

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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CHAPTER FIVE



(Part 2)

S

o, guess what Haley,” Tim said, leaning against a small bookshelf. “I hit a girl.”

“You hit a girl?” Haley spun around.

“I mean . . . um, yeah, um,” Tim’s voice cracked. “But it was a tie. You know. Tim: two. Rocky The She-Bully: two.” Tim raised his hands, pretending to do a victory dance.

“So, you couldn’t win a fight with a girl?” Haley’s brow rose.

“No!” Tim’s voice cracked again. “I could have—just trying—just didn’t want to make her look bad.”

“Congratulations,” Haley said.

"Thanks!" His voice cracked a third time. Puberty wasn't taking any prisoners.

She inhaled deeply, "That's not what—!"

"I submit to you—" Nick cut off the inevitable verbal carnage. "—I submit to you the first ever, solar battery projector. Thank you all for coming out to the beta test demonstration. While I am disappointed the press didn't show up, I'm sure word-of-mouth will make up for it. Please distribute the protective eyewear, Tim."

Tim pulled out a small box and opened it. The contents looked more like a collection of swimming goggles than protective eyewear. He started passing them around. The snap of rubber came from around the room as everyone stretched the bands over their head.

"OK. I'm supposed to give a speech at Rick Killing's Light The World Contest," Nick said. "So I'm gonna practice on you guys." His voice dropped an octave and he raised his chest. "It is common knowledge that Earth's climate has been altered over the last hundred years, leaving us with the Great Cloud and a lack of proper UV radiation. The sun's output is eighty percent less than what it used to be—"

"Twelve percent less." Daniel corrected him. "If it was eighty-percent we'd be talking to each other through an icesheet."

"Right," Nick said. "Twelve percent. That's what I meant. Anyway. Oh. Don't forget the helmets, Tim."

Tim had already shoved a football helmet over his head and was passing around an army bag.

Brandy reached into the army bag and pulled out a football helmet.

"Aren't these the missing helmets from Weaver High?" Brandy whispered to Caroline.

"Dude," Xanthus grinned at Tim, "what do we need helmets for?" Tim looked back at him long and hard. Xanthus's grin quickly disappeared and he shoved on the helmet.

"Currently," Nick continued his speech. "artificial UV lights have been used to compensate for the lack of sunlight, but they're really expensive to maintain and, you know, suck a lot of power. One day I was watching this video on Ned Talk—"

"I love those," Xanthus said under his breath.

"They were talking about the updated solar batteries in cars. Everyone knows that cars used to run off of the old solar batteries until the Great Cloud. They had to redesign the batteries so it could capture as much solar radiation as possible. They took the photovoltaic cells, which converts solar into electricity, and upped their intake by three hundred percent. That got me thinking. What if we didn't convert it to energy fuel for cars? What if we collected up all that solar light flying around in the air, stored it somehow, and then, you know, shot it back out onto cities, highways, houses. We could have sunlight bulbs on the roads and in houses.

As the god, Prometheus, brought fire to humankind, I bring sunlight to the Earth! The Prometheus ten-thousand!"

Nick shifted to the left, holding his hand out proudly.

"Woohoo!" They all clapped, their football helmets bobbing back and forth.

"Please refresh our memory," Daniel said, cutting off the applause. Nick knew that Daniel was the smartest person in the state of Colorado. He didn't need his memory refreshed. "What's your plan again? Why are you doing all this?"

Nick raised his hand as if to gesture how obvious his plan should be. "Rick Killings is offering one billion dollars to the first person who develops a solution for the Great Cloud. You know, to get the sun back. There's so much wasted sun out there, above and below the fog. So we'll store it up and send it down to the cities. All I have to do is, you know, invent the machine. Then I get the money, buy a ticket to Moon, and finally leave this planet. Simple."

"Simple?" Daniel cocked his head.

"Yeah," Nick shrugged. "Invent machine. Win prize. Leave Earth. Simple."

"He wants to move to the Moon," Tim said with a less excited tone. "Start a new life."

"That sounds nice," Caroline perked up.

"Yeah," Haley said. "I'd leave if I could."

Daniel said nothing to this. He just leaned on his cane while his head stooped under the weight of the football helmet.

"So," Nick said. "The machine. The plan. Awesome, right Daniel? Don't you think?"

"I think," Daniel said. "the football helmets were a good choice."

"That's good enough for me, then. Now,"—Nick bowed proudly—"let the demonstration commence!" He snapped on rubber gloves, donned a welder's mask, and made a quick hop, grabbing two handgrips.

"Wait," Brandy said. "You've boiled all of your other test cases."

"Not really." He turned the machine toward a lone fish in a glass bowl at the far end of the room. With the monstrous machine pointed in its direction, the fish zigged and zagged desperately. It recalled previous experiments involving the untimely death of its brethren.

"Not again," Brandy said. "That's just evil."

"Are we ready, Tim?" Nick said.

"Sure," Tim said slowly.

