

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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CHAPTER SEVEN



H

uron . . .

. . . Steward . . .

. . . Nikolas . . .

. . . Rones . . .

. . . Peril of us all . . .

. . . Steward . . .

The woman's words banged around Nick's head like a really good song or bad commercial. It had been that way since the fire marshall escorted them to their bedrooms. Even now, he could feel Huron's cobblestone road under his boots, and hear the crackle of the blue flames of that katana as it warmed his hand and face.

Presently, both Lyons brothers were lying on their beds. They were shimmering red, except where protective eyewear had been—an effect from the sudden burst of solar radiation from the Prometheus 10,000 just before it blew up. Tim lay sideways with his mouth slightly open, but Nick kept a determined expression on the plastic alloy ceiling.

From somewhere on the otherside of the bed he heard the familiar whirling of anti-grav motors.

“That was quick,” Nick said, without turning. “Hasn’t even been a day.”

“Good afternoon, Nick,” the replacement nannydrone said. “It has been brought to my attention that you have been put on house arrest. Lucky it wasn’t jail, you know.”

Nick shrugged and shifted to his side, moving his determined expression from ceiling to the new nannydrone. “Mom and Dad have the fire marshall’s bank account number. And *that’s* how the world turns.”

“Well. My bio-rhythm sensors, which are sponsored by Pappy’s Popsicles, tell me you are quite frustrated, and we just can’t have that. What *you* need is a Pappy’s Popsicle.”

Nick fell back with a groan, thinking to himself, *What I need is to get off this planet.*

Probably should stop hearing voices in my head, then. What did that woman say? ‘The Ronas lies about their true intent. They enter the city of Huron at the peril of us all.’

Nick supposed he should’ve been worrying about the failed invention, or the fire marshall who threw out words like “Prozac”, and “threat to all plant and animal life in a fifty mile radius”. Which wasn’t fair, not really. Nick wasn’t psychotic; he never enjoyed torturing small animals. It was just that he was, well, optimistic. And sometimes that optimism led to the singeing of a tree branch or two. Not that it really mattered. If you twisted your ankle, a dozen ambudrones would be right there. And if you accidentally set a tree on fire, pyrodrones would sweep in and have it out in minutes. Your every need and whim would be provided for you . . . well, if *you* were a

“civil”. If you had the unfortunate luck of being a refugee with a twisted ankle, BioFarm Corporation would lower your life expectancy by a year and send you a pamphlet directing you to make a cast out of old T-shirts and clay.

Seriously? Nick thought. *Tons of refugees die everyday from lack of access to basic medicine when, just across the canyon, civils can receive a new heart as part of their outpatient surgery? What kind of a society does that?*

And by “society” Nick meant his parents.

When their grandfather, Nikolas Lyons the eleventh, set up a trust fund with a never ending supply of money, his parents decided to take early retirement and move to one of Colorado City’s suburbanhoods. His parents hadn’t worked for five years now. Instead, they spent their days globe-shopping and burning through Grand’s trust fund account.

But Nick wouldn’t get sucked in. *What did Grand always say?*

“You must arise, Nikolas, and take your place among the clouds.”

Hospitality 3000 announced: *Sonya Lyons, identified. Heart rate: Excited. Condition: Healthy. Geneva infection levels: 0.00.*

Erik Lyons, identified. Heart rate: Excited. Condition: Healthy. Geneva infection levels: 0.00.

Beep, beep.

House secure.

Nick heard the clop of boots. Fast voices echoed downstairs.

Beep, the intercom alerted.

“Nick and Tim!” Their mom shouted through the intercom. “Get your freaky pyromaniac rears down here now!”

A holographic image of an Asian news anchor in a three-piece tweed suit was cast over the mantle. He thanked his cohost and began his segment: “Reports coming in from the villages of the African Federation to the most northern region of Alaska have confirmed that we are, indeed, experiencing the second greatest outbreak of the Geneva virus. There are

two hundred and seventy-eight thousand confirmed deaths reported throughout the Global Union. As of last May, more marriages have ended by the Geneva virus than divorce. The U.S. will open its thirty-fifth intranational refugee camp by month's end. A bill is currently in the international council to replace refugee fences with walls, no longer allowing refugee minors to cross its bord—"

A computer voice cut off the broadcaster. *Forgive the interruption, but the bio-rhythm sensors indicate a hostile confrontation between a Sonya and Erik Lyons, and their two sons, Nick and Tim Lyons. Would you like me to record the tele-holo for another time?*

"You bet," their mother said in her pitchy voice. She held two large shopping bags on each hand like the Lady of Justice. Her fingers flared, sending both bags to the ground.

