

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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A decorative graphic for the chapter title. It features a dark, textured, shield-like shape with intricate, swirling blue and black patterns. At the top center, there is a small anchor icon. The text "Chapter 13" and "Mermaids!" is written in a stylized, glowing blue font within the central dark area.

Chapter 13 Mermaids!

T

hey were thrown out of a bloom of red fire.

“Did it work—?” Haley’s voice faded away and then returned. “That’s awesome! Are you guys seeing this?”

Xanthus and Nick gasped. Grand’s stardust rendering had nothing on the real Mōon and Earth.

“Are you seeing this, Nick?” Haley repeated. Brandy and Caroline squealed from somewhere in the background.

“Yeah,” Nick said. “There is another world, but it is in this one.”

It was Xanthus’ turn to look at Nick.

“Yeats,” Nick said.

The brother planets were anything but peaceable. Mōon hung over Earth, recalling images of Atlas bearing the

weight of an entire planet. The sun cast a paternal light between the two weather systems, revealing a black mass of cloud and dust. Lightning crackled around the otherwise hidden tether.

It was the unreal beauty of Mōon that made Nick unbuckle his harness and crawl over Xanthus. Scattered underneath the clouds were islands, craggy and desperate. The continents were covered in ripples of mountains that smoothed into deep valleys. The land masses were utterly blanketed in wild vegetation. There might be cities down there, but Nick couldn't see them.

It looked nothing like his Moon.

"Are you guys getting this?" Tim said.

"Yeah," Nick said. "All of it."

"Please remain in your seats as we begin our descent to Earth's Keranu Walls," the auto-pilot announced. The shuttle took a sharp right from Mōon and steered directly toward Earth.

"Wait," Xanthus said. "We're not supposed to land on Earth. We're going to Huron, I thought?"

"I don't know." Nick buckled himself in. "We'll see, I guess."

The shuttle nosed toward Earth's surface. Belts of clouds were the only thing they could see for several minutes until they hit atmosphere. The stars disappeared under steam and fire. Finally, they passed through the cloud line, revealing a swampy landscape with a circle of stone crowning the tether. On a closer look, the tether seemed to be organic, even tree-like. Well, aside from the fact that trees don't grow to the size of mountains.

"I think that's the Keranu Wall," Xanthus said.

"Landing sequence initiated," announced the auto-pilot.

Suddenly, a grey object flashed by. Before Nick could make out what it was, wind punched through the cockpit and sprayed glass everywhere.

“Hold on to something!” Nick yelled to the intercom. “We’ve been hit! Something blew out the windshield. Prepare for a crash landing.”

The space shuttle flipped over, turning cloud and Earth into a kaleidoscope. After a few rotations, the shuttle stopped tumbling and fell into a corkscrew.

“Sorry, Caroline,” Nick said to himself.

The passenger door whipped open, revealing a very confused Grand. He leapt for Nick’s controls.

“Auto-pilot overridden. Emergency landing sequence initiated,” the auto-pilot announced.

After a few grunts and curses, Grand leveled the shuttle. Nick heard something like the small blast of air and two parachutes opening from the wings.

Too late.

The shuttle slammed ground, skipping over rocks and bushes. Tree limbs shredded the parachutes. Branches slapped the window. Rocks scrapped the bottom, and muddy water sprayed over the windshield. They slid for what seemed like an eternity, until a tuft of land kicked them to a stop. Grass and dirt flicked upward and then rained down in thick, muddy plops.

Welcome to the south side of the Keranu Wall, announced the computer.

Grand’s quivering brow set on Nick. A ribbon of blood ran around his eyes, down his cheek, and across his chest. He breathed deeply and roared, “Well done, Nikolas! There’s my copilot.”

“That was awesome!” Nick stood to his feet, adrenaline still pumping through him. “We were, like, spinning, and

then the parachute and then we just rammed into the ground.”

“Something hit us?” Xanthus said.

