

Always Sunny

Episode 1: Dawn

Themes:

- Inanimate transformation (not heavily featured in first episode)
-

March

Ray was fidgeting with the slider of his jacket's zipper. He looked down the empty hall. One hour after class started, the building was largely empty, especially in the administration section of the university. He was here to apply for a scholarship but the nature of the scholarship made him nervous and the fact that he was all alone made it somehow worse, as if he was the only person in the world who would even consider such an offer.

Finally, the door opened to reveal a man. "Raymond Dawson?"

Ray nodded and got up.

The man smiled and shook Ray's hand. "Glad to finally meet you in person." He gestured for Ray to come inside. "Please, have a seat."

The inside looked like an office. In front of the desk was a single chair, likely for Ray, while at the side of the desk there was another chair, with a woman sitting on it. When Ray approached, she got up to shake his hand and introduce herself. "Ms Beck."

The man closed the door and sat down behind the desk to join Ray and Ms Beck. "Thank you for coming. I'm Carlos Morales, vice principal of Solberg University and supervisor of the Daedalus Project. We briefly talked via mail." He gestured to the woman next to him. "And this is Melissa Beck. She is the project's counselor."

Ray didn't know what to say, so he just nodded.

"Before we go into details," Mr Morales continued. "I would like to ask you how much you already know about the Daedalus Project."

"Well," Ray began. "It's like a science experiment, I guess? Increases physical and mental abilities, but... People turn into inanimate objects after some time."

“Yes, that’s about the gist of it. But it’s less of a science experiment and more of a long term research project.” Mr Morales pulled out a folder, presenting the different files inside one by one. “We have found a solution to, as you said, increase the physical and mental abilities of the person undergoing the treatment.”

He pointed at a paper that displayed multiple people with a before and after image for each. The image before the procedure showed a regular man, usually on the thin or chubby side while the image after the procedure showed an athletic looking man in peak body condition with a wide neck, broad chest and strong legs and arms, someone who wouldn’t at all look out of place on a man’s health magazine cover. Next to the images were scores of various cognitive or mental tests the people took. The scores after the procedure were always near perfect, while the scores before were often all over the place.

“The discovery of this solution was more or less an accident, meaning there are, unfortunately, plenty of gaps in our knowledge.” Mr Morales continued, his voice suddenly more somber than before. “This project has two main purposes. One is to study the process in more detail, testing your physical and mental abilities. For that reason part of your curriculum will be dictated by the project and may change depending on certain events, such as sports competitions. Most do not allow participants of the Daedalus Project to join, but we are in negotiations with several of them. That will make up roughly half of your subjects. The other half you can choose freely.”

Ray looked up at Mr Morales. “And the second purpose?”

“The second is to find ways to, well, get rid of the side effects.”

“To turn people into superhumans?” Ray asked while looking at the bodies of the men after the procedure.

Mr Morales took a sharp breath. “Well, yes. The solution puts the person into peak condition, which also means that certain health defects are being cured. Imagine a world where people can be at their best, physically and mentally, through a simple injection. That is what we are researching.”

“Would it be available to everyone?”

“The solution is surprisingly cheap to produce. If it was up to me, I’d be giving it out for free.” There was again the somber tone in Mr Morales’ voice. “But first we’ll have to... iron out the kinks, so to speak.”

“I see.”

“Speaking of which.” Mr Morales continued, pointing at a timeline. “About the side effects. There will be one injection at the start of the first year. This injection will trigger the physical

and mental transformation. We do have an antidote to stop the decay, but we cannot give it right away.”

“Decay?”

“That is what the process of turning into an object is called.” Mr Morales clarified. “The agent that starts the process begins to decay after a few weeks or months. This decay then leads to the inanimate transformation. The antidote stabilizes this agent, which is why it stops the decay without reverting the physical and mental changes. Unfortunately, it takes almost exactly 48 months for the agent to metabolize into a state to accept the antidote, which is why the scholarship is four years.”

“Is it possible, then, to avoid turning into an object?”

“Theoretically, yes.”

“We have had 58 students joining the project and whose scholarships have already concluded.” Ms Beck chimed up. “Out of those, only three managed to receive the antidote.”

“So, about one in twenty.” Mr Morales added.

“The chance is too low to gamble on it.” Ms Beck said. “When you make a decision, treat the decay as a foregone conclusion. Otherwise, there is a very high chance of regret.”

Ray nodded and thought for a moment. “What kind of objects do the people turn into?”

Mr Morales turned around to pull a ring binder from a shelf and opened it. Inside were pages with photos of both men smiling at the camera as well as an object for each face, side by side. Each entry had a name, a start date and a date labeled ‘PTO Admission’.

“There’s a lot of variety, and we haven’t yet had the same transformation happen twice.” Mr Morales explained as he began flipping through the book. “Even if it was the same object, details such as color or style were different. In general, all objects were somewhere between the size of a shoe or medium sized furniture, such as a pool table. None of the transformations so far were into objects containing electronics. Weapons, such as guns or blades have also been absent. Other than that, it seems like everything’s fair game. Transformations can either be into a single item or into a set, such as multiple pieces of clothing.”