"Oh. My. Gosh," She shoved her sunglasses into her hair, giving the impression of a blond peacock that just got back from a shopping spree. "Like, seriously, Nick. This is so beyond irresponsible. Your son, Erik. *Your* son is mentally ill."

Nick looked slowly to his father. He'd just had the tips of his blond hair and soul patch re-highlighted. The stylist had gotten a little aggressive around his eyebrows and one was shorter than the other.

"Bro . . ." his father said, snapping his finger. A housedrone whizzed into the room holding two diet soda bottles. "Come on. I thought we were tight, bro."

In case one was wondering, yes. Nick's mom and dad had the collective maturity of a thirteen-year-old.

"Erik and I were sitting there," their mom started while opening the diet sodas and passing one to their dad. "And I'm in the middle of a back-skin regeneration, which can-*not* be interrupted, and guess what? The fire marshall calls me. The fire marshall? Again? And they're telling me you've burned a forest down or something? Whatever, Nick. Seriously. What. Ever." She tipped her head back and downed half the bottle of diet soda.

"The pyrodrones were there in thirty seconds flat," Nick said. "The machine singed like ten trees, and maybe an azalea. They'll inject it with growth therapy, and it'll be good as new. Probably already is."

Their dad smacked his lips after an equally deep guzzle from the soda and shook his flipped hair. "You two are crazy-town crazy."

"Hey. It's not my fault, Dad, er, bro-Dad." Tim said, pointing to Nick. "He's trying to build an invention to raise money. He's going to runaway to Moon."

"We had a deal." Nick gritted his teeth.

"Yeah. We did," Tim snapped back. "And you broke that deal. I told you I didn't want help with Rocky. And—and he got into your stuff, too, Dad. Took your solar battery and memory chip."

"My stuff?" Their dad said, completely ignoring the fact that he just learned his son was trying to runaway. "What do you mean, my *stuff*?"

"He was in the garage—"

"Doing what?" His dad stood up.

Nick leaned into his brother. "Seriously, Tim. You do not know pain."

"He took apart your hover utility vehicle," Tim mumbled, then winced as Nick clenched a fist.

"He did WHAT-TA?" His dad's eyes grew. "I know you didn't touching my Validate, bro. I know you didn't. What did I say? What. Did. I. Say? I said to stay on your side of the garage. You don't see me messing with your stuff?" Their dad's sandals flapped quickly as he marched into the garage.

"It worked, though," Nick called after. "The solar battery worked. I stored the light in it and shot it out."

"I so don't care if it worked." Their mom followed. "Keep your freaky hands off of Erik's stuff. It ain't yours. Wait until I tell your granddaddy."

"Whaaa . . ." their dad's voice dried up. "WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY VALIDATE?!"

"Nick!" His mom screamed from the garage, and he heard the shattering of a diet soda bottle. "Your dad's H.U.V.! Are you insane?"

Nick had completely dismantled the engine.

"I—I needed the solar battery and motherboard," Nick said. "I've always put it back together."

"You did this before?" their mom said.

"One time—"

"Ten times," Tim corrected.

"I swear, Nick Lyons," their mom said. "You better put every wire and chip back in its place."

"Yeah. About that." Nick took a step back. "The experiment was a resounding success, but it sorta blew up the Validate's battery and—and motherboard."

Nick's dad kept attempting words, but none seemed to relate to the English language. He was beet red, and his mouth looked like it was trying to decide between screaming and crying.

Their mom spun on her heel and balled up her fists. "What did I tell you would happen, Nick, if you got your hands on one more electronic device?"

Nick's eyes grew.

"I've had it with you, freak!" Their mom screamed. "You're getting the inhibitors tonight."

"What?" Nick looked to his dad. Everything just turned really serious. Neural inhibitors were given to kids who were considered dangerous and out of control. Nick would be seventeen the next time he could string together an entire sentence.

