

The Waiting Game

2019

It was the middle of autumn, crinkled leaves with rolled edges beginning to litter the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, when he saw her.

Stopping just under the scalloped awning that proclaimed the patisserie's name, he could make out her hazy form through the baguette-lined windows and the warm steam of his breath. Again, it was a small stature with squared shoulders tickled by the tips of a braid that was the same color as the blackberry tarte she cradled in her hands before passing it to a customer. He couldn't see her face, but if she turned to look at him, he knew his life would change.

She twisted toward the window where he stood; it took a moment before she spotted him through the glass that was beginning to fog from the warmth inside.

Matthias was drawn to her instantly and instinctively, as if her gaze had cast a thick rope around him, gently tugging and pulling, telling him to go to her. Her bright eyes lingered on him, delicate brows arched and heart-shaped face pointed in his direction. Her dimpled chin would fit perfectly in the cupped palm of his hand, he thought.

She smiled then, pink lips slowly parting, and he thought the waves of thumping in the center of his chest might shatter the foggy glass that separated them.

As she turned away from him and back to her customers, however, a vaguely familiar thought knocked on his temple:

Should I kill her?

It was always a moment he dreaded, this first meeting. The second when he saw his Soulmate and everything clicked into place like a key sliding cleanly into a lock. Like anything before that moment, that feeling, was insignificant, and everything after was endless.

But Matthias didn't have time for feelings, even though he had all the time in the world. Once she was gone, once she died, he waited years for her to come back in a new body only to end her life once more. It was a cycle by his design, and his alone. He had liked it that way, enjoyed the satisfaction that came with knowing she could do nothing but live and die for what she had done to him.

He continued to watch her turned back, following the smooth movements of her legs from behind the counter while taking orders and grabbing various pastries from the domed glass display. Maybe in this life, she was a better dancer, he mused.

Matthias realized the corners of his mouth had begun to slope upward; disgusted, he hastily settled his features into indifference once more.

The pull to her deepened, an ache or an itch that caused his body to yell at him to move—move towards her, be near her. Close, closer, closest. Matthias had no strength to not oblige. Besides, if he chose to get this over with sooner, then the sooner he could return to normalcy—a life without being shackled to one person who the universe deemed a perfect fit. A life with no end.

He walked past the patisserie window, kicking dry, crunching leaves as he went. The maroon door was nestled between the two glass displays, and its wrought iron barred window brought an influx of memories he'd rather forget—ones of soft romantic lights, of clicking heels on metal stairs, and an unforgettable voice with a lilting French accent in his ear. In fact, this whole city felt like a bank of memories, and he a reluctant heistman forced to steal each one back, forced to remember.

Matthias reached out to grab the doorknob to the patisserie with ease. He didn't feel nervous or clammy; it was just another undesired beginning, and, perhaps, another swift ending.

1936

They met for the first time in Paris. At least, for the first time in this iteration of himself.

The city was a grey cloud, all steel and iron and industry. Motor buses whizzed by on every street, fast enough that he could never really get a close glimpse of them. How does one justify a quick pace of life, he wanted to ask, when everyone was waiting for the same thing?

Paris was something Matthias wanted to capture with his art. Something to borrow for a moment, hold on to, and finally feel it, truly feel it, only then giving it back. Photography was too expensive, and ink was too precise, but charcoal—it was raw and real and messy, the only medium that would do. So he came everyday to the Champ de Mars to sit on the down feather-like grass and draw it.

The Eiffel Tower never changed, and he used it as an anchor for the people and seasons and colors that shifted around it. Matthias had pages and pages of the structure, each one vaguely different than or similar to the last, differences often discernible only to his cloud colored eyes. He was in the middle of sketching its usual grey drabness when a pop of color caught his eye.

He couldn't tell whether she was a girl or a woman, her short pumps sinking into the soft dirt as she sat some 10 feet ahead of him, but her entirely peach ensemble made him lean toward the former. Even her felt hat was swathed in the loud color. Matthias shook his head, and went back to his drawing.

His hand had hardly begun to move again, tracing out the familiar outline, before he heard the drawn out sigh. It was all too happy, too unperturbed, and it made him wrinkle his nose and look up once more at the girl. She sat leaning back on her palms as her fingers caressed the grass, pleated skirt billowing around her legs, face tilted toward the early summer sun. He

couldn't see her expression, could only watch as she reached into her matching quilted purse and pulled out what looked like a candied pear slice then drop it into her mouth with a satisfied hum.