“You mean those?” Grand pointed to the tether.
“Groungers.”

Several winged tadpoles the size of a small plane swarmed the tether. Electricity threaded through their bodies, lighting up a mangle of intestines and bones.

“Groungers?” Xanthus said. “Those aren’t in my bestiary. . . .”

“They feed off the tether’s electricity. The shuttle’s power system was just another meal.”

Grand stood full height, let out a triumphant breath, and stepped into the cabin door. “How are we? Appendages connected to their traditional counterparts?”

Most said, “Yes.”

“Good, good,” Grand said. “Then we make for Huron, by way of the Mottle Craw.”

“Wait,” Caroline said. “Shouldn’t we rest up? Maybe eat or something? We did just crash land, you know.”

“Impossible, Miss Wendell,” Grand said. “If we miss this flight, the next won’t be for a month. The Merrows need us. Huron cannot wait.”

Grand fisted the shuttle door button. *Beep, beep.* The air hissed. Harnesses unclicked, and feet banged through the cabin.

“Why didn’t we just land on Möön in the first place?” asked Xanthus. “Would’ve saved all the screaming and flames of death.”

“Couldn’t,” Grand said. “Möön guards its skies from illegal Earthlings sneaking across. They’d burn us alive before we touched the clouds.”

They all piled up around the cabin door to get a view of the outside, except for Tim. He was white knuckling the back of a seat.

“Nothing blew up, Tim,” Nick said. “We made it.”

“Is there a bathroom on this shuttle?” Tim stood up carefully. “I really hope there’s a bathroom on this shuttle.”

Nick didn’t bother to answer Tim. He was too busy gawking at the scenery. There was mud and fog *everywhere*.

They had landed in a bowl-shaped valley. Trees, with no sense of direction, climbed out of rock-faces and brackish pools. Where there weren’t moldy leaves, mud pockmarked the ground. And where there weren’t moldy leaves and pockmarked mud, there were small bits of grass pushing out like upside down goatees. On the cliffsides were several winged ships that looked like they’d been hung out to dry. Each ship had a shabby ladder filled with a long line of odd, malformed looking creatures and people.

Still, there was mud. Everywhere.

“Earth. Epochs ago,” Grand announced, hopping out into a slab of mud.

Xanthus put a hand to his chest and took a ceremonial step into the mud. “Oh wow wow wow. Here I step, Xanthus Kobayashi. The first boy to touch foot upon this here ancient and magical Earth.

“Mr. Grand, I’ve got some questions for yo—cawk! Cawk! Cawk!”

Before Xanthus could ask his questions, everyone started hacking and coughing.

“I got some questions, too!” Nick gagged. “Like, what is that smell?” The air was rank with a filthy, iron stench.

“That—” Grand’s nostrils whistled. “—smells like dirt.”

“It smells disgusting!” Brandy covered her mouth with a black silk handkerchief.

“Come now,” Grand said. “They have dirt where you’re from.”

“Not in the cities,” Daniel said, covering his own mouth. “It’s synthetic dirt. Meant to keep the germs out.”

Mud wasn’t the only invasion to their senses. Small, little creatures bizzed and buzzed everywhere.

“Are those . . . ?” Brandy said.

“Yes, Brandy.” Daniel steadied himself. “Insects. I’ve seen them once before, in that museum off of Rollhill Pass.”

“First, I gotta ask, Mr. Grand, dude,” Xanthus said, regaining his sense. “Are Furies benevolent or not? I’ve always been partial to the anti-hero camp, cause, you know, they seek justice, but they’re pretty psychotic about it. Like Marvel’s The Punisher. Second, and this is really important. Are any of Tolkein’s creatures actually real? I hope that’s the case. Maybe an Ent, perhaps? Fimbrelthil the Ent? But I’ll settle for a gollum. Also, are gumnut babies and chucklebuds the same creature? There’s been a raging debate on the Myth-us boards for, well . . . as long as I’ve been alive. To give my two cents, I would say they were the same creature at one point in history, but a mage or a wizard got involved and created a second species. I’d say the chucklebuds were the original. Kinda like mogwai and gremlins.”

