

Changeling

By Tiffany Reyes

The sheriff of Quadrant X watched Max Xeno with eyes afire. She was happy to sentence him, to take him down. He knew that. Everyone did. She'd known he was guilty since the day of the murder. The sheriff didn't know the whole story of course. No one did. So others glared at him, too, wanting to hear the worst punishment possible. Whatever would hurt him the most. Whatever would make him pay for the murder of his brother's wife. She appeared to most as a noble, god-fearing woman. Far from it, actually. A bit of a reckless spirit. Got herself into a lot of trouble. Not just drugs, but some other particularly nasty situations. Like this one.

The others in the courtroom looked like they were waiting for someone to serve them a feast. Their eyes were hungry, wicked even. And Max just stood there, tentacles limp at his side. He'd lost. Not just the court case. He'd lost his family. He'd lost his friends. He'd lost any respect people had for him. He'd lost it all. But if he had to do it again, he would've. Because it was for his brother. And in the Xeno household, family came first. It was old school, sure, but that's just how it was. His brother knew it, too. Maybe even took advantage of that fact. But Feral already had a bad rap, and murder would've surely gotten him the worst death penalty imaginable: being eaten by a wicked stone teeth worm. Most people didn't know there were dragons in space. Funny, huh?

The sheriff blabbered on and on, but Max didn't listen. He was thinking of his future. Or lack thereof. It was over for him. Killing a woman was a big no-no for any race or culture. But add the fact that she's pregnant? Then you know you're going away for life. It was a hard pill to swallow. But at least this way, Feral was in the clear. Still alive. Could still go to family functions and live his regular life. Meanwhile, the Xeno's would surely visit Max on holidays. He was pretty sure they would, anyway.

Max glanced around at the gawking sets of eyes. My gods, some of them were *smiling*. Smiling! He couldn't believe it and had to crack a smile himself. That received a few gasps and a low growl from the sheriff. She stroked her barbed beard and tsk-tsked him. He didn't bother to explain she got it all wrong, that he was just chuckling over how dirty and tasteless this audience

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was. But according to them, he was among the worst. Not so much dangerous as he was evil and sinful.

The sheriff got to discussing the murder. Taralee had been fileted. Not by Max, of course. That was all his brother's doing. But the sheriff talked to Max like he'd been the one anyway. The way Max and his brother worked it out, Max wanted Taralee dead because she dismissed his advanced. You know, because she loved Feral so much and all. No one close to Max and his brother believed that though. Everyone saw the way Taralee and Feral were. Constantly bickering, fighting, about anything really. It wasn't all Feral. Taralee was no space picnic either.

Taralee liked to pick on little things, but *lots* of little things. And it would blow up on Feral who just took it out on her any chance he got. In private, of course. And Taralee had a spending problem. She could go through a million galactic credits in three hours if you let her. Sucked Feral dry. Feral, on the other hand, had extremely high standards for his trophy wife. And getting herself knocked up was not one of them. Max knew Feral got nagged by a few of the guys at the club he managed. It was embarrassing for the big guy, when appearances meant everything. So Feral just had enough of it, it seemed. One day, he just...snapped.

But no worries. Big brother Max was there to take the blame. Anything for family. Anything to help them out. Feral was appreciative...he thought. Eh, it was hard to tell with big, tough guys like him. Words had to count for everything in their case. Max hoped he meant it. Because he did sacrifice everything to help his little brother out. So he confessed to the crime. They caught him literally red-handed. It was a bloody crime scene, that's for sure. One he'd never forget. Not in his dreams or his nightmares. Man, did Feral make a mess of things.

The sheriff slammed her gavel a few times. The sentinels swept in and pulled Max from the room. He was antsy to get the cuffs off his tentacles. They were rough and gave you sharp jabs of electricity if you pulled on them too much. The sentinels led Max outside to the spaceship destined for Earth. That was the punishment for murder of a pregnant woman. The worst any alien could begin to expect. A lifetime on Earth. What was more terrible than that? Nothing. Nothing at all. Anyone who didn't think it was all that bad had never been to Earth.

It wasn't something Max was looking forward to. Death would've been easier. But this was the path he chose and he just had to live with it. It wouldn't be all that bad. He didn't have any kids or a spouse. He didn't really have anyone. He was divorced and had just moved back

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home hoping to start anew. So yeah, nothing. He had nothing. That made it easier in a way. Because there was no one there to miss him.

Yeah. No one there to miss him.

In a way, that was the worst part. Feral wouldn't miss him. His family wouldn't miss him. But Max could pretend. He could tell anyone new he met on Earth that "back home," he had a wife and kids and a golden retriever. Isn't that what people on Earth had? Golden retrievers?