know," she choked. "I give up."

Mr Gaden looked momentarily disappointed, but it disappeared in an instant. He nodded his head. "You've all made your guesses, with the exception of young Miss Alba who has abstained. Please show your cards everyone."

Jan showed her card first, flashing the ace of clubs for everyone to see. Next was

Talia, the ace of hearts. All eyes focused on Alba. She turned the card in her hand.

It was the ace of diamonds.

What?

No-one the ace of spades.

"It would seem that I've won this round," Mr Gaden smiled, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a fourth playing card. It was, of course, the ace of spades. "And, for my prize, I shall have you partake in a little side-project of mine."

The 'project' was an artsy video that Gaden had made. A 'modern art' piece. Which was to say, utterly devoid of meaning and beauty in any way. It was all colours without form or substance, flashing in and out, random shapes that appeared and disappeared before anyone could even tell what they were. Audio played in the background, mostly static and tonally-off screeches and beeps.

It was, Janet decided, utter bullshit.

Modern art was bad enough, but to put it into video and audio format made it even worse. It was fitting, though. Of course the rich and pompous Master Gaden would love equally pretentious and meaningless art.

Still, if that was all she had to endure in order to get that ten million, it was worth the price.

As they left the mansion, Master Gaden handed each of the women a small box, a three inch cube of polished wood and golden latches.

"A consolation prize, if you will," he said. "And now, ladies, I must bid you adieu."

Back in her patrol car, Janet opened the box. Inside was a single chess piece made out of white glass, carved delicately and inlaid with fine golden threads. A knight.

The thing must have been worth a small fortune.

And Master Gaden was giving it away as a 'consolation prize'?

Two opposing thoughts went through Janet's mind. Indignation at the waste of money, the pompous disregard for wealth that could be spent in so many other useful ways. And gratitude, happiness at receiving something so valuable from Master Gaden.

Once a week, from that day on, Janet would be summoned to the mansion for one of the Master's little games. Alba and Talia would always be there with her, competing three-on-one with the Master in order to win. Once, they even managed to.

Thanks to Alba's quick wit, they managed to outfox their host in a game of riddles.

Whenever they lost, all they had to do was watch one of the videos the Master had made for them.

He'd even shown them around parts of his mansion. His tour included the basement levels, packed as they were with cars of all shapes and sizes. Modern electric-powered super-cars sat next to century-old wooden auto-mobiles, expensive sports cars were parked right next to common, run-of-the-mill family cars.

"I'm something of a collector," he told them during their tour. "Variety is key, you see. If one was to collect coins, for example, one would want coins not just from their own land, but from all around the world. A collection can not be complete without true diversity."

It was fun while it lasted, these little games and challenges. But, eventually, the last game was upon them.

A simple game of chess.

"Three heads are better than one," Master said, gesturing at the board. "So, you have an automatic advantage over me. In order to balance this handicap out, none of you are allowed to talk or discuss strategy. You must work as a team, silently."

It seemed fair enough to Janet. But that was to be expected. Master was fair.

The chess pieces were plain, made of wood. Only there were three missing, all on the white side - the side that the women were playing. A knight, a bishop, and the king.

One by one, compelled by invisible forces, the women retrieved the boxes Master had given them so many weeks and months before. Pulling them out of bags and pockets. And, one by one, placed their pieces in the missing spots.

Janet, the knight.

Talia, the bishop.

Alba, the king.

And the game began. Slow, full of thought and planning. On some level, each of the women knew what would happen if they lost.

After half an hour, Talia's bishop was taken.

Master lifted the white glass, gold trimmed piece and set it aside. And, as he took the bishop, he also took Talia. She stood, started removing her clothes. Went to him and sat by his side.

With two minds, Janet and Alba did better. But the flow of the game was already set and it was only a matter of time until Master took Janet's knight.

The moment he set the piece down, off the board, Janet felt a change in her. She'd lost. She was Master's now. She belonged next to him as her piece belonged next to the board. And, thoughtless, without worry or concern, she rose to her feet. Her clothes were not needed here and now. They served only to conceal parts of herself from Master, and Master would want nothing hidden.

She went to him, sat by his side, next to Talia.

And on the game went, Alba and Master battling minds and wits.

If she had played the game by herself, alone against Master from the beginning, Alba might have stood a chance. As it was, her defeat was a forgone conclusion.

When she lost, she did as the others did. She disrobed. Only she didn't sit besides master. She sat on him, on his lap. And he touched her, felt her, played with her. Janet and Talia watched enviously until master signalled to them to join in.

They went eagerly, desiring nothing more than to please their new Master.

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Mr Gaden looked down at the three portfolios on his desk. Three women, all beautiful. All unique. This one, the personal trainer from Russia, was strong, bulky, but rather than detract from her beauty, it added to it.

She would make for a fine Queen.

And the other two. A perfect Rook, and a second Knight. His staff, his pretty little pawns, had done excellently finding these three. They would be well rewarded for this.

He beamed.

This collection was coming together spectacularly.

Once his set was complete, the real fun could begin.