

TURNABOUT
A Novella in the GAILSONE Series

Book 3.5 in the story arc
RARE GEMS

By Casey Glanders

Gailsone: Turnabout

1st Edition

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No dancers were harmed in the writing of this story

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This is Book 3.5 in the story arc GAILSONE: Rare Gems

This story takes place at an indeterminate point in time after Red Rook, but before No Man's Land

Also by this author:

Big In Japan

Blood & Rust

A Night at the Opera

Date Night

Blackbird's Song

The Impossible Door

Black Days

Red Rook

Hit

Old Ghosts

Ifrit

Paint the Town Red

No Man's Land

Rare Gems

“Sex without love is a meaningless experience, but as far as meaningless experiences go, it’s pretty damn good.”

-Woody Allen

It was a table that you could have found in any number of low-lit, upscale restaurants in Manhattan. The décor itself was fairly standard; its tables were covered in simple, white table cloths and adorned with cream-colored china. The music in the background was a terrible attempt at a piano-only version of *Sister Christian*, which was being blocked out by most present. The service was slow, the prices were high, and most of the food was over sauced.

Alice Gailsone, one-time commander of the world's most notorious terrorist organization, sat and grumpily sipped her glass of red wine as she counted the minutes it took for her food to arrive. With her at the small table sat Victoria Green, vice president of Tanner Industries. Through a series of events that Alice still had difficulty justifying in retrospect, she found herself presently employed by the billionaire industrialist superhero, Alan Tanner. This meant she was now considered a member of the Collective Good, and by extension, a superhero herself.

It wasn't that Alice was adamantly against the title, but for the life of her, she wasn't sure how to go about being heroic. She understood the *concept* of good (as it applied to others), and she supposed that as long as she approached it like a job, she could wing the finer points, but still. This 'hero stuff' was new, and scary, and awfully limiting to someone who was used to using fire and violence to solve the majority of her problems.

Victoria Green, who was currently in a dark green business suit (due to her name, green had been her favorite color as a child.) She was likewise enjoying a glass of wine, and seemed much more at ease. She was also known as Blackbird, a noted crime fighter in her own right and currently Alan Tanner's girlfriend. This bothered Alice, not because she was attracted to either one of them, but because despite their prior working relationship, she always pegged the woman across the table as not being the kind to put up with his shit.

Alice slowly sloshed the drink in her hand and then took another sip. She couldn't help but be on edge. Despite their new working relationship, the very idea of sitting at a table with this woman was beyond weird. They had a sordid history of actively trying to murder each other, and now here they were, waiting on their respective cow-based dishes to arrive.

"Okay," Alice said as she ran a hand through her brown wig. The itching was starting to get to her. "This is weirding me out."

"Which part?" Victoria asked as she put down her dessert menu and casually glanced at Alice, "That we're sitting at a table together, or that we haven't killed each other?"

Alice nodded. "Yeah. That. Both. This is...why are we doing this again?"

Victoria sighed and calmly clasped her hands in front of her. "Because I don't like you," she said in a slightly louder than normal voice. "You represented everything terrible in my life for years, and your very presence at this table instead of in a gulag or in a shallow grave still bristles me a bit, but no. You signed Alan's wonderful little Open Hand Act and got a get-out-of-jail-free card. Now, you're a hero and he won't shut up about the work you're doing for him. Now, I have to consider your active role as a member of the Collective Good. Now, I have to...work with you. So you asked why we're here?"

Alice nodded. Victoria gritted her teeth and said, "Because I have always made it a point to sit down with each member of the Collective Good and outline the expectations of the organization. In your case, I have chosen a venue that serves alcohol. The alcohol is strictly for my benefit."

Alice blinked. "Um, didn't we do that? You know, kinda before I even left for Japan?"

Victoria glanced around for a moment. It was subtle, but suddenly, everything about Victoria's odd behavior that evening clicked for Alice. She nodded, and allowed herself a little smirk. "I get it."

She leaned back in her seat and said in a much louder voice, "I totally get it. This is HR work. Cool. You wanna start with organizational policy, rules and demerits, or should we focus on assignments and classification of duties? I read the handbook already, and I also talked to accounting. My forms are in and they seem cool with everything. Also, I filed for Allison and Aika, and put together a PowerPoint for them. We reviewed it yesterday. They had some questions I jotted down. Do you prefer email, or is now a good time?"

Victoria opened her mouth to respond, and then stared in slight shock. "I...how did you know what...what?"

Alice took a sip of her wine and grinned. "I was second-in-command of the largest terrorist organization on the planet, remember? It wasn't just because I can magically rot anything I touch. It was because I am a business woman and because I understand policy. Okay, so you have a new employee and you hate that employee, but you have to show them the ropes. I get it, and I've been there. For what it's worth, I don't like you much either, but I respect the position and I don't envy you the work, so I'll be as cooperative as I can be."

Victoria stared at Alice and did her best to process this. "You do PowerPoints?" She asked in a quiet voice.

Alice nodded. "Yeah, with the little effect thingies and everything. No sound, though. Always found that annoying."

"God, tell me about it."

Alice nodded. "One time, Dr. Tolarius kept trying to walk us through a bombing he had planned for one of our European hold-outs, and every slide came with a little 'kaboom' sound. I had to excuse myself from the room, I was giggling so hard."

Victoria smiled, but then quickly put her 'angry face' back on. She curtly nodded and said in a loud voice, "Well, thank you. I appreciate that you..."

"The bar. Third stool."

Victoria blinked as Alice finished her drink. Victoria tried to smile a little. "I'm sorry?"

