

“Ade 3M127T462H.”

“Yes!” The interviewer looked up from the display that he was reading. Ade suddenly regretted speaking. “I’m sorry, am I supposed to say yes?” The interviewer did not respond. “I just presumed that you wanted me to confirm who I am, that’s all.”

“We know who you are. You are Ade 3M127T462H.”

“Yes, of course. I am sorry.”

“When I want an answer, I will ask you a question.”

“Yes, I understand. I’m sorry.”

“Do you know why you are here?” Ade blinked at the interviewer. “That was a question, Ade 3M127T462H.”

“I’m sorry. I’m nervous.”

“I can see that.” Ade lowered his gaze as the other stared at him intently. “I am still awaiting an answer!”

“I’m sorry?!”

“Do you know why you are here, Ade 3M127T462H?”

“Well, yes, I mean, no. I mean, I know that I received an appointment and that it is mandatory to attend, but no, I don’t know why I was called in.”

“Don’t you?” A long pause developed. “That was another question.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

“No, I don’t know why I was called in.”

“You need to pay attention, Ade 3M127T462H. You need to be both concise and honest in the answers that you give me. This interview is being recorded, which is normal under these circumstances, and your punishment will depend on the arbitrator’s understanding of your situation.”

“Punishment?!” Ade looked concerned.

“We don’t reward people for breaking the law, Ade 3M127T462H.”

“I haven’t broken the law!”

“Haven’t you?”

“No, honestly. I haven’t broken any law, not knowingly at least!”

“Not knowingly, that is an interesting phrase that you chose to use there.”

“Honest, I am a law-abiding citizen.”

“You consider yourself a law-abiding citizen?”

“Yes, in everything I do!”

“Then perhaps you can explain this to me?”

The display that the interviewer had been reading suddenly appeared projected in the air before Ade's face. His eyes scanned it quickly, but he looked dumbfounded.

"I don't understand!"

"Your IQ score suggest that you should be able to read this simple report."

"Yes, I can read it, but I don't understand it all the same."

"Don't you? Then let me explain. This report is based on a measurement of your daily breathing pattern. The average person breathes 11,000 litres of air a day, this is the figure that the government fixes its tax rate upon. People who breathe less than 11,000 litres a day are, therefore, avoiding paying due revenue to the government."

"A tax dodger? I'm not a tax dodger!"

"These figures suggest otherwise, Ade 3M127T462H. You have been breathing less than 11,000 litres a day on a pretty consistent basis for some time now. How do you explain that?"

"I don't know!"

"You don't know. That is hardly an acceptable answer. You appear to be of average height and average weight for your age. The government expects you to consume 11,000 litres of air each day and to pay the due tax accordingly. You have not been doing that, Ade 3M127T462H. You have been consuming less than your expected share, Ade 3M127T462H."

"I don't understand?!"

"Well, we do, Ade 3M127T462H. Do you think that you are the first to be brought before us accused of this crime?"

"Crime? I didn't know I was committing a crime!"

"Ignorance is not a defence, Ade 3M127T462H, it is another crime for which you can be prosecuted!"

"I know that. Of course, I know that. I am up to date on all my mandatory self-awareness training. You can check my records!"

"We already have, Ade 3M127T462H." The interviewer smiled, but there was no warmth expressed in their face. "In meeting your mandatory requirements, you never excel, do you?"

"Excel?"

"Do more than is asked of you."

"Oh, right. Well, I'm busy."

"Your breathing records do not agree with you there. Busy people consume more air than the average and pay more taxes as a result."

"Look, I don't know why my breathing looks less than normal on there. Maybe, I have a condition or something? Yeah, maybe that's it. Maybe there's a medical reason for why I'm not breathing as much as other people my age?"

"A medical condition?"

"Yes, I mean, it's a possibility isn't it?"

"It most certainly is, Ade 3M127T462H, but your record doesn't show any applications received for disability status."

“What?”

“You haven’t informed us that you are disabled, Ade 3M127T462H.”

“Well, I didn’t know that I was, well, not until now.”

“Are you going to apply for disability status now, Ade 3M127T462H?”

“Well, I thought that I needed to see a doctor first. You know, to make it official. To get a medical report, I mean.”

“Yes, you do have to do that.”

“Then, maybe, we could postpone this interview until after I see a doctor?”

“No, Ade 3M127T462H, we cannot do that.”

“Oh!”

“I am correct in inferring then that you are not submitting an application for disability status to be considered at this time?”

“Well, no. I haven’t seen a doctor.”

