

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



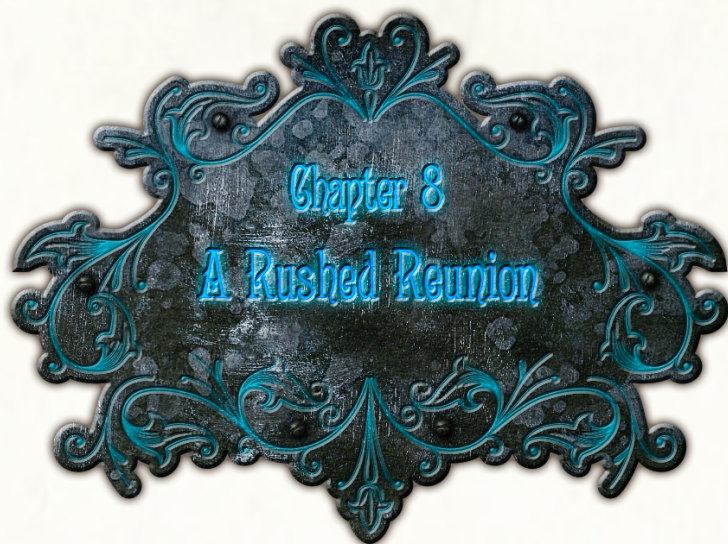
Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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L yons?" Yeri grumbled to himself as he crawled out of the merway, which led to a bridge and a pool. "What do they mean I must get word to Nikolas Lyons? A steward of Huron nonetheless. I'm a driver, not a messenger. How did I get caught up in all this mess? This has gone too far. I must tell them that. I need my horses and I need to be off. All of Gromwell village will be looking for me by this time."

Yeri smacked his head a couple of times, trying to bang out the water, but it was hopeless. He climbed onto the large, white bridge that turned out to be a whale's backbone, which spanned the breadth of the water. Where was he again? Oh, right. The Duke's chambers, though it really wasn't a chamber at all, but a pool, the whalebone bridge being the only dry surface.

Yeri's attention was caught by some kind of movement under the pool. There were strange sea creatures stirring underneath. They were a bit monstrous, a bit mysterious, and altogether fascinating.

A pair of mermaids broke through the surface and grabbed two silver cords. Like a harpist's gentle stroke, they pulled the cords down until a platform emerged carrying two ornate thrones; the occupants being Lir and Nia.

Yeri was about to say something when he saw Lir's face buried in his right hand while gripping Nia's other hand. He could hear the merman's quiet sobs.

"I'm—I'm sorry," was all Yeri could manage.

"Afraid we've lost many lives today," Nia said with a sad expression directed at her husband. "First his brother, and then over half the sailors on the bridge."

"Oh dear," Yeri said. "They didn't make it? Captain Jonn?"

"Many perished," Nia said. "But Captain Jonn survived."

A group of black-robed Merrows slowly rose out of the pool. One mermaid began to sing a lonely, quiet note. After a few verses, the rest of the singers accompanied her. Their words were in a language Yeri did not recognize; he did recognize the tone however. The Merrows mourned for their fallen.

After they finished, Lir breathed, regained his composure, and sat up. "Leave us now, Nia. Your mother is right. You're in no condition."

"I cannot leave you at this hour." Nia's hand was interlaced with Lir's. "The headaches will pass."

"Forgive my rudeness," Yeri called out. "What is all this business? I've been in the dark far too long. What are these foul creatures? Who are the Dujinnin? And what happened to your brother? As senior driver of Fungman, Zedock and Josiah, I demand an explanation this very moment."

"If we were to tell you," Lir said, "you would be put under the strictest of oaths, one that would require your very life."

"My very life?" Yeri's tone quickly shifted from demand to farewell. "Well, then. I will be on my way. Very sad you've run into trouble, but it's got nothing to do with me and my horses. Good day, your Grace and . . . er, your Grace-ness."

Pain, deep and bottomless, filled Nia's eyes. "Please, Yeri Willow. Do not leave us. You are the Merrow's only call for salvation. Our enemies mean to exploit our weakness and will do so if none will speak for us."

"So . . . I, well—" Yeri's heart turned doughy. He never could manage himself around a beautiful woman, even the half-aquatic sort. But he couldn't give in now to his weaker emotions. Every minute he stood on this whalebone platform was a minute closer to his doom—he felt it. The stagecoach driver collected the words up that would inform Nia he had to leave, no matter what. Nothing could be done. He had to just simply say: "no".

