

Hamartia

The apple covered the boy's mouth with rotten flesh and stained his pure white button up with shades of red and green. His mother glared at the mess with wrinkled dark eyes, the only indication of her age. Her deep black dress was long and loose, reminding Dorian of the curtains at school and distracted him long enough that he missed the man's voice telling him that they were ready to start.

Father was lifted above in a rusted golden casket by several different men too indistinguishable for Dorian to really pay attention to so instead he took heavy steps and sat down on one of the broken wooden chairs that made his head wobbly. His mother stood in front next to the deep, dark hole, her head bowed with tears that seemed sewn into her face. The scene reminded him of every other time Father had an event in his honor, of the painfully stiff painted faces that he and his mother were told to hold onto like a lifeline.

A man who breathed loudly into every word he said stood next to her and was supposedly a priest from several towns over, that Father knew at some time or another. Perhaps it was Evergreen but the man rarely discussed anything but work and what he wanted his family to do or don't do.

Dorian was bored out of his mind. He hated how someone could just die and leave all their messed up shit behind for all the people *they* left to pick up the pieces like it was some kind of holy consolation prize. But he hated more how empty everything felt.

All that he did for his Father mattered none because all it did was continue this godforsaken lineage in which every one of them grew mold at their cores. The kind that was passed on and would never disappear.

His mother sent him a dark look and Dorian forced himself to try and focus in on what the man was saying but still the words seemed to blur into the background, his thoughts loud.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see a faint figure falling into the snowy forest beyond the scene of Father and his mother. It appeared really quite suddenly with wild hair and glowing eyes that stared at Dorian's soul, which now felt like it was the icicles hanging from the blackened aging trees, dripping and melting. The figure went away once again and very quickly Dorian realized that everyone around him had stood up, with his mother once again glaring at him.

The hours that followed were fuzzy and Dorian just tried taking one step after another, feeling the weight, heavy on his chest. He at long last got back to the dorms and laid his head on the pillow leading to the most restless sleep of his life.

Dorian woke up to an olive toned finger poking his cheek. He followed the boy's freckled covered arm up to a sharp jaw and a Greek nose, finally landing on eyes that seemed to glow green underneath curls of brown hair.

"Man, you all there?" He asked with a voice sounding very much like *Bowie*. Dorian blinked, trying to focus on talking normally.

"Who are you?" He glared slightly. The strange boy chuckled and roughed up his hair.

"Your new roommate! The name's Byrd." Byrd looked down at Dorian's expression. "I know, it's weird but you don't have to look so disgusted. Anyways, I'm a classics major, a Taurus and a lover of fate." He leaned down further, nearly touching noses with Dorian, "*Memento mori, amor fati.*"

Dorian felt himself grow uncomfortably warm, biting his tongue so hard his mouth tasted like metal. He jumped up very suddenly, making Byrd step back in surprise, and leaned away from the boy as he pulled on a crisp white button up and ironed black slacks. Byrd stood there, looking at him with puppy eyes.

Dorian promptly ignored this. Instead he grabbed his book-bag and rushed quickly out the door, starting towards his first class of the day. He arrived earlier than usual and expected to be the first one there. However sitting right in the center of the room was Byrd.

"Dorian, right? Can I call you Dori? Dori, it is so great to see you again! A shame you left before me or we could've walked together..." Byrd said with a grin.

"Do not call me that."

"Doriii-"

He glared at the boy in response and sat as far away from him as possible. Dorian hoped that since his next class was for the Theology half of his major, Byrd would not be there. He held onto this hope in order to get through the professor's boring drawl and the incessant looks sent his way from the boy.

The topic of class today was what the semester final would look like: an essay on *The Iliad* with a minimum of five pages and it was due in two weeks. It seemed like what was dragging the class out was the excruciatingly long list of questions the professor was answering from a previous class. Dorian thought that they had to have been the professor's worst and most idiotic class because some of them were truly inane. This at least gave him more time to think about his essay and planning out the rest of his day after the next class.

"What's up with that dude making eyes at you?" The man next him whispered.

"I have no idea."

"You think he's one of them *queers*?" He asked through a harsh chuckle.

Dorian felt like someone pierced his stomach with ice and instead of saying something he was going to regret, he stared intensely at the chalkboard in front of the room which upon closer inspection, seemed to not have been cleaned since at least the last school year. His classmate looked at him in anticipation before giving up and returning to his notes. Disappointingly, Byrd's eyes were still locked on his and Dorian could feel his chest tighten ever so slightly.

