

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



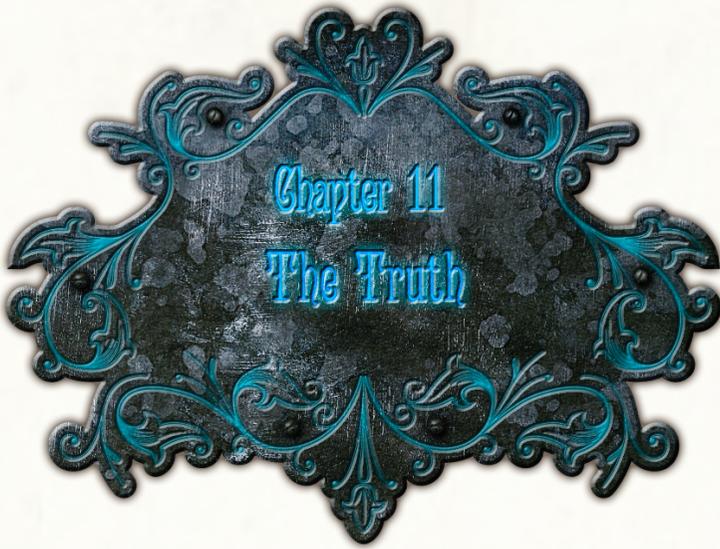
Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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Chapter 11  
The Truth

H

aving just been downgraded from hover, the truck tore through the first floor of a newly constructed high-rise, two gated communities, and the Colorado City summer parade. The drum major grabbed her skittling baton and yelled after them, “Antique cars will just get someone killed!”

Nick didn’t care. He was just happy to put some distance between them and what Grand called trackers.

Eventually, they took the I-45 highway. Since the transportation industry could not afford hover technology, the old highway had been reserved for transport vehicles. Grand was able to zip quickly past the compact trains and eighteen wheelers.

Once they passed Dickinson Bridge, everyone’s leashes began to spark. They shook their wrists, trying to stop the

electrical jolts, but it didn't seem to help. BioFarm's properties were moving outside of the assigned fifteen mile perimeter.

Grand followed the signs to Sion Park. Once there he smashed through the guard arm, ignoring the attendrone's request of payment. With little visibility and a waning Moon that glowed through the Earth's great cloud to guide the way, they crept along an old service road for another hour. Finally, the truck drove into a forest clearing.

Grand launched from the cab, leaving on the remaining headlight. "This should do for now, Huron. Tried to be as unpredictable as I could. Be patient with me, please, Huron. I'll save the Mermen, I promise," he mumbled to no one in particular. He grabbed the mimes and let them fall like sacks of beef. "Everyone, out."

Haley rushed over to Nick and grabbed him by the arm, "Your grandpa was freaking us out in there," she said. "Kept blabbing on about protecting the mermaids, and trackers picking up our scent. Said he'd kill them with his bare hands if he had to. What is going on, Nick? Is your Grand an international criminal or just bonkers?"

"I don't know what's happening." Nick raised his hands.

"My sisters and I can't hang out with a mentally unstable person, OK?"

"OK," Nick said.

A blue arc leapt around from Brandy's leash-band. "Ow! That one really hurt!" She whipped her wrist.

"We've moved out of the refugee camps range for the leashes," Daniel said.

"Have to figure out how to turn those off," Nick said.

"Don't worry about that. I have a halter." Daniel held a flat object the shape of a dime. "Saved it for such a time. Brandy, your wrist please."

"That's high security stuff?" Nick said.

"Yes. I know," Daniel said. "Brandy. Your wrist, please."

“But the cops don’t even have those. Where did you get it?”

Daniel didn’t respond. Instead, he held the halter until Brandy’s leash clicked and slid to the ground. “Who’s next?” Several more wrists raised to Daniel.

“Where did you get it, Daniel?” Nick repeated.

“I have my sources,” Daniel said.