Alice gave Victoria a calm stare. "Sorry, but I can't take this anymore. You've got Dr. Susan Gordon parked at the bar, pretending to grab a drink. Dr. Gordon works across town, and her shift only ended thirty minutes ago. She must have hauled supersonic ass to get changed and be here in time to run potential interference for you. Now, if I were jumpy, I would say that she was here to ambush me, and that everything leading up to this conversation was a clever ploy to lure me out and stage my capture,

for whatever reason. Also, two tables over is a couple that has been talking and laughing without food since we got here. No couple is that happy without appetizers in a place like this. They don't even have bread. What shithole establishment doesn't even serve bread? They're agents."

Victoria opened her mouth to comment, but Alice raised an eyebrow, almost daring the raven-haired woman to contradict her. Intrigued, Victoria smirked lightly and said, "Go on."

Alice downed her drink and pointed. "Three of the waiters are packing some kind of electrical weapon. Even when off, they have to remain charged to be effective. Light smell, ozonish."

"Ozone doesn't really have a smell, you know."

Alice waved her hand. "You know what I mean! That weird, burny, electrical smell? Smartass. Anyway, three are packing, maybe more. This table was deliberately kept free. We were seated two over from an active section where there was an open spot, which means you wanted me here. I'm guessing the floral arrangement in the center is hiding an inhibitor or some kind of emergency restraint."

Victoria glanced at the flowers. "I didn't think people could tell when inhibitors were on, and I'm pretty sure 'burny' isn't a word."

"Says you, and we can't detect them, at least, until we try stuff. Lucky guess. I would guess that the sprinkler system has been disabled to avoid me using it as a distraction, and this alcohol is laced with something to slow me down. Not working, by the way. And seriously? I catabolize poisons like they're Sprite. I'll write that off as a formality. In fact, I'm guessing that based on the generic look of the patrons, the extremely slow and shitty service, lack of reasonable small talk immediately around us, and the sheer number of men still wearing their suit jackets while seated and women with hand bags on the tables that not one goddamn person in this place is actually a civilian, save for whomever might have had the misfortune of wandering in here just before us. If you were a dishonest woman, I would start to suspect that all of this was not so much for your safety, but an elaborate ruse to capture me."

Alice set her empty wine glass down as Victoria slouched a bit in her seat. "Well," Victoria said in a quiet voice. "It's a good thing I'm not that kind of woman."

Alice nodded and smiled. "Good thing. You're better-than-average." Alice couldn't help raising her voice. "But even with your friends here, I'm pretty sure I could take you."

Victoria raised an eyebrow at that. "Someone's got a high opinion of herself."

Alice grinned. "Yes. Yes, I do. See, if I were still a villain, *if*, I might just have considered wearing the lovely utility belt your R&D team whipped up for me to this little meeting, which includes an EMP just powerful enough to knock out all electronics in this restaurant, including the inhibitor in our table display. I also might have slipped some concentrated HCL pellets into my not-drunk-from water glass when I sat down, so that when the nice man at the table to our left jumped out of his seat to subdue me, I could give his face a little chemical treatment. Beyond that, a quick kick to this table would be enough to push you back, and the gun I could take from his right-side holster, as he's left-handed from what I've observed since sitting down, would be enough to put a bullet in your thigh to stop you for a moment. Then, it would be a matter of holding everyone off with some witty dialogue while the area under me, which I would have been rotting from the moment the EMP went off, rots away and falls

through, giving me an escape to the floor below. A few smoke bombs to cover my escape, and then poof, I'm outie."

Victoria calmly nodded, following along as if someone were reading off travel directions. Around them, Alice could hear the conversations in the restaurant come to a halt. The tension in the air was almost tangible, and Alice was tempted to jump up and scream "Boo!" but thought better of it.

"You brought concentrated HCL?"

Alice shrugged. "I carry a ladies survival kit in my purse. I'm sure you do, too."

"I have gum. A normal person has gum."

Alice raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, fine. Gum and a taser, and maybe some smoke pellets."

Alice nodded. "A gal should be prepared. Knowing you, that can't be all. What else are you packing?"

Victoria glanced at the bracelet on her wrist. "Cool little pepper spray thingie R&D whipped up. Shoots out the top, with a three meter range."

"That's pretty sweet," Alice said with a grin. "Do they come in purple?"

Victoria nodded. "I can see about it."

Alice then turned her attention to the patrons in the restaurant, who were still staring at her in a tense silence. She leaned back and called out, "Oh, my God! Relax, would you? I'm just screwing with you!" She then leaned in and quietly said, "I talked to Suzie earlier today. She said you wanted her here in case things got bad. I'm guessing you didn't mean with me."

Victoria coughed and adjusted her collar as Alice studied her. Alice couldn't help but wink before she raised her voice yet again.

"This," Alice said with a gesture, "as far as I can tell, was your idea, Green. You wanted to meet here. You wanted to go over the new employee orientation. You arranged this. Not me. I said yes to everything. I've run your missions. I've had some downright horrible days that are the direct result of taking this new position and I have been Miss-fucking-Manners about it, so please suck it up a little and give me a bit of credit?"

Victoria softened, and Alice saw her about to say something that she suspected was along the lines of 'I'm sorry,' but then, her face tightened. She looked at the restaurant, and then shot Alice a look. While Alice wasn't entirely sure, she thought it meant 'go with it.' Again, in a slightly louder than normal voice, Victoria said, "Honestly? I'm still trying to figure out why I should. That Japanese woman sitting across the restaurant with a romance novel looks suspiciously familiar."

