

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY

## Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY



BY KEVIN MCGILL  
Illustrations by Carlyle McCullough



A decorative, ornate frame with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns in a dark teal or black color. The frame is centered on the page and contains the chapter title in a stylized, light blue font.

## Chapter 10

### Going To A Better Place

H

e'll save the Merrows, Huron. I know he will."

Nick heard the modulator switches kick in as Grand activated the landers. The hovertruck began its descent toward a floating electrostation in South Wales. It had been three days since they'd fled the hospital.

"Merrows," Grand mumbled to himself as they pulled into the parking space. "Must save the Merrows. Have to break the tracker's scent first, Huron. You know this. I have to."

The hovertruck landed next to a Pakistanian family's van with a trailer hitched to the back. Nick and Tim jumped out and bee-lined it to the convenience store.

"Nikolas," Grand called from the hovertruck. "Be sure to grab three beef jerkys while you're in there."

"What if they have bacon jerky?" Nick said.

"Even better!" Grand said.

Nick nodded and kept walking.

For the past three days Grand had nearly circumnavigated the Earth. He only left the cloud line to eat and use the bathroom. For some reason he never went groundside.

The flights were long and boring. Most of the conversations consisted of Tim saying: "We need to go back." "Mom and Dad might be dead." But Grand remained tight-lipped about their parents. In fact, Grand said very little to the brothers. What was said consisted of: "What will you be eating for breakfast?" "Time for bed now." and "Think we'll see the Himalayans in the morning."

As always, it wasn't what Grand said to *them* that mattered, it was what Grand said to himself: "Have to save the Merrows. Mustn't let the trackers know what I'm thinking, Huron. Keep 'em confused. Break the scent."

*Huron?* Nick thought to himself as he walked inside the food mart to buy a candy bar. *Grand hears the same voice?*

"Psst," Tim called Nick over, having just grabbed a bag of Sour Powers.

"Yeah," Nick said.

"What's wrong with Grand? Is he getting, you know, Alzheimer's?" Tim said.

"No," Nick shook his head. "Grand is incapable of illness."

Tim gave a withered look. "Dude. I know you think he's the patron saint of awesomeness or something, but Grand's mind's all screwy. He keeps talking to himself."

"We can drop you off at the nearest daycare if it makes you feel better."

"Just saying that I'm having major doubts about Grand's psychological stability." Tim snatched a bag of jelly beans. "Don't have to be a jerk about it."

"He told us to wait; we wait."

"Since when did you heed the opinions of an authority figure?"

Nick shrugged.

It was true. He didn't care about the opinion of authority figures, except Grand. He was the only adult Nick had ever respected, which makes sense, since Grand was also the only adult that ever scared him. It was like someone had taken Aragorn, William Wallace, Beowulf, and mashed them into their grandfather. What do you say to a person like that?

Truly, they'd never had the average grandfather-grandson relationship. Grand never celebrated national holidays with them, or Christmas for that matter. He never sent them e-cards with e-money. Grand would send real, physical letters. They were twenty pages long, recording his whereabouts and archaeological activities across the globe, giving full details of the local aviary, with samples included. Bat wings. Parrot beaks. Eye and talon of a Sulawesi serpent eagle. It took Nick hours to read the letters because he spent most of the time cross-referencing between Grand's words and the e-dictionary.

Also, Grand never came groundside, so he never saw where the brothers lived or went to school. He always insisted they meet at a Cappumulus, a franchise of coffee shops with locations stationed two miles in the air. More times than not, Grand would carry an oversized axe into the coffee shop, plop it on the counter, and order a large triple espresso, no syrup, no sugar, and no whip. Then he'd fire up his pipe and set off the very sensitive smoke alarms. Most of their coffee sessions entailed Grand grilling Nick and Tim, asking if they had enrolled in any sword dueling classes or at least metallurgy. How many stanzas of poetry had they memorized in the last week, or had they learned to fell a wild animal with their bare hands yet? Tim explained that there were no wild animals within twenty miles of the city limits. Nick reminded himself to download all the books he could on W. B. Yeats and sword fighting.

Yes. Grand's eccentricities were unnerving, but it was the very reason Nick trusted him. He was as real as they came.

Grand wasn't a drone.



Finally, after another two days of hopping between electrostations and elevated restaurants, Grand nodded to the ground and said, "That's about long enough."

He punched in a new location: *Grace Church of Colorado City*.

"Church?" Nick said.

"You typed it wrong, Grand. We want to go to St. Mary's," Tim said.

"It's our last chance before they cremate the bodies."

Tim sat up. "Cremate? Mom and Dad are dead?"



Before the truck came to a complete stop, Grand jumped out, reached behind the seats of the cab, and pulled out two antique blowers—the kind their mom and dad kept by the fireside next to the poker and ash scooper. Of course, they never used them, since the fire was only a holograph.

