

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY

## Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

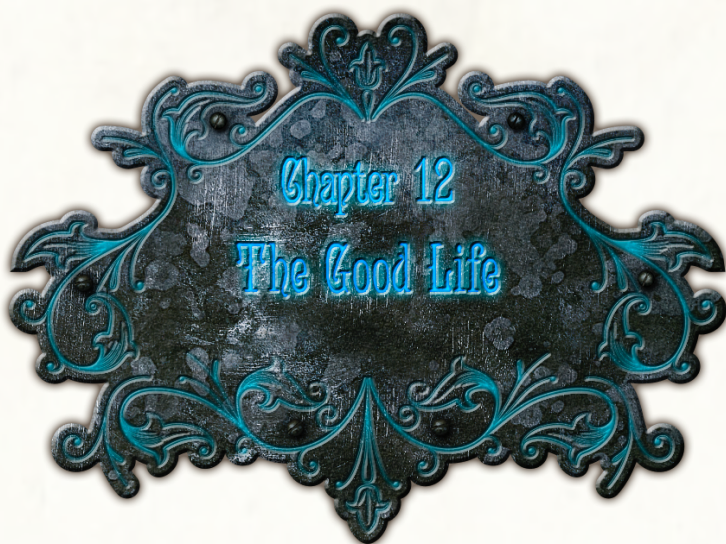
THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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I

'm gonna fly it," Nick shrugged.

"No, you're not. Seriously, Nick, you can't fly a space shuttle."

"It's easy," Nick said. "I've played Maverick Seven like a hundred times. It's an exact replica of this."

"A VIDEO GAME?" Tim said. "You think you're qualified to fly a commercial space shuttle because you played a VIDEO GAME?!"

"Look," Nick said. "Grand told me I was responsible for everyone. I have to do something."

Tim smacked his head. "Where does a fourteen-year-old flying a commercial shuttle fit into responsible? Tell him, Daniel. This is insane."

"Yes," Daniel nodded. "I would advise Nick to keep a safe distance from all technological devices, but in this particular situation I am in full support. He has accrued many hours on the holobox, suggesting that he has the skills to fly the shuttle."

But I'm not blindly optimistic. I'd say there's a strong chance one of us will die. I would wager that it would be you, Tim. Your heightened fear in an emergency situation like this would lead you to make irrational decisions. And your motor skills are below average for a fourteen-year-old boy. Not to mention you're wearing a red shirt."

"Hey. I'm a human being, not one of your statistics, you freak!" Tim snapped. "And what does the color of my shirt have to do with anything?!"

Nick yelled over the Tim, "Maverick Seven? Anyone played? I need a co-pilot."

"I have!" Xanthus sprung from his seat.

"Look. This is real!" Tim banged on the cockpit ceiling. "This isn't a video game or some crazy invention. This is a real GPS! That's a real ion fuel gauge to real ion fuel. And we could all be blown to REAL blubbery, smoldering pieces!"

Everyone yelled in unison: "SHUTUP TIM!"

"What's your ranking?" Nick said to Xanthus with both hands behind his back.

"Sir, Sergeant General. 5th Class, sir!" Xanthus held a salute.

"Level?"

BAAANGH! BAAANGH! BAAANGH!

Xanthus rocked to his knees, but held his salute. "Sir, Andromeda Mission, sir!"

"You recognize the shuttle then, Sergeant?" Nick nodded to the control panel.

"Sir. This is a Class C, twin ion engine. Full interplanetary travel, but limited interstellar. Stick is a little touchy, sir!"

"All right, co-pilot Kobayashi, take a seat."

Both boys sat down.

"Did you beat the Andromeda mission, Sergeant General 5th Class?" Tim said.

"Pshh. Dude, not any harder than the Belton level . . . The landing is always a little interesting."

"Again, I ask. Did you beat it?"

"Security!" Xanthus called.

Haley reached over and pulled Tim into a chokehold.

"Let's go, Tim."

"No. No. No. No!" Tim's feet grabbed the doorframe, chairs, shuttle wall, Daniel . . .

Caroline's whispery voice cut through the pandemonium.  
"Nikolas."

"Yes, Caroline?" Nick looked back.

"We're here because we trust you."

"Thanks."

"Yeah," said Haley, throwing Tim into the back row.

"Mom made me promise to look after my kid sisters, so no crashing and burning and screams of death. OK? Promise?"

"Promise." Nick nodded and tapped the passenger door.

"We're all going to d—" The closing door cut off Tim's cry of death.