Alice (very obviously) scoffed. "What exactly are you implying? I would...Okay, yeah. I can't keep a straight face with wine in me. Turn that fucking inhibitor off before I get drunk, would you? Aika is here for the same reason. Plus, I promised her a free dinner and an open bar. She's cool to just observe, although having her here is, in my humble opinion, overkill."

Victoria shook her head and took a sip of wine. "Is this how you won so many fights in the past? Did you just talk us into submission? I'm a little hazy, but..."

Alice leaned back and pointed at the scar on her throat. The healers had done a remarkable job, but there was still a pale, jagged gash. "You think I don't know my own limits? How's about this? Huh? How's about the fact that I had to slit my fucking throat?"

"An emergency tracheotomy is hardly slitting your throat..."

"Jesus!" Alice said, slightly louder than she should have, "Fine! Impromptu emergency surgery without the use of antithetic! Sorry to split hairs! I figured this would have bought me a little bit of credit with you, but noooo!"

Victoria scoffed. "Please. You want to talk about earning some credit? You think that little love tap is anything special? Look at this," Victoria downed her drink and proceeded to roll back the sleeve of her blazer. Alice watched as Victoria revealed a long, winding gash that trailed up the inside of her forearm. "Right there? Plasma-based Infinity knife. Instantly cauterized. Don't whine to me about injuries if you can't handle the work, sister."

"Psssh!" Alice said as she pointed to her arm. "Look at my skin tone. It changed slightly. You know why? Fucking body-wide radiation burns!"

Victoria rolled her other sleeve back. "Japanese robot plasma blast."

Alice unbuttoned the top two buttons of her blouse and yanked the collar down to reveal a large gash in the pale, white flesh of her shoulder. "Serrated throwing star. And the charming woman who did it is now living rent-free above my shop and drinking me straight to the poorhouse."

"I heard that," a voice called out across the restaurant. Alice paid it no heed.

Victoria lifted her flowing, jet-black hair on the left side to reveal a patch where the hair wasn't growing. "Bullet. Grazed my skull."

Alice raised her own hair. "Yeah? Me too. So what? In our profession, that's like showing off an appendix scar."

Victoria leaned back and put her leg on the table with an unceremonious thud. Several nearby "patrons" were doing their best not to stare as Victoria rolled up her pant leg and pointed at the long, white, spindly scars that trailed her leg. "Barbed wire. Wrapped around me and then yanked off."

Alice whistled. "Damn. Fence?"

Victoria shook her head no. "Death trap. Some asshole in a top hat that called himself the Organizer."

Alice snorted and started yanking down her shirt when a hand gently rested itself on her shoulder. "Ladies," Dr. Gordon said calmly, "before you give the restaurant any more of a show, why don't we save the credentials for afterwards? Hmmm?"

"But, I have a gash from a cursed voodoo spear under my...oh. Point." Alice settled back into her seat and buttoned her blouse back up. She looked around at the other people in the restaurant who were

watching with interest. One or two even had their phones out and were ready to take some snap shots.
“Hi Suzie. How’s life?”

Dr. Susan Gordon smiled a little and took a seat at their table. “Oh, the usual. I read the report of your mission on the cruise last month. Nice work, there.”

Alice smiled. “Thanks.”

Susan looked over at Aika, who was watching them intently.

“You wanna invite your friend over? She looks kinda upset that she’s been left out.”

Alice glanced over at Aika. “She always looks upset. That’s her normal face. She could be thinking about pie, for all I know. Hey, Aika,” Alice called out. Aika calmly stood, gathered her book and her purse, and headed over to the last vacant seat at the table. She seated herself and then looked at each of the women present.

“Miss Fukijima,” Victoria said in a formal tone.

“Blackbird,” Aika greeted her back as she picked up her menu and scanned the specials. “You are both handling this in just about the stupidest manner possible. If you were going to stage something for your employee’s benefit, there were numerous things you could have done that were more believable than this. I feel like I am in grade school.”

“Please keep it down,” Victoria grumbled.

Aika looked around. “Is the Collective Good support staff really so inept, mistrusting, and incompetent that they cannot take your word that Alice serves you? Or that they truly have nothing to fear? Is a public grandstanding really what we have come to? Next, shall I clear Alice’s schedule for a playground fight tomorrow afternoon?”

Victoria slunk in her seat a bit as Aika turned her attention back to the menu. “I recommend you let me review your training regimen. It obviously needs work. Also, this food looks terrible.”

Susan glanced around the table and read the faces of the women gathered. “This is a bad idea.”

Alice raised an eyebrow. “What makes you say that? The agents, the shitty service? The lack of comfort for anyone involved?”

“Look, this was a wash, Victoria. Everyone is on edge, and the service here is shitty even without us taking the place over. Boss, I’m asking that we move this to a different venue.”

Victoria shrugged and sat back. “Okay, fine. Where to?”

The Medallion was not a place you would normally find on a tourism brochure of New York. On the outside, it was the third floor of a grungy, bricked up building near a carwash/taco stand combo business that occupied the remains of a gutted-out *Dairy Queen*. Once you got inside (if you knew where the door was), you found one of the more ‘private’ club scenes in New York. The air was smoke-free, the floors were clean, and the lighting, while low, was even and pleasant. There was a low, pinkish glow on

pretty much everything, including the faux marble surface of the round, corner table that the four women occupied. Alice leaned back in the rounded, comfy, and surprisingly clean pleather seat and smiled at the waiter as he brought a large pizza on a stand. The server, a young, muscular man in dress pants, a bow tie, suspenders, baby oil, and nothing else, smiled at each of the women as he offered a second pitcher of beer to the table.

“Why the Hell didn’t we *start* here?” Alice asked as she held up her glass. She noticed that Aika, while still not smiling, had not looked in her paperback once since arriving.