"All right, Tim. Now, I think we made a mistake in the field array calibration last time. Needs to be a little more focused." Nick reached around the machine to an odd assortment of knobs. He turned a large, silver one, then reached up and pulled a rope. A hole appeared from the roof, sending a grey light over the machine.

"The solar battery will now take the diffused solar light in the atmosphere," Nick explained, "store it in the machine, and concentrate it on our test subject."

Tim bent down to a car battery and a pair of positive and negative cables. He attached the cables to the battery, took a

deep breath, and then pushed the cables into two holes on the side of the Prometheus 10,000.

Sknazz. Pop.

The machine's insides began to glow.

"Success!" Nick did an air punch.

"Wow," Brandy said. "It really works?"

"Of course," Nick said.

Tim stood up, his face slightly pale. "If by work you mean it didn't blow up in my face, and make my nose hair sprinkle out like ground pepper, then OK, it worked."

"Muzzle your non-believing tongue, infidel!" Nick raised his hand.

Tim rolled his eyes.

"Now then. The video recorder, Tim. We'll need to record it for the press conference."

Tim ran over and adjusted an old 3D recorder mounted on a tripod.

"Commencing countdown," Nick called out. "Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One!" He smacked a red button on the side of the machine.

The room swelled with light. Everyone slowly stepped back to the wall. Suddenly, the machine went dark. One could hear a knob click.

"That it, dude?" Xanthus called out from somewhere.

Nick tightened the grips until his knuckles turned white, then planted his left foot behind him like a runner at the starting line. Tim grabbed one of the firmer poles on the wall.

"Not quite. Now, we have to see if the machine can reproject the solar li—"

Crack-pop.

There was a blast of yellow light. A girl's scream. Nick gripped the machine as it began to shake and roar. The fish wiggled furiously.

"I think it's wor—!" Nick looked back to give Tim a thumbs up, but stopped.

The shed and everyone in it were gone.

“Uh, guys?”

Nick was standing on a dark crossroad.

“Hey, guys?”

Nick squinted and saw a ramshackle of houses up and down the road. He looked up to find a horizon line shrouded in city lights. His nose was bombarded with a rich, organic smell, and he felt cobblestones under his feet. Something flickered at the corner of his eye. He jumped.

There, in his right hand, was a katana lit in blue fire. He lifted it up to his face and studied the flames as they walked up and down the sword.

“Seriously, what is going on?”

He wanted to raise the sword higher but his arm felt constricted, like he had on a suit. He looked to his right arm and down his chest. For some reason he was wearing a wool black frock, golden vest, and black pants with black boots. He slowly looked up and found the bill of a hat.

“OK?” Nick said, taking the hat off slowly. It was a bowler hat. “Where am I?”

But for some reason Nick already knew the answer. *This* was the city of Huron. And he knew something else too. The city of Huron wasn’t on Earth.

It was on Moon.

That was completely ridiculous, of course. Moon was an empty satellite devoid of oxygen, and had very little gravity. There were no cities on it, especially ones with cobblestone streets. Still, somewhere past logic and reason, Nick knew this place. He didn’t know why, but it felt familiar to him—like one’s first house or that park your parents would take you to as a little kid.

And then Nick knew why it felt familiar.

“Home,” Nick said to himself.

The lunar colony was the home he had always known. But there was another home beyond memory. An unknown home. A magical home. Huron was that home. Suddenly, he wanted to go to Huron more than anything else in the world.

For the first time in his life, the plan to runaway to the lunar colonies felt wrong. This is where he belonged.

Huron's voice began to echo from all the windows and doorways. *Keep them from my gates, Nikolas. The Rones bring death to your city!*

"Who are you?" Nick said. "What's going on . . . ? Hello . . . ? OK. I'm kind of freaking out here. Is this real? Hello? I can't do this right now. Seriously. If I'm going insane I'll never get off Earth. They'll lock me up in the loony bin forever. Hello . . . ?

Nick squinted into the darkness. "Are you there?"

The Rones will destroy your citizens. They will destroy me!

Nick pointed the sword into the darkness, hoping it would give him more light.

"Who are you?"

Please, Steward. Come home, Nikolas. Nikolas. Ni—

"—ick! Nick!" Tim screamed. The vision oiled away and was replaced with Tim waving his hands frantically. "Are you listening, you 'tard!? The beam's too focused. It's cutting through the bowl!"

Nick looked up to see a white-hot beam, no bigger than a pencil, shoot straight through the fishbowl. Small waterfalls began spitting out of the newly burned holes.

"No, no, no, no, no, no." Nick flipped up his welder's mask and yanked open a panel. "Don't worry. I got this."

The fish stared at the growing holes and small waterfalls. It realized what the holes meant: freedom from the horror that was this glass prison. With a new hope, it swam toward the escape route. Nick fiddled with several knobs and then turned a blue one.

The fish pushed through the hole.

Nick turned the knob twice. The light bloomed from a beam to a yellow glow.

The fish kicked up and arched with a graceful twist. Now encased in the yellow glow of Prometheus 10,000, it flipped its torso skyward.

