

The Small Moon Rose First

On February eighteenth, eleven seconds after Nell Mercado disappeared beside the frozen pizzas, she came back screaming for a boy no one had heard of.

Her mother still had one hand on the shopping cart. The other had been holding Nell's sleeve. Then the sleeve was empty.

Eleven seconds.

Nell hit the floor beneath a cardboard tower of paper towels, wearing the same red hoodie and jeans, her left shoelace still untied. She had a healed scar under her ribs that hadn't been there before. A dirty crescent of copper lay clenched in her fist.

When a stock clerk reached for her, she rolled onto one knee and drove her elbow into his stomach.

"Bash!" she shouted. "Bash, answer me!"

Her mother caught her by the shoulders.

Nell struck at her, stopped with her knuckles an inch from her mother's throat, and made a sound that Celia Mercado would hear in her sleep for months.

Not a scream. Worse.

Recognition.

"Mami?"

At the hospital, Nell told them she'd been gone six hundred and seventeen days.

Celia showed her the receipt from the register. The time printed at the top was 6:42 p.m. The paramedics had been called at 6:43.

"You were gone a few seconds," Celia said.

"I counted every day."

"Nell."

"I cut marks into my belt. I know how many days."

The nurse glanced at Celia, then at the police officer standing near the curtain.

Nell saw the glance.

She'd learned to recognize that look in Ravel. People wore it before they decided you were weak enough to ignore.

She pulled up her hoodie and showed them the scar.

It ran from her right side toward her navel, white and puckered, the width of a spear blade. The doctor touched it with a gloved finger and said it was fully healed. Not a wound from that day.

Celia had packed Nell's lunch that morning. She'd seen her change for gym. There had been no scar.

"Where is Sebastian?" Nell asked.

"Who's Sebastian?" the officer said.

"Bash. He hates Sebastian."

"Is he a friend from school?"

Nell stared at him.

"He was holding my hand."

The doctors called it an acute dissociative episode. The officer wrote down possible abduction, though the supermarket cameras showed no one near Nell when she vanished. One frame caught her looking into the freezer. The next showed empty linoleum. Eleven seconds later, she appeared three aisles away.

The footage had no sound.

That was lucky. Nell didn't want strangers hearing the language she'd screamed when she returned. Some words belonged to the dead.

On her first night home, Nell slept under the kitchen table.

Celia found her there at four in the morning, curled around a bread knife. Her son Tomas had left it on the counter after making a sandwich.

"Nell," Celia whispered.

Nell's eyes opened.

She didn't move. The knife stayed against her chest.

"It's me."

"I know."

"Give me the knife."

"Doors are locked?"

"Yes."

"Windows?"

"Yes."

"The fire escape?"

"Nell."

"The fire escape, Mami."

Celia checked it.

When she came back, Nell put the knife down. She wouldn't sleep in her bed. The mattress was too soft, and the bedroom window faced the elevated tracks. Every time a train passed, the walls shook.

Before Ravel, she'd slept through it.

Now the noise reminded her of the siege engines at Hallowmere.

School was worse.

Her body had returned at the age and size it had left. Thirteen years old, ninety-four pounds, no muscle in her arms. Her mind remembered hauling Bash across the Salt Road after the ash hound tore his shoulder open. Her body couldn't manage one pull-up in gym.

On her ninth day back, a boy named Jordan Price grabbed her backpack from behind.

Nell tried to throw him over her hip.

Her legs buckled. They both crashed into a row of lockers. Jordan needed three stitches in his chin, and Nell spent two days suspended.

The vice principal asked whether she understood that Jordan had been joking.

"I understood," Nell said.

"Then why did you attack him?"

"He put a hand on me without warning."

"He was playing."

"So was the thing in the orchard."

The school psychologist wrote that down.

Everyone wrote things down.

Nell received forty-five minutes with a therapist on Wednesday afternoons. Dr. Kan had a basement office that smelled like cinnamon air freshener and wet coats. She kept a bowl of polished stones on the table for patients to hold during difficult conversations.

Nell tested one against her teeth.

"Can you tell me about Bash?" Dr. Kan asked.

"He snores through his mouth. He can read six dead languages, but he can't gut a fish. He cries when he's angry and lies about it afterward."

"Do you think Bash may represent a part of you?"

"He hates onions."

Dr. Kan waited.

"If he's part of me," Nell said, "why would I make him hate onions?"

"You're certain he's real."