“Because this would have been a harder sell to the staff. They needed a show,” Victoria said. She was focused on taking a slice of overloaded pizza from the massive pie in front of them. “By the way, I didn’t even know clubs like this served pizza, let alone good pizza.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Susan said as she helped herself to a slice. “Say what you want, but deep down, you *wanted* to show her you were in charge. They get it. You’re in charge. And yeah, this place is fucking unreal. Now, would you chill out and enjoy yourself? Look, there’s a man up there working for his tips. I say we enjoy this food and this beer, and then help support his stint at medical school.”

Victoria looked at Susan for a moment, and then deflated a bit. Alice noted her body language and then, after a swig of beer, asked, “So, all of that back there was to quiet down the natives, I’m guessing? They really hate me that much?”

Victoria looked to Alice, and then shrugged. “It’s the cruise thing. Someone took a video of you interacting with the Purge soldiers and posted it to YouTube.”

“Did they show the part where I took one of their guns and started filling them with holes?”

“Unfortunately, no.” Victoria rubbed her forehead. “There was a bit of a mutiny this afternoon. A third of the staff threatened to quit unless I did something to ‘reign you in,’ so I made a snap decision. I didn’t have time to discuss it with you, and I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We’re friends, I think. Friends let shit slide.”

“You, we’re, you’re not,” Victoria started.

“...We’re friends. We’re just bitchy friends. I get that. It’s cool, but we’re both women who are, or have been, in command of massively testosterone-driven groups. We’ve both had to make hard decisions, and we both know what has to happen to get things done. Even if we’re not gonna do each other’s hair, I respect you, Victoria. I have for years, and while my younger self would probably balk at me saying this, I’m glad we’re able to do, well, this.” Alice gestured to the club.

Victoria allowed herself a small smile. “Well, thank you, Gailsone. I appreciate that.”

“Alice. My name is Alice. It’s okay to use it.”

Victoria considered the woman before her. “We’ll see.”

Alice, content with that for now, settled back with a grin and took a swig from her glass. “So, since we’re out on a Ladies’ night, and since there are acts of indecency happening within sight of our food, I have to ask. How is Alan?”

Victoria shrugged. "He's fine, I suppose. We spoke just before I left to meet you, actually."

Alice shook her head. "No, no, no. You don't get it. I never get girl time."

"You live with four women," Aika pointed out.

"No, I live in a flat."

Aika stared at Alice. "Tell me when you slept there last."

Alice huffed and sipped her beer. "Fine. Still, I don't live with girlfriends. I live with my niece, her charge, and android, and the very talkative Aika Fukijima. This," she gestured to the room, "This is friend time. This is wonderful. Shit, this is like a Goddamn fanfic-fueled fantasy for me. I have three woman I can talk to about what I do, beer, pizza, and a room of pleasant, sweaty, naked men for my amusement. This is my fucking definition of heaven."

"Wait, fanfic?" Susan asked, bemused. "Why fanfic? Why is that even in your mental rolodex?"

Aika chimed in. "She writes low-grade pornography under the name PurplePrincess9195 for an online community that likes Harry P..."

"You can shut the fuck up now, Aika." Alice said, her face suddenly crimson.

"I recommend *Snape Escapes*," Aika commented. "Short, but terrible."

"Shut. The fuck. Up." Alice growled. "Enjoying naughty time. You're not helping."

"You realize that the majority of the patrons are male," Aika pointed out. "You are unlikely to pick up a date here."

Alice watched the stage as a man in scrubs stood before another man that was braced in a chair and mostly naked. The doctor ripped off his clothing to the rhythm of *Let's Dance*, and then started to preform what Alice considered to be some pretty aggressive dentistry. "Honestly don't give a shit right now, Aika. Now, back to the matter at hand. I have always wanted to know, between us, how is Alan?"

Victoria frowned. "I just told you, he's..."

"She means in bed," Aika interjected. "Alice is not the best at casual transitions into small talk. She is inquiring about your sexual habits in an attempt to bond with you in a way that does not involve violence. That, and she is awful about inquiring about intimacy, boundaries, and private matters in general."

Susan snorted back a laugh as Alice turned slightly red. "That is only somewhat maybe true and fuck you," she said in one breath. "Fine. Yes. I was trying to, well, I don't do small talk well."

"Sex is small talk?" Susan asked.

Victoria looked to Alice for a moment, and then came to a decision. She took a bite of her pizza, sipped her beer, leisurely wiped her face clean of any offending tomato sauce, and said, "It's like fucking a Greek God, but with lots of money, better abs, and an exquisite knowledge of the body's pressure points."

Susan and Alice whistled while Aika merely raised an eyebrow. Alice laughed and said, "Thought so. There had to be a reason you were still with that asshole."

"Well, that's one reason, and it certainly doesn't hurt things. He comes off as a jerk, but he's...He's complicated. I'll leave it at that."

Susan glanced at Victoria and grinned. "Complicated? Is that why you're with him and not Paul?"

Victoria blushed heavily and shrunk in her seat. "Shut up, Susan."

"What now?" Alice asked, curious.

"Oh, you didn't know?" Susan said while glancing at Victoria. "Little Miss Priss here had a thing with Yeager back in the day."

"You and Yeager?" Alice asked. "Really? Like, the Speedster Yeager? How was that, if I may ask?"

Victoria blushed and sipped her beer. "You know how people make jokes about how fast he is? Well, they understate things a bit. You have *no idea*."

Susan raised her hand. "Um, you mean that in the good way or the bad? Because I'm thinking of about six different situations where super speed would be just lovely and..."

"Bad." Victoria cut her off and took a swig of beer. "Bad, bad, bad. Double-bad."

