

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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CHAPTER THREE



COLORADO CITY, COLORADO

Hope Tim didn't *actually* try to have a conversation with Rocky The She-Bully," Nick mumbled to himself as he raced down the wooden steps to Hiker's Canyon. The canyon was a large, dry creek bed that separated the massive, newly built homes from the refugee camp and its shanties and dorms and teenagers. The Geneva virus, also known as the genetic plague, had swept through the planet nearly twenty years ago. It attacked the nervous system, killing the adults, but crippling the children. By the end of it all, the Geneva virus left millions of children homeless. Local orphanages were unable to deal with the demands so every country formed their own intranational refugee camp.

Nick couldn't have felt luckier.

Moving next to the refugee camp was Earth's saving grace. He couldn't stand all the kids at the private school. They were snobbish, preppie students. But refugee kids? They knew how to have a good time. Tough as nails and wouldn't say no to anything.

But the refugee kids didn't like Tim very much, other than as an opportunity to pound his face in.

"I said leave Tim alone!" Nick yelled to a six-foot-tall, fourteen-year-old—well, girl, if he were to be categorical about it. In a stroke of prophetic naming, her parents called her "Rocky." Shortly thereafter, they passed away from the virus. The refugee kids ordained her with the full title, "Rocky The She-Bully." With this knowledge, he made a quick, confident assessment.

Tim's digestive system wouldn't survive the afternoon.

"Rocky!" Nick yelled again as he jumped several steps and landed in packed dirt.

"I can—take—her, Nick," Tim said, trying to stand, but his legs were matchsticks. "Go away! I don't need your help."

Rocky shoved him down.

"Leave him alone," Nick said.

"No, Nick—khaa—khaa!" Tim clutched his pant legs, letting out another round of coughs. "You promised."

"I can help." Nick leaned around Rocky.

"Go away! I *said* I don't need your help."

Nothing could have been farther from the truth. Nick had protected Tim from bullies since the Lunar Colony. Their move to Earth hadn't changed a thing.

"Look, everyone," Rocky said. "Tim's big brother's come to the rescue, again."

"*Big* brother?" Tim said, trying to stand up again. "He's the little brother. I'm the oldest."

"By twenty-eight minutes," Nick said. "We're fraternal."

Rocky's porpoise shaped neck swung around. She critiqued Tim's floppy physique, dust, blond hair and sloping brow. Even though Tim was fourteen, he wasn't much taller than a

seventh grader. He even had small hands and slow reflexes, like their mom.

Rocky's eyebrow led the way back to Nick. He was tall, and stocky with large hands, more like their grandfather, Grand.

An unearthly sound came from deep within Rocky. It proved to be a laugh. "Hah, hah, haaaaah!" Her finger pointed at Tim. "*Tim's* the big brother! Oh, that's funny! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! He's like your genetic fart."

The hecklers roared with that one.

"Shut your drain," Nick gritted through his teeth.

Rocky's mouth clapped shut, sucking up the heckler's laughs with it. Her horse-like legs pushed her forward.

"Out of the way, Rocky," Nick said, trying to step around her, but she shadowed him until they were facing each other, neck to chin.

Nick's eyes crept upward. He didn't like what he saw. Either Rocky's hair hadn't been combed for months, or the brush had completely given up, taking an easier job as a street scrubber. Her right, piggly hand hung clenched, while her other hand held a Pappy's Pudding Finger, which left her mouth and fingers caked in brownish white cream. From her nose came an inordinate amount of hair, especially for a fourteen-year-old. In fact, she just had an inordinate amount of facial hair altogether.

Nick sighed and said to himself for the second time that day, "I really need to get off this planet."

A spark leapt from a black bracelet around Rocky's wrist. The refugee camps couldn't afford to lose track of a refugee, as it would have to answer to BioFarms: producer, buyer and seller of human organs. In order to pay for the cost of the refugee camps, the U.S. government had a contract with the BioFarms Corporation. All refugees and their organs were considered property of BioFarms until their eighteenth birthday. It was an ideal business arrangement for the organ manufacturing corporation. Mortality rates in the refugee camps were so high, and it was bioethically required to pass

on one's organs upon death. Since the organ manufacturing company would be upset if they lost a harvest, most refugees were leashed by black bracelets, unable to wander more than fifteen miles from their camp. If they did, their leashes would set off electric shocks, reminding them to return to the perimeter. Some of the more unruly refugee leashes were set to three miles.

