

The Mixcoat household still lived in the house Hardir had before he died five years ago. It was in a higher-middle rated neighborhood for families. By the size, Marlot guessed they had three or four cubs. He could have pulled the family's information from the revenue database, but had decided to face them without any scent to preconceive his expectations. Having to raise her family alone couldn't have been easy on her or the cubs left behind.

He stepped out and hurried to the door, careful not to lose his footing on the not entirely cleared path leading to the house. He knocked and put his hands in his pocket. Before the cold could seep in too deep the door opened and Marlot stared at Hardir Mixcoat.

"Yeah?" the man asked, his voice sounding too young, and Marlot realized his eyes were gray instead of blue.

"I'm here to see Miss Mixcoat." Marlot reached for his ID, but the man was already looking into the house

"Mom," he called, "there's someone here for you." He motioned Marlot in. "Come in before you freeze your tail off."

"Thanks you." The door opened to the living room, which took the whole front of the house, where three cubs were playing. One a video game on the screen the other two with toys on the floor. Their colorings were brindled, but in varying shades of brown and reds. The one seated on the couch had to be in her low teens while the two on the floor close to ten.

The one who'd let him in was vanishing out of a door on the opposite side of the living room.

"Brathen, check on Vix, she'd been too quiet," a female said as she appeared through another door, wiping her hands on a cloth. An indistinct reply came. She was rust colored, faded in places due to age. Marlot looked at the cubs, or maybe stress. She smiled at him. "Hello, how can I help you?"

Marlot showed his ID. "Registered Investigator Marlot Blackclaw, I'm wondering if I can have a word with you." He looked at the cubs. "In private might be best." The two on the floor were pulling a figure between them.

She chuckled. "I don't know how private I can make any room, but follow me." She turned. "Tarl, let your sister have the toy, there's enough for both of you."

He older of the two let go of the figure and the youngest gave him a raspberry. Then Marlot followed their mother out of the living room. The kitchen was cluttered, meat in the process of being cut, containers of vegetables, a lot of them, packages of pastry dough.

"I can't afford to feed everyone an entirely meat base diet," she said without trace of embarrassment.

"How many cubs do you have?"

"Six still living here. My eldest left two years ago. Brathen could leave, but he's staying to help out. Without him, and Jareth before, I have no idea how I'd have managed." She put on baking gloves. "I hope you don't mind if I keep working while we

talk. Preparing food of everyone isn't fast. Take a seat. Do you want something to drink? Water is all I can offer I'm afraid, I have to keep the blood for the youngest, they need it the most since they're still growing."

"Water will be fine." Marlot sat at the large table. As she poured him a glass of water from a container she took from the cooler, he tried to come up with a way to ask his question that showed more sensitivity than he felt he usually did.

"Ask your questions," she said, putting the jug away. "I'm guessing you're here because of Brathen's hunting."

"Why do you think that?"

"You're an RI. Him and me are the only one of predation age and I know I haven't left anyone lying around. Brathen..." she trailed off, "well, he's still young and not always as careful as he should be."

"I'm not her for him," Marlot replied. "I actually have question about your deceased mate." He hesitated. "He is deceased, correct?"

She nodded, going back to cutting meat. "A little more than five years ago now. Pardiss never got to know her father."

"What do you remember of the circumstances surrounding his death?"

She paused. "A hunting accident is what I figured happened. He didn't come home from work one evening, we were low on meat so I thought he was late in catching anything. As much as I loved him, Hardir was never the greatest provider, either of food or money."

"So having to use vegetables to round the meals isn't a new thing?"

She chuckled. "This is much better than back then. I can't remember how many times vegetables was all I ate so the cubs would have some meat on their plate." She dumped the cut meat in a large bowl and set about cutting vegetables.

"I'd have expected things to be worse after your mate's death, you say he wasn't a great provider, but he did provide."

"I was terrified for that week until I received his belongings. Of course by then I knew he was dead, and I was trying to figure out how I was going to keep us afloat, taking care of this bunch if a full time job and I had Jareth, my oldest, right out of the academy. She wasn't planned, but we didn't mind. Hardir was a hard worker, and keeping the three of us fed was simple. Even once Brathen came we still managed. For decade everything was fine."

She cut vegetables in silence for a few minutes, adding them to the bowl. "Thing his company downsized. He found work, but the pay was lower. Hardir was a male who dealt with stress through sex, and I was more than happy to help him, but it lead to making the family larger. More mouths to feed, more stress, more time in bed."

"Didn't you consider fertility treatments?"