He became so entrenched in figuring out what that funny feeling meant that he missed the professor dismissing the class almost entirely.

Green eyes greeted him when he shook himself out of his thoughts and for a moment he thought it meant he was dying, like time itself took his mind by its careful hand and held on so tightly it drowned him, but it was just Byrd.

In the distance, a clock rang strong and loud, echoing in Dorian's ears and so he left without saying another word to the boy that had moved in without an invitation.

He was in fact not in Dorian's next class and even when he returned to their dorm, the boy wasn't there. Dorian glanced at the clock, 6:00. He set his bag down and laid his copy of *The Iliad* down on his desk along with several blank pieces of paper, a black pen and a notebook that was falling apart at its seams. Then he gently sat himself down in the dark green cushioned chair and stared at the phone. It was an older *Western Electric* model that he was gifted as a high school graduation present. A moment that felt so long ago even if it had only been one and a half years.

It was 6:06 when he remembered that there would be no Monday evening calls anymore because Father was dead.

He let out a sharp, dark laugh. Then he gave it deeper thought and wanted to cry.

The boy, because he really was just a boy even at 20 years old, curled into himself and looked out the opened window where he could see the darkness settling in. Heavy on everything it touched. The iciness of the wind touched and pulled at his heart gentle and gory. He laid his head down on his bony knee and stared for a lifetime at the world spinning around him. The boy's eyes blearily blinked shut and for a while his short frame became lost among the freezing cold room.

Byrd came in quietly and upon seeing Dorian looking genuinely peaceful, closed the window tight, splayed a blanket around his shoulders and sat on his own bed. If anyone was looking in, it would've seemed as though Byrd didn't move a single muscle all night long.

Light guided by Apollo himself reached into the dorm that next morning, waking Dorian from a soft sleep. Looking over, he saw Byrd sitting there and staring like nothing about this was off-putting.

"What are you doing?" Dorian asked, voice weighed with exhaustion.

"I can't sleep."

"..."

"Really, Dori, it's called insomnia. Thought you were smart, man."

Giving up, Dorian changed his clothes and left Byrd all alone for the second day in a row. As the day went on, something felt off. Yesterday it felt that everywhere he looked, Byrd was there. But today not even a trace of him could be found. In spite of the fact that both classes he had today were a part of his Classics major, there was nothing.

It felt strange but one day and this boy had changed him irrevocably, even if Byrd was excruciatingly odd. Likely due to the even stranger fact that Dorian had never been very close with anyone his own age.

The emptiness of the day left him thinking on repeat about everything and nothing, it was a wonderfully dreadful way to spend one of his last days before finals set in. Dorian stepped into the library and then drank five cups of coffee in hopes of becoming numb. It got to the point where he felt light enough that he finished all of his assignments before midnight.

Walking back to the dorms and he could hear every step he took, felt every hair stand up straight, the patches of snow leading him along. This late and it was like the thick stone walls and tall white arches were going to swallow him up whole. It was an intensely comforting thought, that he could just *be* in the grand scheme of things. The rest of the walk could've taken merely minutes or hours, it all would've felt the same way.

Across from his room was stained glass doors, sparkling blue, that led to a balcony overlooking sprawling hills covered in white. For the first time, Dorian was intrigued by the idea of going out there and staying, just for a moment. He leaned against the door, quietly slipping through in hopes of not waking anyone up.

A faintly glowing dark figure sat softly upon the ledge, looking at the stars above in search of something, perhaps a certain constellation.

Dorian slowly stepped closer and closer until the figure finally turned its head, revealing the boy himself, Byrd. "What are you doing?" Byrd asked soft and low, sounding remarkably like he could start singing *Five Years* at any moment.

"I could ask you the same."

"Same thing as last night. Are you gonna answer?" The boy was grinning despite the sad sound of his voice and raccoon eyes.

"I was working."

"That's not the entire truth though, is it Dori?"

In response he got up on the ledge right next to Byrd. The boy was wearing a pair of short shorts, quite obviously his sleep wear, but it exposed his long legs, freckles looking like they mirrored the stars.

"You don't seem to enjoy talking very much."

"I suppose so..."

"Dori, do you want to hear a story?" Byrd scooted closer, close enough that their thighs were just almost touching.

But Dorian nodded and so Byrd continued.

"Once upon a time there was a boy, tall and very manly..."

"Is this just you being full of yourself?"