Their mother pointed upstairs. "Get up to your rooms now! The doctor will transmit a prescription to your nannydrone."

The brothers marched slowly up to their rooms.

"Why don't you shut your mouth?" Nick said, just as their bedroom door slid closed. "I protected you from Rocky. You know what? Next time Rocky can ape all over you for all I care."

"I told you I didn't want your help," Tim said. "Besides, you destroyed Dad's Validate. And for what? Another arson attempt? Sorry, dude, but electronics are the last thing you should touch."

"It was coming together," Nick sighed. "Almost had it ready. Would have won that money, too."

"You *almost* burned down a forest, Nick. Someone's got to stop you."

"If you want to make an omelette, you gotta crack a few eggs."

"Exactly!" Tim waved his hands. "You know who said that, Nick? Stalin said that. Stalin—who committed genocide against his *own* people."

"Well—we don't know *who* really said that." Nick pounded the intercom. He had rewired it two-ways so he could eavesdrop on his parents. It came in handy when planning a sneak out.

His dad's voice trembled. "My Validate! That crazy punk kid took apart my Validate!"

"I told him what I'd do," their mom said. "He's insane. He's just insane. . . . Yes? . . . Um. Yeah. I need that doctor—you know, the one who gives neural inhibitors. He's on the Medinetwork, right? . . . Yeah . . . No. We already have a file opened in the psychiatric wing. . . . Yes. We have a nannydrone. . . . Yeah, she better be able to process all forms of medication. We paid, like, a fortune for her."

"Whatever." Nick fell back on the bed, focusing his brow on some point in the ceiling. "It is time I leave this den of parental totalitarianism."

"Call the national guard," Tim said. "The monster is loose and headed for New York harbor."

"You seem distressed, Nick Lyons." The nannydrone crept toward him.

"Now is *not* the time," Nick said. "Planning my escape."

"Hmm. I wonder what might make you happy today. Perhaps—" The nannydrone lifted its right arm holding an unwrapped popsicle. "—A complementary Pappy's popsicle?"

"I. Don't. Want. It!" Nick jumped to his feet. "I don't want a Pappy's Popsicle, or Pudding Finger, or Dipping sticks. And I don't want a digital head floating in my face, selling me junk all the time!" Nick grabbed the popsicle and threw it.

The nannydrone spun, shooting several laser beams to intercept the popsicle fragments before they hit the wall.

"That was a close one." The nannydrone grabbed the popsicle stick. "Cleanliness is next to happen—Please standby for a transmission from St. Mary's Medinetwork . . . I have received your mother's request to administer the neural inhibitor, R-5235." The popsicle-free hand flipped like a switchblade, revealing a long, silvery needle. The nannydrone moved slowly toward Nick.

"Crap." Nick sat straight up.

"Dude," Tim said. "Mom didn't waste any time."

"Nothing to be concerned about," the nannydrone said. "This medication is not fatal. It will simply suppress any and all aggressive thoughts and behaviors. Common side effects may include dizziness, memory loss, aversion to social environments, difficulty with complex verbal communication and thinning of the hair. It is a very efficient medication, if I do say so myself. One shot will last up to thirty-six months or three years."

The nannydrone spun around with the popsicle stick in its other hand and headed toward the trash compactor. "But my primary protocol is to clean up your mess, first. Afterward, I will administer the drug."

Nick stood to his feet.

The trash compactor slid open.

Nick raised his right tennis shoe.

The nannydrone held the popsicle stick over the trash compactor.

Nick kicked. Before the nannydrone could retreat from the compactor, he slammed the door.

Muffled commands came from the trash compactor. "Open the compartment, Nick Lyons. The nannydrone is in severe danger of being destroyed—"

Nick tapped the button: *COMPACT*.

The compactor moaned as it tried to crush the nannydrone.

"Please open the compartment," the nannydrone repeated. "The nannydrone is in severe danger of being damaged or destroyed—Would you like executable file—chocoberry—R-5235—yum three-hundred and Pappy'ssssssssssszzz—"

The compactor moaned again, and then finally accepted its victim.

"You scare me," Tim said.

"A nannydrone just tried to turn my brains to mush and I scare you?" Nick said. He flopped back down on his bed.

