

Caught

By Chris Thurman

Arclin ran through the trees, his legs fighting to keep up with the unexpected pace he demanded of them. “Got to... keep... running,” he panted, his legs searing with pain as bushes whipped against them.

He looked behind to see the lamp lights from his hunters as they ran after him. The Enforcers. A small, specialized police force built after the revolution meant to track down and catch the remaining shifters like Arclin, who had escaped the uprising. Shifters had been the ruling class until about a decade ago. Now they were hunted because of their innate ability to change into another creature, and the fear they would try to rule over those who couldn't shift again. The last decent meal that Arclin had had was over a year ago, and that was because someone had forgotten to lock the door to their house before leaving.

A branch snapped behind him, and he looked back to see the three Enforcers and their lamps gaining ground.

Need to move faster, he told himself. They're keeping up.

But his legs couldn't carry him much further. He needed to find a way to lose them.

The sound of rushing water reached his ears and he grinned. He followed the sound and came to a stream that was almost large enough to be a full-on river. If only it *was* a river, then he could have hidden in the water instead of running. Deciding to not pine over his circumstances, Arclin waded across the ice-cold water, conscious of the chill running up his legs as the cool autumn breeze wafted around him.

Curse the gods and their changing weather. He should have had summer weather for at least another few weeks, instead this accursed chill was here making him chatter. He worried his shaking bones might give him away.

Climbing out of the water he rested on the bank and realized it was a little too steep, He'd need to be careful as he climbed in the dark. Carefully, slowly, he began to pull himself up making sure to have a good foot hold before continuing up. He was a little more than halfway to the top when a light fell upon him.

“There he is!” an Enforcer with a deep voice cried. “After him!”

There was a splash of water and he glanced back as three Enforcers jumped in after him. They all wore the same green uniform of an Enforcer and they each held a lamp. The light from their lamps illuminated the brook where the stream lay and the tallest of their group was making the best time across the water as they ran after him.

“Quick, before he shapeshifts and runs away,” the deep voiced Enforcer said, his badge on the shoulders marking them as their captain.

Arclin cursed. Blast his luck! He thought he had left them in the city. Who in town had alerted the Enforcers that he was a shifter? He hadn't shifted in front of anyone recently had he? The only ways he knew to tell a shifter apart was either track them down from their family trees, or to make them change in the open, and he hadn't done that since... well, maybe he had done it once last week.

He tossed caution to the wind and shimmied the rest of the way up the high bank. Looking back before running off he could see his pursuers had already crossed the stream and were already starting on the deep incline. He stomped on the edge, tried to kick dirt into their faces to slow them down and then booked it in the opposite direction.

Blaming himself for his tired body, he kept what he hoped was a steady pace. *But where can I hide? I need a place to hide!* Why, oh why did he have to get caught! It was just a little fruit. The cart owner never seemed to mind if he stole some fruit here or there. At least, Arclin didn't think so since the Enforcers or the police had never been called before. Perhaps someone remembered what he looked like when he had shifted into his wolf-dragon form? Could they have recognized him that easily?

That's the last time I let myself steal from that cart owner. Or even that town!

His stomach growled, reminding him of why he had tried to steal food in the first place. *Unless I want to die, I should probably avoid shifting,* he worried. Shifting now could use up the last of his energy, and instead of getting away he'd be caught. While shifting was a natural ability it still took energy, and a lot of it. Shifters could only change into one other shape, and it was usually determined by their ancestry. Arclin's family claimed their bloodline was one of the purest for dragon shifters known as Drahl. Obviously, someone had taken a liking to a Rathi warrior and added their wolf shifting blood into the mix.

Oh, how he wished he could have had wings to fly. But for now he just wished to have strength running through his limbs again. His father had always said, "Strength over weakness." He had always assumed that meant to be weak was to give your enemies an advantage over you. Well, right now his apparent weakness was allowing the Enforcers to catch up with him again, and again.

If only I was strong enough I could have gotten away from these Enforcers long ago.

He plowed through some bushes, angrily cursing them for their noise and for whipping at his legs mercilessly.

Suddenly, Arclin burst into a wide clearing and he could hardly see the trees on the far side. His heart pounded in his head. How was he supposed to escape now? Any direction he went would allow the Enforcers to find and follow him easily. It was getting brighter as the light from their lamps shone through the trees behind him. They were almost caught up again.

Surveying the area quickly, he spotted several large bushes among the tall grass and he ran to the nearest one, sliding to a stop behind it. Praying to the gods above that the Enforcers wouldn't find him, he worked on calming his breathing.

"Hurry! This way," an Enforcer called. "I saw him enter the clearing just a few second ago. Spread out. He won't get away this time."

Arclin cowered behind his bush. *Don't let them find me, don't let them find me.*

He held his breath as the Enforcers drew nearer and nearer. He could see their lamps lighting up the clearing. One of the lights came dangerously close to revealing where he was hiding, the bush casting a shadow around him and keeping him out of the light. Arclin held his breath.

"I've got one!" an Enforcer called out, and the light creeping toward Arclin moved away from him and toward the Enforcer who had spoken.

He heard some shouts. From someone other than the Enforcers? Surprised at his luck from just being missed he tentatively peered around the bush to see who they had caught.

"It's not the one we were looking for," the shorter Enforcer grunted as he pulled a girl out the rest of the way from behind another bush. "But I'm sure she'll do." Arclin was about eighteen, but she looked a little younger than he was at around sixteen or so, and her hair was a

matted mess over her tan skin from living out in the woods and hung in clumps around her head. Face half covered in hair, she snarled as she clawed at the Enforcer holding her.

“Leave me alone,” she said as she tried to pry the man’s fingers off her arm. “You don’t know who you’re messing with.”