"No. Just listen to the story alright? Okay so this boy is liked by everyone in his small little village. He's kind to all the old little ladies, helps his parents with everything they need, works to help his family, and he's the perfect son. The problem is, he has no friends. People are nice, sure, but he is so very lonely." Byrd looked intensely at Dorian. And Dorian avoided his gaze, instead focusing on his lips and his crooked smile.

Byrd kept going, "Next thing he knows, he meets this beautiful princess and feels as though he should get closer to her. So he does what he's always done and goes up to her, showing off everything he does well. Like lifting heavy objects or having a bunch of money. But it's not enough. The girl leaves the village, not thinking one single thing about the boy she left behind. This boy gets sad but he ignores it and gets back to work. He works until he can't anymore, providing for his parents until their death and then he's really and truly all alone."

"The boy needs more hobbies." Dorian interjected. "And maybe a better job."

"That's not the point. So there's this witch in the village. No one likes her except for her three dogs, but that's enough to make her happy. She comes up to the boy, who I suppose is a man now, but she comes up to him and gives him some advice." Byrd went quiet, looking even more pointedly at Dorian.

"Well what does she say?"

"Look who's invested now?" Byrd smiled wide. "Well what do you think she said?"

"I don't know. That he needs company?"

"Kind of. The witch tells the man, 'Relationships don't come easy to you because you're closed off.' The man is confused because the witch's only relationship is to her dogs, and he says this. The witch replies, 'Except our friendship is mutual. I take care of them, they take care of me, I talk to them about my life, and they communicate back as well as they can. You can't say the same thing.' The man never gives this advice deeper thought and dies all alone."

"That's it? His life just ends?"

"Yeah. It's sad is it not?"

Dorian sat silent for a moment and then whispered, "Is that what you think is going to happen to me?"

"You could say that. But I've given you the best advice I could."

"My dad died last week. Heart attack. Funeral was Sunday."

"Hm. Mine died years ago."

"Did you get adopted or something?"

"Nah, I've been on my own for a long time. I just happen to like traveling around, going to universities and learning a thing or two. That hippie lifestyle y'know."

"Aren't you my age?" Dorian questioned noticing a strange look in Byrd's eyes.

"Sure. Will you look at that sunrise? Beautiful, isn't it?"

"How long has it been since I came up here?"

"A while."

And Byrd was right. The sunrise was the most perfect sunrise to have ever existed. Snow glistening from early morning rays, sounds of roosters and dogs waking up their homes, birds chirping and no other human for as far as the eye could see. Dorian imagined that Father would've enjoyed dying underneath this sky. A death where it was peaceful enough to smile through the pain. He hated the man when he was alive but now he missed him as much as he missed seeing stars not blurred out by light pollution.

"Grief is weird isn't it?" Byrd whispered, sounding hollow.

"Yes it is." And Dorian understood the boy next to him, painfully, deep inside his gut.

"Don't you want to disappear sometimes? Hide away from it?"

"I suppose it'd be easier."

"If you were given the chance to do so, would you?" Byrd's voice was getting oddly shaky.

Looking at his eyes for once, Dorian replied, "Yes." Perhaps hoping that Byrd would smile again, genuinely this time.

The second the word left his lips, Byrd began glowing, fading away until he looked like a ghost. A ghost colored bright green just like his eyes. "I'm not human, Dori."

"That's nice..." Dorian breathed.

"If... if I created a world that belonged to you, where you wouldn't have to feel grief or loneliness ever again, would you make a deal with me?"

Dorian blinked slowly and so very naively thought about the advice the boy in front of him gave him and said, "Yes." Once again, thinking nothing about anything except for Byrd and his stupid smile.

"You have to give up your body." The boy said, gazing at Dorian once more.

"In what way?" He asked softly.

"A ghost needs a host and this body is dying."

Not knowing what he was signing up for, Dorian nodded and told Byrd, "Alright. For you."

A tree came into existence where it wasn't before, glowing just like the boy, and reached a branch toward him like a conman reaches out for a handshake. Making a deal. Dorian touched it ever so gracefully, like any good ballet instructor would teach you.

In that moment, the ghost split into two, a soul smashing into Dorian's and a real human body falling to the ground in blood behind it. Byrd's body. Every freckle and crooked tooth and strand of brown hair. Eyes now a deep amber but so very clearly dead. Dorian let out a cry before being forcefully pulled towards the tree and its infinite branches just below.

Like the boy in love, he fell. But he did not land. Not for a very long time.

Not until he woke up underneath a picture perfect sunrise. Landing in a field not unlike the one back home but this one felt like summer, his favorite season.

Dorian had never told anyone that before.

But now, he was alone, completely and utterly alone.