Part of him wondered why he should even bother to try and runaway to Moon. How long had he been trying? Well, probably since the day he saw that kid dying in the spaceport.

It was five years ago, one early August morning. They had just returned from a ski trip in the himalayas. Nick remembered deboarding the shuttle and walking down the rampway to Gate F10, clutching his red backpack. The gate dumped them out into a horde of shoppers, all clutching their newly purchased merchandise. But it was not the shoppers who made him sick to his stomach. It was the mass lying on the ground. At first he assumed someone had unknowingly dropped their luggage, until he saw those brown eyes.

A teenage boy was hemorrhaging.

From nowhere, an ambudrone flew past Nick, announcing, "Geneva virus detected. Geneva virus detected." The drone aimed a hose at the boy and smothered him in quarantine jelly, and then left him there like some dying cocoon. The shoppers, with their department store bags and eyes in perfect balance, stepped over him, around him, beside him. But their eyes never fell on him.

Nick dropped his backpack, tore through the crowd, and kneeled down to the boy. He didn't know it was the Geneva virus at the time. All he knew was the boy needed help. Nick screamed at the top of his lungs, "Help! Somebody help him!" The course of shoppers slowed as they searched for nine-year-old Nick's call for help. When the source was found, they glared at him, glowered at him, and a few even shushed him, but no one helped him. Not knowing what to do next, he reached out to the jelly. Suddenly, there was a flash of light and he lay ten feet from the boy, stiff as a board.

The ambudrone had tazed him and now floated above. The white, orbish body, held up a wagging finger, "Please keeps your voice down. You are disturbing the shoppers."

Looking up at the plastic outline of the ambudrone, Nick had only one thought from that day on: *I need to get off this planet.*

And his mind never changed. He had to get home, but his prospects were looking worse and worse. The Prometheus 10,000 had blown up, the fire marshall locked him out of the shed. And now the nannydrones were trying to inject him with R-5235. For the first time since he started planning his escape, the future seemed hopeless. He needed to get to Moon, but how?

An explosion of glass came from downstairs. Both boys turned to the intercom.

"Erik? Erik! What's wrong?" their mom cried.

The door swished, and Nick flew down the stairs. "Dad?"

His dad lay in a halo of glass, still gripping the bottle of diet soda. He was lathered in sweat and blood. From what Nick could tell, he had collapsed onto their coffee table.

"Dad!" Tim yelled. "Is it the Geneva virus?"

Nick's mom tapped her ear and shouted, "9-1-1!"

The earpiece answered, "Dialing . . ."

An electronic voice answered, "9-1-1. What is your emergency?"

Nick's mom sobbed into the phone, "Erik—Erik! Something's wrong with Erik!"

Sweat ran down their dad's puffy red face. Tim tried to prop him up.

"Don't touch him!" screamed their mom. "Yes? No, I was talking to Tim. . . . OK. I won't hang up."

Within sixty seconds, a hoverbulance's siren descended to the front of the house. A woman with a black bag and an ambudrone met Nick at the door.

"He's over there." Nick turned to his dad. Blood had now moved past the glass and onto the Persian rug.

Hospitality 3000 announced: *Ambulance attendant Cheryl Sierra has now entered. Condition: Healthy. Heart rate: Normal. Geneva infection levels: 0.00. Ambudrone has now entered. Condition: Unavailable. Heart rate: Unavailable.*

Beep, beep.

House secure.

The attendant opened her black bag and pressed a small, thin square on their dad's chest. She fiddled with an earpiece, paused, and pursed her lips.

"What?" Nick looked at her.

The attendant quickly placed a square piece on Nick's chest. Cold metal pressed through his shirt. She repeated it with Tim, then their mom. The attendant paused, looked at the diet soda in their father's hand and closed her bag.

"Was it the diet sodas?" their mom said.

"Ma'am—" the attendant didn't answer her. "—we need to get you and your husband to the ER, now!"

Their mom croaked through tears, "Wha—?"

"Please, ma'am, follow us." The attendant turned to the boys. "Next of kin?"

"Our Grandpa, Grand," Nick answered. "Nikolas Lyons, the eleventh."

"Call him now. Meet us at St. Mary's ER."

Another ambulance attendant came in with a stretcher. It was a whirlwind of limbs and lifting and dispatches to the ER.

