

Villainy

a short short story

by

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Villainy

The world of supervillainy was predominantly male. A ratio of twenty-seven male villains for every woman. And most times, the one in twenty seven amounted to less than a costume — a graduated sidekick looking to make a name for herself. They had the desire, but most lacked the ambition.

Valentina Vartan, on the other hand, had ambition. She was one of the most ambitious things on the planet, without qualification of gender, race or species. She had conquered cities, vanquished heroes more powerful than herself, and had come to be known as one of the greatest villains alive.

That qualifier — “one of” — gnawed at Valentina’s ego. Despite her many criminal accomplishments were many, the only way she could ever be known as *the* greatest — singular and alone — was to eliminate any and all competition. Greatness could only be achieved through victory over all. The only other name in the same tier as Valentina’s was Rance Raptor. He was seventy-six, a full three decades Valentina’s senior. In Valentina’s mind, she was obligated to do all that was necessary to give Rance Raptor and the entire patriarchy a permanent rest.

Valentina arranged for a dinner meeting with Rance, under the pretense of a possible team-up. She would arrive on time, be polite, poison Rance’s food and walk out knowing her status as the singularly greatest was confirmed.

The location was set: Chez Vous in the East Village. It was unbiased territory, to allow both parties to feel at ease. This was standard protocol, and Valentina was well acquainted with protocol. She arranged for an agreed-upon third party to pump sleeping gas into the dining area, to assure anyone in attendance would not bother their discussion. Things were best done when they were done by the book, even if that book’s subject was murder.

Valentina dressed for dinner in a smart suit, tie, vest and boots. Her valet Mortimer helped fill the secret vials lining her jacket. The right sleeve held the poison. The left sleeve held the antidote, in case she needed to save herself.

“My mistress,” said Mortimer, “far be it for me to question your decisions. But I would be remiss, my mistress, if I did not point out — and forgive me for doing so — that Rance Raptor is, as they say, on our side.”

“That he is, Mortimer,” she said. She capped a vial with a rubber stopper and slid it into position within her sleeve.

“He has fought many a hero and done much to advance our shared desires.”

“Certainly,” she said. She filled another vial with smoking, green goo.

“Then why, my mistress, must you kill him?”

Valentina stood straight and glanced at Mortimer. He flinched like a child expecting a punch in the teeth. She grinned at this.

“Am I the greatest villain alive?”

“Yes, my mistress.”

“She need convincing. Some need convincing by eliminating the alternatives.”

“But — and forgive me again, my mistress — with Raptor dead, will they not simply qualify their answer? Will they not call you the greatest alive while calling him the greatest to ever live?”

“Not if I defeat him.”

Mortimer let the thought sink in. “As you wish.”

He lifted her coat. She put it on.

“The killing will give me no pleasure, Mortimer. Rance Raptor is a legend in the field, known throughout the world and beyond. I have considered every alternative.” She buttoned her jacket. “But to achieve greatness, I must do all that is necessary.”

The journey was a short helicopter flight away. Chez Vous was part of a country club, isolated from the city making it ideal for such meetings.

During the flight, Valentina and Mortimer discussed her plan. She was scheduled to arrive early, giving Raptor the luxury of the grand entrance. She would have a drink with him, chat, flight (but not to much as to make him suspicious).

“Certainly he will try to kill you, my mistress.”

“I suspect it is a possibility,” said Valentina. “Standard procedures then.”

“Standard procedures, my mistress.”

They arrived early, landing on the eighteenth green of the club’s gold course. There were only conventional vehicles in sight. ‘Let the old man have his moment,’ she thought. Valentina dispatched Mortimer to check on the status of the dining area. He quickly returned.

“Everyone is asleep, my mistress.” They both walked inside.

Valentina kicked aside a sleeping hostess and took a moment to select a table. The middle one. Mortimer cleared the places and reset the table setting. Then they heard the engines. The noise was far away, but distinct and getting louder, purposely announcing themselves. Valentina rolled her eyes and walked back out to the door facing the parking lot.

