

CATFIGHT

By Rob Hines

Problemo dropped a bag of avocados next to me while I laced up my boots.

“What are those for?” I asked him.

“The booze,” he said. “They’re full of fat. It’s the same thing as eating a slice of greasy pizza at the bar.”

“Too late,” I told him. “I’m already sober.”

“Seriously? I just bought you a bag of avocados for nothing?” Problemo picked them up and dropped them in the locker room trash can.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” I said.

“I’m your business partner, you know. If you decide to stop drinking, you really need to let me know.”

“This match is a big one, so I didn’t drink today.” I walked over, retrieved the bag from the trash and handed it back to my manager. “Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to get shitfaced tomorrow. And now we can have guacamole.”

“Fine.”

I threw some shadow punches, then picked up two dumbbells for some heavy curls. Gotta make those biceps pop for the crowd.

“Winning the belt tonight,” Problemo said. “Crazy.”

“Who’d a thunk?” I smiled.

“They’re gonna go nuts out there,” he said. “Do they still throw batteries?” he clutched the sides of his head. “I should have a helmet.”

“I don’t think they throw batteries anymore. Too many cops watching.”

“Still,” he said. “We’ll have to watch ourselves.”

There was a knock at the locker room door. A voice called from the other side.

“FIRECAT! YOU’RE UP!”

I took a deep breath and grabbed my mask. A ferocious orange fabric feline stared back at me. The Firecat was born years ago, but the next twenty minutes was going to define its legacy. No one had ever won a title with this mask, and I was about to change history. I used a moment to silently thank the men who had worn the face of the Firecat before me, and I dedicated the match to their spirits, praying that I wouldn’t let them down.

Problemo put his mask on, making his familiar complaint. “A possum. You get to be the ‘Firecat’ and I’m just a possum.”

“Possums are tenacious fighters and skilled deceivers,” I said, turning to him. “You should be proud.”

“Yeah, sure,” he replied as we approached the curtain. He peeked from the side of the black drape to see the crowd. “I still wish I had a helmet.”

“THE FOLLOWING CONTEST IS SCHEDULED FOR ONE FALL, AND IS FOR THE WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP!”

Hearing the ring announcer make it official gave me chills. Then adrenaline took over. My legs moved on autopilot as I walked through the curtain. The crowd showered us with boos, but fortunately no projectiles. Yet.

“INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGER...FROM HOUSTON, TEXAS...WEIGHING 275 POUNDS AND ACCOMPANIED BY EL PROBLEMO... THIS IS FIRECAT!”

I entered the ring and postured to the crowd. I was a heel, but a confident heel. I didn't whine and argue with the fans. That's what Problemo was there for. My persona was all intimidation, but at that moment, I was the one who was a little intimidated.

“AND HIS OPPONENT...FROM EL PASO, TEXAS...WEIGHING 253 POUNDS...HE IS THE REIGNING AND DEFENDING WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION...EL GATO DEL NORTE!”

The Cat of the North made his way to the ring. His mask was ice blue with sparkling accents that made him look like he had just crossed the arctic. Every fan was on their feet and he gave high fives to kids and old ladies as he proceeded down the aisle. These people would be incensed in just a matter of minutes when I defeated their hero. That was called “getting heat,” and heels are trained to love it, but I still felt some sympathy for the children who would likely be in tears seeing their champion go down in defeat.

When the champ made it to ringside, Problemo was in his face, giving him a serious tongue lashing. My friend was truly in his element. If he hadn't been in wrestling, he would have been an amazing villain in the movies or on those TV cop shows. Gato walked past him without consideration, which just played into Problemo's angry little man character. One of the benefits of wearing a mask was I could watch these mini-plays and smile at my friend's antics. But once Gato entered the ring, we were all business.

The referee was Emilio Cruz, and I knew him well. He had been a referee for decades in Texas and had worked many of my matches in the past. He delivered some basic instructions as Gato and I fixed our eyes on each other. We tapped fists and backed into our respective corners to wait

for the bell to ring. In the corner of my eye, I noticed a man in a suit approaching ringside. I looked over at Problemo on the opposite side of the ring and he shrugged. Then the bell sounded, starting the match.

Gato and I locked up, pushing each other back and forth. While in this position, I asked him if he knew the guy.

“Who?”

“The guy in the suit,” I said. “To your left.”

He glanced over and quickly said, “No idea.”

I ducked down and flipped him with a fireman’s carry. He got back to his feet and we were once again facing each other. This time, I grabbed him in a headlock. He pushed me over into the corner and Emilio started to count to five as the rules required me to break the hold within five seconds. I waited until 4.5 and let go. The crowd sent a hail of boos as I pointed at them menacingly. The man in the suit just stood and watched, smiling at what he was seeing. As I was distracted, Gato grabbed my lower body and tossed me over the ropes to the floor. The crowd cheered the babyface getting one-up on the heel. I made it to my feet and Problemo came over. “Find out who that is,” I said. He nodded, gave me a quick backrub to “heal” my injuries, and went over to some of the ringside workers to get info.

I returned to the ring, and challenged Gato to a Test of Strength, raising my hands over my head to encourage him to do the same. He looked to the crowd and they were mixed in their reaction. Some cheered him on to show me he was stronger, but others adamantly warned him not to take the bait. As he locked his fingers with mine, I sent a kick to his gut and dropped the Champ to his knees. This started the tried and true “face-in-peril” sequence, and I worked Gato over to the great dismay of his fans. A combination of strikes and throws allowed me to assert my

dominance and create some doubt that Gato could survive this title defense. Meanwhile, I was watching Problemo to see if he had learned anything. He just kept shrugging when I looked his way.