Yeri opened his mouth . . . and chickened out, "Well . . . I . . . the—the Dujinnin. Are they from Huron?"

"They are a people from the Oruse Isles," Nia removed a pinch of stardust from a satchel and flung it into the air. She whipped her fingers and an image of a brown-skinned man appeared. He had dreadlocks to his waist, thick facial features, and looked entirely unpleasant.

"I am afraid we are the cause of their hatred for us," Nia continued. "For over a thousand years we enslaved their entire race. Treated them no better than cattle, worse even. While it's been a long time since they gained their freedom under Huron's instruction, they've never forgiven us. They wish to bring us to our knees."

"Is it about your treasure?" Yeri said. "You have bits of treasure tucked here and there? As the old tavern toads tell it, anyway."

"Yes." Nia's hand glided along the silicon armrest. "Very observant, Yeri. It is about the treasure; it's always about the treasure. You are familiar with sulmare? The most precious

metal of Earth and Mōon? Merrows have been endowed with the gift of sulmare-making.”

Nia rubbed her fingers, giving the universal sign for money. Three sulmares sparked into existence and clinked into her open palm. She flung them at Yeri’s feet.

“I’ll be . . .” Yeri held up the sulmare, mouth a gape. The coins were still hot from Nia’s making. They felt rough and smooth, heavy and light, all at the same time. These three pieces would feed him and his mother for a month.

“Because every Merrow is endowed with the power of sulmare-making, we are tasked with its protection and distribution, both here and on Earth. Merrow fortresses patrol all coastlines, protecting the sulmare banks. Lir and I were charged with the Eynclaene offshore accounts.”

“They want your abilities of sulmare-making?”

“Not entirely. Our money is secondary. They want revenge. They mean to expose our—” Nia stopped to look at her husband, then back to Yeri. “Tell me, Yeri. Have you ever visited the fair city of Huron?”

“Of course, ma’am. Who hasn’t? We go at least once a year. I’ve a fine map of it hanging on my bedroom ceiling. Know every borough, alleyway and byway. My father was born there, you know, Mōon rest his soul,” Yeri paused. “Anyway. Yes, in short.”

“Permit me one more question,” Nia said. “Are you a hero, Yeri?”

“A hero, my lady?” Yeri slipped the three sulmares into his knee breeches.

“Yes. Have you ever heroed?”

“Well, uh, er, I mean, Father thought I showed promise, but schooling was a trifle expensive, and there wasn’t one to apprentice me. And now—” Yeri rubbed a slightly bulging tummy. “—afraid I’m not quite in the condition for heroism.”

“Would you like to be one?”

“Agatha would like it.”

"Agatha?"

"Yes," Yeri said. "Agatha is my sweetheart. But she won't marry me on the account of, well, my belly, to be honest. She will marry nothing less than a hero. And Agatha made it quite clear that a hero does not have an "amorphous midsection". Afraid I'm destined to live out my days with Mother."

"I need a hero of high quality to take a message to the Huron City Council," Nia said. "It must be someone who is not Merrow, one whom the fowls can not smell."

"Oh . . . well, honestly, ma'am, it being the holidays and all . . . and, er, my dear mum. I mean, I . . . forgive me. When you asked for my help, I imagined a ride free of charge or a lent horse. But all this? More than I can handle. Gromwell doesn't see too much in the way of adventure. Once, when I was no bigger than a leviathan's pimple, there was the scourge of the three-headed chicken. It was a bit frightening at first. One head breathed fire; the other two breathed chicken feed and pond water. But it turned out when the first two heads spewed out fiery chicken feed the last one would put it out. Counterproductive in the end, really."

Nia leaned in. "Agatha, right? Well, Yeri. If you take on this quest you will trim up that hero's physique within the month."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

Yeri's gaze drifted off. He saw Agatha's flirtatious eyes flash across his view, and then those soft lips whispering the word: "marriage." Yeri clapped his hands. "Always wanted to holiday in Huron, m'lady!"

Nia smiled and reached out to her husband. "Love. The greatest motivation."

Lir squeezed her hand and immediately picked up a squid pen and scroll. "Because our kind guards the treasure of the brother worlds, we carry a special citizenship under the city of Huron, and with it, the protection afforded her citizens. The Merrows are in need of that protection. Within this scroll is a

secret to which only Merrows are privy. Our enemies, the Dujinnin, have discovered it and mean to exploit this secret. If we are exposed, it will destroy all Merrow kind. I now entrust this secret to you and to the Steward of Huron, Nikolas Lyons. He sits on the city council under the Roggen Tree. In case the scroll is lost, I'm afraid we must divulge this secret to you, also, so you may pass it onto the Steward.