A large blimp-shaped object descended through the clouds. The noise gained in intensity, yet no engines could be seen. Valentina reasoned the vehicle was likely powered by stolen alien hover technology. The only reasonable answer. The ship lowered its landing gear and settled itself across half the parking lot. A silver door slid open, a gantry dropped to the ground, and out stepped a weary, grand old man. He walked with a cane, the only strength in his entire frame was set in his square chin. But his eyes showed life and the spark of a trickster. As old he was, this was Rance Raptor.

Though he walked with a cane, Valentina thought he carried himself with regality, above all around him and any he might encounter. This air of superiority was not pure arrogance. It was belief. Not only was he confident with his stature, but so was everyone else, including Valentina. It was a fact.

His curious eyes focused on her.

“My dear,” said Rance. “Aren’t you cold?”

Rance motioned his large body guards to follow him inside.

They stepped over sleeping patrons as they made their way to the center table. Mortimer and Rance’s bodyguard argued over who should have to remove the customers from their path. While they waited, Rance leaned against the doorway, then sat in a chair. He breathed heavily, but tried to look like he wasn’t.

“I’ve been here before,” he told her. “Twice, in fact. Once with a fantastic cook, then once with one that disappointed me. I arranged for the first cook to be brought back.”
At last, the path was truly ready. They made their way to the table and sat.

Valentina dressed her napkin across her lap. With one fluid motion, she slipped a vial of poison from her sleeve into her palm, disguising the move with her napkin. The champagne arrived, with Mortimer delivering the glasses and Rance’s bodyguard bringing the bottle. Valentina tightened her grip around the vial in her palm.

Rance’s bodyguard held the bottle out for Mortimer, who popped the cork, then handed the bottle to the servant, who poured.

Mortimer and the bodyguard took up the glasses. Mortimer gave Valentina a look. He seemed anxious. She nodded, as did Rance, and both servants drank from their masters’ glasses.

After they finished, all eyes darted around, waiting for a sudden death. Valentina noticed Mortimer’s face relaxing as each second passed, assuring his own life.

“Can’t be too careful,” said Rance.

The champagne was poured again, and the glasses were delivered to Valentina and Rance. They raised them in a silent toast and drank them down.

“So...” said Rance, setting down his glass as punctuation. “A team up?”

“Yes. It only seems natural.”

“They always do,” he said. “As you surely know, I’ve been part of many such ventures — teams, legions, co-ops of some sort. They all start the same, with shared goals. Then egos arise and that’s the end.”

“I’ve done those as well.”

“Right. The Women of Evil. Was that your choice? The title, I mean.”

She shook her head.

“Good thing. It’s disgraceful. One world’s patriarchy is seeded so deep that it creeps into another.”

Dinner arrived — roast duck. They both commented about how delicious it smelled. They forked a bite and fed it to their respective surrogates and watched. Mortimer wiped sweat from his lip. Valentina was careful that the rolling of her eyes did not, in fact, prohibit her from watching the surrogates.

“That should do, shouldn’t it?” said Rance.

With no sudden death, the surrogates were dismissed and the true dinner began.

Rance ate with vigor, continuing the small talk. It reminded Valentina of a grandfather she never had.

Then he coughed. And coughed again. Not the kind of coughs he would do once he injected the poison. These were hacking, wet coughs. The kind accompanying old age. He stood up, as though that would help his breathing. His bodyguard rushed out of the kitchen to help his master. Valentina seized her opportunity. She, too, stood up, dropping her napkin on the table, and dripping three drops of poison into Rance’s food.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m not as young as I look,” he said. He smiled and fought a last hack. “Never get old.” She laughed at the sheer level of cliché in this statement, but his dark eyebrows focused. “I’m serious. You have resources, don’t you? You’re a scientist. Figure it out. Fight the aging process if it’s the last thing you do. Because it will be.”