Suddenly a face appeared in the book that didn’t have an object next to it. Ray pointed at it. “What about that one?”

“That’s Terry.” Mr Morales paused for a second, looking at the image. “He was the first to receive the antidote.”

A shiver ran down Ray's back. He knew that all these people in the book were now objects, but seeing Terry and imagining him still being around out there brought the fact of all these other people being items lying around in a shelf or locker, closer to reality.

"Are there any natural objects? A rock?" Ray asked.

"No. Everything so far has been a manufactured item."

Ray looked at a guy turned into a shoe. "I don't recognize these brands."

"Neither do we." Mr Morales had to admit. "None of the brands we have encountered exist and we have not yet had any brands repeat."

"Where do they come from then?"

Mr Morales shrugged. "As I said, discovering the solution was an accident. Learning more about it is also part of the Daedalus Project."

"What does PTO mean?"

"Person Turned Object. That is our term for people who have fully decayed. The PTO admission date is when they have completed their decay and have been officially pronounced object."

"Can they still talk?"

"Yes, although not without help." Mr Morales explained. "We have a special facility on-site that allows them to communicate. We do have regular check-ups, once every six months, but outside of those appointments they are virtually indistinguishable from a non-human object to an outside observer."

There was a short silence as Ray let the information sink in.

"Any other questions regarding the decay?" Mr Morales asked.

Ray shook his head. "No."

"Then there is one more thing." Mr Morales folded his hands together. "The decay is the most well-known side effect, but there is a second one as well, one that happens together with the initial changes."

"Oh?"

Mr Morales took a deep breath. "Every participant had their sexual orientation changed to men."

Ray paused. "I would be turning gay?"

Mr Morales nodded.

"... Why?"

"As I said before, these are the types of questions this project hopes to answer eventually."

Ray felt strange. He hadn't made a decision yet, but so far he felt like he might have signed up. This new detail however made him reconsider. He didn't know whether it was the fact that it was a new piece of information he couldn't emotionally prepare for, or the fact that a change to his sexuality would be a fundamental change to him as a person.

But then again, was it? Would he be someone else, just because he enjoyed looking at another gender?

Ms Beck pulled him out of his thoughts. "May I ask you a question?"

"Yes."

"You already knew about the decay. Why are you interested in joining the project?"

Ray swallowed and started fidgeting again. "I... Life's not been very... I feel like I can't get anywhere. Bad grades. No friends." He looked to the side. "I have nothing to lose and I would like to be someone at least for a while."

"I see." Ms Beck's voice was warm and understanding. "We know this is a lot to take in. You do not have to make a decision right now. Sleep it over. Talk to your parents. Do some soul searching. I don't want to make the scholarship look unattractive," She looked over to Mr Morales. "But we understand that this is the end of the line for our participants, at least until the process can be reversed, if it can ever be. You have some time to look into alternative solutions to the challenges you face." "She smiled. "And if you decide that this is still your best shot, you can come back to us."

"How many spots do you have?"

"We don't have a hard limit." Mr Morales answered. "Currently we have 11 spots left among the dorms we have set aside for the Daedalus Project, but we can always make room."

"Until when do I have to decide?"

"You have time until the new semester starts, which is on the 5th of August, so you have more than two months."

"I see." Ray realized this would give him plenty of time to think it over.

“Any further questions?”

Ray thought for a moment and then shook his head.

“Then thank you for your time today.” Mr Morales stood up and shook Ray’s hand. “I will send you some more information material via mail to help you decide. And uhm... Maybe I’ll hear back from you.”

“Yeah...”

August

“And with that, I wish everyone a great start into the new semester!” Ms Fairfield, the head principal of Solberg University, finished her speech.

Ray was seated in the main assembly hall, an auditorium large enough to provide room for at least a few hundred people, enough for all the students of the university and the teachers. Apparently this was a recurring thing. At the beginning of each semester, the principal would give an overview over what happened in the last six months and about upcoming events and changes in the next six.

Ray felt a little bit out of place, like he didn’t belong. He wasn’t university material and the only reason he was here was to serve as a guinea pig for their research project.

He looked around him at the other guys who also joined the project. They were all seated together and he counted 10, including himself. Everyone was pretty much the same age as far as Ray could tell, somewhere between 19 to early twenties.

As Ms Fairfield walked off stage and most students began getting up, Mr Morales quickly grabbed the mic. “As always, I would like the members of the Daedalus Project to remain seated. Everyone else, have a nice day.”

As the other students trickled out one by one, Ray felt his nervousness increasing. By remaining seated, people knew he was going to be one of *those* guys, not a proper student. Now there was no blending in with the crowd. He didn’t look up, but he imagined their eyes on him.

Eventually, the hall almost emptied, except for a handful of people, a bit more than two dozen. Apart from some of the staff, all of them were men, and all of those except for the freshmen looked like they spent every free minute at the gym.

