

Temptation 09 – The Savannah

By Dragonien

Chad

The Jungle Cats were, as their name implied, made up almost exclusively of large cat species. Technically there were non-cats all over the organization but you would probably win a scavenger hunt prize if you were able to find anyone in a real position of authority that wasn't of the feline persuasion. They were some offshoot of an ideology left over from some indigenous tribes from the southern continent that had only integrated into modern society a century or so ago. Integration being a loose term. They believed fanatically in might-makes-right but were smart enough, mostly, to understand that might meant more than just how hard you could punch or bite. The cats were responsible for more than half of all of the species trafficking in the country, as they personally saw no issue whatsoever with servitude or slavery over what they saw as a weaker species. Surprisingly they weren't harsh with those they traded in. Hell, their ideology even compelled them to protect what they saw as those smaller and weaker than themselves. You'd be lucky if all you got was a beating of your own if any of the Jungle Cats ever caught wind that of you beating a slave they sold you. They believed it was their duty to protect those smaller and weaker than them. It's just that they also believed that they deserved respect, service, and devotion in return beyond what most people would see as reasonable in modern society.

They also didn't like dogs. Which is why I was expecting my meeting to be so interesting. Wolves, coyotes, and other canine races they didn't mind so much but dogs like myself they saw as mongrel cross-breeds. Something about the purity of nature.

Ok. So maybe they were a little bit more speciest than I let on.

As my car rolled to a stop in the parking lot, I reached into my glove compartment and pulled on a pair of black riding gloves. At first glance they looked like they were finger-less but on each hand there was a single white cotton finger for only the middle finger and the thumb. They were a precaution. Careful to ensure my car was locked as I had absolutely no faith in the integrity of the neighborhood I was in, I turned to make my way for the entrance of the wildest night club in town: The Savannah. Yea, I know, I thought the name was just as stupid as everyone else did. The Jungle Cats really liked to lean into their name and origin to an obnoxious degree.

I walked right past the long line of people waiting to get in, much to their varying audible complaints and insults and made straight for the bouncer by the door. He was a big, burly tank

of a panther; probably one the biggest one I'd ever seen. Nearly as tall as me and almost half again as wide, in a contest of pure strength he would twist me into a pretzel with relative ease. When he saw me approaching, the panther's back straightened slightly and, despite his professionally disinterested outward demeanor I could see his body tensed up and ready for a fight. He wasn't planning on starting anything with me but he certainly was ready to if the need arose.

"Hey, Mutt. No cuttin in line. You want to hand out some tail you gotta wait in line like everyone else." He spoke in a tone of absolute seriousness but the tremble at the edges of his lips gave away the smirk he was desperately trying to hide.

"No one gets my tail, Jeff." I retorted, not bothering to hide my own grin. "Though if you were finally willing to offer up, I might be willing to take some home."

This caused the panther to snort in derision at me. Despite his flippant attitude however I was still able to notice the slight raising of the fur on his face, which was almost certainly the telltale signs of a blush he was trying very hard to hide. Despite that moment of discomfort on his part, he kept the attitude with me at full volume.

"Enough of your shit, Chad. What do you want? You're holding up the line."

"Official business." I stated simply, reaching slowly towards my belt to flash him my badge. "I need to speak to Anthony."

This caused the panther's whiskers to bristle and his ears to flatten slightly. His eyes briefly darted around as if suddenly worried someone nearby was listening. Of course, there were a half dozen people in earshot all glaring angrily at the two of us for holding up the club's line but they didn't seem to register as anyone Jeff was worried about. When he seemed convinced that whoever it was he was watching out for wasn't around he answered in a much softer tone than before implying this was not a public conversation.

"He call for you?" When I shook my head no, he continued. "You know he doesn't like surprise visitors. You're not gonna start any shit, are you?"

I rolled my eyes at the panther.

"First off. Not my fault he doesn't want to see anyone unless he invites them. I gotta talk to him so he's gotta man up and deal with it. Second, If I was gonna start any shit with him or his own you think I'd be coming here all alone? I'm not an idiot, even if I am dumb enough to get distracted by those big kitten eyes of yours."