Nick watched the leashes fall to the ground one by one, their read outs still projecting the refugees’ bio-rhythms and life expectancy. Everyone automatically rubbed their wrists, while exchanging looks of elation, concern, even wonder. Nick considered the leashes on the ground. He really didn’t understand what it meant to be the property of someone else.

“You and you.” Grand pointed to Tim and Xanthus. “You’ll be storing the bodies into the pressers. This is how it’s done.” Grand grabbed the pinky of the comatose Sonya-mime and shoved it into the presser’s tip. He stepped on the presser and bounced his leg up and down like a one-footed jig. Xanthus’ mouth fell open as the Sonya-mime began to shrivel and get sucked into the presser. It was like watching fruit dry. “This presser will keep them for forty-eight hours. After that they begin to wrinkle. It’s a beast getting the wrinkles out.”

Tim slowly put one shoe onto the presser. The Sonya-mime’s finger slipped out.

“Just shove it back in, Tim,” Grand said. “Try the tongue if it gives you trouble.”

He looked at his grandfather like he was seven kinds of insane. He went to his knees, grabbed the red fingernail of the Sonya-mime, and slipped it into the presser. The knuckle crack-popped and slipped out again. Even in the Moonlight one could see Tim turn pale. After a few more attempts, the finger sealed into place. Tim stood to his feet and began slowly pumping the presser with his foot.

Phfit. Phfit. Phfit, the presser blew and sucked.

Grinning at the Erik-mime, Xanthus raised his massive leg and slammed it down.

PHFIT! The Erik-mime jumped a foot.

“Not too hard, now, boy!” Grand yelled. “It’ll just make a mess if ya go and pop ‘em . . . Very good, that’s more like it. Should keep ‘em for the time being,” Grand sighed. “Have to see about an antidote Moonside. Now, I’m afraid your friends are about to get a mouthful, Nick. These are the monsters that have been chasing us.”

Grand flung a handful of stardust into the air. With a few swirls of his index finger, the scuccas reappeared. Brandy gasped.

Phfiiiiiiiit . . . Both pressers stopped sucking.

“Keep pressing, boys,” Grand ordered. “We’ve very little time before the real scuccas are upon us. Now, to catch all of you up. Your friends are about to get a mouthful, Nick.”

As the pressers beat slowly for the next twenty minutes, phfit. Phfit. Phfit. Nick watched Grand re-explain to his friends how the monsters had chased their family away from their home, Mōon, and how Nick had to return home to saves the Merfolk.

As Grand made large gestures with his massive hands, Nick scanned the faces of all his friends. Daniel tilted over his cane. Haley kept her arms crossed.

Did they believe Grand? Nick thought. Do I?

Finally, Grand took a breath and said, “That’s about all I told Nick and Tim.”

His friends stared back at the large, wild-eyed man.

Phfit. Phfit. Phfit.

Nick hoped they wouldn’t laugh outloud at their kooky grandfather.

Phfit. Phfit. Phfit.

"I told you it was real!" Xanthus performed a frighteningly good drop-kick. "I told you, I told you. I told you, I told you. No one believed me. No one. Redemption!"

Haley rolled her eyes. "What do they want with you?"

"Bet he's torn between love for his family and duty to his country," Caroline offered.

"Dude. It's gotta be the Lord of Fire and Ice," Xanthus said. "He wants to conscript Grand into his elite warrior guard, but Grand works for no one."

"What do they want with you?" Nick repeated Haley's question.

"It's not what they want with me," Grand said, "but what they're trying to keep me from. Chasing me away from Huron has left her and her citizens vulnerable. I believe they were sent by the Dujinnin. The same people who attacked the Merrows. The scuccas kept me on the run these fourteen years so they could execute their devilish schemes. The Dujinnin have now openly attacked the Merrows. While Merrows . . ."

"Mermaids?" Xanthus called out.

"Well," Grand said, "that is what we call the female Merrows."

"Whatever," Xanthus said. "Mermaids are hot!"