“Can’t be anyone too important,” the tall one laughed as he grabbed her from the other side. “Otherwise you would have been on our watchlist.”

The girl tried claw at their hands to get away by, but with both holding her now Arclin knew there was no way she could escape. He turned away, ashamed of himself and his weakness. *If I wasn’t starving, I could help her,* he thought, trying to excuse his cowardly actions.

“You’re going to regret this!” the girl shouted as the Enforcers pulled her back the way they had come.

“I seriously doubt that,” the captain said, and Arclin heard a thud as the girl gasped in pain. “You weren’t the one we were after. But you’ll be a good consolation prize for what we missed out on, especially if you happen to be a shifter.”

Arclin squeezed his eyes shut. *I can’t help her. I’m too weak. We’ll both be caught if I try.* He heard them punch her a few more times and he winced with each one, the heat in his face rising with anger. The girl moaned as they dropped her to the ground, laughing.

This wasn’t what he wanted. Arclin had just wanted to get away, he didn’t want someone else to suffer for what he had done. But what could he do? He was weak, and they could easily stop him if he tried to help the poor girl. He shook with anger as the girl sobbed, angry at himself and his weakness. He should be the one getting punched, not her. He should have stood up ages ago before the Enforcers had taken over. He should have stood up when they had raided his

home and killed his family! When they killed his little sister, mother, and father. All because they were shifters.

“Perhaps we’ll have some fun before we take you back,” the tall Enforcer said loudly. “They don’t need to see how pretty that face is of yours to know your trouble. I’ve got a debt to pay to you shifters for getting my brother killed in your wars.”

“We aren’t to break any bones, now,” the captain said. “But a good punching bag is hard to come by nowadays, and like you said, we all have a little something to share from our families.”

They each muttered in agreement, and Arclin gritted his teeth. He couldn’t take it anymore. It was one thing to chase him down for stealing, but this... this was inhuman. He had seen them catch other shifters before, even peaceably. But these were not those same men.

I’m not going to let her suffer for my mistakes. Arclin made up his mind as it snapped into place. Without even thinking about what he was doing, his form rippled as he shapeshifted, growing bigger until he was just a little larger than a man. His body rippled with scales and fur that stuck out between them down to the tip of his strong tail. His paws held razor sharp claws, and his mouth had been filled with little sharp teeth. Three rows of spikes jutted down his spine like a saw blade.

Jumping from around the bush he saw the two Enforcers who had been holding the girl bending over to pick her up again. The captain standing in front of her.

Arclin charged forward on all fours. His open mouth open as his serrated teeth flashed in the moonlights. Perfect for ripping into an Enforcer’s flesh. He bounded towards the Enforcers, only needing to take a few leaps and he was there, jumping into the air to bite the captain’s head off.

The captain, however, had seen him jump and had swung his fist to intercept. Arclin was able to turn his head just enough that he caught the punch inside of his mouth. Pain shot through him as his vision burst with stars, his animalistic instincts kicking in and clamping his jaw shut, biting into the captain's hand and together they crashed to the ground.

The captain howled as his blood filled Arclin's jaws, and he felt the captain's hand rip from his mouth as Arclin got to his shaking feet.

The captain was cradling his hand in the crook of his uninjured arm as he lay moaning on the dark ground. "Get him!" he growled through his teeth. "Get that shifter before he runs off!"

Arclin's vision swam as he saw both the tall and shorter Enforcer hesitate. They had seen what he could do if he bit them.

Arclin snapped his bloody jaws at them menacingly. Despite his eyesight clearing up, he was quickly losing strength and he knew that if he changed back now, they'd have him.

The girl was still on the ground, but she was not lying as still as he had suspected. Her form began to change and Arclin knew he needed to give her a little more time. Reaching out, he snapped at the heels for the Enforcers still standing and made them jump away from the girl.

There was a strong kick from the captain lying on the ground beside him, landing a hit right at Arclin's head. He fell to his side, his head throbbing in pain, and his body exhausted beyond what it should do. He let his body shift back to his human self, and he groaned as he placed a hand to the side of his head that had received the blow. Drawing back his fingers he could see blood dripping from their tips.

"Take him!" the captain spat, still cradling his arm. "And if I lose my hand on the way back, I'll make sure to even the odds, boy."

A moan escaped Arclin's lips as he was lifted to his feet. There was thud as a fist made contact with his stomach, and pain seared across his vision as he doubled over, gasping for breath.

"That's for biting me," the bloodied captain snarled.

There was a loud screech and the Enforcers dropped Arclin to his hands and knees as they all looked to where the girl had been a second before. Now, instead of a hapless girl, they found a cat-dragon who was much larger than Arclin when he shifted. *So, she's got Drahl blood too huh?* Arclin thought sluggishly. *Must have some Silvi blood in her.*

The cat-dragon girl growled at them with her whiskered snout that was leaking a small amount of smoke through her nostrils. Her bright orange fur partially hid her hard scales underneath, along with her strong muscles that she flexed at the Enforcers as a puff of smoke escaped from her open mouth.

"She's a fire breather!" the tall Enforcer said, turning around and sprinting off into the dark woods, leaving his lamp behind.

The cat-dragon girl screeched again and shot a ball of fire at the captain, but he had dodged out of its way and it barely missed him, blasting into the ground, and lighting the clearing on fire. Grunting with the effort, the captain turned tail and threw another kick into Arclin's bent over head as he ran away, the last Enforcer following close behind.

Arclin felt himself fall to the ground, his head ringing as the already dark sky above winked out. The last thing he heard before losing complete consciousness was the screech of the shapeshifter girl as she supposedly gave chase to the Enforcers into the dark night. His mind began to drift, and he thought he could feel a warmth envelope him like a cocoon as the flames faded from sight.

