

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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CHAPTER FOUR



H

Duke of Encylaene's Merrow Fortress

uron!" Yeri cursed for the second time that day as the stagecoach leapt off the ground and toward the misty ocean. The mad merman had steered them over the cliff, and now all he could do was wait for death at the jagged rocks below.

Suddenly, a white archway sprung from the mist and stagecoach wheels slammed cobblestone. They blew past a gate. Then he saw a second gate, with something near heaven on the other side of it. Before he could decide whether they had, in fact, died and gone there, the stagecoach burst through a hall.

"Lower the gates. Both of them!" Lir commanded.

Metal scrapped and slammed. Yeri grabbed the reins until his knuckles ground together. The horses veered to a stop, panting out their run.

“Where am I?” Yeri said as he stumbled from the stagecoach.

“The Duke of Eynclaene’s fortress,” Lir said. “My home. One part fortress, one part submarine. We travel the seas, moving and submerging along the coastline at various points. It’s quite possible you’ve never seen it docked at this port.”

“It is quite possible,” Yeri muttered to himself.

A guard fitted with automalegs approached the stagecoach. He bowed and said, “Your grace?”

“See about my brother and his wife.” Lir pointed to the second stagecoach. “We’ll each need a velle. And fetch Captain Jonn immediately.”

Four ornate chairs on spindly wheels were being pushed toward them, which Yeri took to be the velles.

He looked around the fortress hall only to find several Merrows gazing back, their expressions moving between various stages of amazement and bewilderment. Most were sitting in their own velles, some were in automaton legs, and the rest were treading water in small pools. Even with all the curious forms of transportation, the stagecoach driver couldn’t imagine how they moved from floor to floor without some kind of stairwell. Then he saw large silicon tubes filled with water and dark, Merrow shapes swimming through them. These tubes were all around—like translucent roots creeping here and there. Some disappeared into the ceiling, others in the small pools, while the rest threaded between walls and floor. The fortress itself looked entirely made from silicon, and traced with mollusks, snail shells, and the bones of other strange ocean creatures. The only metal structures were golden braces that secured the wall joints and edges. Yeri also noticed the sound of constant water drips, as if the fortress had been recently submerged and was shedding its ocean water.

“Oh, dear Nia,” a voice snapped Yeri from his observations. “Child, child, child. Gallivanting about with the local

commoners, and in your condition?" The voice came from an elderly mermaid who was being pushed in a velle by her attendant. She wore a large, powdered wig, had a fake mole just above the right side of her lip, and was covered in makeup bordering on clownish. Maybe Yeri was being unfair; he never went for the more garish fashions.

"Had quite the ride, Mother," Nia said as her shaky hand gripped her chair. She lifted herself to the seat, her fin slipping into a small catch. "You would've been proud of our driver, Yeri Willrow.

Yeri—" Nia held a hand out. "—my mother, Hydan. Mother, Yeri Willrow, our hero of the evening."

Hydan's wheelchair squared to Yeri. He was surprised to find himself looking eye-to-eye with the elderly mermaid. The velle was designed like a small tower, so no Merrow could be looked down upon.

Yeri nodded, "My lady."

Hydan smiled back like a dog that had just learned to fetch. "Humling. We are very grateful." She pointed her chin back to Nia. "Though I cannot believe Lir would condone such a silly excursion, against my advisement, nonetheless. What with your headaches, dear child."

Lir's wheels spun him around. "Forgive my lapse of judgment. It seems I have *again* forgotten my humble position as Duke of all Eynclaene coastlands, to the detriment of your esteemed position as mother-in-law, nagger of all things great and small."

Hydan's eyes shrunk icily. "You know Nia's headaches can leave her bed-ridden. How dare you make me out a malagrug for loving my only chil—?"

Nia breathed heavily. "Please, Mother, do not be upset. It was my idea. I refused to stay bound to the fortress another moment."

"Nevertheless, Nia," Hydan said, refusing to address Lir again. "You should head straight to your chambers."

"Lir needs me," Nia said. "We were attacked, again."

"Your grace," said a merman in armored automaton legs. He had a square face, assortment of earrings, and his hair was shaved on the sides. Yeri didn't know if Merrows had warriors, but this man would be a candidate. "Forgive me. I was being debriefed by our scouts."

"Captain Jonn," Lir said. "We must make way for northern Eynclaene at submersion level. Alert any other Merrows to evacuate the Eynclaene coast and stay to their fortresses. We were assaulted by no less than four fousls down the—"

"Fousls, sir?" Captain Jonn said.

"Yes, yes. We must undock and move this fortress immediate—"

"That will be entirely impossible, sir," Captain Jonn said. "My scout bore witness to a fleet of ships bearing the Dujinnin's crimson flag along the coast line, sir."

"The Dujinnin?" Lir's eyes widened.

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid so, sir," Captain Jonn said. "Their waterdragons make fo—"

"Waterdragons?" Yeri shouted. "Here? But this is the eastern seas?"