The flirting at the end caught him off guard and helped alleviate his sudden nerves a bit, but he still clearly was uncomfortable with the whole situation. I knew Jeff well enough to know what buttons to press to get what I want. A bit of unexpected flirting to get him off

balance, a tiny nudge to his ego to make him feel good about himself and give just enough confusion as to whether I was serious or not and his mind would be too preoccupied with personal thoughts to argue very hard with me. Was it shameless psychological manipulation? Yes. Did I mind? Not so much. It only took a few more moments for Jeff to finally cave.

"Alright, fine." He nodded. "But if anyone asks, I didn't let you in. You fast talked the new guy when I was taking a piss. He's a little prick anyway, gonna get himself eaten if he doesn't straighten his shit out."

With that, he stepped aside and pulled the velvet rope with him, letting me through the front door. I couldn't help but look over my shoulder and wink at the crowd of now very irritated people audibly complaining about favoritism and line cutting. My name is Chad, and I'm a member of asshole's anonymous. Hi Chad.

Inside the club I was immediately assaulted with the heavy, bass-filled thunder of what passed for music these days. Call me a grandpa but I liked my music to be more enjoyable sound and less airborne earthquake. Thankfully for the neighborhood the insulation in the club was something of legend. Not a single beat made it through the walls and into the streets outside. The club itself was a scene of total chaos. Bars surrounding a massive dance floor at each of its four corners serving both Alcohol and things that were far less 'above board' right out in the open. The dance floor itself could barely even call itself that. It was somewhere between a dance floor, a rave pit and an orgy. At least a third of all the girls in the club either had their shirts off entirely or had them pulled up with whatever guy or girl that was grinding against their back giving them a reach-around five-finger bikini. They really took the whole let loose and go wild mentality to a new level here. And of course, the cops couldn't touch the place. Not unless we wanted to start a full-blown war in town.

Thankfully I didn't have to go anywhere near the dance floor. Once inside, I made my way around the edge of the interior until I found the small administration hallway in back. I'd been here a few times before, all business I swear, and had no intention of knowing this place on any level other than a professional one. When I reached the unassuming stairwell leading up to Anthony's office I was met by this absolute wall of a brontosaurus. He was wide and tall enough that you could stick both me and Jeff together and we probably would still lose in an arm-wrestling contest to the walking slab of meat. Not that he'd ever be polite enough to settle things with arm wrestling if we ever got in a confrontation with him.

"Name."

His voice came out in a dull rumble. Simple and commanding in a slow drawl that many would take as a signal that he was the stereotypical idiot meathead that struggled to sling two words together into a sentence. I knew better and kept my mouth shut for once. He liked people to think he was stupid, it made them underestimate him.

"Detective Chad. Here to see Anthony. He's not expecting me. But I expect that he's expecting me by now."

Ok. I TRIED to keep my mouth shut.

"Disarm."

Again, the word came as a drawn-out rumble. The giant catcher's mitt that passed for his hand reached out, palm up, expectantly towards him. This I'd known was coming but still didn't like very much. Despite my trepidation I still dutifully unholstered my service weapon. After double checking for an empty chamber and secured safety I carefully placed it on the giant's hand. When he continued glaring at me, nonplussed, without saying a word I sighed. Reaching down towards my ankle I pulled the small backup derringer I kept in my boot and handed it over. It was an antique but I'd taken great care in getting it restored to fully working condition. It probably wouldn't do more than irritate whoever I shot with it but hey, I liked it and it made me feel cool. He kept glaring, so I pulled the knife out of my other boot and the small blade that was held in a holster on my wrist. Finally satisfied he turned away from me and carefully placed the items in a small plastic tray on a table behind him. Once he was done arranging the items to his liking he turned back to me and gestured up the stairs beside him.

