

NIKOLAS & COMPANY

Audiobook Adventures



Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

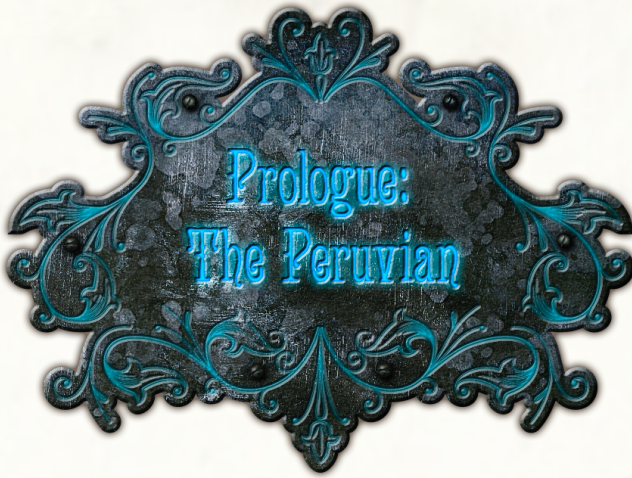
NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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Prologue



THE MOUNTAINS OF CENTRAL PERU

T

ink. Tink.

Hollow . . . metal? The Peruvian man squeezed the shovel.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

He threw the shovel aside. The archeologist knew what he was *supposed* to do. First, he was to report to the project leader. Then, he was to begin the tedious work of gently

removing the dirt away with a soft brush for the next three days.

The Peruvian did neither.

He clawed the ground. Bits of rock shoved under fingernails. Dirt flew into nose, teeth, and eyes.

They gave up on the western site. Thought I was an idiot. He thought, laughing to himself. Yes, yes. Cigar-shaped . . . self-emanating alloy, just as he told me. And here it is—the oldest artifact on the planet.

He thought he saw an engraving. With one inhale he blew.

L? An English L? In Peru? He glanced over. Only the ruins of Machu Picchu leered over the twenty-foot hole. "Ha!" He congratulated himself. English? Chinese? What do I care? Oldest artifact ever to be discovered, and I made the find. That project leader told me it would be worth more money than these Peruvian eyes have ever seen.

The idea swelled before he could stop it.

I could slip it into my pocket. Sneak out after nightfall. And I know just the buyer. The Peruvian loosened his pocket as the object parted from its archaeological grave. A shadow passed over.

He leapt to his feet.

What is he doing down here?

There stood the crazy old project leader with his straw white hair and green trench coat. He never came ground-side, preferring to stay in his hovertruck twenty-four seven so he could watch over the Machu Picchu dig like some Norse god of archaeology.

"I—I think we've found it—" The Peruvian man yielded.

"Yes. I saw it from the truck. Bring it here, quickly now," the project leader barked in a thick, foreign accent.

The Peruvian obeyed. He tapped the *UP* symbol on the auto-lift. Electromagnetic thrusters raised him twenty feet and eye-level to the project leader. But he didn't make eye contact with the old man, couldn't make eye contact with him.

The project leader frightened him.

No other way to put it. He was abnormally tall with the beard of a wild man and a temper to match. And he used big words like "forsooth" and "malcontent."

With a sigh, the Peruvian surrendered the oldest artifact on the planet into the old man's hand trailed in dirt. *Idiot. Weak, stupid idiot*, he thought.

The project leader withdrew a monocle and for the first time ever, smiled.

The Peruvian smiled back. "Wonder if the Smithsonian has my Friendbank address. You know, for follow-up questions."

Or a job promotion? The Peruvian thought. *Maybe even director? Suppose I should hire a publicist.*

The project leader cupped his hand, raised his chest and spit.

"Ugh." The Peruvian covered his mouth.

The project leader rubbed the artifact and spit between his palms, shook it, and then scratched it with blackened

nails. The Peruvian dug through his back pocket and offered up a bottle of hand sanitizer.

The project leader ignored him. "Very good, Ludwig, very good. Couldn't have made the clue more difficult to find. You and your puzzles."

"It—it is quite strange," said the Peruvian. "This script, it is an English 'L', yes? Could not be Incan."

The project leader's face rounded on the object. "And why should it be? Laid here when Peru was nothing more than an ice sheet."

A twig cracked in the distance. In one motion, the project leader shoved the artifact into his coat, reached behind his neck and unsheathed an axe.

"Woah." The Peruvian scrambled backward. "What? *What?*"

He traced a figure eight with the axe head. The jungle responded in silence. The axe was mysteriously hidden again.

"Wh—why do you have a battle axe at the dig . . . at all?" The Peruvian cocked his head. "And where do you keep that thing?"

The project leader curled both fists around the artifact.

Snap.

"Are you crazy?" The Peruvian grabbed his hair.