Haley and Tim were the last ones out of the shuttle. On the very last step, Haley missed a rung and stumbled to the ground.

“Haley!” Tim yelled.

Haley tried to pull herself up. “Just—motion sickness. I get it sometimes.”

“You need to sit down,” Tim insisted. “Just for a minute. Let me help you.”

“I’m OK, Tim. Just need to catch my breath.” Haley put her hand up, proving she could stand on her own.

Tim ignored her and grabbed her arm.

“Seriously, Tim.” Haley’s fingers formed into a karate defense position. “Back off.”

“Everything all right?” Grand shouted back.

Haley answered weakly, “I’m—just—”

“She gets motion sickness sometimes.” Caroline helped Haley to her feet.

“Right,” Haley said. “Motion sickness.”

“It’s the smell!” Brandy said, wrinkling her nose. “She can’t stand it. Its making *me* all pukey.” She curled her lip as she toed the mud with her Louboutins, shivered, and then retrieved a small bottle of hand sanitizer from her black purse. She lathered it all over her neck, arms and legs. Closing her eyes, she lifted another glop to her face. She tucked the bottle between her arms. “Probably don’t even have soap here or nothing.

She tossed the hand sanitizer to Caroline, who squeezed out a smaller glop onto her right hand. “Now, Brandy, I’m sure they have soap. What kind of a pl—”

Whheeeeboom!

Caroline screamed, dropped the sanitizer into the mud, and raised her arm to shield herself from the mushroom of fire and shrapnel. After a moment the white-hot cloud settled, leaving behind a burning space shuttle.

“Sorry!” Nick yelled to Caroline over the flames. “I really tried not to blow everything up.”

“Well—” She looked back to Nick, yelling over the fiery shuttle, “—you didn’t blow *us* up, so technically, you kept your promise.”

“My bestiary—” Xanthus said, reaching into the flames. “My hologlasses!”

Grand grabbed Xanthus by his collar. “Nothing in there you need.”

“This is unacceptable!” Xanthus protested. “I have spent the better part of my teen career beating Magicgeddon. I need my escape, man.”

Grand looked up to Mōon and the great tether. “I suppose twin planets tethered together by a magical rope in the distant past will have to do, then. Won’t it?”

Xanthus looked up. “Huh. Yeah.”

“Let’s get moving,” Grand said. “Our ship waits for no one.”

“OK,” Xanthus said. “But I got like a ton more questions for you, Mr. Grand. Minotaurs. Are their hooves split or not, cause . . .?”

And so began their long march toward the Mottle Craw. They were escorted by the sound of muddy footfalls. Daniel’s cane *pressed* into the mud while sneakers and black dress shoes *pushed* and *plashed*. That is, except for Brandy’s. She made Xanthus give her a piggy back ride because she wouldn’t dare subject her Louboutins to *that* filth.

Chattering voices began to build in the group. They either talked about the smell, the strange ships off in the distance, or who screamed most like a girl in the crash landing. Tim won that prize. But one of them remained silent. Haley. Nick noticed her unsteady stride. Not just that. Her golden blond hair had gone limp and stringy. He moved closer to ask if she was alright. She waved him off.

They walked for at least another hour. By this time Xanthus had switched from conversations about mythological body types to a diatribe on why he believed dragon lore originated in China, and not Europe, which was clearly a Eurocentric idea. He then began to list off several other creatures that predated European mythology. That was about the time Haley lunged for Nick.

“Haley?!” Nick caught her. “Are you OK? Hey—your eyes—?”

Dark circles hung under her blue eyes, and parts of her skin were covered with a creamy, bluish film.

“Just—motion sickness. I get it sometimes.” Haley tried to pull herself up. “I’m OK, Nick. Just need to catch my breath.” She put her hands up, proving she could stand on her own.