Grand took several long strides to the top of the stairs and pulled open the doors. The cobalt blue foyer smelled like a hundred years of perfume, dutifully marching in and out every Sunday.

"They really are dead," Tim whispered, choking back tears.

Grand reached for the sanctuary door.

"Wait," Tim protested. "You can't just march into a funeral service. We're not even dressed for it."

"Erik and Sonya are in there. I am responsible for them."

"Responsible for them?"



Grand opened the door a crack. An air-conditioned breeze and speaker's eulogy slipped through.

"... will be missed. Sonya was also a good person, a beautiful person. She was a woman in the prime of her days, with so much left to give to society. She liked shopping, the reality show, *Laguna Beach Girls* and—"

Grand flung the sanctuary doors open.

"Grand . . ." Tim covered his face.

The speaker, a thin man whose scalp majored more on skin than hair, tracked the great, old man marching down the aisle.

"Testimonies will be after the rap duet, Mister . . . ?" The speaker waited for a response he would never get. Grand walked straight to the closed caskets and flipped the lids back like playing cards.

The audience inhaled.

"He's insane!" Nick laughed.

Grand grabbed their mom by the collar and slung her over his left shoulder. He turned a full revolution, her blond hair sweeping around.

Adult voices shouted. "Sonya! . . . Oh no, he's grabbing for Erik, too!"

Teenage voices joined the commentators. "Awesome—No way! That old dude ripped the lid right off!"

Grand heaved their dad onto his other shoulder. He turned to the audience, paused for a moment to steady himself, and then offered his own parting words, "Carry on."

The bodies swayed in beat with Grand's march up the aisle.

"Linus! Say something," a woman hissed from the front row.

Linus' expression could be described as cadaverous.

"Linus!"

"Um—I'm, well, er. Yes, yes. Er—Erik and Sonya have gone to a better place—"

"Linus!" she hissed.

"Well—well, what I mean to say is . . ."

Grand rolled the bodies to the ground and Tim closed the sanctuary doors.

"What's going on?" Nick said.

"They're dead!" Tim pulled the locks of his hair. "You just hauled our dead Mom and Dad out of a funeral service—in front of everyone!"

"First, they're not your parents. Second, they're not dead." Grand turned their dad onto his stomach, his nose crunching into the blue carpet.

"Not dead?" Nick looked to Tim.

"They should be, grant you that. Trackers put enough poison in their diet sodas to kill a herd of gwinters. But these are mimes." Grand looked at two very confused boys.

"Duplicates, copies. They do appear dead to any modern physician. Nearly on the brink of it, I would imagine. But these particular ones happen to be very difficult to kill. I should know. I bred them that way."

"Bred?" Tim mouthed.

Nick could only stare at what Grand claimed were copies of his parents. Sure, there were moments he prayed they were not his parents. Especially one afternoon when he invited a bunch of friends to play some *Maverick Seven* on his holobox, and there was his mom doing her Kenpo routine to Baby Gangsta's platinum soundtrack, *A Tale of Two Cribs*. Still, wishing and having your wish fulfilled are two different things.

"Daniel?" Tim stood up. "Daniel Kobayashi?"

There stood the boy genius leaning on his cane. His hairless, questioning brow said what his mouth could not, "*What the heck is going on?*"

"What're you doing here?" Nick said.

"It's your parent's funeral," Daniel said, in his staccato, intelligent tone. "Should we not be in attendance?"

"But they're not your parents," Nick said.

"Are we not friends, Nick?" Daniel said.



“Sure . . .”

Daniel cleared his throat. “Anyway, Caroline insisted we attend. Said you two needed the support of true family during such a loss.”

“Oh. My. Gawsh!” Brandy stood in the doorway wearing a black dress, thin black veil, three-inch black heels, and a matching black purse.

Haley pushed herself around Brandy while Xanthus flanked the left. All were dressed uniformly in black, and all were completely dumb struck by Grand’s body snatching.

“Tim, Nick.” Caroline cut through the growing crowd. She flung herself at Tim and then wrapped her other arm around Nick. Her hands were rough and smelled of cherry pie.

“I was so worried.” Caroline stepped back. “Are you guys all right?”

“Yeah,” Nick said.

“Close the doors,” Grand growled.

“That dude just yanked your dead parents from a funeral,” Xanthus said, wide-eyed, as he watched Grand push their mom’s nostrils up, pull her lips open, and smell a handful of hair.

“What?” Haley said. “Hospital short on cadavers?”

Grand twisted to Haley, then Nick.

“They’re my friends—” Nick put his hands up. “—from the refugee camp.”

“Where’ve you two been?” Haley sided around Grand.

“Everywhere,” Tim said.