"On that, we must have full assurance you will not betray us, Yeri." Lir removed a large, white pearl from a small satchel and handed them to a guard. The guard's automaton legs swiveled around and he walked up the whalebone bridge and toward Yeri.

Lir's voice dropped. "This is a pearl-of-devotion, Yeri. It will rest itself in the lining of your stomach. If you betray our secret, this pearl will turn your skin to algae and your insides to seaweed. It will be a long, painful death, to be sure."

The guard came within inches of Yeri's face. He looked down at the iridescent skin of the merman's fingers and the pearl-of-devotion that was to sit in the lining of his stomach. Something like a conscience reminded the stagecoach he was about to take *another* oath. Was this really a good idea?

With a sigh, Yeri picked up the pearl. "Big bugger, isn't it? Heh, heh."

"If you are loyal to our kind," Lir said, "then take, Yeri, and swallow."

"A bit of harjuice?" Yeri asked the guard. "Or maybe a swallow of harchoco to wash it down?"

The guard's face remained stolid.

"Right. I see." Yeri nodded. With a sigh, he set the pearl-of-devotion between his molars, hoping it was chewable.

Krrekkkk.

It wasn't chewable.

So, with watery eyes, Yeri swallowed.

"Now," Nia breathed in deeply, "you may read the message."

Yeri bit his bottom lip as he slowly unscrolled the seaweed parchment.

To Your Honor, Steward of the City of Huron and its surrounding provinces, Nikolas Lyons. This document contains the folly of the Merrows.

Yeri began reading out loud, "This secret is the shame of our kind." He choked on the next words. "Here—here is the abominable truth, Steward Nikolas Lyons."



Lyons. My name is Nick Lyons," Nick answered the St. Mary's nursedrone sitting behind the front desk.

"Full name, please," the nursedrone said, tilting her plastic alloy head to emulate a person asking a question.

"That's my full name. Grand calls me Nikolas, and so does Caroline Wendell too, I guess, but Nick is the name on the birth certificate."

"How may I help you?" the nursedrone said.

"My mom and dad were drinking diet sodas, and they got really, I don't know, sick, or poisoned, or—"

"ErikandSonyaLyons!" Tim had just caught up.

"Your parents are in the Disease and Poison Emergency Wing." The nursedrone pressed a button. "A Nick and Tim Lyons are here for Erik and Sonya Lyons."

A female voice from the console answered, "Send them to the waiting room. I've a few questions about their parents' files. Their biochemistry is off the charts . . ." The voice walked off.

The nursedrone pointed down the hall. "Follow the signs to the Disease and Poison Emergency Waiting Room."

They took off running. The white plastic walls reflected their desperate sprint.

Zzzzzz.

A small, white sphere with green scanning eyes floated next to them. It was an inocudrone.

"Medi-one records tell me—" The inocudrone paced with them. "—that Nick Lyons and Tim Lyons have not received

their inoculation shots for fifteen days. Remember that forty new strands of the cold and five new mutations of the Geneva virus have appeared in only the last forty-eight hours. Please remain still as I administer the vaccine.”

Tim and Nick stopped and obediently put their arms out to the inocudrone. There are two places on the planet you never want to be without your inoculations: the refugee camps and the hospital.

The inocudrone was cycling through its third and last shot when Nick heard a voice come from around the corner.

“Receiving a new transmission from Medi-one, Nick,” came a motherly digital voice. It was a nannydrone.

“Another replacement?!” Nick said, turning on his heels.

The nannydrone sped up with the needle pointed at him. “You are to receive the neural inhibitor, R-5235, Nick.”

Nick jumped back and barely missed the lance.

“R-5235 is designed to suppress all aggression, Nick.” The nannydrone aimed its needle at Nick’s stomach and thrust again.

Nick sidestepped quickly, looked to the two inocudrones and commanded. “Inocudrones. The nannydrone has been contaminated with—uh, the black plague! You have to stop it from spreading.”

The inocudrones immediately swiveled to the nannydrone and replaced their needles with blasters. “Must eliminate all biological threats!” The inocudrones said in unison. “Must eliminate all biological threats!”