"Anyway," Grand said. "The Merrows do not live within the city walls, rather off the coast of Eynclaene in great sea fortresses. Still, they are given Huronite citizenship because they manage and guard all of Huron's wealth in offshore accounts. I would suppose the Dujinnin mean to plunder those treasures. I must return to her and so must you, Nikolas. It is you Huron needs now. I would've never risked coming to the ground and out into the open like this if it wasn't for our dear city. The Merrows are in grave danger and with them, Huron herself. I must bring you home."

"Home?"

"Aye."

Nick couldn't manage a response. All he could do was listen to the pressers. The mimes had withered to half their size.

Grand squared to Nick. "Above all else, what do you desire from this life?"

"Get off this planet," Nick said immediately. He looked to Moon as it glowed behind the Great Cloud. Without moving his gaze he said, "Go home. Moon. But— but I didn't think home was a fantastic version of the Moon."

Nick combed his fingers through his hair. "That's another thing, I don't get any of this. Where's this city you keep talking about? Is there like an unheard of civilization somewhere? Underground? Why do you keep talking about the past like you're some kind of time-traveler or something?"

"Because I am," Grand said. "And so are you and Tim." He stepped into the middle of the stardust scucca and spun his finger like a lasso, each revolution smaller than the next. Dust began to clot into spheres.

"Saturn . . . Jupiter . . . Mars," said Daniel as planets took shape.

"What's that stuff you're using, again?" Xanthus said.

"Stardust," Grand said. "This was Earth myriads of years ago, before men kept record of the heavens. If they had, they would have known that our solar system bore not eight, but nine planets." He stepped to Earth and did a quick revolution around it. "Earth had a twin."

"Uhhh," the kids breathed in.

A second planet crested over Earth like a blue-white sunrise. But it wasn't its mirror copy, they were fraternal. Slightly larger, its oceans were a deeper hue, its continents more severe and pronounced. And it sparkled, like someone had glazed it over with flecks of glass.

Phfiiiiiit . . . The pressers wheezed to a stop again.

"I told you to keep them going, boys," Grand warned Tim and Xanthus. They resumed their pressing.

“Möon was his name,” Grand said. “And the brother planets were bound literally one to another.”

Nick stepped around Grand for a better look. The planetary bodies were so close that the atmosphere fused together like Siamese twins. A massive rope crossed the atmospheres, tethering the two planets together.

“The tidal waves?” Daniel shook his head. “The gravitational force between the two would be enough to rip the surfaces apart.”

“And so it did, until the tether was constructed by Roch-umbria. It cast a spell over the planets, keeping peace among skies and tides.”

“Where’s Moon?” Haley unfolded her hands.

“Möon,” Nick said, knowing the answer before Haley asked the question. “Möon is the Moon.”

“Yes, Nikolas. Well done. Earth, in my time, is nearly inhabitable. Except for the tethered realms, it is ice or wilderness. As fate would have it, Möon, your Moon, is the rich, powerful planet of the brother worlds. Steeped in wonder and mystery, he is the cradle of all magical civilization.”

“Dude,” said Xanthus, lifting up his bestiary. “Totally makes sense! We have always looked to Moon as our source of magic. Werewolves changed by it, farmers planted their seeds by it, mothers prayed they would give birth by it. Oh, and let us not forget the Greek goddess, Daphne—”

“Hey,” Haley said, “wanna be sedated? ‘Cause I will happily do it.”

“It’s my job to keep people informed.”

“And here—” Grand pointed to the middle of the largest land mass. “—is Huron, home. Your home, Nikolas and Tim.”

Tim gave Nick an expression: “Seriously. Is anyone buying this?”

Next to Tim, Xanthus was furiously taking notes in his bestiary while pumping the presser.

“In my time, the city of Huron is the seat of power on Mōon. Huron’s magic makes her both the jewel and the envy of the brother worlds.

