

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



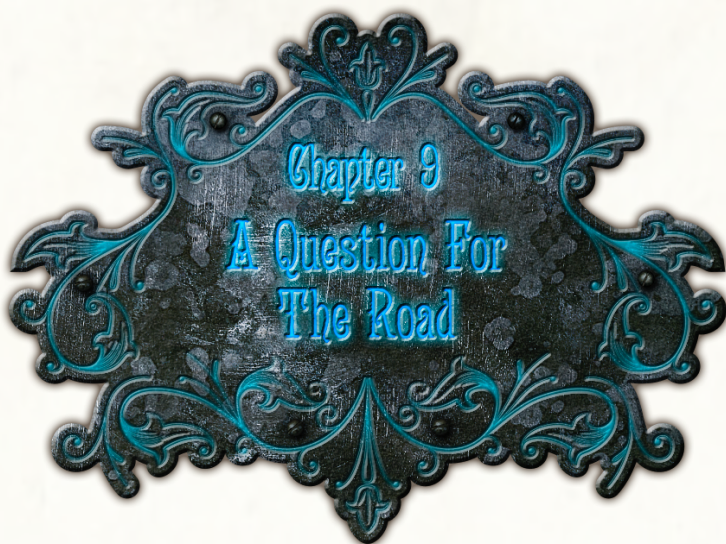
Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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Yeri looked slowly to Lir and Nia while rolling up the scroll. "This is a tragedy, my lady. I will secure this . . . to my very heart."

"No humling or creature has ever known our secret, until now," Nia said. "You understand why the pearl-of-devotion was so necessary."

The guard took the scroll from Yeri and returned it to Lir. Another attendant held out a large fish scale with a puddle of steaming red wax. Lir rolled up the scroll, then lifted the scale and poured the wax over the edges of the paper. He raised a signet ring and, with a commanding tone, said, "Be ye the hand of the Steward Nikolas Lyons or be ye the hand that turns black and dead." A hundred strands of black swarmed between the signet ring and the scroll, and he pushed his

knuckle over the flap. The wax sizzled and transformed into glass, sealing the scroll.

"Remember," Lir said, "only Nikolas Lyons may read this."

"Of course, Duke," Yeri said as he took the scroll from the attendant. The senior stagecoach driver felt a new emotion creep up his spine. He hoped it wasn't courage. Yes, he wanted a hero's physique to catch the eye of Agatha, but he didn't want to give over to heroism. His mum had always said: "Do not try to be a hero, Yeri. You'll just get someone killed, probably yourself."

"Please, Yeri," Lir said. "Follow the attendant downstairs."

Nia gently pressed her hand on Lir's arm. "My body has betrayed my will. I must rest now."

He nodded to an attendant, who quickly brought a velle to the tired duchess.



Yeri could hear the ocean water break between the floating fortress and cliff side. The only thing that kept him from plummeting down to his death was a thin plankway leading to the cliff, on which he currently stood. Yeri took the last step and exhaled. Lir and Captain Jonn followed slowly with the help of their automaton legs. Having crossed, all three were now outside of the fortress and walking down crude steps hewn into the cliff side. After a few minutes of descent, they entered a cave. The only sign of life was a lamp dangling at the stern of a small boat at the edge of a pool.

"In the boat you will find enough provisions to last you two weeks," Lir said. "This pool leads to a merway, much like the ones you've seen in the fortress, except this particular one is not completely submerged, allowing for humling travel."

Yeri looked again. Sure enough, at the far end of the pool was a watery tunnel.

"The water is enchanted, carrying you inland and along the merway. This merway cuts through the Dorseteen cave system and will take you four hundred miles west to Fendrow county. There, you will find a blacksmith by the name of Mullen. She will know you by the signet. Do not reveal anything to her until you give her the password. Do you understand? Simply say, 'squall.' Once you've told her the password, Mullen will provide you with a horse and a few week's rations. Do not forget. Now, once you row down the merway, you will not be able to return. We must undock from this port for our own protection. If you have questions, now is the time to speak."

"It's a bit dark in there, isn't it?" Yeri's voice reverberated down the tunnel. "Those monsters couldn't make their way down there, right?"

Lir clutched Yeri's bony shoulder. "You are our only means of salvation, Yeri Willrow."

Yeri nodded.

"Do you have any other questions?" Lir said.

"None that I can think of, Duke," Yeri shook his head.

Secretly, he wished he had a myriad of questions—anything to stall the inevitable. He sighed, reached out to Captain Jonn's muscular forearm, and awkwardly placed his left foot over the boat. He lifted the oar but didn't drop it into the water.