The other guys next to him looked at each other. Now they knew who was part of the project for sure.

“Now, there is not much to say about the last six months.” Mr Morales continued, now flanked by three more members of the staff. Ray recognized Ms Beck, but there were two more men he didn’t know. “We are making steady progress, but of course, the finish line is still a ways off. Now, as it is the new start of the year, we have a few new faces.” He gestured towards the back row, where Ray and the others sat. “Welcome to the Daedalus Project.”

Suddenly everyone turned around to face the ten young men. The facial expressions ranged from welcoming smiles to curiosity. Ray felt put on the spot and was glad when everyone turned around again as Mr Morales continued.

“Okay, let’s introduce the people you’ll be working with.” He gestured one by one to each of the others next to him. “You already know Ms Beck, who will be your counselor. You will have regular checkups with her, so we know how you’re doing.”

“If you need any help, no matter what it is,” Ms Beck chimed in. “You can always come to me.”

“Then next we have Mr Lou, who is head of research. You will have one regular class with him where you go over the latest findings of the Daedalus Project. Mr Lou will also take monthly blood samples to monitor the agent’s progress in your body.”

Mr Lou nodded to the audience.

Finally Mr Morales turned to the last person. “And this is Mr McCarthy. He is your physical trainer, preparing you for the various sports competitions.”

“You can call me coach.” Mr McCarthy said.

“And that’s pretty much everyone you need to know.” Mr Morales finished. “You will naturally have various teachers for your regular classes, but they are not part of the Daedalus Project. Any questions?”

Silence.

“Then let’s move onto your fellow students. Each of you will share a dorm with a junior or sophomore, who we hope will become your guide to life in the Daedalus Project. Additionally, you will have a mentor for your first weeks.” Mr Morales motioned to three people in the front row. “If you would be so kind?”

The three men stood up and joined the vice principal on the stage. One of them was dressed in baseball catcher gear, complete with pads, helmet and even glove; pants and button-up shirt awkwardly worn above the armor.

“These are our remaining seniors: Liam, Austin and Shawn.” Mr Morales turned to address Ray and the other new guys again. “Each of you will be assigned one mentor, who will introduce you to the campus and be your guide for the first few days.” He turned to the seniors again. “You guys take it from here?” The men nodded and Mr Morales turned to the freshmen. “Today your mentors will show you around and answer any questions you have. You will even have the opportunity to talk to one of our students who has already completed his decay. Then you have a night to sleep on it and tomorrow you will receive your injections. Any further questions?”

Again silence.

“Then let me officially welcome you to Solberg University and the Daedalus Project.”

With that, Mr Morales and the rest of the staff left the stage. Most of the juniors and sophomores began to get up too.

The senior dressed in baseball gear approached the mic with a paper in hand. “Hey, I’m Liam and I’m the mentor for Pablo, Fabian, Julio and Christopher. Please come to me, thanks.”

Four of the freshmen stood up and made their way to join Liam.

Then the next senior spoke into the mic. “Hi, I’m Austin and my assigned freshmen are Victor, Yeong and Kenneth.”

More of the freshmen stood up. Now only Ray and two others remained.

Then it was the third senior’s turn. “I’m Shawn. Umm, Raymond, Marc and Gavin, please come to me.”

Raymond got up and walked to his assigned senior together with the other two.

“Nervous?” Shawn asked the three freshmen.

Nobody said anything, but the three nodded. Ray looked up at the muscled frame of Shawn. Was he taller too? Would the solution grow them in size as well?

“I think we all were.” Shawn laughed. “Anyway, ready for your first day on campus?”

Ray made eye contact with the others. Nobody looked excited, but he could see the relief in their eyes, the same relief he felt right now: At least he wasn’t in this alone.

“So, first thing we’ll go to the dorms, so you can drop off your stuff there.” Shawn said as the ten freshmen and their mentors walked. “After that we’ll split up. Liam, you wanted to go to the main building first?”

“Sure.”

Shawn looked at the remaining senior. “Austin?”

“Doesn’t make a difference. Dormitory?”

“Alright then.” Shawn turned to Ray and the other two in his group. “That means we’ll cover the outside first, check out the lake. Then we’ll rotate. And at the end we’ll all meet back here at the dorms.”

“And after that,” Liam began. “You’re going to meet one of the post seniors.”

“Post seniors?” One of the freshmen asked. “You mean, someone who made it?”

“Made it?” Liam looked at the freshman. “Christopher, right?”

“Chris, please.”

“Chris, don’t go into this project hoping you’ll be the one. That’s the wrong mindset. There hasn’t been a single student who received the antidote since we started here as freshmen. Everyone here went through the decay and has earned our respect. Everyone here ‘made it’.”

“I was told the chances are 1 in 20.” Another freshman chimed up, Yeong, if Ray remembered correctly.