“So, you are not disabled?”

“No.”

“Which brings us back to considering what other reasons there might be for you not breathing your expected quota of air.”

Ade looked at the floor and squirmed in his chair. There was nothing else to be seen in the room, just the table and the interviewer sat on the other side.

“Do you consider yourself efficient, Ade 3M127T462H?”

“Efficient?”

“Yes, as in being well organised and competent.”

“Yes, I think that I am efficient.”

“That is good. Efficiency is good. Efficient people consume just the right amount of resources, however, people who are too efficient can become a problem.”

“They can?”

“Yes, they can. Over-efficient people can actually consume less than expected and thereby create a surplus. The government does not like to have surpluses of anything. The existence of a surplus causes imbalances, and imbalances lead, somewhat ironically in consideration to efficient people, to inefficiencies, and inefficiencies lead to chaos. You would not like to live in a chaotic world would you, Ade 3M127T462H?”

“No. No, I would not.”

“You prefer a world where the government controls everything for you.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“Including the air that you breathe?”

“Well, yes, of course I do. I most certainly do!”

“You would not have any sympathy therefore, for radicals?”

“Radicals?!”

“Yes, you know the type, Ade 3M127T462H, those who advocate breaking the law by indulging in unlicensed relaxation.”

“I don’t know anything about that!”

“Don’t you?”

“No!” Ade shook his head with determination.

“A moment ago, you said that you had completed all of your mandatory training.”

“Yes, and I have.” An equally determined nod of the head.

“Including the module on avoiding radicalisation by extremist groups then?”

“Of course.”

“The very module that uses the relaxers as an illustration of what an extremist group is!”

“Well, yes, I know about them from there.”

“From where, Ade 3M127T462H?”

“That module of the mandatory training!”

“Which one?”

“The one we’ve just been talking about!”

“Ade 3M127T462H, are you raising your voice to me?”

“No!” He looked shocked.

“Excuse me, but it most certainly did sound as if you were raising your voice. Why yes, the decibel recorder confirms it. Please, do not raise your voice again as you will find yourself in breach of the Acceptable Oral Volume Code.”

“Yes. Sorry. I understand. I apologise for my bad behaviour.”

“Ade 3M127T462H, do you understand the meaning of your surname?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Can you explain it to me then?”

“Explain it?”

“I noted previously that you have an average IQ score, I am just wondering if maybe it is actually a little generous, too much in your favour shall we say. Please, indulge me, explain the meaning of your surname.”

“Very well.” Ade licked his lips. “My surname is 3M127T462H, which stands for three million, one hundred and twenty-seven thousand, four hundred and sixty-two.”

“And what does that mean?”

“That there are three million, one hundred and twenty-seven thousand, four hundred and sixty-one people called Ade who were registered before me.”

“Very good! Very good indeed. Well, at least that seems to clear up the question of whether you were miscredited in respect of your IQ score or not. It was a perfect answer.”

“Thank you,” Ade actually smiled.

“But it still leaves us with the unanswered question of why you do not pay as much air tax as the average person does!”

“It does?”

“It does!” The interviewer smiled again. “Just admit it, Ade 3M127T462H, you like to relax, don’t you?”

“No, relaxation is inefficient. We have to keep occupied. A busy life is a worthwhile life!”

“You are telling me that you are a busy person?”

“Yes.”

“That you are always active?”

“Yes.”

“Are you aware that activity leads to an imbalance in the water levels in our bodies?”

“Er, yes.”

“You don’t sound so sure, if I may so, Ade 3M127T462H.”

“No, I am sure. I know about how there’s water in our bodies and that we have to drink it regularly.”

“Good, then I am sure that you will be explain this report to me.”

“Which report?”

“The one that just replaced your breathing records, it concerns your avoidance of the water tax, Ade 3M127T462H. Not only do you not breathe as much as the average person, you don’t drink as much water as they do either.”

“It shouldn’t be a crime to just want to sit and do nothing every now and then!”

“Well, it is, Ade 3M127T462H. Lazy people don’t consume and if people don’t consume then the government does not get its due revenue. I will be recommending that you are charged with one count of air tax avoidance and one count of water tax avoidance. A colleague from the Department of Inefficiency will investigate your latent indolence after the arbitrator has made their decision on whether the charges that I have laid against you are prosecuted. Is there anything that you wish to say?”

“Is there any chance that the arbitrator won’t decide to prosecute?”

“Of course not, Ade 3M127T462H, that would be both lazy and inefficient of them.”