They sat down again, and Valentina focused her eyes on her dish, being sure to not stare at Rance’s poisoned food. Her periphery vision saw him stab the fork into the center of the plate. The food vanished. It was done. Valentina mentally checked the time. It would all be finished in 30 minutes — the last 30 minutes of Rance Raptor’s life.

He stood, “Excuse me.” Another bodyguard rushed to help him, as did Mortimer. Rance’s aid scolded Mortimer, and helped his master away from the table, leaving the plate completely unattended.

Mortimer looked at Valentina, stunned. They could hardly believe he was capable of such a flub.

“Check on him,” she said and Mortimer rushed away. They had planned for such a contingency, in case Rance was planning some sort of counter-offensive. Finding the gun Clemenza had left in the toilet, as it were.

She stared at the unguarded plate. A rookie mistake, leaving the food unattended. She wondered what happened to the true Rance Raptor, the one so cunning he managed to destroy the dark side of the moon, and hijack the British gold reserves (the ones you don’t know about).

Her first reaction was one of disgust. The wasted potential of this once great man was begging to be replaced. It would be so easy. But those were replaced with a feeling Valentina had not felt in her entire adult life. As Rance returned, aided by his bodyguard and appearing somehow older, Valentina felt pity for the old bastard.

He apologized for the interruption. Valentina felt a twinge of embarrassment for the man, but circled back to empathy as she saw him drop his fork. She reasoned that what little energy his old body had, he had used it up on his grand entrance.

“I admit I wasn’t looking for a partner,” said Rance.

“I know we barely know each other.” She watched him pick up his spoon and feed himself more poisoned meat, the poor idiot.

Rance pointed the cleaned spoon at her. “I know enough about you.”

“How is that?”

“How is what?”

Memory loss was not a side-effect of the poison. The old fool was losing his mind before her eyes. Valentina might have enjoyed this if not for the nagging remnants of conscience burning inside her.

“You’re cunning, I know that much. And not just for a woman. For everyone, everywhere.”

“You’re making me blush, Mr. Raptor.”

“Please. Rance.”

She tossed her hair a little, then realized what she had done. Valentina had spent most of her adult life and all of her life in villainy in full control of her emotions and reflexes. Yet here, before this doddering old man, she felt comfortable enough to let her guard down and actually enjoy herself. Maybe it was the relaxation into certain victory, but Valentina felt her pulse flutter. The old man was charming.

She scolded herself. ‘Stop it. Get this job done. Enjoy yourself, certainly, but do not lose sight of the objective.’ There was only 23 minutes left.

Rance and Valentina discussed their plans over the rest of the meal, adding some more wine and dessert. All the while, he filled her with complements. Sometimes he repeated himself. It reminded Valentina about her uncle, mumbling the same stories again and again. It was almost endearing.

Valentina stared at Rance’s plate, empty of all but one or two last deadly bites. Remorse was not helpful in their line of work. Her mind raced through the scenarios. Her left sleeve still held the antidote. She still had 10 minutes left. She would not have truly defeated him, but it could have been understood by both of them as her victory. From there, the team-up could actually still commence. They had come up with brilliant and ambitious plots, and with this night establishing a firm power dynamic, she would surely be the leader. It would be like helping a rival. A rival who had shown no anger toward her in any way.

Then Rance said something even more conflicting, saying, “I was thinking of offering you my legacy.”

Valentina’s left sleeve felt tight. She had not seen this coming. She felt foolish realizing that by only expecting the worst from people her entire life, she had chosen a more difficult path.

“Like,” she said, and felt stupid for starting a sentence that way. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Consider it. I’m near the end of my days. I have no children or living family. And no one can live forever. God knows I’ve tried to crack that one,” he chuckled and coughed again. He was still funny, even with his corners dulled.

“How would we manage it?”

“I can have it all arranged very quickly. You’ll get everything, and treat it right, I believe.”

She felt the blush in her cheeks. He surely saw it, and she didn’t care this time.