Before the city was built, the valley of Huron was discovered. Because of its rich magic, a fierce civil war broke out among all the lings. Humling, creachling, bigling, midgling, faerling. They fought over rights for the valley and its magical properties. As a truce, Rah-Neron the Wise, decided to build the city of Huron. All races were given their own boroughs. It has become a metropolis, a melting pot, if you will, of Mōon’s fantastic creatur—”

“Forgive me,” Daniel interrupted. “Aside from your more interesting rendition of Moon, we would have found evidence of a previous civilization. It’s nothing more than a mass of iron and dust.”

“Yes. That was before the wars and the burning away of all Mōon’s creatures. There is no evidence of a previous civilization because what you see in the sky, my friend, is a corpse, the ghost of a once powerful, magical world. Some dark force ripped off the skin between that time in history and today, and flung it away from Earth to become a satellite, instead of a brother. Even your scientists, Daniel, attest to the fact that Moon is the remnant of a larger, more Earth-like planet.”

“Yes, well . . .” Daniel fell silent.

In fact, everyone else fell silent too, except for the whistling of the pressers.

Nick took a step closer to the stardust. “Home?”

Grand nodded. “That’s right, lad.”

“They’re all like you?” Nick said.

“Well . . . afraid there is no one like me in Huron. The citizens are more . . . civilized. But yes, I call them brethren.”

“Right,” Tim said in a slow, unbelieving tone. “Look. All I care about is Mom and Dad. If these are some type of

mimes or clones or whatever scientists call them, where are my parents?"

"They're home. Oxbar Estates, Manor Major, southeast of Huron." Grand pointed to the center of a large continent.

"No. I mean, really, Grand. I'm fourteen already. You don't have to fabricate stories to make me feel better. Where are they really?"

"I wouldn't lie to you, Tim. As I said, the trackers hunted us throughout Huron Valley. I left them secured at Manor Major."

Nick looked to the shriveling mimes. "So, they're not my parents?"

"No," Grand shook his head. "Surprised you never suspected. I did a poor job making them, and I'm not trying to be modest either. The trackers were close on our heels, and I had to cut the mime's firing time short by ten minutes. Pulled them out of the kiln too fast, and they cooled immaturely."

"That's why they were so weird," Nick said. "Always acted like they were cool, hip—one of us. They were basically teenagers."

"Yes," Grand nodded. "The mimes share your parent's memories; that's one of the first things you add to the brew. But their personalities were underdeveloped."

Phfit. Phfit. Phfit . . .

"But we digress," Grand clasped his hands behind his back, sighed, looking the Lyons brothers dead in the face. "I am ashamed to admit it, but because I abandoned Huron to her own devices, she abandoned me. I am no longer her steward." Grand's bear-like finger rose to Nick. "You are Nikolas Lyons. She will speak to you now."

"Speak?" Nick said. "Like, with words?"

"Yes," Grand pursed his lips. "When the city of Huron was built many epochs ago, a strange thing occurred. A voice from the steward's horn called to Rah-Neron. It was

then the settlers learned that every city has a voice. You see, a city contains thousands, even millions, of citizens. If there is no voice, anarchy and death would reign. The voice of the city is a guiding light for all. But she doesn't speak to just anyone. Huron will speak only to her steward, and you, Nikolas, are that steward."

"You're kidding, right?" Tim laughed. "Steward? As in concerned for the well-being of other life forms?"

"Could there be any doubt?" Grand said.

"Ha," Tim shook his head. "Yes. There could be."

"He's like me in so many ways," Grand said, "if that be an indication of his care for the well-being of others."

In his mind, Nick saw Grand fling an inocudrone across the room and lift up two bodies out of a casket.

Really not helping, Grand.

"Yes," Grand said. "He is just like me, right down to name and place in the family order. The voice is passed down from grandfather to grandson. Always the youngest. You are the youngest, right?"

"Yeah," Tim said. "By twenty-eight minutes, though."

"Always the youngest grandson," Grand said. "And you are named Nikolas Lyons. Every Steward of Huron is given the name, so she might find him. I am Nikolas Lyons, the Eleventh."