When it was time for the babyface comeback, I climbed one of the corners to the top turnbuckle and confidently taunted Gato and the crowd. Then I jumped about ten feet in the air and aimed my body for the fallen champion. At the last second, he raised his knees into my abdomen, which was his opening to retaliate. It was my turn to take a few minutes of punishment, resulting in me falling to the outside of the ring. This was my chance to see what Problemo knew.

“He’s an executive, I think,” he said. “One of the owners? Maybe he’s here to give you the belt after the match.”

“Really?” I was surprised. Heels don’t usually get a ceremony after a title change. For the safety of everyone in the building, they’re usually ushered out of the arena as quickly as possible.

I didn’t have time to think about it, because it was about time to go to the final sequence of the match. Gato was going to bring me back into the ring and attempt his finisher, which I would block and counter with my own finishing move. Then I would make an illegal pin with my feet on the ropes, grab the belt, and hit the bricks.

A hand grabbed the top of my mask and I slowly crawled into the ring. Gato gestured to the crowd and teased the big move. He picked me up on his shoulders and prepared to deliver the Death Valley Driver, which would drop me on my neck and shoulders. It was a move that looked particularly devastating, but I wouldn’t be taking it that night. I kicked furiously, making Gato lose his grip and I dropped behind him and pushed him into the ropes. When he bounced back, I caught him, spinning around and slamming him down on his back with a Spinebuster. It sounded perfect and I heard audible “oohs” in the crowd as fans felt the pain Gato expressed on his face. I

pivoted my body toward the ropes and placed my feet on the second rope, which is an illegal advantage, but Emilio was supposed to make the three count as if he never saw the cheat.

Instead, he slapped his hand to the canvas twice and the man in the suit jumped up to the ring apron, which interrupted his count. The man was pointing at my feet and protesting to the referee that I was cheating.

I was stunned. This wasn't the plan. I looked at Problemo and he was just as shocked. I stormed over to Emilio and the man in the suit dropped back down to the floor.

"What the hell?" I said. "What's going on?"

Emilio shook his head. He was clueless, too.

Gato came up from behind and delivered a forearm to the back of my neck.

At least, that's what I was told. The blow was hard and intentional. The champ changed the plan and he had just knocked me out. From what Problemo told me, Gato spent the next few minutes posing for the crowd, most of whom were still cheering for him, but a few were visibly concerned with the lifeless challenger laying in the ring. Just as I started to come back to consciousness, he picked me up. Without my cooperation, his moves would be limited, but he was strong, and he was able to lift my 275 pounds to deliver a hard body slam. Since I was still a little woozy, I didn't protect myself and my head bounced on the lightly padded mat to more gasps from the crowd.

Gato taunted me as I instinctively pulled myself up the ropes. When I made it to the second rope, I started hearing cheers. The champ looked at the man in the suit for direction, and the man looked around at the crowd. I grabbed the top rope and got one foot under me. A roar started near the ring and made its way to the back of the arena. Gato was frustrated at the fans' reaction and he wrapped his hands around my neck, pulling me all the way to my feet.

I was barely standing and he pointed at me while he looked to the crowd. “Is this your champion?” he yelled.

He slapped me. The mask protected my skin, but not my pride. He slapped me again, and the crowd booed. The cobwebs began to clear and I saw El Gato Del Norte in a red ring of rage.

I ducked a third slap and charged him into a corner. I laid in about five heavy punches and heard the air leave Gato’s lungs. Emilio tried to exercise the rules, but I told him to leave me alone. To the crowd’s delight, he backed off and let me keep beating on the champion.

As Gato tried to regain his breath, I used my size advantage to pick him up and take him down with a belly-to-belly suplex, dropping all my weight on his chest in the dead center of the ring. I grabbed his legs and rolled him up for a pin. Emilio stood paralyzed for a moment, then dropped down to begin counting.

One.

Two.

The man in the suit grabbed Emilio’s leg and pulled him out of the ring to break the count. He began to berate Emilio, threatening him if he defied his orders. Problemo ran up from behind and knocked the man out with the solid metal title belt. Emilio was still stunned at the turn of events. “Get in there and count, dammit!” Problemo said.

Emilio snapped to action and leapt into the ring faster than I had ever seen him move before. He raised his hand over the canvas.

One.

Two.

THREE!

The bell rang and the crowd exploded. Problemo flew up the stairs and slapped the belt on my shoulder as the ring announcer made it official.

“THE WINNER OF THIS MATCH... AND NEW WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION... FIRECAT!”

Emilio raised my hand and kept an eye on the man in the suit who had regained his senses and was pulling the former champion out of the ring.

“We’re probably all fired, huh?” Emilio said.

“Maybe,” I said. “But look at the bright side. No batteries!”

Problemo looked around at the crowd of happy faces and nodded.

“Yeah. This is nice.”

I glanced over at Emilio, who was also taking in the moment.

“Thank you, Senor,” I said. “You risked everything tonight.”

“Eh,” he replied. “I had a good run. It’s time for me to retire anyway.”

When we had our fill of admiration, we left the ring together. Instead of taking the aisle backstage, we walked through the crowd, accepting high fives and back slaps on the way out of the arena.

“Hey,” Problemo said. “Your clothes are still back there.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “So are your avocados,” I held up the belt, “but now I have this. I think it’s a good trade.”

We found the closest exit and took off in my car to leave town, find a bar, and celebrate the victory.