"Hah!" Nick yelled and twisted a smaller knob. The light blasted into a brilliant white. Everyone covered their faces.

The fish reached the top of its dive, hovering, posing in the white light . . .

A snowy substance fell to the ground.

Tim ripped off the Weaver football helmet. "Turn it off, Nick!"

Nick reached for the orange power cord and tore it from the wall.

Brandy squealed with arms outstretched, "A tan. Bronze!"

"Nick!" Haley pointed. Where there was once a water bowl, wooden chair, and a gold fish making its great escape, now swirled a cloud of white ash. And behind the ash, a perfectly cut hole in the shed. And behind the hole, a stunning view of Hiker's Canyon.

On fire.

"Ah! My roast, Nick!" Caroline ran with outstretched arms to the beef fueled bonfire.

The football helmet fell from Tim's hand and as he stared at the fire. "We—are—so—dead."

"Post an update for me on Friendbank. I don't have access to Nick's fanpage," Brandy yelled into her cell. "Tell everyone the after-party is cancelled. . . . Yeah, again. . . . No. Just some trees this time. I know. I know. They're living creatures too . . ."

ZZZZzzzzzz. Came the sound of Firedrones zooming across with their anti-fire hoses at the ready.

The scene around Nick fell into chaos. Teenage refugees ran around the canyon in horror and pandemonium. Prometheus 10,000 exploded into a bloom of sparks and smoke. Caroline smacked at her roast, angrily. But Nick didn't notice any of this. All he could think about was the woman-voice in his head crying out about the city of Huron.

And she called him "Steward Niko—"

—olas. This is Grand again. Not sure if you got my last message, but the solar harvest plant above the Mediterranean must have messed up my phone.

The ID and timestamp read:

CALLER: GRAND LYONS (GRANDPA)

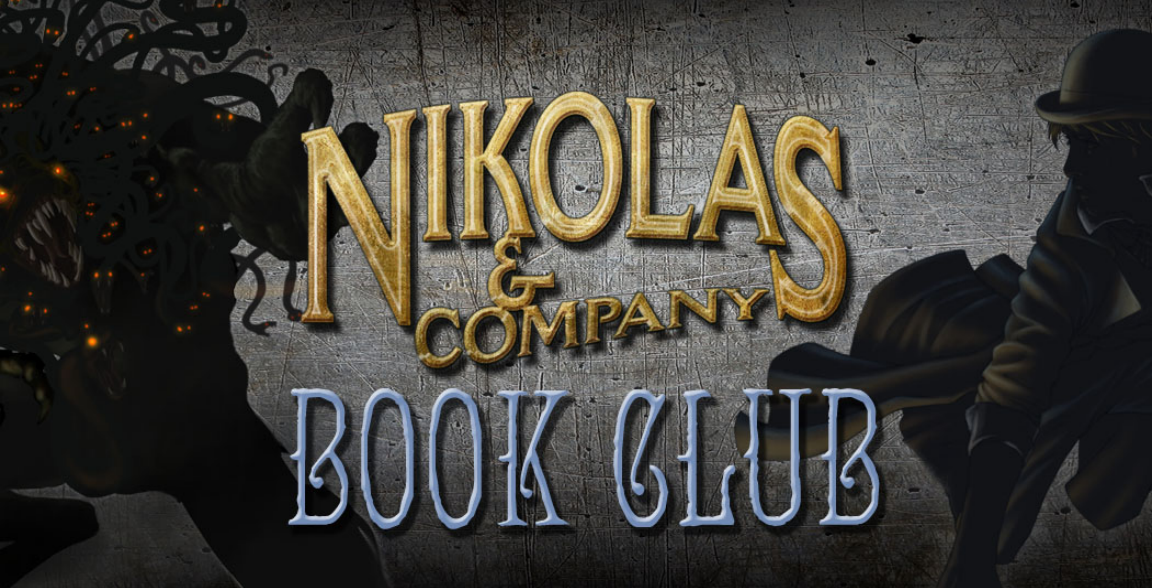
TIME: 2:59 PM

LOCATION: BEIJING, CHINA

I am taking a round about way to Colorado. Trying to shake off these trackers!

I must get to your house before they do! The trackers may have figured out where you live. I am not sure.

As I said, you're the steward of Huron. Only the steward has the power to protect the Merrows. The voice will guide him, the voice of Huron. I think the trackers want to stop you from returning home and saving the Merrows. We must shake those devilish creatures loose! If I don't bribe you back to your place and time in history, the merfolk perish! Start packing your bags, grandson. I have been sworn to return you, Nikolas.



NIKOLAS & COMPANY'S BOOK CLUB

Book Club Questions

- Name all of Nick's friends.
- Review Nick's plan. Is it a good one? If you were in his situation what would you do?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most, how responsible is Nick?
- Risk for something you believe in can be tough. Have you risked for something you have believed in?
- Should Nick give up on trying to leave Earth? Would you give up?