"I'm certain you're real, and I know less about you."

Dr. Kan put her pen down.

That earned her half a point.

* * *

Nell searched at night.

She searched Sebastian missing child Boston. Sebastian scar shoulder. Boy called Bash Cambridge two moons. Sebastian returned after eleven seconds.

The results gave her missing dogs, fantasy novels, baseball players, and men selling shoulder braces.

She added details.

Sebastian private school Latin cello mother hates wet shoes.

That brought up six thousand Sebastians and an advertisement for waterproof loafers.

She didn't know his last name.

They'd been warned against surnames during their first week in Ravel. The Hollow Regent collected true names. Give him the one you'd been born with, Oren had said, and he could send things into your dreams.

Nell had thought Oren was trying to scare them.

Then she watched a sleeping soldier bite through his own tongue.

After that, she became Nell. Sebastian became Bash. They stopped talking about family names, streets, schools. Home hurt too much anyway. They assumed they'd return together.

That assumption had lasted until the Glass Gate broke beneath them.

Nell remembered Bash's wrist sliding through her fingers. His face on the other side of the white light. Blood in his teeth.

I'm right behind you, he'd shouted.

Then she was on the supermarket floor.

She made a page on a free blogging site and called it The Small Moon Rose First.

The title came from an argument they'd had during their second month in Ravel. Bash insisted the little blue moon rose before the gold one. Nell said he had it backward. They stayed awake all night to settle it.

Bash won.

He had been unbearable for days.

Nell posted a photograph of the copper crescent she'd brought back. It was half of a gaming token they'd found in Oren's coat after burying him. Bash had snapped it against a stone before the final battle and given her one piece.

For luck, he'd said.

Nell told him luck was what rich people called it when somebody else did the planning.

He'd laughed so hard Saint tried to bite him.

Beneath the photograph, she wrote:

If you are Bash, tell me what Saint did at the border tower.

The page attracted eleven comments in its first month.

Three were advertisements. Two told her to take medication. Someone using the name RegentKiller99 claimed to be Bash, then answered her question with information copied from earlier posts.

When Nell asked what they'd found beneath Marn's Bridge, RegentKiller99 replied, *treasure?*

Nell closed the page.

She didn't delete it. She couldn't.

Every Sunday, she checked the messages.

Then every other Sunday.

By May, she had almost stopped.

* * *

Sebastian Wren disappeared from a cello lesson on June seventh.

His teacher, Mrs. Halpern, had been adjusting his left thumb. One moment he was seated in front of her, annoyed and twelve years old.

Then the chair was empty.

Mrs. Halpern screamed. The cello tipped sideways.

Twelve seconds later, Sebastian reappeared under the piano.

He had a cluster of healed bite marks on his shoulder and a crescent of filthy copper embedded in his palm.

He seized the fallen bow in both hands and swung it at Mrs. Halpern's ankles.

"Where is Nell?"

The bow snapped against the piano leg.

Sebastian crawled backward until he struck the wall. He began shouting in a language Mrs. Halpern had never heard. When she approached, he jabbed the broken bow toward her face.

His mother arrived before the ambulance.

Evelyn Wren found her son wedged behind the piano, weeping so hard he couldn't breathe. The room smelled of rosin and the lavender perfume Mrs. Halpern dabbed under her ears.

Sebastian wouldn't let anyone touch him until Evelyn said his name.

Then he looked up.

For one second, relief crossed his face.

It vanished.

"You aren't Nell."

His mother called two neurologists before dinner. His father had copies of the security footage sent to an imaging lab. By Friday, three adults with careful voices had asked Sebastian whether he knew the difference between a memory and a belief.

His parents believed something had happened.

They simply wanted that something to have a name covered by insurance.

Sebastian stopped sleeping in his bedroom. It was too large, with four windows and a bathroom door he couldn't see from the bed. He dragged blankets into the laundry room and lay beside the dryer, where the walls were close and the machine gave off a steady warmth.

His mother found him there on the second night.

She sat on the tile beside him.

"You can tell me what happened," she said.

"I did."

"I mean what really happened."

Sebastian shut his eyes.

"I spent six hundred and seventeen days telling Nell I was going home to people who believed me."

Evelyn's mouth tightened.

He regretted saying it. Not because it was cruel.

Because it was true.

His father hired a private investigator.

The man came to the house with a leather folder, a quiet suit, and the tired expression of someone who'd heard impossible stories for money.

