

1. EOIN: THE NAME THAT LINGERS

THE HARMONY CHIME woke Eoin before the light did. A soft, neutral tone, three notes, always the same, always inoffensive, drifted through the PSU's speakers at precisely 06:00. It was designed to be impossible to resent. Eoin lay still for a moment, letting the sound settle into him like a command he had already obeyed.

He rose, folded his bedding with the exactness expected of a Registry clerk, and stepped into the narrow corridor that led to the kitchen. The flat was quiet, as it always was at this hour. Quiet was safe. Quiet meant no one had slipped into the dangerous territory of familiarity.

Mara was already at the table, reading the morning bulletin aloud in her steady, affectless voice. "Productivity targets remain stable. Weather: overcast with intermittent showers. Public ceremony scheduled for Friday. No deviations reported."

Eoin nodded, though she wasn't looking at him. He moved to the counter and began preparing the porridge. The oats were rationed in pre-measured packets; the water was dispensed at a regulated temperature. There

was no room for improvisation, which was a relief. Improvisation invited attention.

Behind him, Tomas entered, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He murmured a greeting, the safe, state-approved one, and took his seat. Siobhán arrived last, as she always did, her posture already stiff with vigilance.

They ate in silence. The only sounds were the scrape of spoons and the soft hum of the ventilation system. Eoin kept his gaze on his bowl. Eye contact could be misinterpreted.

When the meal was finished, they rose one by one, rinsing their dishes in the prescribed order. Siobhán checked the time. "Departure intervals begin in two minutes."

Eoin slipped on his coat, the grey one issued to all Registry employees, and stepped into the corridor. The air outside was damp, carrying the faint scent of the canal he was not permitted to walk beside. He inhaled it anyway, quickly, before the OSH sensors could register a pause.

His commute was uneventful. It always was. The Ministry of Allocation ensured that no route contained surprises. The same faces passed him each morning, never acknowledged, never greeted. They were fixtures, like lampposts or bollards.

At the Registry of Approved Relations, Eoin took his place at his terminal. The screen glowed with the

day's queue of Connection Licence applications. He adjusted his posture, placed his hands on the keyboard, and began.

Application 14-B/92: Request for a mentorship bond between two citizens in adjacent PSUs. Denied—proximity risk.

Application 22-C/11: Request for a friendship licence between co-workers. Approved with conditions—monitored interactions only.

Application 07-A/03: Request for a partnership bond. Deferred—emotional indicators require further assessment.

Stamp. Stamp. Stamp.

The rhythm was soothing in its way. Predictable. Contained. Safe.

Around midday, the Harmony Chime sounded again, signalling the lunch interval. Eoin rose, filed out with the others, and took his place in the communal hall. His PSU sat together, as required. The meal was bland but warm. He ate mechanically, listening to the low murmur of permitted conversation around him.

After lunch, he returned to his desk. More applications. More stamps. More quiet.

It wasn't until late afternoon that something shifted. He opened **Application 31-D/77** and froze.

The name on the form was familiar.

Not personally—that would have been impossible—but familiar in the way a half-remembered melody was familiar. A name he had seen once, years ago, on a list he wasn't meant to read. A name that had lingered in his mind longer than it should have.

He blinked, steadying himself. It was just a name. Just a citizen. Just another form.

He read the details carefully, searching for the source of the unease. Nothing unusual. Nothing dangerous. Nothing that should matter.

Still, his fingers hesitated over the approval key.

A pause like that could be flagged.

He exhaled slowly, forcing his hand to move. Approved. Stamp.

The moment passed.

By the time he returned home, the unease had faded into the background hum of the day. The PSU ate dinner in silence. Tomas assembled a puzzle. Mara tended her plant. Siobhán reviewed her reports.

Eoin sat by the window, pretending to read the state bulletin. Outside, the last of the daylight slipped behind the rooftops, leaving the sky a soft, muted grey.

He thought of the name again. Just a name. Just a form.

But something in him—something small, something quiet—held onto it.

Not rebellion. Not even curiosity.

THE QUIET PROXIMITY

Just the faintest flicker of recognition, like a candle guttering in a draught.

He closed his eyes.

The Harmony Chime sounded for lights-out.

And Eoin, compliant, dutiful, unremarkable Eoin, obeyed.

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