“Technically they are.” Austin said. “But over the course of the whole project. The first version of the agent was more volatile. The chances of the decay not triggering until the person receives the antidote was much higher, around 1 in 7, but on the other hand for those who did decay, it started within weeks after the injection.”

“Wait, they made it worse?” Yeong seemed angry. “Instead of giving people a chance to receive the antidote they took it away from everyone?”

“It’s a trade-off.” Shawn explained. “The ultimate goal is for everyone to receive the antidote. For that purpose they are trying to stabilize the agent, make it last long enough so the decay doesn’t happen. The increased stability comes at a reduced lifetime.”

“Current strategy is to stabilize the agent until the point of decay becomes predictable.” Liam added. “Then, once the agent is fully stable, they will work on extending its lifetime.”

“So we’re just fodder for the meat grinder.” Yeong continued.

“No,” Liam countered. “You’re willing participants who know the risks.”

“Then why did they lie about the odds?”

“I assume it wasn’t intentional.” Shawn said. “Mr Morales is very open about the project and actively refused testing on prisoners, although the government has offered.”

“Yikes.” Chris said.

“Yikes indeed.” Shawn shrugged. “We’re all here voluntarily and not because we got pressured into it or blackmailed with the promise of freedom. Mr Morales and Ms Beck are very much on our side here. I assume they didn’t think what they said got interpreted in that way.”

There was a short silence.

“Liam?” Marc asked. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you wearing baseball armor under your clothes?”

Liam let out an amused sigh. “I’m not wearing armor. I’m becoming it.” He pulled up his shirt to reveal the front padding on his torso. “I’m turning into catcher gear.” He gestured over his entire body. “Pads, shoes, helmet.” He waved. “Glove.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. As far as decay goes, this isn’t the worst.” Liam thought for a moment. “Except for the helmet. Nights are a pain.”

“And here we are.” Shawn interrupted as the group entered the dormitory building. A big glass facade let light into the interior. The upper floor did not extend all the way to the front side of the building, leaving a two storied empty space filled with seating areas between the dorms and the facade, like a lobby of sorts. The walkways on the second floor made the entire area almost look like a vacation resort. “Dorms are on the second floor. Ground floor is all lounge, lobby, showers and stuff.”

The group made its way up the stairs to the second floor. “Alright, let’s meet here again in ten minutes.” Shawn and the other mentors pulled out some cards. “These are your keycards for the dorms.”

The mentors passed down the keycards to every freshman. Ray received #102 and walked to his room.

When he opened the door he found a guy lying on one of the beds, seemingly waiting. "Hey there." He jumped up from the bed, his muscular frame towering over Ray. He extended a hand. "You my new roomie?"

"Yeah." Ray shook his hand. "I'm Ray."

"I'm Nickolas. Call me Nick." He let himself fall back down onto his bed with a relaxed sigh.

"What year are you?"

"Junior."

Ray knelt down in front of the closet to unpack his stuff. "You don't have class?"

"Not today." Nick replied. "Mondays are always Daedalus classes with Mr Lou, but we skip them on the first day of each year because the mentors are busy with the freshmen."

Ray stuffed his clothes into an empty drawer. "Ahh."

"Man, you brought a lot of clothes."

"Just two weeks worth."

"I mean..." Nick began. "You're gonna throw most of that out in a couple days anyway."

Ray turned around. "Why?" Then he saw Nick's tall muscled frame and realized. "Oh... yeah."

"Don't worry, bro." Nick laughed. "We all made that mistake."

Ray didn't say anything.

"So," Nick smirked. "Already pumped?"

It took Ray a few seconds to reply. "I don't know, to be honest."

"Worried about the whole decay thing?"

"That too, I guess?"

"What else is there?"

Ray shrugged. The part about turning into an object seemed so distant and abstract, but a change to his sexuality? He didn't know how to breach that topic without making it awkward. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

Ray paused and looked at Nick. "Why did you choose to join the project?"

Nick smiled with a squint. He expected that answer, it seemed. "Why did any of us?" He shrugged. "No perspective, no future, nothing to look forward to. I figured I get to have the body of my dreams for a few months and then I'm back to where I started, just in a different shape."

Ray returned his attention to the closet.

"You?" Nick asked.

"Same, really."

"See? It's pretty much the reason for most of us."

Ray turned to face Nick. "Any regrets?"

"Nope."

"How many of your friends have already..."

"Decayed? Four from my freshman group. My mentor. My first roommate. Several of the others."

"Does it get easier with time?"

"Easier?" Nick leaned back. "You need to stop thinking about it in that way. Accept it as something that happens, as something you signed up for. We've started to throw parties whenever someone starts to decay, like it's some form of accomplishment." He looked Ray in the eyes. "Ask yourself: Did you sign up because you wanted to become a superhuman or did you sign up because you wanted to escape your shitty life?"

"And this is what we call the Beyond." The janitor explained as he led the freshmen and their mentors into the basement of the main campus building.

They found themselves now in a somewhat wide hallway. Near the entry on the left was a double steel door with a keypad next to it to enter a code. On the right side was a single

door, also with a keypad. Further in, towards the end of the hall was a big glass window on the right, as well as a third double door right next to the window.