Alice laughed while Susan turned her attention to the purple-haired, former villain. "Hey, I just realized, weren't you wearing your wig before?"

Alice shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair. "Took it off five seconds after walking in. Who the fuck is going to care in a place like this?" Alice asked. "Sides, I hate wearing that thing. Too itchy. What about you, Suzie? You ever make it with a cape?"

Susan nodded, mid-drink. "Hell yes. You'll find that the Collective Good has a relationship history not unlike a soap opera, but with more spandex."

"I always wondered," Alice said, thoughtfully.

"And why not?" Susan continued. "I mean, we're all built like statues, we work in high-stress situations that get our adrenaline and endorphins pumping, and most of us are dressed like we should be up on that stage. It happens."

So, who was yours?"

Susan finished her glass and wiped her mouth. "So this was, what? Four years ago? I was on a stakeout with the Patch. Remember him?"

"Yeah," Alice nodded. "Really gruff, hairy, one eye, had some kinda Panther thing going on, didn't he?"

Susan nodded. "Yep. Just parked in an old Chevy Caprice, watching a boring-as-Hell doorway. So, we're about two hours into it, and it's raining, the street is deserted, it's late, and we're talking about our personal lives, and suddenly, bam. Just like that. Shirts off, seat's reclined, and Goddamn." Susan took a swig of her beer. "Goddamn. We busted the car's suspension. Hell, we didn't even notice the perp we

were waiting to tail had taken off. I tell you, if that man hadn't gone all psycho evil and tried to take over Vermont, well, woo."

"That does not speak well to your competency," Aika pointed out.

"Really?" Victoria asked. "You and Patch? Was it just the once, or..?"

"There were a couple of other times, one was in the training room on the mats, but nothing like that night in the car, let me tell you. So yeah, that was mine, and really, that was pretty damn good."

"He always grossed me out a bit," Victoria said. "Too hairy for me."

Susan shrugged. "Least he lasted more than a few seconds."

"Burrn," Alice said, laughing.

"So, what about you?" Susan asked Alice. The former villain nearly choked on her drink.

"Me? Um, yeah. Me. I, um, I haven't really 'dated' in a while."

"I didn't ask about dating," Susan said with a sly grin. "I asked about your shameful one-night stands."

Alice blushed and glanced away. "I don't really, um, I haven't had a one-night stand in a long time."

"You're kidding," Victoria said.

"Seriously," Alice said with a shrug. "I'm busy. I have a business, and I had to lay low, and before all that? I was a crime boss. The only person I could sleep with and not have to worry about how they were trying to advance their career was *my* boss, and he probably would have enjoyed this place more than me, to tell the truth. I dated a bit here and there, but it never got serious."

"So you're telling me that Dyspell, the Queen of Pain and Most Dangerous Woman in the World, never did anything? I always figured you had a little kink going on."

"Look, it's not for lack of trying! My dating life is awkward at best."

"What about Vincent?" Aika asked.

"We've had one date, and that doesn't equate to sexy time. Yet."

"So," Susan asked, "You've never just gone and made a huge mistake? Or had fun? What about with another villain, or a hero? You...You're blushing. You have. You have! Spill."

Alice fidgeted in her seat. "The most I've had was...um..." She blushed heavily and glanced to Victoria.

"Well..."

Victoria picked up on the cue and shook her head. "I told you before, I know you and Alan kissed on the cruise. That's really not that big of a deal."

Alice shook her head. "No, not that. That was PG. This was more...So, let me preface this by stating that yes, I make bad choices. I know that. Also, I had not had any sex in a long, long time, and I'm normally not this, um, forward. I was gonna say slutty, but we all wear spandex. I'm not sure where the slutty line is, anymore."

"This should be good," Victoria mused.

Aika poured a beer and handed it to Alice, who nodded her thanks. "Um, so there was this one job, in Berlin? I was trying to get away with an art heist, and there was a chase, and I wound up at this theatre. It was an, um, it was during a burlesque show."

The other women had their attention firmly on Alice at this point. "Go on," Victoria said.

"Well, honestly, this is not something I like to go into detail about. Let's just say there was a wooden horse, and a spotlight, and, um, honestly? The job and the show aren't important."

"You sang?" Victoria asked, genuinely impressed.

"THE JOB AND THE SHOW ARE NOT IMPORTANT," Alice reiterated, slightly louder than she meant to. "This was after. So. It was dark, and all I had time to grab was a trench coat off a hanger before slipping out. I was on my way, when someone I assumed was an Inspector stopped me in the back alley to ask some questions, and I want to preface again that it was extremely dark by the stage door, and I figured if I played it cool I could get out of there."

"Played it cool?" Susan asked.

"Yeah. Cool."

"You flirted," Victoria filled in.

Alice nodded. "Um, yeah. Yes. That is the word for it. Yes. So I might have, um, done some stuff."

"Some stuff?" Victoria asked with a raised brow.

Alice blushed heavily and downed another glass of beer. "Well, he was kind of hot, and I could tell he was hitting on me, it was dark, and I was turned on from being on stage, and..."

"On stage?" Susan interrupted. "Care to go into detail about that?"

"**No.** So anyway, I might have let him mess around under my coat for a while. And, um, I might have done some stuff back."

"With a complete stranger? In a doorway?" Susan asked in a voice that sounded a little too much like she was impressed.

"It was the back alley, and it was warm out, and like I said, I was kinda revved up from being on stage, he knew how to use his hands, I could tell he was built, and he smelled nice, and the whole thing was just *really fucking hot*, so yeah. I figured if I had to, I could still get away, and he was *ripped*, I cannot stress that enough. So, I let him take a tour. I thought that if he figured out who I was, he couldn't run with his pants around his ankles, so..."