Rance leaned in closer. “Outside of my pride, Valentina, I have nothing else to live for.”

She was flabbergasted. Becoming the heir to Rance Raptor’s name and legacy meant access to secrets, secrets he had surely planned to take with him to the grave.

Secrets that would remain secrets if he died tonight.

Valentina looked at Mortimer. He couldn’t hear a thing, tucked away in the corner with the other cronies. He couldn’t see how her entire demeanor had changed. She was ashamed of herself for feeling such warmth, but the path ahead seemed clear.

“I think I would like that very much, Rance.”

She reached into her left sleeve and pulled out the antidote vial under the table.

Valentina weighed her options. There would certainly be some value in her honesty, but there was no guarantee Rance would value honesty the same way.

Her fingers opened the vial under the table, pouring it into her napkin. It worked as an inhalant, all she would need to do was get him to inhale, switch the napkins, give him a reason to use it on his mouth.

Her only plan was simple: she sneezed. She aimed her sneeze at Rance Raptor’s mouth, nailing him right in the face. He reeled back as any rational person would.

“I’m so sorry! Oh, let me help you.”

Valentina rushed to his side and wiped Rance’s mouth with her napkin, wiping the snot away and the antidote onto his lips.

Rance’s eyes watched her carefully. “Quite alright, my dear.”

Valentina finished wiping the antidote napkin on his face, focusing on his shirt for good measure, then ordered some more drinks. They came swiftly.

Valentina sat down and raised her glass. “To our partnership. To ruling over the entire world.”

Rance looked over his glass at her. “Until the end of our days.”

They drank fully. It tasted even sweeter than Valentina’s first glass. She relaxed and smiled. Rance, she noticed, did not.

“Do you know why I chose you to be my heir?”

“For my cunning nature? My meticulous strategizing?”

“I thought I saw a bit of myself in you, Valentina. A part that would do all that is necessary.”

Rance picked up his fork and stabbed the last remaining bite of poisoned duck.

“I was wrong.”

Valentina’s smile dwindled away. She resisted the urge to scream “No,” but still sat straight.

“This is poisoned, isn’t it?”

“No.” Her head was swimming. The rush of the drink made her dizzy. Things had been going so beautifully.

“You’re lying. You came here to kill me. To finally be the one to defeat the great Rance Raptor.”

Valentina felt sweat drip into her eyes. She stood, wobbly from the drinks. She grabbed her chair for balance.

“We will discuss our terms tomorrow, when you’ve cooled down.”

“You are going nowhere.” Rance Raptor’s eyes were black.

Valentina took a step and her strength left her. She fell into her chair, knocking it over. Her head spun.

“One cannot become the king without defeating the sitting king. You know this as well as you know your own name. It is an unspoken rule in our circle. The only way to surpass is to defeat — to truly destroy — the one on top.”

Valentina rolled onto her back. She could see the empty champagne glass. The bottom had melted.

“Mortimer!”

She searched the room for Mortimer. He was still in the corner, motionless, laying in a heap on top of Rance’s own bodyguards. His blank face turned toward his mistress.

Her hand found the empty vial of antidote. Her eyes rolled up and back, then focused in Rance’s direction.

“...How?”

“I poisoned the drinks.” He laughed and coughed. “Weeks ago.”

Valentina’s tongue felt fat. She bit it saying, “You drank the champagne, too.”

“Indeed I did.”

Valentina kicked at the floor, trying to make her body listen.

“But how did I get it and not you?”

Rance Raptor grinned, victorious. “You do not understand.” He lifted what remained of his champagne glass, the rest breaking against the table. He coughed, then spit blood onto the floor.

Valentina’s anger grew. She tried to kick at him, scratched at the floor. She couldn’t reach. She pulled herself onto her front, and pushed with all her might. If she could reach him, she could choke the life out of the old bastard with her last dying breath. Instead, she collapsed on the floor. Her last thoughts were of him, how he was willing to die simply to defeat an opponent.

To remain on top.

To do all that was necessary.