“This is where people who have gone through their decay are stored.” The janitor continued. “And this is also where we can talk to them.”

“Stored?” Ray asked.

The janitor pointed to the double door on the left. “That’s the vault. With some exceptions, everyone who completes their decay moves in there.”

Yeong furrowed his brow, looking at the heavy steel doors. “Looks like a prison.”

“It’s not a prison.” The janitor countered. “Before we had this security, some of the students got stolen.”

“Did they get them back?” Gavin’s face was pale.

“Oh yes, don’t worry. Luckily it was just done as a prank, so they were quickly returned.” The janitor said. “But... the kidnapped students didn’t think it was funny and the incidents made us implement proper security as a result.”

“I know it looks bad,” Shawn chimed in. “But it’s for your own good...” He thought for a moment. “As authoritarian as that sounds. And you may have the option to be placed in a more public area if you’re too big to be stolen, or being sent to your family.”

“I can let you in, if you want.” The janitor offered.

“Sure.” Shawn agreed.

The janitor swiped his keycard through the lock and opened the doors, letting the group inside. “There you go. This is the vault.”

While the mentors walked inside as if they had been there several times, the freshmen all formed a clump at the entrance, hesitant to enter.

Ray looked around. It wasn’t like he imagined. He expected a dark ugly place with concrete and metal shelves everywhere, like a storage tends to look like, but instead it was well lit with warm light. The walls had proper wallpaper and there was even a carpet on the floor. If it weren’t for the lack of furniture this might have looked like a hallway of someone’s home.

Although, technically speaking, there was furniture: Racks and shelves filled the room. Each one had different objects on display. Ray looked at a speedo next to him in more detail. He couldn’t see any hint that it used to be human. Anatomically speaking it was a piece of swimwear and virtually indistinguishable from a non-human object. However, a card, like a student ID card, was attached to it via a plastic string. Ray couldn’t make out what most of

the card said from his vantage point, but a big bold text on the bottom spelled 'Person Turned Object DO NOT REMOVE'.

"Didn't you say they can talk?" Kenneth asked.

"Not without help." Shawn replied. "We have to use the communications room on the other side for that."

"But..." Pablo spoke up. "Can they hear us?"

"They have touch, sight and hearing." Shawn explained. "But no smell and taste. And no vertigo either. So yeah, they can pretty much see and hear you."

By now most freshmen had entered the vault proper. Ray only saw Gavin and Yeong standing at the entrance.

He returned his attention back to the items on the shelves. It was difficult to imagine these were people, but Ray forced himself. His eyes fell onto a football. The name tag identified it as a student called Connor.

This was going to be his future, wasn't it? First spend a couple months as a beefed up jock and then...

His hand absentmindedly reached out to touch the football on display.

"No touching." Came the janitor's voice.

Ray recoiled his hand as if he had burned himself on a stove. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't-"

"No harm done." The janitor continued. "Just remember, don't touch a PTO unless you've got explicit consent."

"Truth be told, Connor probably wouldn't even mind." Shawn told Ray. "We often use him for practice, but yeah, what he said."

The janitor let the students look around for one more minute before he spoke up again. "So, ready to actually talk to one of them?"

Shawn looked around at everyone. "I think so, yeah."

"Then let's go." The janitor waited until everyone was outside and then closed the door again.

While the mentors guided the freshmen to the window at the end of the hallway, the janitor entered the small room opposite of the vault.

On the other side of the window was a featureless room with a concrete pedestal in the middle and a skateboard resting on top of it. On the right side of the room was another window to the small room with the janitor. From what Ray could tell it had technical equipment in it like servers and control panels. On the other side of the room, on the left, was a garage-like gate, no doubt connecting to the double door next to the window. That was likely how one entered the room. Ray noticed a radiation hazard sign right above the double door.

“So this skateboard right there?” Shawn pointed into the room. “This is Hunter, one of the guys who started together with us.”

“Why is he in a special room?” Ray wanted to know.

“PTOs cannot really talk like humans do.” Shawn explained. “Instead they send out something similar to brain waves. Unfortunately, in order to pick up these brain waves, they need to be surrounded by a special type of radiation that’s harmful to living matter.”

“Deadly radiation?” Yeong blurted out. “How does one even discover something like that?”

“Research?” Shawn shrugged. “We can detect the brain waves just fine with regular equipment, but in order to isolate it from the background noise, you need to increase the amplitude by applying a same frequency--”

“It’s ready.” The voice of the janitor coming from the loudspeakers interrupted Shawn’s explanation. A light lit up above the window.

“I’m sure you’ll cover it in Mr Lou’s classes.” Shawn turned to the window. “Hey Hunter.”

A voice different from the janitor’s sounded from the loudspeakers. “Hey. Those the new guys?” To Ray’s surprise it didn’t sound robotic or monotonous at all, more like a person speaking into a microphone.