"So you just let him have you in the alley? That's pretty ballsy, Alice." Victoria said with a tip of her drink.

"It's fucking hot, is what it is," Susan chimed in. "Go, girl."

"Well, that's the thing. It *was* hot, like, amazingly so. He knew exactly what to grab and where to go. So, we got right up to that point, and, um, we were definitely going to, um..."

“Conclude the tour?” Susan offered.

“...But my back was getting dirty, and I wasn’t cool with being bent over a pile of dirty boxes, so I went for my coat, and then...”

“So he got you naked?”

“I had one piece of clothing. It didn’t take much.”

“He had you on your back?”

Alice turned crimson. “He *really* knew what he was doing.”

“Where was your suit?” Victoria asked.

“That is irrelevant. Yes, okay? I was naked, save for the coat I grabbed. So, I pushed him off me and went for said coat, and while there, I just felt like, um... Anyway, I kinda did some other stuff.”

“What ‘other stuff’?”

Aika sighed and looked at Victoria. “What do you *think* she meant?”

“She could mean lots of things!” Victoria said, agitated.

“I mean what you think I meant,” Alice said, embarrassed.

“You are my hero,” Susan said with a toast of her glass.

“...And then in the middle of things,” Alice continued, “I noticed he had a small birthmark on his abdomen that looked familiar, so I stopped what I was doing, told him to close his eyes, and then smashed him in the head with a beer bottle I found on the ground before getting the hell out of there. That right there, sadly, is the most action I’ve gotten since I was a teenager. It was also the single biggest source for every sexual fantasy I had for years afterwards.”

Susan snickered, but Victoria suddenly became very still. “Alice, *how* did you happen to see the man’s birthmark?”

“Jesus, how do you *think* she saw it?” Susan muttered.

“...And how did you happen to recognize it? Tell me,” She took out her PhoneBuddy, scrolled through a few photos until she found one that Allison had sent her from a certain botched night in Sydney, and then turned the phone around so Alice could see. “Was it because you’d taken this?”

Susan stopped laughing as she caught on. “Hooooo shit. We need more alcohol. Waiter?”

Alice looked at Victoria with a pleading glance. “I am very sorry,” she said in a small voice.

Victoria mulled it over in her head, and then sighed heavily. “It was before we were dating, I think. I remember Alan telling me you got away, but he left out the part where he ‘intercepted’ you.”

“Oh, he *very* ‘intercepted’ me,” Alice said before she could stop herself. “Shit. Sorry. I...”

Victoria held up her hand. "You know what? It's cool. I am not going to think about what you were doing to have been able to see that birthmark. I'm...you know? This is *exactly* fucking like him. You know he slept with Aquatica the week she joined?"

Alice blinked. "Seriously? You're not mad at me?"

Victoria shrugged. "What for? You used what you had to try to escape a situation, and you had fun doing it. You didn't know who he was, so it would be somewhat shitty of me, but let me ask you this. There was enough light for you to see his abdomen?"

Alice grimaced and nodded.

"He didn't notice your hair color?"

Alice shrugged and turned deep crimson. "I had a silver wig I had found backstage, but, um, he was clutching my hair pretty tightly. I think he might have yanked it off before I escaped? Still, I don't think he's ever put two and two together. I've never mentioned it, and neither has he. I just try to pretend like it didn't happen."

"Jesus," Victoria said to herself.

Susan whistled. "You know, I thought Aquatica had a better head on her shoulders than that."

Victoria started counting fingers on her hand. "And with Infernia, remember her? Oh, and with Techno-lass. Before we started dating, he pretty much did whatever would..." Victoria suddenly froze as she stared off into space. "Sonofa..." Victoria picked up her phone and angrily jabbed the screen a few times.

"Hey," said a familiar voice on the other end. Victoria set the phone to speaker and set it on the table.

"Hey," she said the moment she heard the line pick up. "Sorry to bug you. Just a quick question. Were we dating when you were on assignment in Berlin? I can't remember," Victoria asked in as calm of a voice as she could manage.

"Um, I think we had just started. We weren't really serious then, I don't think. Why?" Came the reply.

"Did you ever fool around with anyone while you were over there? I'm just asking."

There was a long, long silence.

"...I don't remember?"

Victoria nodded to herself. "You are never having sex again," she said before hitting the giant red END CALL button on the face of the phone.

"Liar," Susan said. "I give you three days before you crack."

Victoria grumbled and reached for another slice of pizza. "Is that why you were asking about Alan? Because you never got the chance to find out?"

Alice glanced off to the side and shrugged. "Little bit. Can you blame me for wanting to know?"

“Honestly, no. You know, I had a huge crush on him when I was starting out as Blackbird. He used to meet me on random rooftops to give me assignments. God, that was hot. We weren’t even doing anything then, but, woof. In fact, the first time? We stayed in costume. Well, as much as you can be.”

“Really?” Alice asked.

“On top of the Chase building. That was fun. I’m still mad, mind you. But that was fun.”

Aika, who until now had been silent, narrowed her gaze at Victoria. “You are taking this far too well. Most women would be upset upon hearing a story such as Alice’s. Why are you not on your way to castrate your lover?”

“Hey, she’s right.” Susan agreed. “Alice has herself a Cinemax moment with your boyfriend, and you don’t bat an eye?”

Victoria glanced at Aika and Susan, and then quickly looked away. “He’s just, I completely figured that this was the kind of thing that...”

Alice snapped her fingers. “Red Guard! Oh. Ooohhhh, Allison is going to be pissed when she hears this!”