Unaware of the scene behind him, Grand continued to march forward.

“Hey!” Xanthus said. “What’s with those guys?”

“The swayers?” Brandy said.

“Yeah. Look,” Xanthus said. See, over there. A ton of people standing on that wall, holding their hands up like they’re praying to the tether or something.”

Brandy slipped off Xanthus’ back to have a better look, then shrugged. “Probably some religious stuff.”

“Not religious,” Grand said. “They hope to breathe in Mōon air. Find their inner-air, I’m certain.”

Everyone turned to Grand with a puzzled expression.

“I’ve got a lot to catch you up on, I see. Earth has little magic, but Mōon is filled with it. Its very air is rife with power. The swayers stand on the wall to catch a bit of Mōon air.”

“What’s it doing for them?” Brandy said.

“To begin with, it will extend your life tenfold.”

“Tenfold? How old *are* you?” Daniel tilted over his cane.

“Five-hundred and twenty-three.”

“Geez,” Nick said. “Holding up well, Grand.”

“You cannot be that old.” Daniel’s mouth hung open. “It is . . . impossible.”

“I am, laddie,” Grand chuckled. “One doesn’t forget five-hundred and twenty-three years. But more importantly,” Grand continued. “Möon air gives you jynn’us. These poor souls don’t need to stand so close to the tether and risk being struck by lightning. This entire valley holds enough deep air to awaken any power they might have.”

“Oh yeah. That’s another question,” Xanthus said. “Can you give me some of that jynn’us?”

“Let’s not be hasty, lad,” Grand said. “You cannot *get* jynn’us. Magic has a mind of its own. It will choose you if it so desires. And the jynn’us may not always be to your liking. There are a variety of powers for a variety of souls.”

“OK,” nodded Xanthus. “Variety of powers. I can live with that. So what are my options?”

“There are many options,” Grand said. “Trinkes, automa, atla—that one is mine by the way. Those are the conventional ones. There’s also lustratio, transe, ethereal. Thousands really. And new ones crop up everyday. But this is all irrelevant at the moment, Xanthus. It will be months before you’d undergo the transformation.”

Xanthus tilted his head. “Is there any way to speed it up?”

Behind the throng of questions, Nick noticed Haley looking to the Keranu Wall. Her head swayed unsteadily, and the blue film had now covered every part of her skin.

She was absolutely disinterested in their conversation on jynn'us. No, more than that. It looked like she was about to

“Eeeewww!” Brandy hopped on one leg. “Not on the shoes! Uggh! You did not just blow chunks all over my Louboutins.”

Haley clutched Caroline's arm, trying not to collapse again.

Grand moved around Caroline and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “Lass. Look at me.”

She slowly raised her face to Grand's. The blue film had now covered her hair and teeth.

“I see everything.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “It hurts to look. I can see it all.”

Grand shook his head and looked to Xanthus. “Afraid I owe you an apology, Mr. Kobayashi.”

Caroline cooed as she wrapped her arm around Haley and found a lone boulder. She directed her horn-rimmed glasses to Grand. “What's wrong with her, Mr. Lyons?”

“Everything! Everything is wrong with her, but that will change soon enough,” Grand grinned. “Jynn'us has found Haley, and within only an hour of our landing. Quite extraordinary . . .”

“No way, Haley!” Xanthus cried. “You got some jynn'us? Already?! I love this place! OK, OK. I gotta record everything that happens to you. And . . . I need samples. Lots of samples. Hair. Skin. Urine.”

“That is disgusting, Xanthus,” Caroline said.

“This is a momentous occasion!” Xanthus raised his hands in the air. “You're so lucky, Haley. Oh, wait. You breathe it in, right? Maybe I just need to breathe deeper. You know, open up my lung capacity.” Xanthus went bug-eyed, inhaling like a gorilla suffering from a cardiac arrest.