“Yup, we got ten this time.”

“Nice.”

“So, Hunter.” Shawn continued. “How’s life?”

“Ah, you know, the usual. Sitting on a shelf, twiddling thumbs, uh metaphorically speaking of course, and waiting until something happens, heh.”

Shawn leaned against the window and looked at the freshmen. “You make it sound so boring.”

“Yeah well, it’s not the most exciting life, I guess, but you know, it’s not the worst either.” There was a short pause. “Oh! Forgot to mention that PTOs experience boredom a little bit

differently. You can kinda zone out, I guess? You're not getting bored out of your mind sitting here, don't worry."

"Wow, what a relief..." Ray heard Yeong say to himself. If either Hunter or one of the mentors heard him, they didn't show it.

"Yeah, that's what I was getting at." Shawn continued. "Don't wanna scare our freshmen, do we?"

"Guess not!"

Ray could swear he heard something like amusement in Hunter's voice. It definitely wasn't like a simple text to speech program.

"Alright then." Shawn looked at the freshmen one by one. "If you have any questions for Hunter, ask them now. This whole setup is pretty expensive so usually a PTO is only brought here once each semester for checkup."

Fabian raised his hand and Shawn nodded for him to ask his question. "What does it feel like..." Fabian gestured with his hands. "Being an object?"

"Well, as I said, it's largely uneventful." Hunter replied. "There's not much to say. It's pretty mundane all things considered. You just sit on a shelf. That's it. And occasionally, someone takes you out for a skating sesh."

"And what is it like to, uh, change?" Fabian dug deeper.

Ray saw Liam, who stood a bit to the side look up into the distance upon hearing the question. "Decay." He murmured his correction.

"Real talk? You go through a bit of an emotional rollercoaster, heh." Hunter explained, seemingly not having heard Liam's comment. "Denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance. It's different for everyone though, but it's going to be a journey."

"Do you have any advice?" Shawn asked. Ray couldn't tell from his tone whether he was asking for the freshmen or himself.

"Aim for acceptance." Hunter's voice produced a laugh. "But seriously, when it happens you can't change it. You can yell at the clouds as much as you want, but ultimately the faster you work through your emotions the more you get out of your remaining time as a human."

Nobody said anything.

"That was quite the bomb, wasn't it?"

"They need to hear it though." Shawn commented.

Marc was next to ask a question. "Why did you choose to stay here?"

"As opposed to?" Hunter sounded confused.

Marc looked at Shawn. "Well, Shawn said that people also have the choice to go to their family."

"Those are exceptions." Shawn took over. "The faculty wants PTOs to stay on site for research purposes. Occasionally an agreement can be made to send them to their family, either temporarily or permanently, but it doesn't happen a lot."

"And, to be honest, I kinda prefer being here." Hunter added. "Got all my bros here and we all went through the same shit. Feel like my family would be taking this much differently."

In the resulting silence, Ray raised his hand. "I have a question."

Shawn nodded for him to go ahead.

Ray looked at Hunter while he chose his words carefully. "Are you happy with your decision?"

There was no answer at first and Roy was worried that there was a technical issue, but then Hunter's voice sounded from the loudspeakers. "Honestly, I don't know. It's hard to say. Happy... Is anyone happy? I don't regret my choice if that's what you mean. Can't turn back time. Acceptance also means that you have to accept your past decisions, be they mistakes or not." Another short silence. "I made friends here. I was happy with my body for the first time in my life. I would be inclined to say for these things alone it was worth it."

There was a moment of silence as the words sunk in.

"Any... other questions?" Shawn asked into the round.

Nobody said anything.

"Then, thanks Hunter."

"No problem!" Hunter replied. "See you around."

"We will." Shawn pulled out his phone, presumably checking the time. "Alright, how about lunch?"

"Sounds good." Austin confirmed.

"Mind if I join you guys later?" Liam asked. "I wanted to talk to Hunter."

“Sure thing.” Shawn turned to the freshmen. “Everyone else, let’s go.”

“Okay, who’s up for a round of pool?” Shawn asked as the group entered the lounge.

“Does that mean the tour is over?” Gavin asked.

“Well, kinda, I guess.”

“I would like to leave then.” Gavin half turned around. “Explore the area a bit.”

“You can do that afterwards.” Shawn offered. “Come on, I wanna take your mind off things for a bit, get to know you.”

Gavin rolled his eyes but walked back towards the group.

“Last stop for today, I promise.” Shawn pulled out the triangle rack for the pool table. “Okay, we’re three teams, each mentor and their assigned freshmen. And we’ll play three games, each team combination once.” He looked at the other seniors. “Who’s first?”

Liam waved him off. “You two can go first.”

“Alright.” Shawn finished preparing the table and grabbed a billiard cue. “Austin, your team can begin.”

“Let’s go in reverse alphabetical order.” Austin thinks for a moment. “That means the first turn is Yeong.”

Yeong went and did the break shot without sinking any balls.

“We’ll go in alphabetical order.” Shawn nodded to Gavin. “You’re up.”