"No, but those cost, so even if we had, I don't see how we could have afforded them. The females in my family are all quite fertile, so we learn out cycle young. But with the stress, keeping them wasn't easy for Hardir."

"Then he died," Marlot said to bring the conversation back on track. "You were

afraid things would be worse, but clearly they weren't."

"Not as bad as I feared, no. His survivor's benefits were higher than I expected. Then Jareth was offered a new job, a higher paying one and she returned home to help out. With her here to help with the cubs, and Brathen also old enough to give a hand, I was able to find part time work at a restaurant not far from here. That also had the advantage that the owner let us split the food that was about to be thrown out. It wasn't much and it wasn't reliable, but everything helped. It was hard, but it got better."

"Have you received any outside help since then?"

"No. I applied for a few government support programs, but we were just above the approval limit. Jareth sends me what she can, but she'd building her own family now. So we work a little harder, and now, everyone in this house had some meat on their plate at every meals." She added a jar of sweet smelling sauce to the bowl and mixed it. "Even if it's never all that fancy."

"Would you mind looking at a picture?" Marlot brought up the one Jaxca had included for identification. There was no doubt the male was dead, but the head had been straightened, fur brushed. It was before he'd begone working on him. "The reason I'm here is that I have a body that's a double of your dead mate, and he went by the same name."

She paused in taking the pastry sheets out of their packaging and looked at his pad. "That certainly looks like him." She studied it closer. "The fur doesn't have his sheen, but this male's dead, so I'm guessing that's why. Yeah, I can see why you thought he might be my Hardir. He didn't have any brothers, only two sisters, so I'm not sure who he can be."

Marlot nodded. "Is there any chance your mate had contacts that would make it worth while for a look alike to assume his identity?"

She chuckled. "No, Hardir's rating was definitely not going to increase. His family is middlingly like us, I think their's doing a little better since all their children have moved out, but nowhere to a level that someone claiming to be Hardir would have anything to gain from them."

Marlot nodded, putting the pad away. "How old was your mate when he died?"

"Forty-two. He was two years older than me."

Forty-six matched Jaxca's determination of the body's age. Marlot's instinct told him there was no way someone would take this male's identity after his death, as the female said, he was just too middle-rating to bother, and his prospect had not been looking up. So that left him with this being the same Hardir Mixcoat who'd died six years ago. Only it made no sense. Why would anyone pretend to die? He'd have to live without an ID, which mean he was worth nothing. If he'd taken a different name, there had been the chance he was using a fake ID, but he still went by Hardir Mixcoat.

If he proved this was the same male, what did that mean for his case? Did he have to find who had kill him this time or because he was already dead was the case already closed? His first task was to prove under the law if they were the same person. The only certain way to do that was to match his DNA.

“Do you have anything of your mate I could have? This body’s not in the database, I’d like to at least confirm it isn’t him properly.” The lie had been so easy he almost corrected himself, then looked at her work.

“I think I still have the belongings they returned.” She was at ease with her situation. Her mate died years ago. “For a while I didn’t think I could move on without him.” She’d mourned him, gotten on with her life. Would it improve anything for Marlot to tell her his suspicions? For her to know that for six years her mate had lived in the city and not come to her? He thought it over as she took the backing gloves off. Wiped her hands. “I’m going to have to pull them out of storage, it might be a few minutes.”

“Take your time,” he answered, still thinking, trying to determine if this was him going for the easy way to get what he wanted or if it was best for her family, because he needed to consider the cubs, her older son, even the daughter who’d moved out. Would any of them gain something if they found out their father had been around without their knowledge.

He couldn’t see how they would. He couldn’t see anyway in which knowing their fathers had been alive and not visited would make them feel anything but pain. Knowing that whatever his reasons had been, Hardir had preferred living without a rating to being with them.

When she returned with a revenue issue package he was at ease with his decision. Not telling them was for the best. He opened the package to take a piece of clothing that was certain to contain fur, maybe blood.

“Take it all,” she said.

“Are you sure? One piece of clothing will be enough. I don’t want to take all you have left of him.”

She smiled. “That isn’t been Hardir in years. I have the memories of the good time we shared. It’s all I need anymore.”

“You’re cubs?” Marlot asked.

“That was at the bottom of a box. They haven’t needed their father’s scent either.” Marlot nodded. “I will return this once I’m done.”

“Thank you, just don’t feel you need to rush it on my account.”

He stood and she escorted him to the door.

As he hurried to his car, Marlot realized he had another unanswered question. If Hardir went by his old identity, he had no ID card on him, so why would his killer leave a free meal to be claimed by someone else?