“I just… I just didn’t think a **LIFE** response would ever happen to me.”

Dave had already lost his voice; defeat was now the primary tone to his musings.

“And you’re sure you can’t file another appeal?”

“Ben. It’s not something you *forget*. Under the **LIFE** assignment, there was the big text that said ’NO APPEALS APPLICABLE’”

In the murky quagmire of sadness emanating from Dave, Ben thought back to all of the estrangement surveys he had taken in the past, and tried to remember any possible loopholes or exceptions; though he knew there likely were not any. None of the ES’s he ever took matched the surprise that he felt at his first.

It was a practice estrangement survey, one that all state Low-School students experience before they graduate to Middle High-School. Because every survey needs a subject personality that it is about, this first ES would be a hypothetical scenario, and all standardized Low-Schools used “Cam”.

*Estrangement Survey*

*PRACTICE SURVEY :: CERTIFIED NOT VALID BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ESTRANGEMENT*

*w*

*Hello, student! You are at the brave level of Rank 6, and you should be ready and excited for your graduation from Low-School to Middle-High School to begin Rank 7. Being a Rank 7 comes with a lot of responsibilities ; more homework, growing pains, and more responsibilities from parents - what a bore! Along with these, the Department of Estrangement also requires that you are familiar with the U.S.S.E.S. - The United States Standardized Estrangement Survey. After knowing someone for no longer than a 30 day period, you will both take the U.S.S.E.S., which will calculate an aggregated score that will tell you how long you can associate before mutual departure. This is a Category 2 test, for friendship. Don’t worry about Category 1’s, for romance, usually people don’t take those until late in their M-H school years!*

*Based on the registered subject with the system, you will be given your time span until estrangement. This way, you don’t have to worry about messy breaking of relationships, or not knowing if someone will be your friend - they are assigned to you as a friend until their estrangement date, and then you depart from one another.*

*1) If Cam was trapped in a well, and you had never taken your primaries in swimming, what would yo-*

Ben was brought back to the room from the auditory input of Dave beginning to cry again.

Ben, now 29, no longer had to worry about his ES-1; he first felt feelings for his current romance partner, May, 17 days into knowing her after meeting her at the needle factory. May didn’t agree until day 26 to take their mutual ES-1 - she was agitated by the way that he never stopped shaking his leg, but being 27 and only haven taken 3 ES-1 ’s before, many of her peers thought her to be quite peculiar. They submitted their surveys 28 days into knowing each other, 2 days before the ES deadline. To Ben’s overwhelming excitement, and May’s unanticipated confusion, their results paper had the big purple stamp everyone knew to expect so well. “**LIFE**”.

Ben and May grew into a comfortable marriage. Ben knew some people who had gotten **LIFE** from their ES’s and ended up disliking their spouses enough to accept extinction as their only alternative - Ben knew he’d never have the gall to admit himself to an extinction center, even if he was in a loveless ES-1. The government didn’t want loveless ES-1’s, and ES-1’s can not be dissolved, as a dissolved ES-1 is not conducive to raising bright and bold children. That’s why the government offered the alternative of euthanasia at the extinction center.

Ben’s infatuation never grew, but it never diminished. May learned to love Ben adequately. They were better off than most.

“I just don’t understand how our ES-1 could have turned out this way. We can’t stand each other, Ben.”

Dave and Jana were not sober when they took their ES-1’s. After meeting each other at an underground party and losing their sobriety to illicitly obtained tranks and stims, they made their way to the automated ES machines behind the mid-city slums. When thinking back to that night, Dave never got angry at himself or his wife he did not love- instead, he just felt intense anger at the mid-city regulators, who fought for their right to keep the mostly outlawed non-human run ES machines where they were.

Dave and Jana, half conscious, took their ES right there on that night. Before the results even finished printing out, Dave and Jana had already left back to Dave’s loft. They didn’t even see the result of the slip of paper that the machine spit out onto the ground, denoted at end by a large **LIFE** stamp. Them not seeing the result did not invalidate the implications of the ES. Although they started their marriage with a hopeful apprehension, their love didn’t hold.

“Every day will get better, Dave. You and Jana will learn to co-exist. And when the time comes that you need to create offspring, I know you will both come together to raise successful children. I’ll see you tomorrow, alright?” Ben came up to Dave and attempted to put a reaffirming arm on his shoulder. Dave didn’t respond to his touch.

Dave watched as Ben left his flat. When he closed his eyes, he could feel the emotions encroaching and strangulating his being.

Although citizens aren’t supposed to leave the house after curfew unless you’re heading home, Dave decided he needed some release; some fresh air, some sort of tangible freedom. Something he could control. He walked down the street past his building and all of the identical government subsidized living skyscrapers. He didn’t notice any night patrol, any other people – just the desolation of the quiet night. It comforted him.

With the continuity of his steps forward, he was starting to come to terms with his future with Jana. No, they were not in love; but with a little time, just a little to himself on the side, he could do it; he could handle the marriage, and he would still love his children and he would enjoy life after his retirement.

After walking along the street of the identical skyscrapers, he came to the Big Bridge that separated Town-4 from the nearby forest. He knew that if he was caught he would’ve likely been on trial for going out of boundary and for being out after curfew – consequences were secondary to the serendipity and tranquility of the moment at hand. Looking over the Big Bridge and into the bay, he saw the ship freighters coming in and out of the inlet; he saw the lighthouses signaling the boats into their final destination.

In his tranquility, he heard the voice of a female: one that was familiar, but had a discomforting tone that broke through his moment of calm. He could not identify it; but he sensed boldness in her voice-

“We would’ve had a bad family anyway, Dave”.

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Ben left Dave’s with a smile. He knew that in about a half hour or so, the national cleaning service would be coming by to clean up Dave’s lifeless corpse. After hearing for the past months about Dave’s dilemma, he was approved the rights of assisted euthanasia by the USSES. They insisted on the speed and painlessness of the serum; just that it needed to be mixed into any liquid to be imbibed.

Ben knew Dave was better off without his family, and because Dave just lost an ES-2, he thought of the possibility of a new friend he might get in his place at his next ES-2. He liked to think that his next friend would be as good of a friend as Dave was.