The nannydrone turned, flipping its needle with its own blaster, but it was too late. The inocudrones fired. Red bursts of light smashed the nannydrone to the wall. The sound of blasters reverberated throughout the hallway causing nearby drones to pivot in their direction.

“Come on.” Nick tore into another run.

Tim tried to keep up with his brother. “What just happened?”

They charged through the sliding doors and were met by a packed waiting room divided into refugees and suburbanites. One side wore tattered, mismatched clothes, while the other wore that week's hottest fashion. Though their clothes were different, their expressions remained the same: fear.

Among the suburbanites was a mother wearing a *Robin's Little League* t-shirt and matching hat, and holding her three-year-old daughter. The mother covered her mouth, crying bitterly as a doctor spoke under hushed breath. Nick couldn't hear what the doctor was saying, but he could guess. The mother and child left with the doctor, opening up two seats for the brothers.

"What's happening?" Tim said as he plopped down next to an old, snoring hover-bus driver.

"I don't know," Nick shrugged.

"So, if it's not the Geneva virus, what is it?" Tim said.

"I don't know."

"Where's Grand?" Tim said.

Nick sighed, "I don't know."

They waited for what seemed like an hour. Just when Nick was about to doze off, he heard the cautionary tone of an inocudrone.

"Please, Mr. Lyons. You cannot go any farther until I take a reading."

"My grandsons. Where are they?" came a Scottish accent.

Nick stood to his feet.

"I am collecting some very disturbing vitals," the inocudrone said.

"My grandsons!" the Scottish voice bellowed.

Everyone's gaze shifted to the voice on the other side of the emergency room doors.

"Mr. Lyons!" the inocudrone said. "Not only are you six hundred and twenty days overdue for your inoculation shots, I am detecting fifteen viruses, one of them predating the iron age, twelve forms of bacteria found only on the south side of Moon, and a form of metal that cannot be found on the

periodic table whatsoever. I am processing the necessary vaccines now. Wait one moment, please.”

“I would be pleased, hubcap,” the Scottish voice said, “if you took three paces in the opposite direction.”

“I will need to administer thirteen different vaccines,” the inocudrone announced. “Five through the arm. Seven through the nose. And one—”

FRZEEESHHHH! came the sound of an exploding inocudrone.

“Grand!” The brothers said, jumping to their feet.

The door slid open revealing a shower of sparks and a swarthy looking man. Their grandfather stood like some Viking out of time with his white and yellow marbled beard. He wore a green trench coat plastered in dirt. After three great steps, he pulled the brothers into a hug that smelled of sweat and hovertruck. Nick returned the hug. Tim stiffened.

“My boys!” Grand said.

“Wait a second—” Tim raised his hands. “—you never come down here. I thought an ‘evil shadow’ covered the face of Earth or something?”

“Nikolas—” Grand grabbed Nick by the shoulders. “—I finally cracked Ludwig’s puzzle. It was buried in Machu Picchu of all places. The Merrows are under attack. Huron needs you.”

“Huron—How do you know about the voice?” Nick said.

“Well.” Grand’s head tilted. “Yes. It is Möonside. Well. Not the moon you know, though you don’t really call it moon . . .”

Nick hated to tell Grand this, but he was babbling again. His grandfather was his most favorite person in the world, but he had a tendency to talk scattered. You just had to go along for the ride.

“Möonside?” Tim said. “Wait. What’s a Merrow?”

“Mermen,” Grand said. “You know. Fishpeople. They’ve been attacked by Dujinnin and they call for Nikolas’s aid.”

"Mermaids?" Tim shook his head. "Grand, there's no such thing as mer—"

"There's a good deal that I need to explain—" Grand had his hand up. "—But now is not the time. First, I'm to fetch your parents, Erik and Sonya. Where are they?"

"They're in there." Nick pointed to the epidemic ward. "One moment they were talking and the next Dad couldn't breathe and turned all purple-death."

Grand looked to the door with a sign clearly marked *Disease and Poison Ward: No admittance beyond this point without clearance*. He tried to pry the doors open. They beeped a warning but wouldn't budge. Then something very strange happened. Grand's eyes lost their hue and turned blue while waves of blue misted from his fingertips.

"Grand?" Nick took a step back.

Their grandfather's fingers formed a hollow circle and he plunged them into the crack of the door. It rolled apart like paper.