Susan glanced to Alice and frowned. “What do you mean?”

Alice smiled at Victoria. “I get it. The reason you’re not too mad at Alan is because you *can’t* be. This happened right when you started dating? And tell me, that time you mentioned to me after the cruise? With the Red Guard? How long exactly were the two of you thinking you were about to die?”

This time, Victoria was the one to turn red. “I should never have mentioned that to you.”

“How long?” Alice asked, genuinely relieved that things had shifted to Victoria. “When we were talking about this, you made it sound like you had just minutes.”

Victoria poured another glass of beer and downed half of it. “Fine, but let Brandon tell Allison before you blab it, please?”

Alice nodded. “Deal. Now spill.”

“So, we’re in Tulsa, and Dr. Tollarius has this fucking gravatronic bomb or some shit and he’s placed the whole city under a dome, and he’s going to detonate it in 24 hours.”

“I remember that,” Alice said with a nod. “He was psyched about that one. That was actually meant to be a test of our new plasmatic shielding. Said it could do wonders for the tech on the *Argent*. Go on.”

“Anyway,” Victoria continued. “He announced that if we turned ourselves in at noon the next day, he would spare the city. We were debating it, and we knew we would die, and it was an emotional time for both of us, and, yeah.”

“Yeah?” Alice asked.

“We had we’re-about-to-die sex.”

“Nice,” Alice said as she raised her glass.

Victoria lightly blushed. "Yeah, it was. I mean, we were really on edge, and honestly figured that was it for us, and since we knew where the bomb *would* be, there wasn't much point in running around until then, so, yeah. We had ourselves a little goodbye tryst."

Alice nodded. "And this was after you and Alan started dating." It was more of a statement than a question.

"...I don't remember?"

"Well, that settles that. You two are perfect for each other," Alice said with a smirk. "And don't worry, your secret is safe with me."

"Allison already knows," Aika said, calmly. "He told her when they started dating. He wanted to be up front with her. She does not mind or care that the two of you were intimate."

"Really? She knows?" Victoria asked, slightly surprised.

Aika stared at Victoria for a moment. "What kind of woman would get into a serious relationship with a man that would not share about his past? He is honest, and so is she, and they seem compatible. I see no reason for shame."

Susan eyed the quiet, Asian woman for a moment. "So, what about you?"

"What *about* me?"

Susan leaned back and smiled. "The rest of us have spilled. That's kind of the point of this, I think. Bonding through blackmail stories. So what's yours?"

Alice shook her head. "Aika doesn't share a lot of private details. That's just who she..."

"On a hot, September evening, I chased my prey, Roku-Oni, to the roof of the Edo Museum. We stood, facing each other under the pale light of a bulging, full moon. He and I had clashed several times in the past, and he was the only man who had ever lasted with me, toe-to-toe, with a sword. We fought like savage tigers, sparing technique for fury. The sound of traffic and the whistling of the wind our music, the pounding of blood in my ears a steady tempo to our dance. At some point, our bodies pressed together, our hands lost their blades, and before long, we were entwined in the folds of our robes. He was like a furnace, blazing hot to the touch, and as thirsty for me as the desert for a rain shower. We fought, rolling back and forth across the cold rooftop, each desperate to conquer the other. Our passions raged, and our cries echoed off the distant walls of glass and steel that surrounded us."

The other three ladies at the table stared dumbly at Aika.

"Damn," Alice said. "That's the most I think I've ever heard you say in one sitting."

"So, what happened?" Susan asked. "Did you two ever meet up again? Is he your secret boy toy on the side?"

Aika glanced to Susan. "Once I was positioned atop him, I slipped a pin out of what was left of my hair arrangement and plunged it into his throat. I held it in place until he finished struggling, and then left him there, naked and disgraced, in the moonlight. I was bare, covered in filth, and felt the pang of the cold, night air against the sheen of sweat on my skin, but I was satisfied that I had completed my

mission. My foolish opponent believed some insane desire for sex would override my commitment to my duties. It is a mistake that cost him dearly.”

The three women scooted a little bit away from Aika.

“So,” Susan said after gulping down the remains of her glass. “That was graphic, and unnecessary.”

“I do not make time for romance,” Aika said in a calm tone. “My commitment is to my profession. Everything else is secondary.”

“So,” Alice said, gently sloshing her drink, “How long did you wait while you were ‘atop’ him before deciding to do what you did?”

Aika glanced off to the side. “...It may have taken me a moment to get my bearings.”

Alice shook her head and grinned. “Whatever floats your boat, girl. You wanna get all Praying Mantis with a guy, that’s your thing.”

Aika calmly sipped her beer. “This, coming from a woman who let a stranger violate her body and dirty her knees in a back alley.”

Alice grumbled and took another slice of pizza. “I want more beer. I wish I hadn’t told you that, now.”

“Why *did* you tell us that, anyway?” Victoria asked.

“Because,” Alice said with a small shrug. “We’re trying, in our own, horrible way, to bond. You didn’t have to share about the Red Guard, but you did. None of us had to say anything. We could have just discussed the new, breathable Kevlar weave that R&D whipped up.”

“It is very nice,” Aika commented.

“I know, right? I thought it would chafe, but it feels like cotton! I...anyway. We could have gone any number of ways, and instead, we went with embarrassing, debasing, personal stories. That’s what friends do, I think. I’m not sure, honestly.”

“Actually, that’s what messed up people do. We’ve let alcohol make us into walking stereotypes,” Victoria pointed out. “Still, the sentiment is appreciated, and you’re right. I have to admit, when we started this evening, I didn’t see it going well. The restaurant was a bit of overkill, but with everything going on, I’ve been a bit moody lately. I meant it when I told you before that I trusted you, Gailsone. I did, and I do. You’ve done enough that you’ve earned that, at least. I just...”