Matthias scoffed, internally shaking his head at her seemingly complete lack of care or worry, but before he knew it he was drawing her instead of the tower, transforming the harsh lines of wrought-iron into soft lines of peach-colored cloth. He almost wished he had colored pencils to fill in her sleeveless blouse. All the while, she didn't move, and he wondered if her eyes were closed, if she somehow fell asleep.

He'd just finished sketching the stitches of her hat when she finally shifted. Matthias scowled at her change of position; this was why he drew the tower—it never moved. He figured she would settle into stillness once more, but she instead looked to her left, then to her right, then brought herself to her feet. There was a pang in his chest as he realized he wouldn't get to finish his drawing, but he supposed he could live with it.

She faced him, and their gazes met.

Something clicked. Matthias didn't know what or how or why, but his heart began to thrash in his chest and his mouth encountered a sudden drought. What was this feeling? He could only describe it as an upheaval in his heart, a suddenly familiar, instinctual warmth spreading over his body. Her eyes were still locked with his, and he guessed she felt it too.

But then the moment broke. Or rather, she broke it, taking away her stare and its accompanying warmth. She walked past him without another glance, heels digging into the dirt once more.

Matthias looked down and noticed his hand was trembling; he had crushed his charcoal stick into two pieces with one resting in his lap. He was trying to process what had just happened, trying to catch every emotion that flitted through him one by one, asking himself what

in the world was going on but more importantly—who was she, and why, from one look, did he feel like he'd known her forever?

He looked around his peripheral, but there was no trace of the girl. Matthias mentally berated himself. He should have said something to her, should have stopped her from walking away so he could figure out what this feeling was and why she was at the root of it. Now all he had was this unfinished picture and a lingering moment that had ended too soon. Why did he have a sense that he just missed the most important thing in his life? Why, why, why, why—

“My shoulders are a little too broad, don't you think?”

His head turned fast enough to give him whiplash. It was the girl, in all of her monochromatic glory, but she wasn't even looking at him; she was focused intently on herself; or at least, his drawing of her backside. She crouched to his level, shaking her blonde bangs from her face and raising her arm slowly to reach out to his sketchpad, smudging the lines of her back and arms. He sat frozen, trying to hide how hard he was breathing at her proximity, taking in the floral tones of her perfume.

When she seemed to be satisfied, she finally looked at him and smiled. “That's better.”

Matthias only nodded, throat clenching as she lowered herself onto the grass once more, this time close enough that their arms brushed. She had goosebumps, even though the sun was directly overhead.

“I think we've been looking for each other,” she said, but her tone told him that it was something she knew instead.

“I believe so.” It was all he could manage as his pulse seemed louder than his voice.

They stayed there, together, talking until the sun dropped below their backs and the Eiffel Tower became a beacon of light. They spoke about his classes at the *École des Beaux-Arts* and

how he came to Paris to be an artist, how her father was a jeweler and that she loved anything sweet, how he had no middle name and how people wanted to call her Bell or Bella but she simply preferred Bellamy. They shared how he had stopped aging a year ago in waiting for his Soulmate and how she just turned 17, how his hair used to be a colorless blond but eventually turned copper brown and how she liked it better that way.

When they eventually had to part since her parents would be worried and he had school the next morning, he grabbed her hand to help her up, holding on to it and asking, “Will I see you again?” Many years worth of eagerness escaped in the release of a single question.

Bellamy’s eyes glinted. “Not if I see you first.”

Matthias’ face fell faster than a downpour. As his mind raced through all the possible meanings to what she had said, Bellamy tried to soothe him as she chuckled at her own joke. Of course they would see each other again, she said. That’s all they have ever done and will do, in this life and the next and every one after that.

2019

The inside of the patisserie was too warm. Matthias’ hands instantly went to loosen his scarf as he looked around, nostrils flaring at the astringent assault on his senses of coffee beans and sugar.

It was a quaint place, with aged wooden tables and chairs that had matching curled legs. Striding past a display of tiered cakes, he inserted himself into the long line of customers, preparing himself to speak to her for the first time in eighteen years.

They had spent a year together in Paris that first time they met. A year where he felt that finally, everything was right and he was exactly where he was supposed to be. It was perfect, until it wasn't.