"Her name is Nell," Sebastian said. "She's thirteen. Maybe fourteen now. She lived near a train that ran above the street. Her mother worked nights. She said Frankford a lot."

"Frankford, Delaware?"

"I don't know."

"Philadelphia has Frankford Avenue."

Sebastian leaned forward.

"Philadelphia."

"Do you know her surname?"

"No."

"School?"

"No."

"Phone number?"

"We didn't have phones."

The investigator waited.

"Where did you meet?"

Sebastian looked at his father. Graham Wren stood by the window with his arms folded.

"In Ravel."

The investigator wrote nothing.

He returned three days later with a list of eighty-six girls named Nell or Nelly between twelve and fifteen in the Philadelphia area. Sebastian studied their school photographs until the faces blurred.

None looked right.

He wasn't sure what right meant.

The Nell he remembered had hacked her hair off with a skinning knife. She'd had a burn along her jaw, cracked lips, and the flat stare of someone who knew exactly how many arrows were left.

An Earth photograph would show a child.

So would his.

He searched the internet himself.

He tried every detail he could remember. Black orchard two moons. Hallowmere ash hound. Marn's Bridge Oren. Copper token small moon.

Most searches led to games.

One week after the cello lesson, at 1:16 in the morning, Sebastian sat on the laundry room floor with his father's old laptop balanced on a detergent box and typed:

the small moon rose first

The page appeared halfway down the results.

He knew it was Nell's before he opened it.

The header was plain black text on a white background. No decoration. Nell had never trusted decorations. She said pretty things were where people hid hooks.

At the top was a photograph of a broken copper token.

Sebastian pulled his half from the cord around his neck and held it against the screen.

His hand began to shake.

The page had been created on March fourth. The first post began with another date: February eighteenth, the night Nell had returned.

He checked both dates again.

February eighteenth. March fourth. June seventh.

Ravel had returned Nell three months and twenty days before it took him from his cello lesson.

Nell had spent most of that gap searching missing-child pages for a boy who wasn't missing yet. Sebastian had been going to school, refusing mushrooms at dinner, and pretending not to hear his mother ask him to practice scales.

He read every post.

Nell had written about the Salt Road. The orchard. The rain that fell upward on the hills outside Sere. She never used Oren's name, but Sebastian recognized him in every sentence about the old man who cheated at dice and slept with his boots on.

At the bottom of the first post, she'd left the question.

If you are Bash, tell me what Saint did at the border tower.

Sebastian clicked the contact link.

His first message was eight pages long.

He deleted it.

The next was one sentence.

Saint bit the customs priest because you fed him my red scarf.

He added his phone number.

Then he waited.

* * *

The message sat unread for nine days.

Nell had stopped checking the page after Tomas found her asleep at the kitchen table with her hand around the bread knife again. Her prepaid phone had no data plan, and Celia disconnected the apartment's internet for a week. She said it was about the bill.

Neither of them pretended very hard.

On the ninth night, after the Wi-Fi had been restored, Nell woke at 2:08 with the taste of smoke in her mouth.

For several seconds, she was back beneath Marn's Bridge. Water dripping through the stones. Oren beside her, already dead. Bash trying to strike a match with fingers too numb to bend.

Then a train passed outside.

The apartment walls trembled.

Earth.

Nell got out of bed and checked the locks. Front door, kitchen window, fire escape. She drank water from the tap, though the pipes clanged and the sound made her shoulders rise.

Her phone was charging beside the sink.

A nine-day-old message notification waited on the screen.

She read the sentence once.

Then again.

Her knees gave out.

She sat on the kitchen floor with the phone pressed between both hands.
Anyone could have guessed a mule biting someone.
No one could have known about the scarf.
She called the number.
It rang once.
A boy answered with a gasp.
Neither of them spoke.
Nell could hear his breathing. Quick through the nose, then a soft whistle at the end. He'd broken it in the ruins of Vey and refused to let her set it properly.
"Where did I break my finger?" she asked.
"The north stair at Hallowmere."
"Which finger?"
"Left hand. Little one."
"What did you tell Oren?"
"When?"
"Before we buried him."
Silence.
Nell gripped the phone harder.
Then Sebastian said, "I told him I was sorry I'd stolen his silver button. You heard me, but you pretended you were asleep."
Nell covered her mouth.
"Nell?"
"You said you were behind me."
"I tried."
"You weren't there."
"I came back twelve seconds after I left."
"I've been looking since February eighteenth."
"It's June."
"I know what month it is."
"No." His voice cracked. "Nell, I didn't leave Earth until June seventh."
She looked at the microwave clock.
2:14.
A truck groaned along the street below. Somewhere upstairs, a baby began crying.
"You hadn't gone yet," Nell said.
"I think Ravel pulled us from different days."
For months, she'd pictured him dead beneath the Glass Gate.
The truth was stranger. While she'd been searching missing-person pages, Bash had still been safe at home. He had been eating dinner, going to school, waking each morning without knowing her.
Nell began to laugh.
It came out wrong. Too close to sobbing.
"You took your time," she said.
"Three months and twenty days between your supermarket and my cello lesson."
"You counted?"
"Your first post had the date. I counted backward from June seventh."
That did it.
She lowered her forehead to her knees and cried so hard she couldn't speak.