Without warning, Grand began to march again. “She will be sick over the next few days. Lucky for you, we have proper quarters on the Mottle Crow, that is if we make our departure time.”

“Ugh.” Brandy smacked her shoes on a rock. “Sounds about right. Haley gets a power up, and I’m scrubbing chunks off my shoes.”

The valley quickly descended into a thick grove of gnarled trees. It was covered in some kind of sap that was runny and got into everyone’s hair. The second it hit their heads, it would crystalize. Everyone started to walk slower as they tried to pick the dried sap out of their scalp, ears, face. It took another hour of spongy bogs, unrelenting rocks, and piggy-back rides, but they finally made it out of the grove and to a field separating them and the cliffside.

Before they knew it, a winged ship fell out of the sky, hurtling toward them. Everyone but Grand dove to the ground. At the last minute it turned direction and curled upward. The grass rolled, sticks kicking up.

“OK, that’s sweet,” Nick said.

“It an aero,” Grand said. “Our ride to Huron.”

It looked like one of those old ships from a pirate movie. Maybe a Spanish galleon? Nick thought.

And then he realized something more important.

That’s a real flying ship!

He was literally looking at a real flying ship. This was like some fairy tale. He’d made the right call, believing Grand. Everything he ever wanted, a simple life, an uncomplicated life, it was all right here. What could be simpler than a fairy tale?

The winged ship angled up and toward the massive tether in the distance. One could see dozens of other aero ships circling the tether, like hawks around a prey. One by

one, the tornado winds pulled the aeros into the sky and toward outer space.

Nick looked up to the cliff face. All along the cliffs were aeros hanging on the side like bats, just as they'd seen earlier that afternoon. A half-mile stairwell led up to the aeroship. The stairs were filled with hundreds of people apparently waiting to board.

"We have to wait in that line?" Haley groaned.

Grand quickly explained that prepaid passengers didn't have to wait in line and pointed to a massive bowl that seemed to be made out of a fibrous substance.

"It's a willy-kirk." Grand said. The large bowl was growing out a large vine, something similar to a pumpkin patch. "It'll take us up to our ship. I've never been too good with these willy-kirks, though. They require a more delicate touch." He petted the rim of the bowl. It shook like a wet cat and tipped over. "Will you look at that? It responded right away. Too much of your Earth's moisturizing soap, I'd wager."

They all stepped slowly into the strange willy-kirk plant. Nick wondered if this is what a bug felt like flying into a venus fly trap? When everyone was in, the bowl righted itself and began to rise skyward toward the Mottle Crow. Xanthus leaned out to see what mechanism lifted them up. He looked at Nick, grinned, and then looked back over. Nick peered over. They weren't being lifted up by a mechanical lift, rather by the root of a very strong plant.

Xanthus then faced the stairs and began reviewing all the strange creatures as they rose upward. "Gabans, Salks . . . Wait, I know that one. I know it . . ." He reached into his vest but then remembered his bestiary had gone up in flames with the shuttle. "A tragedy . . . Mr. Grand, dude. Are they coming with us?"

“If fate wills it,” Grand shook his head. “They’re standing in line for the lottery. It is a privilege to go Möonside. You’ll find that people will do all sorts of tricks to cross the tether. I once met a fell—”

“Mermaids!” Xanthus cut Grand off and flung himself to the other end of the willy-kirk. A second willy-kirk below them carried two mermen in wheelchairs. “Wicked cool.”

Huron knifed Nick’s skull: *The Rones lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all!*

Nick grabbed the edge of the willy-kirk.

The Rones lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

Nick crumpled to his knees.

“Nikolas?” Grand looked to his grandson.

“It’s her . . .” Nick tried to stand up.

The Rones lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.

Nick moaned and wiped something warm from his lip.
Blood.

“What’s going on, Grand?” Nick said.

“Is it her?” Grand whispered over his shoulder. “Is Huron speaking to you?”