It was around their anniversary when he took her on a date to the Eiffel Tower, back to where they met. It was a windy night, and Bellamy had his tweed jacket wrapped around her shoulders as they climbed up latticed iron to the restaurant situated upon the second platform. Even now, he could still hear her heels making a resounding click with each step, a click that still echoes in his mind as it echoed through the courtyard that night.

At dinner, he had presented her with a ruby bracelet he had commissioned from her father. She had slipped it on immediately, eagerly, holding her wrist up to watch it shimmer in the soft candlelight, the light in her eyes shimmering right beside the rubies as he watched her.

He shouldn't have asked her to dance. But he did, because they were alone and there was music and the lights were so lovely, lighting up her lips in the darkness as they whispered affectionate French pet names. They twirled and spun, and she stepped sharply on his loafers countless times but Matthias didn't mind because he felt drunk on the feeling of just getting to be with her, there and then. She threw out her arms as she rotated away from him, and they both stopped when her bracelet unclasped from her wrist, flinging through the air and landing on a thin pole that stuck up on the outside of the guardrail.

"Lift me up," Bellamy had pleaded, although he shook his head because it was too dangerous with the wind and her thin heels that weren't suitable for climbing. "Lift me up, please."

By the look in her eyes he knew she wouldn't give up, so he had hoisted her up to the highest point of the guard rail and looked on with bated breath as she swung a leg over the

horizontal top of it, reaching over the side to grab the bracelet. The metal shook in the wind. When she finally snatched the jewelry she tossed it down over the guardrail to him, telling him to store it in a pocket so it would be safe. He was about to reply, but then the wind picked up, hard and gusting and it was only a moment that felt like forever as her hat was lifted from her hair and she reached out to grab it back, losing her balance and plummeting over the edge of the second platform and onto the first.

Matthias had stood there, ruby bracelet in hand, and all he could remember thinking was how the gems were the same color as the blood droplets from where she had fallen below, leaving him holding the least precious of the jewels that had been in his hands moments prior.

The scratchy shuffling of feet brought him back to the patisserie, the line of customers slowly creeping forward. Others around him tapped their feet, and Matthias found himself feeling similarly irked. The anticipation of being near her, of getting to speak to her, took hold of him and he found it difficult to just stand there one by one, waiting as she attended to other patrons asking for their daily lattes and croissants.

It reminded him of those years after she had fallen, when she had shattered into pieces and he along with her; reminded him of the almost two decades he spent trying to pick them up and put them back together, searching for the one elusive piece that prevented him from becoming whole again

All he had left from their year together was a full sketchpad of drawings of Bellamy, but the one he always came back to was the view of her from behind, sitting in front of the Eiffel Tower on the day that they met, the smudges of her fingerprints having hardly faded over the years. There was also her ruby bracelet, which he wore for some time around his wrist but

eventually stopped because he was always distracted by the weight of it and the weight of her absence.

He hadn't aged a single day since she died. Everyone knew that once a person turned 18, they stopped aging until they found their Soulmate, but that first time, he hadn't known that after her death, he wouldn't age until they met once more. Eventually, he had grown used to not aging in between their encounters.

Unlike him, she was a completely new person, especially compared to who she was the first time they found each other. An almost calming presence behind the counter, she was cool and collected as she expertly spoke with customers, made drinks or food, and called out orders. Her voice would ring out every so often, rising above the patrons who conversed with friends or mumbled their complaints about the long line, his heart rate rising right along with it.

She was here. She was here, and for a split second, Matthias gave in to the temptation to imagine what it could be like to look at her and not be planning how he was going to end her life. He envisioned endless days and depthless nights together, countless stories to share, and memories to make. But in between these thoughts, old habits forced his eyes: he kept sneaking glances at the knife holder near the bread display and at the cupboards which he supposed would house strong cleaning chemicals.

Maybe it was cruel. But she had been crueler.

1952

It was a torture, that pair of decades before he found her again. Like losing something and knowing it's not completely gone, but rather somewhere around you; yet you have no way to

pinpoint directly where. Matthias wouldn't describe it as agony, however, because that was the feeling reserved for what transpired after he found her once more.

Matthias was supposed to be an almost 40 year old man; yet the mirror in his budget flat reflected a strong and healthy 20 year old. He had graduated from art school, moved to Nice, found a job as an art curator at a local museum, and all the while retained his youthful energy and physique. Oftentimes, he wondered how many people there were like him out in the world, how many people were waiting for their second chance.