Sebastian stayed on the line.
He didn't tell her everything was fine. He knew better.

* * *

Their parents discovered the call at four in the morning.

Celia came into the kitchen holding a baseball bat. Evelyn Wren found Sebastian in the laundry room, wrapped in a blanket with the phone against his ear.

The adults took over.

This went badly.

Graham Wren wanted Nell's identity confirmed before any further contact. Celia wanted to know why a grown man was demanding information about her daughter. Evelyn worried that the children were feeding each other's illness. Celia used a Spanish phrase Evelyn didn't understand, though the tone carried well enough.

Then Nell showed Sebastian her half of the token on video.

He held up his.

The broken edges matched.

The following evening, Celia emailed Evelyn a screenshot of Nell's first post. March fourth. The photograph metadata showed the same date.

Your son vanished in June, Celia wrote. My daughter posted this in March. Explain it without calling either of them crazy.

Evelyn called twenty minutes later.

"I can't," she said.

That was the first useful thing any adult had admitted.

They agreed to meet at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station the following Saturday. The Wrens would come down by train. Evelyn insisted on bringing Sebastian's therapist. Celia refused. Graham suggested a private room. Nell said she would leave if they tried to put her in one.

They settled on the main concourse at noon.

Nell arrived forty minutes early with Celia and Tomas.

She stood beneath the departure board, back against a stone column, watching each entrance. A police officer crossed the concourse and Nell's hand moved toward the place where her knife had once hung.

Nothing there.

She shoved both hands into her hoodie pocket.

"You're going to recognize him?" Tomas asked.

"Yes."

"What if he looks different?"

"He will."

"Then how?"

Nell didn't answer.

The Boston train arrived at 11:57.

Passengers came through in clumps, dragging suitcases, staring at phones, complaining about the heat.

Nell ignored their faces.

She looked at how they stood.

Bash appeared between a woman in a linen coat and a tall man carrying two bags. He was smaller than Nell remembered. His hair had grown back over the patch she'd cut away to stitch his scalp. He wore clean sneakers and a blue button-down shirt.

But he kept his back close to the wall.

His eyes moved across doors, stairways, windows. Counting exits.

Then he saw her.

Sebastian stopped.

His mother nearly walked into him.

Nell couldn't move. For one sick second, she thought they'd made a mistake. This pale, tidy boy couldn't be the person who'd held a shield over her while glass arrows fell around them.

Sebastian reached into his shirt and pulled out the copper crescent.

Nell drew hers from her pocket.

Across the concourse, he tapped two fingers against his leg.

Three taps. Pause. Two.

Their signal in the tunnels beneath Hallowmere.

Still alive?

Nell tapped her palm once.

For now.

Sebastian ran.

His father called after him. Celia caught Nell's shoulder, then released her.

Nell met Sebastian halfway.

She punched him hard in the chest.

He staggered.

"That's for the gate," she said.

"Fair."

Then she threw both arms around him.

Sebastian made the same wounded sound she'd made in the supermarket. His chin struck her shoulder. He clung to the back of her hoodie with both hands.

"You're so small," Nell said into his collar.

"So are you."

"I was taller than you."

"You were standing uphill."

"There wasn't a hill."

"There was a slope."

She started laughing again.

This time it sounded right.

Their families watched from opposite sides of the concourse.

"Mercado," Nell said.

Sebastian drew back.

"What?"

"My last name. Nell Mercado."

He wiped his face with his sleeve. "Wren."

"Like the bird?"

"Yes."

"That's a terrible last name."

"I spent four days searching for Nell Frankford."

"I spent four months searching for Sebastian Cambridge."