Rocky's was set to one hundred yards.

The leash crackled another blue arc, making her arm convulse.

Nick smirked. "Got you on a short leash?"

"I don't feel it no more." Rocky took a long, drippy lick from the Pappy's Pudding Finger, showing the readout on her leash: *Geneva Virus Levels: 0.05. Chance of Cardiac Arrest: 1 in 100. Life Expectancy: 19.*

A pang of sympathy ran through Nick. Growing up in that refugee camp wasn't an easy life. Maybe Rocky was just misunderstood.

"They shortened her leash again," a bystander said. "Rocky was caught sneaking into a pet shop off of I-90. Mixed all the pet food up with the Geneva virus and fed it to the animals."

She smiled at Nick with a brown, pudding smile.

His sympathies evaporated.

"What do you want with Tim?"

"I told him to give me his pudding finger," Rocky curled her lip. "He wouldn't. We don't get any fancy stuff like you *preppies* up there. So what? You gonna hit me now? Or are you afraid I'm gonna get you sick?"

"I'm not supposed to hit a girl. Grand wouldn't like it," Nick said, clearly against his will.

"You won't hit a girl? Oh, look at you," Rocky said. "Aren't you a goody too shoes 'cause you won't hit a girl. But the real question is—" Her head bobbed like a buoy. "—Who's. The. Girl?"

"You're right. That's a *very* good question."

"Oooh," the hecklers said.

"What? Did? You? Say?" Rocky's eyes grew.
Don't hit her, Nick thought. Don't hit her. Grand wouldn't like it.

"Come on, Tim. Let's go." Nick turned toward the house.

"Oh no you didn't. Where're you going? Is it feeding time for grandpapa?" Rocky rounded her arms imitating an old grandpa. "I need a wipe, *Nicky*. I think some of this plum juice dribbled on my big, fat, belly!"

The hecklers guffawed in response.

Nick turned quickly and took three long paces, cocked his head up and grinned. He smiled so long, Rocky started to get an uncertain look in her eyes. Nick found the smile to be a very useful, versatile instrument in a confrontational situation. Way better than a grimace. It was great for a faceoff with knuckle draggers like Rocky. You just smile ear-to-ear, long enough for your opponent to let their guard down. All the while thinking, *I'm about to punch you in the face.*

Like right now, for example.

CRACKK!

Rocky spun, her dreadlocks tilt-a-whirling, while the Pappy's Pudding Finger somersaulted away.

"Don't talk about Grand like that!" Nick said, then pushed two awestruck kids apart and marched toward the house.

"Mgggrrrh!" came an inhuman sound.

Nick looked back.

"Raaggh!!!" Rocky leapt to her feet and charged. Nick shifted slightly to the left, grabbed her waist, and threw. Rocky fell with the impact of a moderately sized meteor.

"Aaaiighhh!!!!" Rocky's face turned beet red. She dug her pudgy fingers into his shoe and pulled. Nick's world spun. The ground kicked air out of his lungs, and the cloudy sky looked back down.

Rocky charged on hands and knees. Nick crab walked in reverse while she lashed at his shins.

"Woah!" He leapt to his feet. "Freak!"

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

No, no, no, Nick thought. Come on!

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

The voice was so strong little lightning bolts danced around Nick, and vomit swirled at the back of his throat.

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

Nick's lips started to move, even though it wasn't his voice: "The Rones lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all. The Rones lie about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril o—

Rocky's shoulder slammed into stomach, separating organs.

"Ooof!" Nick groaned. He was on the ground again. Rocky grabbed a snatch of his blond hair and dragged him to his feet. Fortunately, she left her right side completely exposed. Nick took full advantage.

Crackk!

Rocky toppled over. Her legs kicked up at eleven o'clock, teetered, and fell to nine.

Nick stood to his feet and prepared for the resurgence.

She said nothing.

Nick heard his own heavy panting. "Grand's awesome. Talk about him like that again, and it's you in traction." In a triumphant breath, he pushed through the crowd and toward the shed.