"Well, that's a problem, then," Tim said. "His name is Nick. It's on the birth certificate."

"Are you my translator, Tim?" Nick said. "Shut it, already. I can speak just fine."

"It should be Nikolas," Grand said. "Your father named you so before we came here. Anyway, that can be rectified. I will take you to the Hall of Pickings so that you might be given your true name." Grand's voice lowered. "It is to you the stewardship passes. And with it, the voice of Huron. She will speak only to you, Nikolas. And that is why I brought you here tonight. The Merrows need you, Nikolas. I must bring you back to your city."

"I'm the steward?" Nick said.

Grand nodded slowly. He marched to the truck. He lifted the seat, revealing a dozen strange oddities. "There you are." Grand held up a small copper box in both hands, with a cone-shaped tube pointing upward. Clutching the device, he moved back to Nick. "Ask her what she would have us do next."

"What?" Nick said.

"It's a gramophone," Daniel said. "One of the first record players."

"Yes. The gramophone was inspired by the steward's horn." Grand raised the device to Nick. "Ludwig gave it to me so Huron could speak to you, tell us what to do next. She speaks to her steward through the horn. Nikolas, please."

"So." Nick pulled his hands out of his back pockets. "What do you want me to do?"

"Rub your finger over the surface, like this." Grand glided his fingers over the small rubber pad.

Nick slowly reached out with his index finger. Small bits of static leapt out to his finger as he pressed down. Then, just like Grand, he rubbed the pad in a circular motion. Garbled murmurs crept from the horn. Nick pressed harder with more speed. The murmurs shaped into a woman's voice. Huron's voice:

"Steward. Where are you? The Rones lie about their true intent. They come to your city. They bring the smell of death to your streets, to your citizens! Come home, steward. Save your city. Save us from this coming death!"

"She sounds bummed out," Xanthus said.

Tim huffed. "You don't expect us to buy all thi—"

"The Rones?" Grand cut Tim off. "Quite strange."

"Why?" Nick said.

"That," Grand said, "that would contradict our entire quest."

"What's a Rone?" Brandy leaned to Xanthus.

"Don't know. I've never heard of them," Xanthus said.

Grand's green eyes investigated Nick. He could almost hear the unhinging of his own mind.

He raised his chin high and said, "Will you come home, Nikolas? Will you arise and take your place among the clouds?"

Nick looked back at his grandfather. He stood like some giant among the planets. A dusty Jupiter clung to his shoulder, slowly falling apart among the folds of his trench coat.

Phfitt, phfitt. Phfitt . . .

Nick's gaze turned toward Moon. According to Grand, it was the ghost of an ancient, magical planet. He'd already been there, hadn't he? There was that strange vision of him standing on the cobblestone streets of Huron. He had that really cool katana in his right hand and was wearing a bowler hat. It felt like home. Maybe that would explain Nick's obsession with the lunar colonies? Maybe Grand's fantastic version of Moon had been the home he had been searching for all along?

Or maybe Grand was completely insane.

Phfitt. Phfitt, phfitt . . .

Then again, a fairy tale world might not be so bad. Those Grimm fairy tale stories always seemed uncomplicated. You know, big bad wolf, three little pigs, make sure you build your house out of brick, kinda story. If that's what life on Moon was really like, then that's where he belonged, right? A simple life.

Nick smiled at that idea. A simple life.

Phfitt. Phfitt, phfitt . . . Phfitt. Phfitt, phfitt . . .

"Yeah!" Nick shouted. "Yes. Yes. Let's totally do that—let's go to magical Moons and bridgeclouds and stuff. I'm in!"

Tim rolled his eyes.

Grand laughed. "Very good, Nikolas. Knew you'd be up for it. Now, we have very little time to lose. Must return

your friends to the refugee camp and then make for the gateway.” Grand turned to the hovertruck.

Nick’s smile slid away. He looked back to the Kobayashi brothers and the Wendell sisters, and then down to the leashes scattered at their feet. Caroline’s readout blinked: Life expectancy: 17. Haley’s: 18. What would become of them after Nick and Tim zoomed off to some fantastic world?