"Scuccas? Trackers? How could it be, Huron?" Grand mumbled to himself. He looked down to Nick, then back through the gap. "It is time we be leaving, boys."

"Um, Grand," Nick said, "why are you all blue and misty?"

"It's my jynn'us. Now, let's go!" Iron-like hands seized their shoulders and shifted the boys away. He mumbled something about "my scent" as they marched out of the hospital.

"In the truck. Don't doddle," their grandfather commanded.

The hovertruck's nose was buried in a mulberry bush, clearly ignoring the parking pads. Both boys tumbled into the cab and were met with the smell of more pipe smoke and truck sweat. Before they could manage their harnesses, the hovertruck rocketed upward and in complete defiance of all commercial airway regulations. They sped through a pair of holosigns that read, *Beauty and the Botox: When nature has been beastly to you*, and *Mind Transplants: Don't die, download!* Nick glanced quickly at St. Mary's. He half-expected a fleet of

policedrones on their tail, but there were only a couple of mangy dogs tearing across the lawn.

Or were they horses?

"What's going on?" Tim said just as they broke through the clouds.

"Waiting . . . no use waiting at the hospital," Grand said.

"For what?" Tim said.

Grand squeezed the steering wheel. "For your parents."

Nick looked sideways to his grandfather. His crinkled brow spoke worry, even fear. He began bobbing his head. "I'm coming my love. I'm coming."

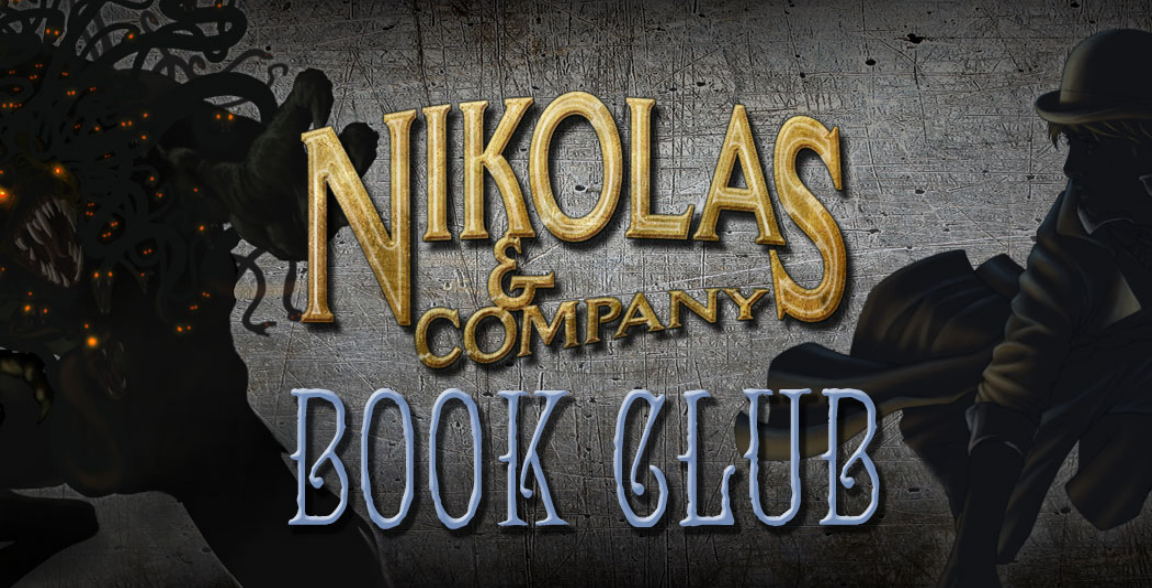
Uh oh, Nick thought. Here he goes again with that mumble-talk.

Grand would often carry on full conversations with himself—it was one of his many eccentricities.

"I'm coming. It'll just be a little longer. A few setbacks. Gotta break the trackers scent, but I'm coming, I'm coming, Huron We must not allow the Merrows to perish. We must save the Merrows. We must bring the steward home.

Book Club Questions

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NIKOLAS & COMPANY'S BOOK CLUB

- What kind of person is Yeri? Is he courageous? Wimp? Is he selfish? Selfless? Come up with your own definitions of Yeri.
- There were a lot of new words in this chapter. Which word seemed weird to you? What do you think it means?
- The Merrows have a secret but we never got to hear it. What do you think it is?
- When Nick and Tim met Grand, Nick seemed excited but Tim didn't. Why is that?
- What is the difference between Tim and Nick?
- Who do you like more and why?