Gavin did not sink a ball either. It took two more turns until Marc sank a solid ball.

“May I ask a question?” Kenneth chimed up when it was his turn.

Shawn leaned on his cue. “Sure, that’s why we’re here.”

“Why did you guys sign up?”

“Well... It’s the same refrain over and over again, isn’t it?” Shawn said. “No perspective. No friends. No love life.” He shrugged. “I was a loser.”

“Same.” Liam added.

"Now we're still losers at heart." Austin commented. "But with muscles."

Shawn shot his fellow senior a look. "Austin."

"I'm just kidding."

"It's the story for most." Shawn looked around the group. "Hands up, for whom is this not the reason why they signed up?"

Ray scanned the group. Most of his fellow freshmen looked away, uncomfortable with themselves.

Marc raised his hand.

Shawn nodded towards him. "What's your reason?"

Marc swallowed. "Myotonic dystrophy." When there was no reaction, he continued. "It's a genetic disease that causes muscle atrophy. Starts in your twenties." His nails idly scratched over the cue stick. "Morales said the solution should cure it."

"Shit, man." Was all Shawn could say. "Sorry dude."

Marc just shrugged. "It's fine. If this project didn't exist, I'd have to live with it for the rest of my life. This way I'm getting a cure regardless of whether I get the antidote or not."

"I guess the decision was easy for you then." Austin mused. "You win either way."

"You can put it that way, yeah."

"Wow," Shawn shook his head. "Wanted to take your mind off things and we went deeper down the rabbit hole." He looked around the freshmen. "Don't worry though. It's just the first few days like this. Things'll look brighter once you get to enjoy your new bodies."

By now it was Shawn's turn. "Oh, by the way, there's one thing I forgot to tell you." He took his shot and knocked on the pool table afterwards. "Say hello to Isaiah."

There was no reaction in the first few seconds. The freshmen were processing what Shawn was alluding to.

When the penny finally dropped, Victor, who was standing close to the table, almost dropped his cue as he was stepping back in shock.

"That's a person?!" Yeong asked.

Shawn pulled out the little card from the table's ball compartment where he hid it at the beginning. "A PTO, yes."

"He was a junior when we joined." Liam added. "Went through the decay in the same year."

Ray furrowed his brow. "I thought we're not supposed to touch them without their consent."

"When they're in the vault, yes." Shawn explained. "But if a PTO wants to be placed in a public area, then they automatically consent to being used." He shrugged. "Otherwise, what's the point?"

"Isaiah specifically wanted to be placed here so that people could play with him." Liam clarified. "In fact, we didn't have a pool table before him and he liked the idea of adding something new to the lounge."

"Did you keep us here only so we can meet Isaiah?" Gavin asked.

"Guilty." Shawn admitted. "But yes, I wanted you to meet a PTO outside of the vault or the communication chamber. Not all of us can be put in a public area, but if you're a big enough object so you won't get stolen, then you may consider this as an alternative."

"What about vandalism?" Julio asked.

"It's a concern." Liam pointed at a surveillance camera in the corner of the room. "But all of our public PTOs are being monitored."

Shawn let the freshmen process the new information before he continued. "Yeong, I think it's your turn again."

"What's with the weird ass bars in there anyway?" Ray asked as he exited the bathroom.

Ray let himself fall onto his bed. Today was pretty exhausting, physically and mentally. They walked nearly the entire day and were bombarded with tough philosophical questions non-stop. Now it was evening and both he and his roommate were hanging out in their dorm.

"Can't even put towels on it because they're angled." Ray continued.

"Accessibility." Nick replied without looking up from the book he was reading.

"Mmh?"

Nick put the book down. "Our dorms are part of the wing for students with impaired mobility." He gestured with his free hand. "Because, you know, you might need it depending on what object you turn into." He moved his book back up in front of his face. "Means our dorms are more spacious though. Pretty sick if you ask me."

Ray looked around. It was true. The room was larger than he would have expected from a dorm. "Why is it not on the ground floor though? Stairs aren't very accessibility friendly."

"The ground floor is all public area. Guess they wanted to give the students with disabilities as much privacy as everyone else. Also, there's an elevator in the back."

"Mmh." Ray's eyes fell onto the book in Nick's hand. "What are you reading?"

Nick moved the book aside to look at Ray. "Quantum chromodynamics."

"What's that?"

"Do you know what quarks and gluons are?"

Ray had heard the words before, but didn't really know what they were. "Not really."

"Mmh..." Nick thought for a moment. "The strong nuclear force?"

"No..."

"Well... I don't think I can explain it easily then." He moved the book back in front of his face. "It's like seven layers deep into theoretical physics."

"Wow, is it for class?"

"Not really. It's part of my theoretical physics class, but we're not going to go into it until the last semester."

"Why are you reading it then?"

"Idle curiosity?" Nick shrugged. "I'm reading forward a bit. I guess I'm curious and I'm not sure if I'll even see the last semester or if I decay before that."