"Auuiigghhh!" Rocky's scream frightened away a flock of pigeons. "You're not supposed to hit a girl!"

Nick waved his arm to Tim as he passed by. "Demonstration. Two o'clock? What the heck, Tim?! We've only got a couple of hours left. The press might even show up this time."

"I could have taken her." Tim grabbed Nick's arm. "I didn't need your help."

"Whatever, dude," Nick said.

"We made a deal." Tim wiped the caked blood from his nose. "You don't bail me out anymore, and I don't snitch on you about all your little experiments."

"I *so* don't care right now," Nick said. "How am I supposed to finish setting up for the demonstration if you're in the ER fighting for your life?"

"Oh—" Tim rolled his eyes. "—now I get it. You didn't care about me at all. This is about your delusions of running away to Moon. Well, I love you too, brother."

"Are we getting off this planet or not?" Nick said. "I thought you were on board with getting out of here? Or was that before you met Haley?"

Tim straightened his shoulders, paused, then deflected, "What's a Rone?"

"I dunno." Nick looked away.

"You were all psych ward about Rones being bad and babbling on about some city. What was the name of it? The city of—"

—*Huron needs you to come home!* Grand declared on Nick's videomail message. The ID and timestamp now read:

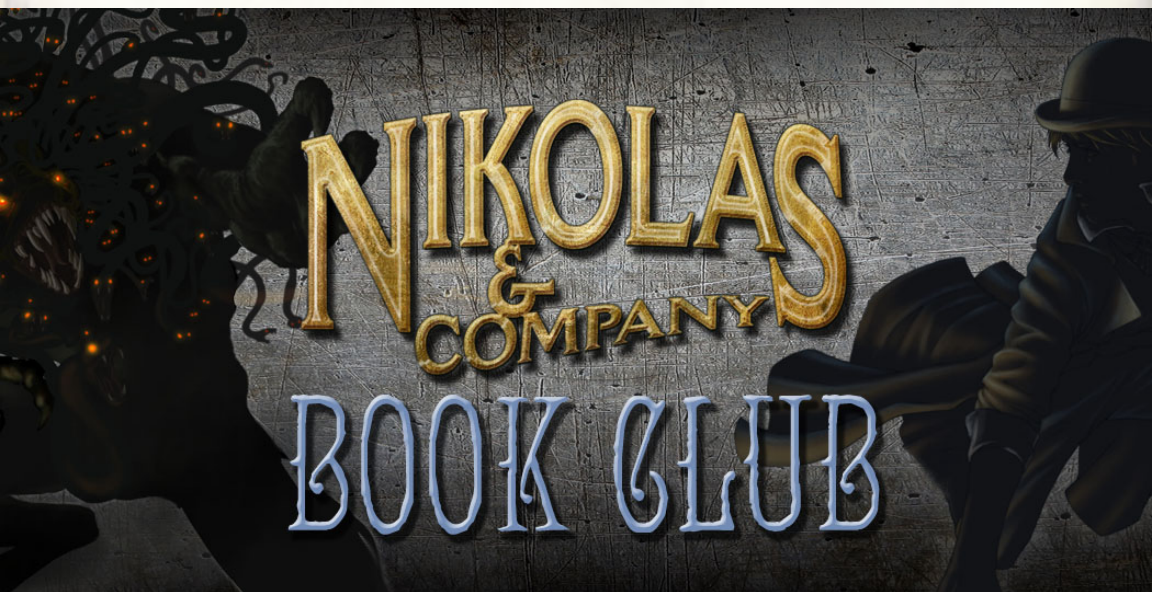
CALLER: GRAND LYONS (GRANDPA)

TIME: 12:11 AM

LOCATION: Santorini, Greece.

I think we got disconnected. Apologies if you have several messages. I'll be there to pick you and Tim up once I break the scent of these confounded trackers! Those monsters have tracked me for years now. I have a horn so you can hear from her. I have never told you this, but this isn't your home, this future

*Earth. You are from another land. Another time Another
moon. You are from the city of—*



Book Club Questions

- Who was the protagonist (main character)?
- Who was the antagonist (the main character's enemies)?
- Why did Nick defend his brother?
- Why didn't Tim want to be defended?
- Have you met a bully like Rocky?
- Did Nick respond the right way? How would you have responded?