Anthony's office was the perfect blend of corporate utility and expensive extravagance. Rows of filing cabinets sat against the wall to either side of him with meticulously written labels on each drawer. His desk was perfectly organized and clean of all clutter, yet still had multiple stacks of papers, forms, and an open tablet screen showing emails in the middle of being reviewed. The floor was the kind of plush, padded carpeting you'd expect heaven to have. Supple red cotton layered over the top of so much foam carpet padding I swore it was more comfortable walking on this floor than sleeping in my bed. And at the head of it all, sitting behind the marble-top desk was the tiger himself: Anthony.

He was big, even for a tiger. Standing up he'd have at least a couple inches on me and was slightly broader in the shoulder. He wasn't ripped like Jeff or a hulking beast like his bodyguard downstairs but his whole body screamed of primal power. The lithe, athletic muscle straining his black business suit was built from use rather than working out. He wasn't just some meathead that wanted to lift heavy things to impress people. He was a predator, ready to pounce on you from 20 feet away and bite your throat out even as he disemboweled you. He was flanked by a much smaller Lynx draped haphazardly on a fainting couch against the left wall in a slightly ruffled gray suit that looked notably cheaper and less well-cared-for than Anthony's. Standing behind him and off to the side was a lean cheetah woman in a suit that matched Anthony's perfectly. She was the smallest of the three build wise but somewhere between the two in height. Unlike Anthony who was casually drawing his attention from his work to me, and the Lynx who looked like he didn't care about anything at all she'd had her eyes locked on me from the second the door was open. As I stared her down for a drawn-out moment, I saw her

claws flex and unsheathe from her fingers before pulling back in; the feline equivalent of popping your knuckles to intimidate someone.

Bodyguard, got it.

"Hey Mittens, how's the mafia business?"

The Cheetah and Lynx both blinked in confusion at my sudden, irreverent greeting of the tiger in front of me, stunned into silence by my irreverent attitude and borderline insulting pet name for their boss. Anthony, for his part didn't seem to take it to heart. Either that, or he was just calmly planning my murder in his head and wanted it to be a surprise for later. Slowly, the tiger pushed himself up from his seat and began walking around the desk towards me, speaking as he did.

"Detective Stone. always a... pleasure. You should be more careful the manner in which you address people, however. Some might find such flippant attitudes and lack of respect as insulting. And some people can be so unreasonable when insulted."

The threat was clear in his voice even if his words were not. I know they're trying to be all vague for plausible deniability sake but it still pissed me off when they would just say to my face "hey, I'm gonna have you beaten half to death if you talk like that again."

"Yea Yea. And I can be unreasonable when I'm in a hurry. Cut the threatening crap and answer my questions. the sooner you do the sooner I leave and you can get back to watching your orgy pit from on high."

Now the other two were looking annoyed. The Cheetah was glaring at me but otherwise hadn't moved from her position. The Lynx on the other hand looked like he was about to blow his top from what I assumed was the disrespect he saw me aiming at his boss. Before he could start ranting and threatening me on his boss's behalf, I spoke towards him without ever letting my eyes leave where they were locked staring down Anthony's.

"And you keep your pants on, Kid. the big boys are talking. When mommy and daddy are done you can have a cookie before bed. Till then, keep your mouth shut."

Now the Lynx looked like he was about to pop a blood vessel. I actually heard the holes his claws made when they dug into the fabric of the couch he was sitting on. He froze, then forcibly had to push himself back into a fully sitting position when Anthony spoke again.

"And which of us is the mother and father in this scenario?" He asked with wry amusement. "I have to admit, you would look so flattering in a low-cut red dress."

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

"Fuck. I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

We both chuckled about it for another moment or two before Anthony cut off and his expression went serious again. He leaned forward slightly, making a bit of a show of having to lean down a bit to better match my eye-line and emphasizing his height superiority. Classic attempt to project dominance and far from unexpected.

"Now, Detective Stone. Why should I give you any information about anything? Or are you here to purchase information? Something tells me that your salary won't cover our standard prices, and I don't think the city is going to let you expense a charge from us."