He once thought that their first meeting on the Champ de Mars was an accident, that he was just lucky enough to find her and she him. But he saw her again: in the museum where he worked, staring at Chagall's *Résurrection* from his latest triptych, she stood and brought with her the realization that there was some other force at work that pushed them together.

He hadn't looked into her eyes yet, but he could feel that force pulling him toward her like the inevitability of two magnets. Smoothing out his sports coat, Matthias had walked over to her, thinking about the way her black high collared suit dress and matching gloves were so different from vibrant colors she wore during their time in Paris. He didn't think for a moment that could mean she would be any different, however.

"Bellamy?" he asked breathlessly, feet shuffling against the scuffed wooden floorboards. "Is that you?"

Matthias counted three seconds before she took her focus away from the painting and bestowed it upon him. Her eyes widened as they met his, and he knew that she knew—he was supposed to mean something, possibly even everything, to her. A dam broke inside of him and relief flooded out. Finally, finally, it was her, it was them.

He expected her to smile, to laugh, to cry—everything he felt like doing—but she instead gave him a quick look up and down, then said, “Christine. My name is Christine.”

The relief that had pooled in his stomach churned into something that felt more like a foreboding dread. “I’m Matthias.” He flashed a grin, hoping to break the tension that hung between them.

She merely nodded, shifted her weight onto the other leg, then went back to gazing at the painting. It left him confused and even numb; her actions and her attitude were utterly and hopelessly unfathomable. Where was her excitement, her joy at meeting her Soulmate?

Maybe her coldness was due to nerves or anxiety. She could be so shocked at the monumentality of it all, and he wouldn’t blame her for it. He could help ease her into it, he thought. And then everything would go back to the way it was before, because they would be together.

“Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

She slowly turned back to him, and her rather severe expression gave him chills. A few dark strands of hair had fallen from her tight bun, and she took her time smoothing them back into place before responding, as if that were less of a chore than answering his question. “I’m busy,” she eventually answered with a dark look from under her long lashes.

Matthias' mouth began to suffer a drought. “The next night, then.” His grin softened, hoping to entice her.

“I’m busy then as well.”

His nose wrinkled as if he could suddenly smell sharp, chemical fumes from the paint on the canvasses around him. “Will you at least come back tomorrow?”

She considered him, lashes flitting against her cheek as she blinked. “Fine.”

He opened the museum the next day with a certain joyful anxiety. Bellamy—Christine—had been eerily cold toward him the day before, but he was certain that he could coax her to him with warmth. She was merely an icicle waiting to fall.

Matthias hadn't considered the idea that she might not show up again, but the look on her face when he watched her walked through the spotless glass doors told him that perhaps he should have. She was dressed in black once more.

He immediately took the lead when she gravitated towards a set of old paintings, rushing to her and jumping into a discussion on the repeating shapes. Coming to the museum the previous day, Matthias had thought this version of Bellam was a connoisseur like him. However, as he spoke about the art he noticed the boredom that settled into the lines of her face.

“Do you even like art?” They had stopped under a small spotlight above, and it shone on her like the sole performer on a stage.

She licked her lips. “Not particularly.”

He leaned against the concrete wall, brows furrowed. “Then why did you come in here yesterday?”

In her steadfast gaze, Matthias saw the answer. But he wanted to *hear* it.

“I saw you.”

The way her lips moved slowly as she said the words had him entranced. Matthias smiled. He knew it—she couldn't resist him. Because it was always meant to be them, no matter the time or place.

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

She turned back to one of the paintings, giving it a hard once-over before nodding. Then she left, and the sweet breeze that followed in her wake renewed his spirit.

He spent the whole night preparing, setting up a lovely dinner at his apartment above the promenade that boasted a spectacular view of the clear Mediterranean. When she arrived, she was still dressed in all black, as if attending someone's funeral. Her greeting had been as equally cold as before, but Matthias figured she would warm up to it all, and to him again, eventually.

He tried to make conversation as they ate. All of her answers were clipped, short, and even though she returned the favor, that's all it seemed: a favor. She wasn't all too interested in his responses. She appeared mildly intrigued when he explained their past, but that quickly waned as well. Fear, disappointment and anxiety welled in his chest, but before he could address those feelings there were other emotions he had to let out first, feelings that had spent decades yearning for release.

"I've missed you," he had blurted out after he took a bite of a tart with candied pears on top. She hadn't even touched the sweet dessert. "So much. Almost too much. It's just... I'm so happy we're together again."