Alice tipped her drink with a nod. “Victoria, you’re in charge. I’ve been there, and frankly, I don’t know that I would ever want to go back. Tonight was more of a show for them than it was to intimidate me. You had to prove that you took their concerns seriously. You did it in a remarkably stupid way, but it was public, and word of this will spread, so I guess it all worked out.” Alice thought for a moment. “For so many staff to think I was a traitor, someone major must have said something. I’m guessing you’ve been getting shit from Darkane and Poseidon?”

“Yes, that’s right. How did you even guess that?”

“Well, Darkane is a douchebag and hates me anyway, so it’s only natural to lump him in. And Poseidon is the most untrusting member of the Collective Good. That, and he freely admits that the woman who fucked him over looks exactly like me. Did I miss anyone?”

Victoria glanced away for a moment. It was brief, but it was enough.

“Never mind,” Alice said with a grin. “It really doesn’t matter. You pay me enough that it *totally* doesn’t matter. And I figured it out pretty quickly, what with you nearly shouting ‘I don’t trust you,’ every five seconds. I would have done the same damn thing, and I have to admit, back in the Purge, I don’t know if I would have done it as calmly as you did. Plus, like I said before, Suzie did give me a head’s up.”

Victoria glared at Susan, who nervously grinned back. “Sorry. The girl deserved to know.”

“Agreed,” Aika commented. “And your staff should be willing to take your word.”

“‘Should’ and ‘do’ are two different things, unfortunately.” Victoria grumbled.

Alice looked at Victoria and considered the raven-haired woman for a few moments. She saw so much of herself in her new employer that it hurt, and try as she might, Alice could not be mad with her over how she had been treated earlier on.

“Excuse me,” Alice said, slipping out of the booth. The women watched her head off into the dimly-lit bar as a waiter brought another pitcher of beer to the table.

“You think she’s okay?” Victoria asked.

“Pfft, she’s fine.” Susan said, dismissively. “Girl knows what’s up, and seriously, the only reason she told you any of what she did was because she trusts you. Alice may come off as a flake, but she’s one of the most focused people I’ve ever met in my life.”

“I agree that she is slightly unconventional,” Aika said with a nod, “and unprofessional, and vulgar, and rude.”

Susan and Victoria waited as Aika proceeded to take a long drink from her glass. “But?” Susan prompted.

“I was finished,” Aika said, plainly.

Alice came back a moment later, and grinned as she slipped back into her seat. “And hello again.”

“That was quick,” Victoria said, curious. “Too quick for the restroom.”

“I wasn’t in the restroom. I was ordering dessert.”

Before Victoria could ask what Alice meant, a slightly overdressed waiter appeared with a dessert cart, covered in small cakes and sweets. The waiter was in what looked like a flimsy tuxedo, held together with Velcro instead of buttons. “This is the best bar, ever,” Susan said.

“Strip clubs have dessert trays?” Aika asked, intrigued.

“This one does!” Alice chirped. “We are holding all of the staff meetings for *Rare Gems* here from now on.”

“What about Douglass?” Aika asked.

Alice shrugged. “Of course Douglass can join in. I don’t discriminate.”

“That’s not what I...”

“Oh! That’s not all. Sir?” Alice said, while pointing her thumb at Victoria, “*This* is the birthday girl.”

The waiter grinned and nodded. “I hope you ladies saved room for something big,” he said in a sultry voice. Then, the server ripped his cheap tuxedo off to reveal a Red Guard costume that was 90% body paint.

“How fucking cool is this?” Alice asked. “They had a board of who was available that you could just pick from up by the bar. Red Guard here was \$300 for a private session. There was also a Blackthorne, but I figured this was more appropriate for tonight. That, and the dude was, like, \$500.”

The faux Red Guard proceeded to do what somewhat resembled dancing as the three women watched. Aika slipped her PhoneBuddy out of her purse and took a quick shot. “For Allison,” She said while sending the photo. “She should know what she is missing.”

Susan took a slice of cake off the tray and set it in front of Victoria, who was flushed with embarrassment. “Here you go. Have your cake and eat it, too.”

“Dammit Alice, this is the last time I tell you anything,” Victoria mumbled.

Susan laughed and grabbed a slice of German chocolate for herself. “Relax, Victoria. Later, we can go check that board for ourselves. I’m sure you can get her back with a Professor Snape or something.”

Alice simply grinned and patted her blushing boss on the shoulder. The faux Red Guard offered Victoria his hand, which she flat-out refused until a spotlight hit shined on their table. At that point, Victoria reluctantly stood and let herself be led to the stage, where she was sat in a chair for a front-row demonstration of male flexibility.

“Aika,” Alice asked, “are you...”

Aika was holding up her phoneBuddy. “Yes. Now hush, the chorus is starting.”

Several minutes later, Victoria came back to the table. She was wearing an inflatable crown, and her shirt had greasy stains of indeterminate origin that smelled of baby oil. Silently, she swore to burn her clothing as soon as she got home. Alice offered her a drink and a fresh slice of cake (as she had eaten Victoria’s during the show.) “Consider it payback for the restaurant. We’re even, now.”

“I *said* I was sorry,” Victoria said. She was only numbly aware of the chocolate cake in front of her, but it was enough that she picked up her fork and sampled a bite.

“Coworkers take apologies,” Alice said, helping herself to a raspberry torte. “Friends get even in creative ways.”

“We’re not friends, Alice.”

“Of course we’re not, boss.” Alice agreed.