I was ready for this, but I still wasn't looking forward to it. There were only two ways to get things from the Jungle cats: buy it, or take it. I couldn't afford to buy it, so I had to take it. There's a bit difference between taking something and stealing something in their mind, though. Which is why I had come to Anthony face-to-face.

"You're not giving me anything. I'm here to take what I need then leave."

The moment I had finished speaking I swung a left cross as hard as I could towards his head. Unfortunately, with my arms having been relaxed at my sides until then the swing was wide and awkward. Anthony, on the other hand, was not only already tensed for a fight but was very, very good at fighting. His own arm had jerked up to catch the inside of my wrist with his forearm the moment I had begun moving. At the same instant, his other arm had jerked upwards and delivered a powerful blow straight to my gut. I doubled over as the air was forced from my lungs, a tiny bit of spittle flying from my muzzle and splattering onto the front of his coat. He didn't follow up his attack though, which was good. The tiger was so confident in his superiority in combat he was perfectly happy to stand there and let me take a half step back, catch my breath, and even bring my arms up in a proper fighting pose.

"Please, Detective. Do we really need to continue this? I'd rather not have to send home one of the boys in blue with more bruises than you already have."

I didn't respond to his taunts though. He'd probably expected me to go down from that first punch. I may not be the best in a fight, but I'm pretty damn confident in how well I can take a punch. That fact seemed to have earned me a tiny modicum of respect from Anthony. The last time I'd been here I'd just had to kick one of his lieutenant's ass hard enough for him to call it off. But this time I needed something straight from the horses-er tiger's mouth so I had to go for the big fish. Even if I was confident I could knock him out if I hit him just right (I was damned confident in my right cross) the chances of me actually being able to land a hit on him were slim to none. He was just a better fighter than me. Which is why I'd come prepared. I made a show of stretching my left arm out a bit, spreading my fingers then clenching them inwards to pop each knuckle. I saw the tiger's eyes linger briefly on my weird glove choice, but it wasn't enough to draw his attention away from me as a whole. Without wasting any more time I

sprung forward and started swinging my right arm towards him. Anthony had seen it coming the moment I started to move, and already was raising his arm to block. Which is when I snapped the fingers of my left hand.

A flash of fire burst from my ring finger and thumb, a small gout of flame roughly the size of a golf ball appearing for a half-second just above my hand. The tiger's eyes went wide, every gaze except for mine reflexively drawn to the flame. Everyone has a primal instinct about fire, and every one of them suddenly was worried something in the room had caught aflame. That distraction is what let my knuckles slam headlong right into the edge of Anthony's jawline. The whole room seemed to shake from the impact, or at least that's what I liked to tell myself to make myself feel more bad-ass than I really was. The myth of there being some magic off button that you can hit on someone's jaw to knock them out in one hit was total bullshit. What wasn't bullshit was that a good hit at an angle to someone's jaw would rattle their brain around in their head; which is exactly what happened to the tiger. By the time the feline had even realized what had happened, he was on his ass in the middle of the floor. He'd stumbled in his sudden disorientation and fallen backwards, struggling to regain his senses. Now that he had them back, he found himself looking up at me. I stood over him with a playful smile, snapping my left hand over and over. Each time I did the tiny little bit of flint attached to the remnants of my glove skittered together and left off tiny sparks.

"Flash-cotton. I was obsessed with magic tricks when I was ten. Super thin and dried out cotton needs just a spark to catch fire and it burns up instantly. Burns up too quick to even really burn you, but for that split second it looks really cool when I'm making a fireball out of nothing, right?"

His brain still a bit addled, it took Anthony a few more seconds to absorb what I had told him. Then he began to chuckle softly. He started to shake his head in disbelief, but quickly stopped that when the movement made his dizziness worse. He was being a surprisingly good sport about things. Honestly, I'd expected him to sic the others on me. Then again I had little faith in people's personal code of honor and all that nonsense when it made them look weak in front of their subordinates. But, luckily for me, it seemed Anthony was a true believer in their little might-makes-right world view.

"Now that I've kicked your ass in front of witnesses. I've got some questions you're going to answer."