Hospitality 3000 announced: *Ambulance attendant Cheryl Sierra has now left the premises. Heart rate: Excited. Condition: Healthy. Geneva infection levels: 0.00.*

Ambulance attendant Robert Killigan has now left the premises. Heart rate: Excited. Condition: Healthy. Geneva infection levels: 0.00.

An ambudrone has now left the premises.

Erik Lyons has now left the premises. Heart rate: Low. Condition: Critical. Geneva infection levels: 0.00.

Sonya Lyons has now left the premises. Heart rate: Excited. Condition: Critical. Geneva infection levels: 0.00.

Timothy Lyons has now left the premises. Heart rate: Excited. Condition: Healthy. Geneva infection levels: 0.00.

Nick Lyons.

The inside of Grand's hovertruck rattled under the blows of a summer storm. He gripped the wheel, his eyes fixed on Nick's videomail message camera.

The digital readout read:

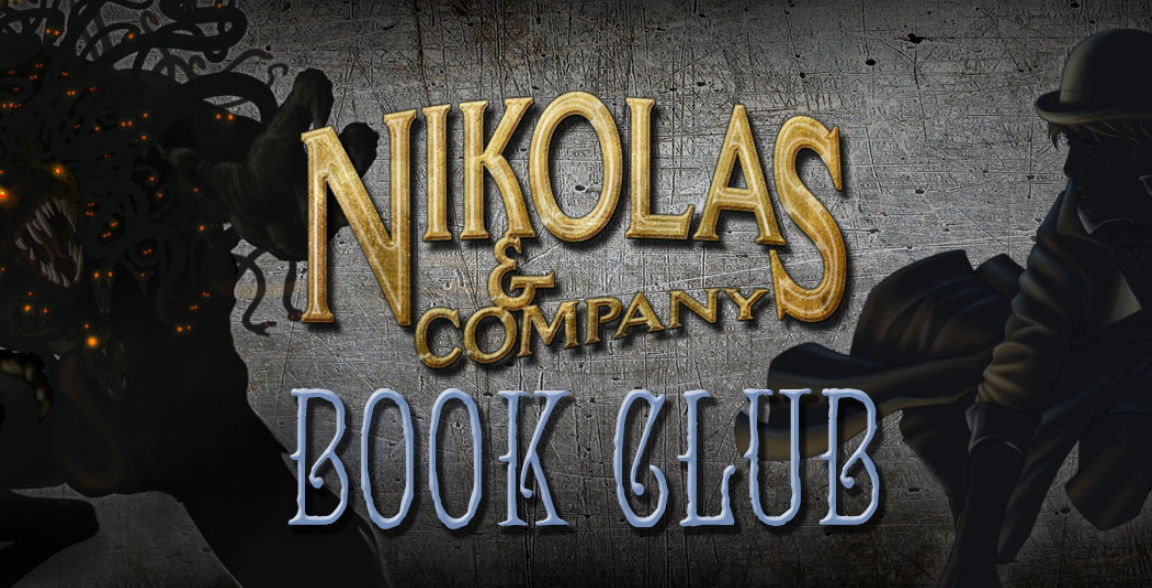
CALLER: GRAND LYONS (GRANDPA)

TIME 8:52 PM

LOCATION: COLORADO CITY, COLORADO

This is Grand again. I fear you haven't been getting my messages about Machu Picchu and the merfolk. That you're the steward of Huron. I am twenty minutes away. I must warn you. There are devilish creatures on my tail. Trackers. Scuccas to be exact. They have hunted me for years. Its why I have never left my truck. I mean to protect you and Tim from them. Nevertheless, be careful. If you see anything

suspicious, if someone becomes suddenly ill or poisoned, know it is the trackers. They have found you. It isn't me they've been hunting for. It is you, Nikolas—



NIKOLAS & COMPANY BOOK CLUB

Book Club Questions

- Nick's parents are weird. What's weird about them?
- Have you ever touched something or broken something that made your parents upset? What was it?
- If you were in the situation, would you have tattled on your brother?
- At the very end Grand tells Nick that the trackers may have poisoned his parents. How do you think they snuck the poison into their drinks?
- Do you think his parents will live? Why or why not?