“If I go, they go,” Nick said quickly.

“What?” Grand stopped in midstride. “All of them?”

“We’re a package deal. I won’t leave them behind.”

“Our mission is far too dangerous, lad,” Grand said. “I cannot allow it.”

“You don’t know how they treat refugee kids,” Nick crossed his arms. “They’re tagged, Grand. A refugee can’t be more than fifteen miles away from the refugee camp before they’re shocked by leashes, like a dog. The farther away, the worse it gets.”

“Isn’t it for their safety?”

“Not even,” Nick’s voice rose. “The Geneva virus is out of control at the refugee camps. Most of the refugees die before they’re eighteen. BioFarms counts on it ‘cause they have a contract with the government. Cheaper to harvest organs than to grow them yourself. Leashes make sure the refugees don’t run away with their precious property. It’s not right, Grand.”

“I have seen darkness in my time, but this is unheard of,” Grand said. “Surely the U.S. government wouldn’t allow it. Its own citizens?”

Haley sneered, “BioFarms foots the bill, and the U.S. looks the other way. It’s considered bioethically responsible to pass your organs on, so a few fancy lawyers have their own souls removed, and then draft up the legal papers. BioFarms can leash us, brand us, chip us, or whatever else they feel is necessary to protect their assets.”

“They come with us,” Nick said.

“You’re serious, Nikolas. Aren’t you?” Caroline said.

“Yes. I am. This could be your home.” Nick turned back around to Grand. “Sorry, Grand, but we’re a package deal.”

Grand nodded slowly. “It is so. But their very lives are in your hands, Nikolas. You are responsible.”

“Yeah, of course,” Nick realized how non-committal that sounded. “I mean—yes—responsible—I’m responsible.”

“Nikolas? Responsible? OK. I’m done with all this.”

Tim stepped in between Grand and Nick. “When did everyone take a swan dive into Nick’s Kool-aid? I’m sorry, Grand. I’m sure you think we’re just kids who’d believe any crazy story about tethered worlds and cities that speak to stewards, and that these aren’t our parents but just clones you baked in an oven—,”

“Actually they’re half-baked,” Nick snickered.

“Half-baked,” Xanthus gave him a fist bump. “Nice one.”

“We don’t believe you Grand,” Tim continued. “The trackers are just genetic mutations. You’re using nano-technology for the dust. And you OD’d on some illegal substance playing World of Witches and Wizards.”

“Grand isn’t crazy.” Nick rounded on Tim. “He’s Grand. I believe him.”

“That’s a no-brainer,” Tim laughed. “Cause you’re like, the most naïve person on the planet, Nick. Grand is senile. Look around. Do you think anyone else believes Earth and Moon were lassoed together? By magic? Like some old bedtime story?”

“I do.” Caroline poked her hand up.

Xanthus straightened. “There’ll definitely be pain involved if someone tries to stop me.”

“Really?” Tim said. “Caroline? Xanthus? Really?”

“Did you see those things?” Brandy pointed toward Colorado City. “They ain’t from around here.”

“I must warn you, though,” Grand said. “If you come, Mōon carries its own danger.”

“It isn’t the danger—” Haley’s hand unconsciously moved over her naked wrist. “—It’s that we can’t protect ourselves from it.”

“You will be given the latitude and freedom that comes with youth at your age,” Grand said. “I will make you all wards of the House of Lyons.”

Haley turned to Brandy and Caroline. “Then, we’re going. At least, the Wendells are.”

“Come on,” Tim said. “Just like that? Daniel?”

Daniel shifted his cane. “Science could only profit from such a trip. Yes, I will go.”

“Wha—?” Tim turned to Haley. “Haley? You’re not buying this, are you?”

Haley shrugged. “Yeah, I am.”

Tim looked shell-shocked. He couldn’t believe the Earth and Moon were tethered together in some forgotten, mythical age. On the other hand Haley did.