Matthias reached his hand towards hers across the white cloth covered table, but she pulled back immediately as if his touch had burnt her skin. His eyes widened, and his head tilted in questioning and in hurt.

"You should know," she started, thin lips barely moving as she spoke, a lack of effort put into the words that might have haunted his nightmares if he'd even dreamed they were a possibility, "that I already have someone."

His heart fell, plummeting down and down, and he could swear he heard it drop onto the floor. "What? What do you mean? How?" he sputtered.

"I'm in love." She smiled for the first time since he saw her a day ago. "And she's good to me, so you don't have to worry about me."

His brows knitted together tightly. “But you don’t have to be with her anymore. I’m here now. We’re together.”

She shook her head, more dark strands falling from her severe bun.

His throat tightened, fists clenching the napkin on his lap. “We’re Soulmates. Don’t you understand what that means? We’re perfect for each other. It’s supposed to be us.”

Lips pursed, she raised her chin defiantly, ice returning, replacing the warmth of that singular smile. “You can think that,” she told him, “but I have chosen what I want, and no predetermined fate is going to change that.”

She then pushed her chair back ceremoniously, quickly standing up and walking to the door, where her hat and gloves hung on the wall.

Matthias wasn’t sure what had overcome him in that moment, but the taste of rejection was too pungent for him to think rationally. Sixteen years of waiting for her, of longing and guilt and loneliness, and this was what he ended up with? His chair flung back, falling and landing on its side.

She had given him so much hope in the past two days, only to crush it like a small, insignificant insect under her heel. Watching her turned back walk away from him, his stomach twisted, his heart clenched, and he felt love melt away into loathing like an overripe pear collapsing in on itself.

Grabbing the pointed knife from beside his dirtied plate, he went after her, walking up behind her as she opened the door, slamming it shut with his palm.

He had her pinned against the door, and she had to strain to look up at him. As they started at each other, he saw the crack in her cool demeanor like that of a marble statue. Pupils dilated in saucers and cheeks suddenly flushed, her eyes flitted back and forth between his gaze

and his lips. She couldn't deny it; they were Soulmates, and, on a visceral, instinctual level she wanted him as much as he wanted her. No matter how much she loved this other girl, Bellamy would always know she should be with him.

But Matthias could also see that no matter how deep this instinct went, she wouldn't waver, wouldn't give up her present love for him.

His only thought before he plunged the knife into her back was that if she wouldn't be his as fate destined, then she would be nobody's.

She gasped in pain, a silent scream caught in her throat. He wasn't sure if the knife was deep enough, as her black dress didn't show a speck of blood. So he drove it in again and again until a warm liquid covered his hand and she dropped to the floor lifelessly. The last pull of the knife from her ribcage came with the release of sixteen years worth of frustration, and for a moment he felt euphoric.

But the moment ended, and he looked down at her body, realizing that where once there was a sweetness in his mouth when he thought of her, of them, of Soulmates, only a bitter taste remained.

2019

The man in front of him was taking forever to order a simple coffee. In fact, the older gentleman was flirting with her—Matthias' Soulmate. She graced him with a smile that split her heart shaped face into two symmetrical halves. Matthias' neck suddenly was hot at the spot where his loosened scarf hung, and he gently rubbed the itch away.

A small part of his mind acknowledged the irony at having to wait for her in this line, having to wait his turn to speak to her. Just like waiting for a Soulmate for years and years.

Somehow, this line felt longer— it seemed to stretch for eons and every step towards the counter felt like decades.

In his decades of waiting, he always wondered how long other people had been waiting. He was lucky, or perhaps unlucky in a way, that he and Bellamy would meet again not too long after she reincarnated. Could a person go decades, even centuries, without ever finding the one person made for them? He didn't know. No one was ever exactly told about Soulmates—it was something you knew, something you felt, as soon as you could form a thought. Matthias supposed he had longer than most to collect bits of knowledge about Soulmates, like gathering seashells on a beach with a perpetually low tide.

This was what he had learned: she never remembered her past lives, which could be either a blessing or a curse. Matthias, however, bore the brunt of memory, storing all of the versions of her inside his mind, like fossils in a rock. They'd eventually erode, he believed, and his memories of her would weather away as time wore and he continued to kill her. He also knew that it was possible to love someone other than your Soulmate, as he learned the second time he met Bellamy. He couldn't possibly believe the love could be as strong as that of the one chosen by fate, but he could begrudgingly admit it had to count for something.