"I got this," Nick nodded. "I've beaten the Andromeda level. Twice."

"Really?" Xanthus shouted. "No way! No one beats Andromeda! I got a T-shirt that says it. I am now submitting your name to Perlock's Mythological Bestiary, 30th edition. Entry title: Epicness." Xanthus announced while punching several buttons. The shuttle began to slowly rise, pointing its nose skyward.

BAAANGH! BAAANGH! The scuccas continued to hammer away at the hull.

Nick looked to the perimeter cameras. The monsters were crawling around the body, trying to slip their talons into any available crack.

"All right, co-pilot Kobayashi. Systems check complete?"

"Complete. O' Captain."

"The clamps?"

Xanthus had one hand on the seat and another reaching for a blue switch. He turned it and the clamps released, making the shuttle shift.

All right," Nick announced. "Starting initiation sequence now. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven—"

BAAANGH! BAAANGH! BAAANGH!

"Sixfivefourthreetwoone!" Nick punched the blue launch button.

The boys nodded to each other as the shuttle rumbled to life. A fiery orange skirted the windows, setting off monstrous screams.

"Can fire kill them?" Nick said.

"No. Just slows them down," Xanthus answered.

The shuttle kicked and both boys squared their sights. The cockpit began to shake, making Nick's teeth rattle.

"OOOHH—MMAA—MAAAN—NN." Xanthus' flabby face was undergoing its own launch sequence. "TT—HHIISS IISS AAWWWE—SSOSSOME!"

"And we have lift off." Nick smiled.

Within minutes they broke through the Great Cloud and the GPS read five miles altitude. The panel flashed that the launch sequence would end in fifteen seconds, a cue for Nick and Xanthus to take the controls.

"Almost forgot." Nick reached into his khaki pocket and pulled out Grand's chronostone. "The key to the gateway."

Nick put the stone onto his lap, leaned forward, and grabbed the control stick. It felt metallic and cold, nothing like the holobox version. Nick pulled the stick back, but it kicked out of his grip.

"Hey!" He put his hands up.

A holographic man dressed in a captain's outfit sprung from the console. "Welcome to your auto-pilot, Mr. Steward Lyons. We have already plotted the course uploaded to your keycard."

Xanthus moaned, "Auto-pilot."

The computer displayed a green line arching from Earth to a white square.

"No," Nick yelled at the holograph. "We're the pilots. We're supposed to fly it. I hate this planet!"



The shuttle turned a strong left and toward Moon.

The auto-pilot announced, "Now, sit back, Mr. Lyons, relax, and enjoy one of your favorite singers from the twentieth century: Tony Bennett."

A holograph of Tony Bennett flickered on and began snapping to a beat. "Oooh, the good life. Full of fun, seems to be the ideal . . ."

"Wow," Xanthus said. "Look at those stars. Never been in space before . . . Hey, Nick."

"Yeah."

"Back at the church—something weird happened when your grandpa punched the scucca. His eyes were all nuclear reactor blue. His hands, too."

"It's awesome. Grand calls it jynn'us. We all get these mythic powers when we breathe Möon air," Nick said.

"No way!" Xanthus' salami arms punched the air.

"I know, right?" Nick said.

"Don't tease me like that. Are you serious?"

"I'm not kidding. And your jynn'us is supposed to reflect who you are or something. It's gonna be fun on the other side."

"Totally agree . . . seriously, those are a lot of stars . . . Hey, bet I'll get that power where I soak up everyone else's power. But I won't be a villain or nothing. I'll just be like the Sorcerer General over a legion of magical creatures. Yeah. That'd be sweet. Hey, dude. Ten minutes, twelve seconds to vector. Are we supposed to do something?"

"Yeah," Nick said. "Grand gave me a key, but just give me another minute. Need to catch my breath."

"It's the good life, to be free, and explore the unknown," Tony crooned away while the sun's rays escorted them spaceward.

Nick glanced at the perimeter camera. The American continent was completely shrouded by the cloud cover, but more importantly, the scuccas started to slip from the hull.

The first two peeled off, and the third was dragged down until it was enveloped by the rocket fire.

Nick's chest deflated, and he said, "They're gone."

He grinned. Had to hand it to himself. They launched the shuttle, managed to get away from the monsters, and no one got hurt . . . for the most part. Even if the autopilot took away all the fun, at least they made it off Earth. Then it hit him. He looked back at Earth and smiled.

I got away.