“The question isn’t to them,” Grand said. “The question is to you, Tim Lyons. Will you cross the tether with us? You do not have to go. I can set up an account here. You’ll never have to work again.”

Tim’s mouth hung open. “But—, wha—Seriously, guys. There’s just no way . . . I mean, you guys can’t really think the Moon—” He looked to his friends, and then to Haley.

What would Tim choose? Principles were important. Haley’s lips were soft and pink.

“Whatever,” Tim crumbled.

Grand handed the steward’s horn to Nick and collected the pressers. “All right. I’ve let nostalgia and bygones delay us. Now, to the gateway.”

“Like a food pantry,” Xanthus said. “Or, um, wardrobe?”

Grand stopped. “If it were only that easy.” He turned and pointed to the sky, “The doorway is right . . . there.”

“In the Great Cloud?” Xanthus said.

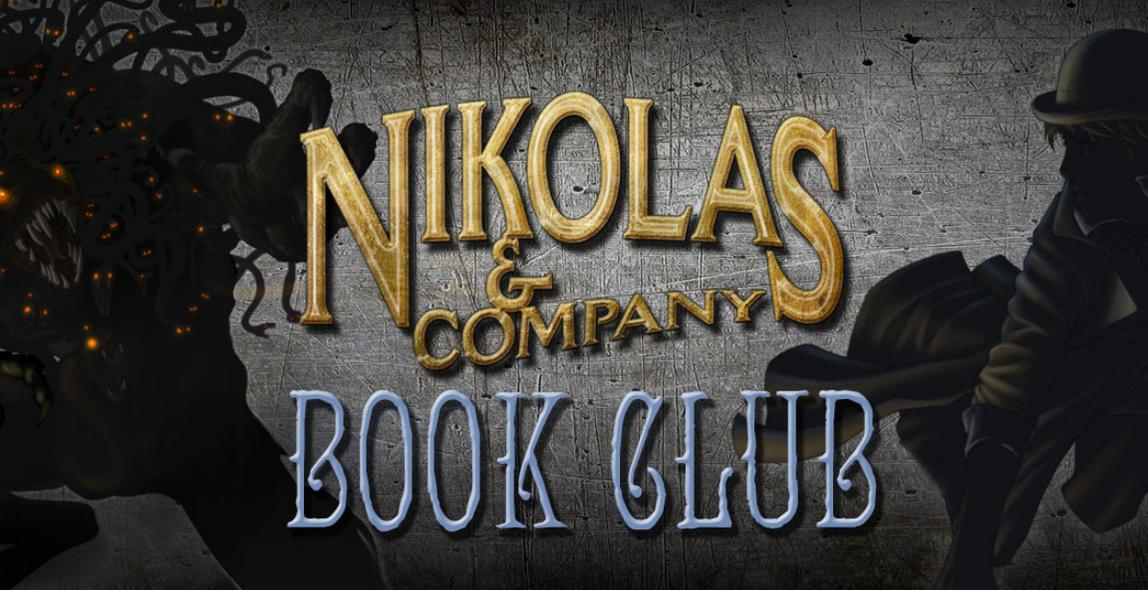
“No,” Grand said. “Beyond the Great Cloud.”

“What . . . space?” Tim said. “Outer space?!”

“Yes. Afraid so, Tim.”

“Of course,” Daniel said. “The gateway is a pre-fabricated wormhole.”

“No,” Grand said. “Nothing so crude. A wormhole is a tear, a scar in the heavens. This is a passageway made by the hands of a craftsman. And this is the key. It is a chronostone.” Grand held up an obsidian stone. “Quickly, now. Colorado Spaceport’s west gate is shut down for remodeling. Work crew comes in the morning.”



# NIKOLAS & COMPANY

## BOOK CLUB

### Book Club Questions

- How does the truth they discover change Nikolas's story?
- He has a big decision to make. Why does he decide to accept his role as steward? Do you think this was a good reason?
- What would you have done and why?
- What were his friends' motivation?