"Mmh."

Ray lay down on his bed and pulled out his phone. In the last weeks he started to check out his dating app more frequently. Maybe it was his subconscious trying desperately to find a reason not to get the injection. Maybe if he could get a girlfriend he would be happy and he wouldn't need any of this.

He began swiping through the women he was being matched with. Half of them he swiped away because he wasn't interested. The other half he felt too intimidated to message.

But every shot not taken is a shot missed, right? Ray decided to be brave and messaged the first woman he thought had a nice profile.

'Hey.'

He waited for a couple seconds for a reply. Then a message appeared.

'You have been blocked.'

Ray's heart dropped as he stared at the message. After some seconds the phone display went dark.

Maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise, he thought as he stared into his own reflection. Who would want to be with such a loser?

He looked over to Nick's muscled body, the book on theoretical physics in his hand. How could he ever compete with someone like that naturally? The Daedalus Project was his only choice.

"Nick?" Ray began. "May I ask you a question?"

Nick lowered his book with a shocked expression. "Another one?!" His face softened. "Just kidding, bro, go ahead."

"Uh..." Ray put his phone away. "What's it like, being gay?"

Nick looked to the side, seemingly amused. Eventually he returned his gaze to Ray. "Wanna hear something funny?"

"Sure?"

"It's the thing that's on every freshman's mind, even more than the decay. I was no different." His face went serious. "Until your first friends start to decay. Then you think back and wonder why you ever thought being gay was such a big deal."

Nick put the book away and folded his arms behind his head, the smirk returning to his face. "Besides, dating guys is so much easier and gay sex so much hotter."

"Very well." Mr Lou looked up from his notebook as he stood in the doorway. "Everyone here?"

Ray looked around. He and the other freshman had their appointment to get the injection early in the morning so that they could attend classes afterwards. They were waiting in front of the on-site infirmary.

“Alright.” Mr Lou continued after he went through the list. “Just so you know, you still have the chance to back out. There is no shame in walking away now. Once you get your injection, it’s too late.”

Everyone looked at each other.

“Then-” He moved aside to free the way into the room where the injection was going to take place. “Step inside and take a seat.”

Ray and the others slowly got up and did as they were told. Mr Lou closed the door behind them and two other nurses were getting to work on the first two freshmen.

“Before you receive your injection, we will take a blood sample.” Mr Lou continued. “We will continue to take regular blood samples to monitor the progress of the agent and to analyze potential changes to your body chemistry from the solution. In the first month, please be here on Tuesday and Friday mornings. Afterwards you just need to be here on the first Tuesday each month.”

The nurses quickly took blood samples from each student and labeled the vials as Mr Lou continued talking.

“The changes, both physical and mental, will be slow and gradual. It will take about three to four weeks to complete. A little bit of sleeplessness during that time is normal. Your brain is basically going into hyperdrive. If it becomes too much you can ask Ms Beck for sedatives.

“The same is true for your muscles. As they are experiencing growth spurts, they will stimulate easily. You will develop restless muscle syndrome unless you relieve that stimulation by tiring them out.”

“How do we do that?” Chris asked.

“Physical exercise.”

“Oh...”

“Don’t worry though.” Mr Lou continued. “You will not require as much working out as a person who had not received the injection. You can get by with as little as 3 hours per week, but our other students have reported that working out more will ease the symptoms. Plus, it will help with the sleeplessness too. I’m sure your roommates will help you getting used to the gym and its equipment. Unlike the sleeplessness from the mental changes, however, the overstimulation of your muscles will remain permanently.”

By now the nurses were done with the blood samples and were preparing injection kits instead.

“Very well.” Mr Lou looked into the round. “Who wants to go first?”

Ray pulled at the sleeve of his shirt. It was early August so he was wearing a T-shirt and he wanted to make sure nobody saw the band-aid from the injection while he was waiting for class to start.

His first lecture after the injection was mathematics, a basic course to refresh the relevant topics from school for further studies. When it was time to pick his classes in March, he had no idea where he wanted to go, but he always liked building things, so he figured an engineering degree could be interesting. The school had helped him pick the right subjects.

“Excuse me.” A woman appeared next to him. “Is this the basic mathematics course?”

Ray turned to her. He was sitting near the exit. The auditorium was intimidating and none of the other students from the Daedalus Project were here, so he simply plopped down on the first seat without having to walk through the entire room and be seen. Ironically, this made him the first person she could reach.

“Yeah, uh, module 12.” He nearly stammered.

“Oh, good.” She pointed to the space next to Ray. “Is this seat taken?”

“No.” Ray shook his head and watched her sit down next to him. She wasn’t a supermodel, but he found her easy to look at and she had a nice voice.

She pulled out her writing utensils. “Did you also start yesterday?”

Technically Ray started with classes today, but he figured she didn’t need to know the details. “Yeah.”

“I’m Selena, by the way.”

“Raymond.” He was caught off guard and stumbled to correct himself. “Uh, Ray.”

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