"I don't live in Cambridge."

Nell punched him again.

* * *

Finding each other didn't fix them.

That annoyed Sebastian. He'd expected it to.

For the first few weeks, they talked every night until one of them fell asleep. Sometimes they discussed Ravel. Usually they stayed quiet and listened to the sounds in each other's houses.

Nell's apartment had trains, televisions through the wall, Tomas arguing over video games. Sebastian's house creaked. Wind moved through the trees outside his window.

He hated how silent it was.

She hated how much room he had.

During her first visit to Massachusetts, Nell counted seven doors between the guest room and the stairs.

"No one needs this many doors," she said.

Sebastian sat cross-legged on the carpet. "My mother likes doors."

"Your mother likes rooms."

"She likes deciding which people go in them."

Nell slept on the floor beside the bed. At three in the morning, Sebastian came in carrying his pillow.

Neither commented on it.

When Sebastian visited Philadelphia, he brought Nell noise-canceling headphones that cost more than Celia's weekly grocery budget.

Nell made him take them back.

"They help with the trains," he said.

"I didn't ask."

"I thought you'd like them."

"You thought you could buy me something so I'd be less broken."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

They didn't speak for four days.

On the fifth, Sebastian sent her a photograph of Saint's half of the copper token beside an onion.

Nell replied with a photograph of the same onion dropped into a trash can.

The fight ended there.

They found a therapist in New York who agreed to see them together once a month. Dr. Sayegh had gray hair, square glasses, and no bowl of polished stones.

During the first session, Sebastian spent twenty minutes explaining the physics of the Glass Gate. Dr. Sayegh listened without interrupting.

"Do you believe us?" Nell asked.

"I don't know what happened," she said. "I know you came back hurt."

Nell considered that.

Sebastian looked suspicious.

It was enough to start.

They worked on small things.

Sleeping in beds. Sitting with their backs to windows. Throwing away food that had gone bad. Letting someone walk behind them without checking for a weapon.

Sebastian stopped carrying a sharpened screwdriver in his schoolbag after Nell pointed out that he'd survive Ravel only to be expelled for bringing it to algebra.

Nell stopped hiding bread in her dresser after it attracted mice.

Neither of them stopped checking exits.

They also disagreed about the gate.

Sebastian believed it might reopen.

He kept boots, water tablets, matches, two knives, and a coil of rope in a hiking pack beneath his bed. He read physics papers he barely understood and covered his walls with diagrams.

People were still in Ravel, he said. The villages along the Salt Road had no walls. The Regent was dead, but something else would take his place.

Nell wanted the gate burned out of existence.

"We were kids," she told him during one of their calls. "They should never have needed us."

"They did need us."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No."

"Then stop acting like we owe them."

Sebastian went quiet.

Nell knew he was thinking about Oren.

She was too.

They left the argument unfinished.

Some things stayed that way.

One year later, on February eighteenth, Sebastian came to Philadelphia.

Celia took them to the supermarket.

Nell had avoided it since the day she came back. She bought groceries at the corner store or waited outside while her mother shopped. The thought of aisle nine made her chest tighten until breathing became work.

Sebastian didn't ask whether she was ready. They'd both learned to hate that question.

He took a cart.

Its front wheel rattled.

They entered through the automatic doors.

Produce. Bakery. Canned soup.

Nell kept one hand on the cart and the other around the copper crescent in her pocket. Sebastian walked beside her, close enough that their sleeves touched.

At aisle seven, she stopped.

"You can wait here," she said.

"No."

"I don't need you."

"I know."

She glared at him.

He stared back.

Still annoying. Still Bash.

They turned into aisle nine.

The freezer cases hummed beneath white lights. Paper towels stood at the far end. A stock clerk cut open a box with a small yellow knife.

Nell's fingers went numb.
Sebastian tapped the cart handle.
Three taps. Pause. Two.
Nell swallowed.
Then she tapped once.
They walked to the frozen pizzas.
"Pepperoni?" Sebastian asked.
"You hate pepperoni."
"I spent six hundred and seventeen days eating roots."
"You complained every time."
"They tasted like dirt."
"They were dirt."
A box slipped from Nell's hand. She caught it before it hit the floor.
For a moment she stood there holding it against her chest.
Then she put it in the cart.
At the front of the store, the automatic doors opened with a soft mechanical sigh. Nell waited for
teeth, claws, white light.
There weren't any.
Bash nudged her through with the cart.