"I do have a question, Lir, if you'll forgive me," Yeri said. "Anyone might call himself a steward. How can I tell one from another?"

"Every city speaks to her steward."

"Very good." Yeri did not drop the oar. "One more thing. He could simply lie and claim the city speaks to him?"

"That is why the scroll has been enchanted and will recognize a true Steward of Huron from a false one," Lir nodded.

"Right. Very good . . ." Yeri still did not drop the oar. "One last thing. It seems I've already forgotten his—"

"Lyons. His name is Nikolas Lyons."

"Read my mind, sir. Thank you, sir."

Yeri slowly dropped the oar and pushed away. As the water squeezed into the frothing merway, he began practicing his introductory greeting to the great Steward of Huron:

"Greetings, oh fair Steward Nikolas Lyons.

"*Steward* Nikolas Lyons.

"*Hello* Nikolas Lyons. The Merrows need you to save them if you please.

"Sir Steward *Nikolas Lyons*, the Mermen are in *grave* peril.

"*Oh*, gracious, excellent, Steward Nikolas Lyons, you must save the Mermaids!"



"Alright," Grand announced, waking them from their sleep. "This is a good spot."

Nick kicked awake. He didn't know what time it was but it felt like midnight. He sat up, trying to get his bearings. They were definitely not in Colorado.

"Where are we?" Nick said.

Tim slowly stirred from his sleep. "Is this—?"

"Death Valley," Grand finished his sentence. We're in California. I need to keep us moving, but I feel like I owe you some kind of explanation about the trackers. I've kept you in the dark for too long."

They jumped out of the hovertruck. Nick stumbled for a moment, the sand shifting under his tennis shoes. He put his hand out and grabbed a bit of the dune to keep himself upright. A gust of wind kicked up, forcing him to cross his arms. He didn't realize deserts could be so cold.

"Now—" Grand prodded the inner lining of his coat. "—a world of explanations and no time to give them. The trackers are mighty slow by land but know how to get arou— Ah, thought I had a bit of stardust left." He pulled out a purple satchel and tore it open. Iridescent dust flew

everywhere. He stuck his hand into the dust and performed several complicated gestures.

"These be the wretched scuccas."

Three monstrous images appeared. The combination of dust and headlights produced a ghostly replica of the trackers. This version moved with their necks to the ground and let out an occasional cry.

The same dread that washed over Nick in the hospital came over him again.

Grand said, "Due to these nefarious beasts, our family has been on the run for fourteen years."

Their grandfather's expression shifted. The fatigue of running for years appeared around his cheeks and brow. With a sigh, he stepped toward the stardust. "They drove us from my fair city, Huron. I forsook my stewardship over her to bring us here, thousands of years in the future." Grand wrung his hands. "Nevertheless, they followed me. It seems that even time and space cannot bind such darkness.

"They are an unnatural kind, filled with dead magic and all its trappings. Scuccas cannot die until they've tracked down and brought their prey to their master. Like a dog or wolf, they can pick up one's scent, but what they do with it is quite wicked. A dog can only smell the trail one leaves behind, but a scucca can smell you, your habits, your passions, your very decisions, present and future. And they will use it against you. That is why they were waiting for me at the hospital.

"You see. It's why I kept to the hovertruck all these years, never coming groundside. Made it difficult for them to pick up a fresh scent. Staying away protected you and your parents from them until . . . until I got sloppy. For the first time in fourteen years, I let my passions take hold when my archaeological team discovered Ludwig's message. Foolishly, I came groundside, touched Ludwig's chronomessage, and then left it there with the Peruvian. They must have found the artifact and smelled my intentions. Learned of you and your

parents. And so the scuccas poisoned them, drawing me to the surface, knowing I would be forced groundside again to fetch your parents.”

“Are they the same monsters that were chasing the Merrows?” Nick said.

“No,” Grand said. “If you recall those monsters had thousands of red eyes, and they did something to the Merrows, corrupting them. A scucca cannot do that. Its power is to track. They are two different agents of evil, two different missions, I’m afraid.”

“Yeah, OK,” Nick said. “Why are they chasing our family?”

“Someone wanted to remove me from power over Huron, to take away my stewardship. I believe the attack on the Merrows is not coincidental. Once they chased our family away, then the city of Huron and her citizens, which include the Merrows, would be left vulnerable.”

“How did your leaving make Huron vulnerable?”