And it really wasn't all that complicated, Nick thought. See, Caroline? Life can be simple. Just keep it simple.

"Oh the good life," Tony sang on. "Let's you hide the sadness you fee—"

"Forgive the interruption—" Tony Bennett was replaced by the auto-pilot. "—an uninvited passenger has been detected on the hull."

WHAMM-CRAKK!! The scucca head-butted the cockpit window.

"Woah!" The boys sat up.

The scucca's talons anchored into the shuttle letting it studied the two boys. It looked to Nick, to Xanthus, and then to Nick again.

CRAKK!! CRAKK!! CRAKK!! The glass fractured, sending a white thread across the cockpit view.

"Dude! It can't breathe out here," Nick said. "This is OUTER SPACE."

"I know, I know." Xanthus quickly flipped through his bestiary.

CRAKK!! CRAKK!! A dozen more threads shot across the glass.

"It doesn't breathe oxygen." Xanthus held up the bestiary. "It lives on scent!"

"What do you mean, scent? You have to have oxygen to breathe scent."

CRAKK!! CRAKK!! CRAKK!! CRAKK!! Nick's cockpit view was a net of fractured glass.



“Asteroid repellant!” Nick pointed to Xanthus’ console. It was common for smaller asteroids and space junk to cross paths with interplanetary shuttles.

CRAKK!! CRAKK!! CRAKK!!

“Right.” Xanthus grabbed the asteroid repellant trigger and squeezed. The gun kicked. There was no sound, just a flash of light and the scucca spinning into the inky void.

The vector sign flashed: 0:53.

“Uh fifty-three seconds, dude,” Xanthus said. “Where is that gate?”

“The key!” Nick almost forgot. “In my lap.”

Nick picked up the chronostone and pulled out a piece of paper.

“Oops,” Nick said, holding up the spell, which had somehow wrapped around a stray piece of gum.

Xanthus buried his face in his hands.

“Don’t worry. I got this.” Nick pulled the piece of paper apart, stretching the gum with it. The spell was partially hidden by chewed gum.

Pa—

Nick started to pull bits of gum off the paper.

Pat—

“Forty-two, forty-one, forty,” Xanthus’ voice quivered.

A piece tore with the gum.

Pata—

Nick tried to reattach the ripped piece.

Pata—hu—

Patahu.

“Patahu!” Nick grabbed the stone and shouted, “Patahu!”

The chronostone quaked in his hands and began to burn. Nick dropped it. The stone vibrated, hesitated momentarily, and then glass shattered from within. The cockpit filled with hot, yellow light.

Nick cupped his hands around his face to try and see past the webbed glass. Nothing changed.

“Do you see anything over there?” Nick said.

"No, dude," Xanthus said. "No expanding vortex. No epic, magical gate. Nothing."

"Come on, Grand," Nick groaned.

"Nick," Xanthus said, "your grandpa is nuts, isn't he? We're dead! We're all dead! The navigation system says we can't go back now. Not enough fuel. I never even got to kiss Caroline on the mouth."

Nick turned slowly to Xanthus.

"What? I know you guys think I'm this child prodigy of mythological creatures, but I need love, too!"

Nick's eyes fell on the trash chute just below Xanthus' leg.

"Waitasecond!" Nick said. "These shuttles are lined with a UV shield. Grand said the stone interacted with solar light. We have to get the stone outside."

The chute slid open at the presence of Nick's hand, and he shoved the chronostone down. They heard rock scraping through the garbage chute. Metal screamed, and the shuttle kicked from the rear. The stone was free.

A reddish wave rolled over the shuttle.

"Wow," Xanthus said.

"That's a good sign, right, Nick?" Haley's voice crackled over the intercom.

"It's the gateway. Strap yourselves in."

A shimmering pocket materialized into a bright, conical object. Its walls were lined with thousands of red stones spinning into a magma center. For all Nick knew, the gateway was the building block of the universe, ready to crush the ship into light and heat. They were about to find out.

"Here we go . . ." someone said over the intercom.

Tony Bennett extended his hands. "Well, just wake up. Kiss the good life, goodbye."



# NIKOLAS & COMPANY BOOK CLUB

## Book Club Questions

- Do you agree or disagree with Tim that it is irresponsible to fly the shuttle?
- Xanthus talks about getting his jyn'uss, magical powers that people on Moon receive. What superpower would you want and why?
- What is Nikolas's mission and why does he need to go to the moon in the distant past?
- Name all of Nikolas's friends. Who do you relate to and why?