“Police couldn’t find you,” Haley said. “Doing the vanishing act after your parents were poisoned wasn’t a great idea. They interrogated all of us, even Rocky the She-Bully. You know she didn’t have nice things to say about you, Nick. Told them you were a violent psychopath who burned down forests and punched pretty girls in the mouth.”

“We didn’t kill them,” Nick said. “Besides, they’re not dead. Wait. What did you tell them?”

"Nothing." Haley rolled her eyes to Grand who had his ear to their dad's palm. "Should we have?"

"Seriously," said Xanthus. "What's with William Wallace?"

"That's Grand. He's my grandfather. I told you all ab  
—"

"Nick, Tim." Grand waved them over. "We need to store them away. Cannot be lugging them all the way to Huron. Bring me the pressers." Grand pointed to the two antique blowers.

Screams peeled from the sanctuary.

Xanthus, nearest to the sanctuary, turned and peaked between the foyer doors.

"Merciful Minerva!" Xanthus turned to Grand. "Bunch of animals chased the pastor off stage."

"Like a bear?" Brandy said.

"No, it's, um . . ." Xanthus fumbled through his trench coat, mumbling to himself. "Sci . . . sco . . . sce . . ." He pulled out a book titled, *Perlock's Mythological Bestiary: 30th edition*. It looked abused beyond use. He quickly undid the rubber band and started flipping.

"Long neck . . . wings behind ears . . . I believe it's a . . . yeah. Scucca!" Xanthus held the book up to Grand.

"Grand!" Nick said. "He's talking about the trackers."

"Trackers?" Grand shoved the kids aside and placed bluish hands against the foyer doors. "Not again. They thwart us at every turn!"

"Article needs to be seriously updated, though." Xanthus held the book to his nose. "Scales are more heather blue. My bestiary is pretty dated. I prefer the books over the ebooks. Just found them more honest to the source material . . ."

Sounds of a wooden object skidding across a stone floor came from the sanctuary. The screams doubled.

"Dude," Brandy said. "What's with your grandpa's eyes?"

With palms leveraged against the door, Grand's eyes once again turned blue, and a blue smoke crept from his hands.

"It's his jynn'us," Nick said.

Glass shattered.

Grand turned his glowing eyes on them. "To the truck, all of you. And take the bodies with you, Nikolas!"

Nick couldn't move.

"Now, Nikolas!"

*Boom.* The sanctuary doors were pushed open and Grand rocked back. He doubled his effort to keep it closed. The sounds of a clogged vacuum hose came from the other side.

"Reeihhh!!" A creature sounded the call of recognition and rammed the door again. Then, it began pushing through, sliding Grand backwards. He gritted his teeth and veins ribboned his neck as he tried to keep back whatever was trying to force the doors apart.

"Grab his feet, Nick," Haley ordered.

But Nick couldn't look away from the door.

Something like the belly of a boa constrictor with two slits edged its way in. The slits pulsed, *grung, grung, grung, grung, grung, grung.*

Grand stood full length. "Gahh!" His fist hammered the slits. It screamed.

Everyone stopped.

They'd never heard an animal scream like that before. Not the holovids, not the VR zoos, not even the history records. It sounded . . . other-worldly.

"What was that?" Daniel's eyes grew.

"I told you. A scucca," Xanthus whispered while slowly tucking his bestiary away. "The forces of darkness have descended upon us all. Are we ready?"

"Reihhhhhh!"

"To the truck, already!" Grand reached for the bodies and flung them over his shoulder.



Nick and company exploded through the doors. Daniel leaned on Xanthus while Brandy kicked her platforms down the steps, choosing survival over Louboutins.

“Reihhhhh!”

Men and women poured out of windows, doors, and any other escape route. The boys scrambled onto the truck bed, and the girls squeezed inside the cabin.

“Here!” Grand rolled the mimes over the lip of the truck.

The Erik-mime landed on Xanthus.

“There’sadeadbodyheadonmylap!

There’sadeadbodyheadonmylap!

There’sadeadbodyheadonmylap!” He tried to squirm away, but the bed gave no place for retreat.

“Where’s Brandy?” Haley jumped out of the cab.

“Aiih!” Brandy was sprinting across the lawn, clutching her shoes. She had changed her mind. Louboutins *were* more important than life itself.

“Brandy! Are you crazy!” Haley yelled. “Forget the shoes!”

Glass showered over the lawn and a blur of lizard skin rolled over. Three monstrous animals found their legs and righted themselves.

“What the – “ Haley said.

“What are those things?” Nick stood up on the truck bed.

“I told you man,” Xanthus’ voice quivered. “Scuccas. Trackers unto death, our death.”