“The voice!” Grand shouted. “The city. She speaks to the Steward. Many scheme to destroy Huron so they may rob her of her powerful magic. But she knows, Nikolas. She knows when someone intends evil against her gates. She speaks to the Steward, warning him of the coming peril. She will guide you, revealing her enemy’s foul schemes. This is why the trackers ran us out of Huron, to leave her vulnerable. Her enemies were tired of being thwarted by the voice at every turn.

The Steward must return so she can tell us how to save the Merrows and defeat the Dujinnin. You, Nikolas, are that steward. *You* must return. If you don’t, the Merfolk and your fair city will be destroyed.”

“I’m sorry,” Tim said. “Did I miss the announcement for the crazy convention? Is this just, like, some elaborate joke you two are playing on me?”

“This is no joke, Tim,” Grand said. “This is real.”

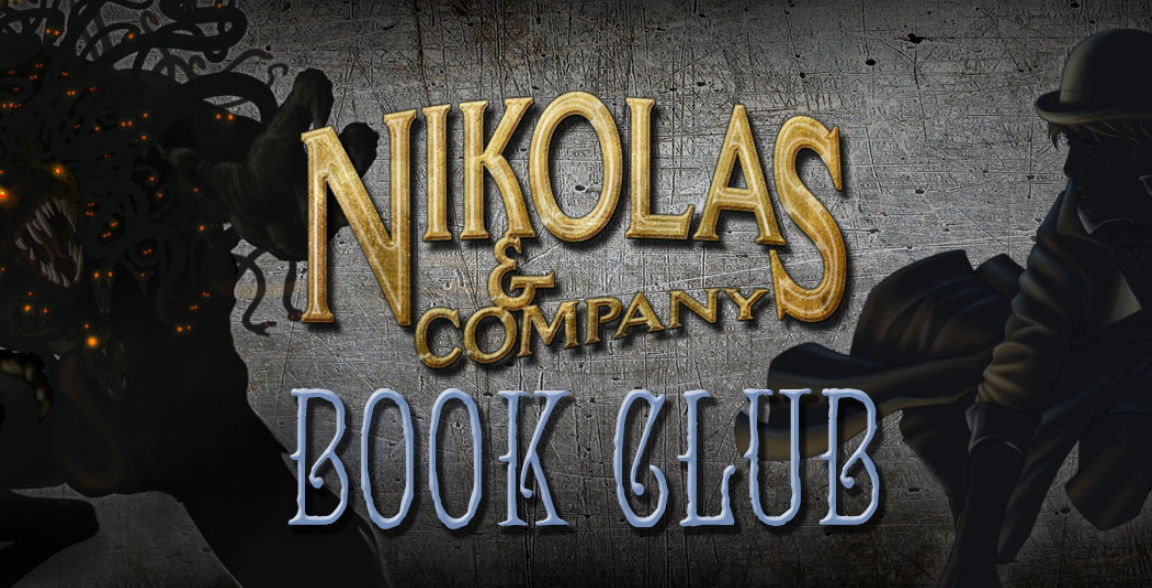
"Real?!" Tim said. "Here are the words that have come out of yours and Nick's mouth for the last two hours: 'Mermaids', 'Moon', 'magic', 'agents of evil', 'time-travel!' Seriously, time travel!? I'm waiting for the part where you actually talk about something REAL!"

"Now, I don't know what animals were in that hospital but shouldn't we call the police or something instead of acting out your crazy role-playing game in the middle of the desert?"

"They weren't animals, they were scuccas, as I just explained to you," Grand said. "And no. We cannot go back right now. We must wait." He sighed slowly, "This isn't fair to you, Tim. Its all too quick. Your parents are gravely ill, you just experienced something very traumatic, and you're in a strange place. I need to give you a little more time to digest all of this."

"Yes," Tim said. "Please allow a few more days so I, too, can lose my marbles."

Nick didn't say anything, but he wanted to tell Grand to ignore Tim. He had a ga-billion questions to ask him, like why was there a voice in his head telling him that "The Rones were evil," and why did he have a vision of some old-timey city? He really didn't want to wait around for Tim to clue in on what was going on, which, knowing Tim, would be *never*. But Grand was already marching to the hovertruck.



NIKOLAS & COMPANY BOOK CLUB

Book Club Questions

- You've had a week to think about what is the secret of the Merrows. Have you come up with any new ideas?
- There were a lot of new words in this chapter. Which word seemed weird to you? What do you think it means?
- If you met someone that seemed crazy like Grand, would you believe him?
- If Nikolas was the protagonist for this chapter, what would that make Tim?
- Why do you think Tim has a hard time believing? List his characteristics. Is he brave? Cynical? etc.
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