

The tracking program's response made no sense.

Marlot stared at the 'no result' message. How could providing the body's name return a 'no result'? How could there be no one named Hardir Mixcoat in the revenue database? He considered this had been a visitor — there were far away places who didn't use productivity rating, even now — but someone one had stated he lived nearby. It was possible to visit, and even stay for a few days with an ID card, but to have an apartment required being in the system.

There were plenty of male brindled colored wolves of the height and mass of the body, but the system considered them alive; their ID had been used to pay for something in the last twenty-four hours.

Marlot wondered if this was a case of identity theft. There hadn't been a recorded case in over a decade, since the last database upgrade, but someone could have gotten through the encryptions and security processes. Nothing remained secure. Only, for identity theft to be effective, the body needed to be eaten, or at least hidden; constant investigations made using the ID difficult.

"And his name would be in the system." That more than anything made him think Hardir hadn't used his real name. It wasn't unheard of. Even people who obeyed the law somethings wanted to disappear for a few hours. The shop where Hardir had been seen wasn't one that required ID. None of those in that neighborhood were. At the rating of an area dropped. The business people had to become less selective about who they served. Accepting physical currency was the simplest way to do that. Without the ID, Marlot couldn't find out what kiosk had been used to withdraw the money.

Could there have been an error on the ID? He'd never heard of an error sticking, too many processes were in place to catch them, the simplest one was kiosk asking for the user to confirm their information each time they used a kiosk. Annoying, but effective. He programmed a letter flipping process in the tracker and set it running.

It didn't like it and crashed. He cleaned the process, and it gave him hundreds of meaningless results. He'd set the priority so it would ignore species. He corrected that, and he received three results. A Hadrir, and Ahrdid and a Hardri, all males brindled wolves, none of them in the city.

He considered adding the last name to the letter flipping process, but how many foreign last names were only flipped letters away from a local one? More than what he'd gotten at this point, he expected. It was five minutes to add that code to the program, and he set it running. That would take a while.

While it did that, he entered the revenue database. What could he do that his program didn't? He filtered it to only the resident of the city. Close to ten million people. When he asked for the wolf population, the database asked for more criteria, like a time frame, status, employment. He quickly filled those. Nearly a million wolves in the city. That seemed high, but it wasn't like Marlot had paid attention to any of the census results. His job had never required that he do this kind of search.

Brindled, brought the result down to just over two hundred thousand. Male, just under a hundred thousand. Starting with H, two thousand six hundred and eight. HA.

Hardir Mixcoat came up, eighth in a list the database told him was seventy-eight names long. Marlot straightened. How had he gotten the name when his program hadn't? He looked through the criteria, the city, brindled wolf, male, status, time frame. He'd entered fifty-five years, instead of five.

Sighing, he checked the rest of this Hardir Mixcoat's details and found what he expected. His tax was paid six years ago. He snorted. Dead Male Walking. It'd be funny, if not for the fact it meant it was of no help to him at all.

He messaged Trembor and received a generic 'I'm busy,' message. He was still in that meeting with his lawyer then.

He let his head fall back and looked at the ceiling. Noting the imperfection in the paint job. He had nothing. No dental records, no DNA; not even a match within the database. The closest was a male dead for six years.

Marlot straightened.

Was he dead? How would the system react if somehow the ID wasn't deactivated with the record of the death? He looked through the information he could access, but nothing there about the status of an ID card.

He'd gotten halfway through the mainframe's firewall when he stopped; Trembor's words coming back. How it started with easy crimes, simple ones. He backed out and brought up the revenue department's IT. After searching, and not finding any names he knew, he called one at random.

"Larmor, IT," a female answered.

"RI Marlot Blackclaw, I have a question about the database."

"ID number, please." Marlot gave it. "What's your questions, RI Blackclaw?"

"Where can I find the status of an ID card on someone who's been declared dead?"

"There isn't a status on deactivated cards."

"That's my question, how do I confirm the card's been deactivated?"

"The ID comes back as dead," she answered. "It's an automated system. When the tax is paid the ID is suspended. Once the ID Arrived at the processing center, it's scanned and moved to the dead files."

"Can I access that?"

"Why would you want to?"

Marlot stifled a sigh. "So I can confirm it's there."

"Of course it's there."

"So there's a way I can access the dead card database?"

She typed. "No, sorry, that's not accessible to the outside."

"Alright, then you can access it, I can give you the ID so you can check it."

More typing. "How old is the ID?"

"Six years."

The typing stopped. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I need to—"

"Look, do you have any idea how many dead ID are processed each year?"

Marlot shrugged. “In a population of ten million? I figure the rate of death is under ten percent, so a million.”

“How do you get a population of ten million?” he asked in disbelief

“It’s the city’s population as of the last census, give or take.”

“You do realize we process every city, right? On the entire continent. Take that ten million and add a few zeroes to it. Do the same to how many deaths we process every year. There’s no way to maintain a database that large.”

Marlot almost told her she was wrong. It was all data, not physical cards. It was just a question of information compression, but she was only IT, and this was the government, so there was no telling what the reasoning was.

“How long at they kept?” he asked, not holding out hope.

“Two years for any cards that come through the kiosks. Five for card numbers that don’t get confirmation of receipt, and indefinitely for any cards on bodies in an RI’s freezer.”

“So, if there had been a glitch in the processing of a card six years ago, it’s possible someone could slip through the wind without being noticed.”

“I suppose so,” she answered, her uncertainty making it sound like a question. “I mean, I can’t see how they could use the card without the system flagging it, but these are computers, so what do I know?”

Marlot nodded. He knew. The odds of a glitch were low, but when they processed a billion of death every year, even a one percent chance became a certainty. “Thanks for the assistance Larmor.” He disconnected the call.

If this was a glitch, he wouldn’t be able to find anything in the system. He pulled the dead Hardir’s information. He had a family, a mate, and three cubs, Omatia Mixcoat’s number was in the system. She’d kept the last name. Was that an indication her mate was still in her life, or just of how much she loved him?

He smiled and wondered if he should take Trembor’s last name. Marlot wouldn’t lose much by abandoning the Blackclaw name. His family’s history didn’t extend past Low Valley, and what it meant to him there wasn’t something he cared to be reminded of.

He had her number entered in his pad when he hesitated. If she’d kept the last name because she loved him that deeply. If he was dead and Marlot was looking as another type of glitch, how much would having to revisit the death hurt her?

That death was common didn’t mean it stopped hurting.

He pulled her address. At the very least, he owed it to her to be there if the question caused her pain.

He hesitated, remembering the times he’d rushed to confront people with some painful fact because he needed information. He realized his history of putting what he wanted before other people’s feelings ran longer than when he’d hurt Trembor. How many times had Trembor warned him to be careful? Was this him rushing to trample someone’s feeling again?

His answer was no, of course not, but he’d told Trembor that each time, hadn’t he?

He called Trembor and received the generic message again.

He couldn't ask for his lion's help. Maybe that was for the best. Marlot needed to learn to handle these situations himself. He pocketed his pad and stood.

He'd be careful, he promised himself. He'd make sure to keep his nose to the wind and not push any further than she let him. His need for information didn't outweigh someone else's feelings.