Captain Jonn looked quickly at Yeri, sizing him up. "And a winged foul was seen among the crew, sir. They're hemming us in," Captain Jonn said. "What are your orde—"

A mermaid screamed.

Yeri spun around just as all the Merrows ran to the edges of the room and away from the second stagecoach.

"No!" Nia screamed and leapt from her mother's arms, "Oh, no!"

Two guards grabbed her by the shoulders as she tried to fling herself at the second stagecoach. Instead of Lir's brother and sister-in-law adjusting themselves into velles, a gelatinous substance shrouded in Merrow clothing lay in clumps between two wheels. The substance looked like skin, devoid of all its innards.

"Dear Möon!" Lir walked slowly past Nia.

"The monster breathed on your brother and sister-in-law," Captain Jonn said. "They've been turned, sir."

A second round of screams came from just behind the stagecoach as two Mermen were pulled underneath by what looked like two long tendrils. The crowd of Merrows broke into a panic.

"We've been breached, sir!" Captain Jonn looked to Lir. "The foulds are inside."

"What is that?" Yeri said, but couldn't see over the swelling crowd.

"Two foulds are inside. Seal the hall!" Captain Jonn said to his guards. "Close the merways." The captain suddenly grabbed him Yeri by the shoulder. "You cannot see this, driver."

Yeri tried to move toward the second stagecoach to get a glimpse of the monster, but Captain Jonn spun him away by the shoulder and dragged him alongside of Lir as they fled from whatever was loose in the hall.

"Brother," Lir said quietly, while holding a sobbing Nia.

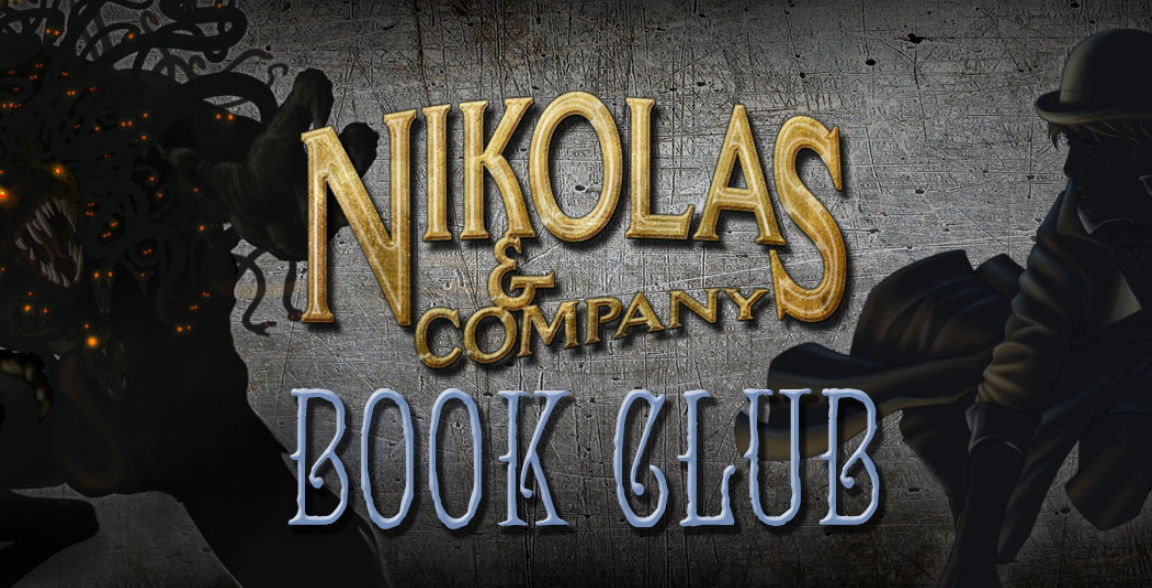
"The Dujinnin mean to trap all the Merrows along the coast . . ." Lir's voice trailed off for a moment as he looked back to the gelatinous glob and then snapped to attention. "They mean to trap us in here and turn us into—"

Something like the crashing of metal came from under the deck, and the fortress shuttered violently. A velle slammed into Yeri's thigh as Merrows were flung off their automalegs and wheelchairs.

"To your battlestation, Captain, and alert the fortress fleet," Lir ordered Captain Jonn as he tried to climb back into his velle. Do not delay, Captain Jonn. Our very lives might come down to minutes. And see if we can get word to the steward."

"Excuse me?" Captain Jonn said.

"We need the Steward of Huron," Lir said, buckling himself into his automalegs. "He is our only hope. We need Nikolas
—"



NIKOLAS & COMPANY BOOK CLUB

Book Club Questions

- Who was the protagonist (main character)?
- Who was the antagonist (the main character's enemies)?
- What did the inside of the Merrow Fortress look like? Describe it. Draw it if you can.
- The Merrows have vells (large wheelchairs), and automaton legs. If you were going to invent another device to help them walk around, what would it be?
- Why didn't Sir like his mother-in-law, Hydan? Have you met an older woman like her? What was she like?