It is a strange feeling to look upon a predator. All chaos quiets itself. Your blood doesn’t know whether to boil or freeze. Without turning your gaze, you ask yourself, “Should I move? Can it see me?” Inevitably, the predator answers “Yes.” And it always answers the same way: the eyes.

The scucca locked eyes with Nick and screamed, “Reeihhh!!”

Brandy scrambled into the cabin. Grand hit the close and lock button. The hovertruck's thrusters kicked from the ground, whining upward and above the tree line. The tracker covered in chains turned to a red sports car and chomped down onto the wheel. Nick looked back to Daniel, whose fingers were curled over anything that would keep him from tumbling out.

Nick laughed, "Crazy, isn't—?" A red car flew inches past his face.

"Woah! Woah!" Nick covered his head.

Metal crashed a beat later. Nick looked down at the scucca, who had locked its teeth onto the wheel of another car.

He pounded on the glass. "They're throwing cars at us, Grand!"

Grand glanced back. "Get your heads down, now!"

The boys wiggled into any position that would keep them below the wall of the truck bed. They pitched right, and then left. Black and green flashed over. Nick shoved his fingers into the small lip of the truck bed. All he could do was stare up at the wind whipping around the bed, and wonder what—

A police's hovercycle rolled over. The truck spun. Everyone screamed.

Nick pushed himself up. White smoke fanned over the grill. Grand's forearms crowbarred against the steering wheel, but he couldn't keep the hovertruck from losing altitude.

The truck slammed. Pavement shot it back into the air. Bodies lifted from the bed. It slammed again. Nine hundred pounds of fiberglass and metal skipped across Parsons Ave and 1125 Farmers Market. Once the hovertruck found road, ground wheels took over.

Grand didn't even consider brakes.

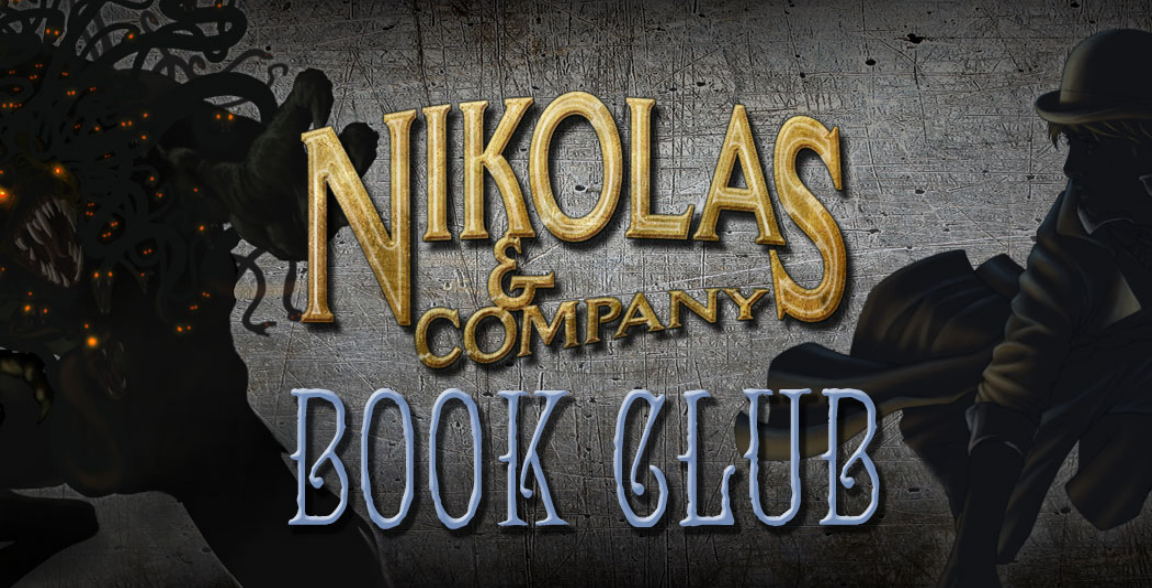
Everyone sat up this time. Nick saw the chained tracker standing in the distance. It lifted onto its hind legs, waiting. . . .

*Crack!*

The truck spun. Nick's head smacked against the tailgate. Barely coherent, he looked around with foggy vision. Having just rammed the passenger side door, two trackers rolled over a street meter. They found their legs and sprung to their feet, but didn't pursue.

Still, Grand found little use for brakes.





# NIKOLAS & COMPANY'S BOOK CLUB

## Book Club Questions

- Grand did some crazy stuff in this chapter like steal two bodies from a funeral service. What was the most embarrassing thing an adult has ever done around you?
- Which word seemed weird to you? Consider the rest of the story. What do you think that word meant?
- Who was your most favorite character in this chapter? Who was your least favorite character?

- Have you ever discovered a big secret, like the fact that Eric and Sonya are not Nick's parents. How did that make you feel?