“She just keeps repeating herself. Goes on and on about those Rones.”

“Mermaids, Mr. Grand,” Xanthus shouted, pointing to the willy-kirk below them.

“Merrows, Mr. Kobayashi,” Grand called back. “That is what we call them. Even so, that isn’t their true name. In more ancient times they were called something else.”

Grand looked back to Nick. “Rones.”

“Rones?” Nick turned slowly and edged over the willy-kirk. “Rones . . . The Rones lie about their true intent . . . Those Merrows are Rones?”

“One and the same,” Grand said. “Huron knows the ancient tongue better than our own. She warns you of the evil the Merrows bring to her city.”

Nick shook his head. “What? She—what?”

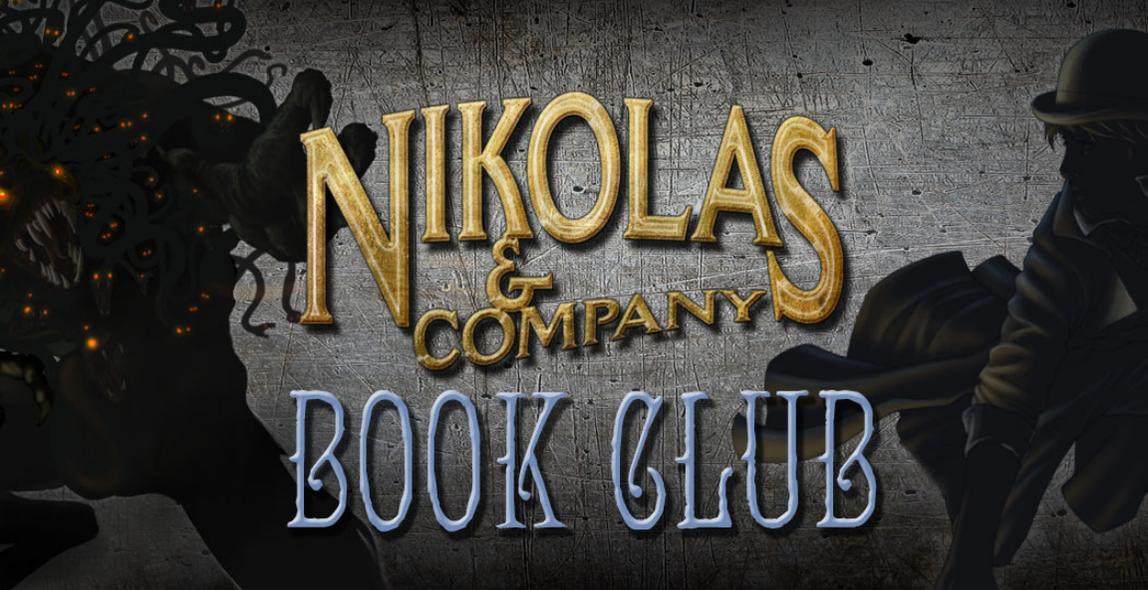
“Ludwig and the Council of Teine summoned me to save the Merrows. So imagine my shock when you told me Huron’s message,” Grand breathed deeply. “The Rones, who are the Merrows, lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all. Nikolas, she didn’t call you to save the Merrows. She called you to stop them.”

Nick watched the older Merrow adjust his fishtail and pat down a powdered wig.

“Everything just got complicated, didn’t it?” Nick said, dropping his chin to the edge of the willy-kirk.

“Yes, lad,” Grand said. “I’m afraid your troubles have just begun.”

Nick stared at the pudgy merman for another moment, then let out a long, tired sigh.



NIKOLAS & COMPANY BOOK CLUB

Book Club Questions

- Nick made a promise to Caroling. What was it?
- Would you say Nick is a safe person to be around or a destructive person?
- Have you blown up, broken, or lost something? What did your parents say about it?
- At the very end, Nick discovered something. Did you see that coming?
- Nick wants a simple life. How does this change everything for him?