The artifact released tendrils of yellow dust. A breeze swept most of it away, leaving only a trace of letters behind.

"I, um, I . . ." the Peruvian mumbled.

"It's stardust. Now be quiet."

Nikolas Lyons XI,

Augustist 12th. Year 4570 of the 5th Epoch

I pray the clues were not too severe, and this message fell into true hands. The merfolk are in grave danger and need the steward.

You must return home with your grandson, Nikolas Lyons. The Steward of Huron.

I know the trackers followed you to Earth's future. While they have run you off to another time, a greater crisis has emerged in our own. I have observed through my looking-eye that the Merrows of Eynclaene are being attacked at this very moment. I do not need to remind you they are guardians of all Huron's wealth, which leaves your fair city vulnerable to an ill and unthinkable ruin. The Council of Teine insists upon your return, demands it in fact. Do not delay.

Your friend,

Ludwig, Master Toymaker

PS. I left a few instruments to aid your return. First, a chronostone. It will open up a timeway so that you may travel back in time. Use it to bring Nikolas back. It should return you to Augustist 12th. Year 4570 of the 5th Epoch—on the very day I have written this. Who knows? Maybe by escaping through the timeway you can shake off the trackers?

Second. I have included the Steward's horn that Nikolas may speak to the city of Huron. I pray it still functions by the time you arrive. But more importantly, I pray the voice of Huron speaks to him.

"The Merrows attacked!" The project leader yelled, swiping the words into an unreadable cloud. "That's it then . . . I left her exposed . . . I should return. I must return . . . but the trackers? You might be right, Ludwig. Take Nikolas through the timeway, and so doing, abandon the trackers to this timeline. Kill two birds with one stone." He squeezed his palms. "Oh Huron, what is the way? What is the way? Confound it all! Why is the city quiet?" He locked eyes with the Peruvian. "Why will the woman not speak to me?"

"Women." The Peruvian shrugged back. "Take it from personal experience. They never call back. Just move on."

The project leader's eyes searched the Peruvian's a moment.

"Aagh." He waved him off and turned back to the dig. To the horror of everyone looking on he took a shovel and began digging at the earth like a butcher gutting an animal. Voices and cries of disbelief gathered around them.

Within minutes he had retrieved a second wooden box.

He opened it, pulled out a large stone, and mumbled to himself, "Timeway key. That'll get us home."

He dug for another few minutes until he found a wooden case. He mumbled again, "Steward's horn. Nikolas will be able to talk to her. Give us further direction. Further direction is what we need!"

He opened the case, a brass hinge crying from thousands of years of disuse. It revealed an old phonograph with a large horn and a place to lay a vinyl record.

The Peruvian started to feel dizzy. His thoughts were a mass of confusion and bewilderment:

Phonographs were from the early twentieth century.

That was almost two-hundred years ago.

But this archeological site is thousands of years old. Way before phonographs were invented!

WHAT IS GOING ON!

The project leader patted his hands together, nodded, and said, "That'll about do it." He faced the archaeological team and said, "I have tarried long enough. Must find Steward Nikolas Lyons now. Good day." Without another word he marched to his yellow hovertruck, which was as swarthy and beat up as himself.

"Wait." The Peruvian moved between two team members at the water station. "You're going to do what—who? Are you not this—this Steward Nikolas Lyons? For years you've demanded we call you Mr. Steward Lyons."

The project leader looked at the Peruvian with his blazing green eyes, making him feel six feet short of his five foot ten. "I was! Huron knows that I was. Steward Nikolas Lyons the Eleventh. But now I must find Steward Nikolas Lyons the Twelfth. My grandson."

The project leader heaved into the truck. A harness responded to the presence of a body and unspooled itself. With a slam of the door, he nodded an empty salutation to the crowd and pressed the power on symbol. An electromagnetic buzz came from the hovertruck and it began to lift.

The Peruvian man stared at his own stunned reflection in the hovertruck window. The scene was fizzling away like a bad radio signal. He looked down to two empty hands. The artifact that would make him wildly rich currently sat in the passenger seat with a crazy project leader who needed to find his grandson and save the Merrows.

“What’s a Merrow?” The Peruvian said to himself.

He leapt to the hovertruck, grabbed the door handle and yanked it open. The hovertruck pitched to the left, forcing the project leader to prop one hand on the roof while gripping the steering column.

“Are you mad?” Yelled the project leader.

“The artifact. You have the artifact!” The Peruvian cried.

“I cannot waste my time in parlay with you. The Merrows, sir. The Merrows are in need of salvation. Now let go before you pitch the hover over!”

“Merrows? What are you talking about?”

“Merrows,” the project leader shouted over the hovertruck’s whining stabilizers. “Mermaids! Merfolk! Whatever you folks call ‘em. They are under the citizenship of Huron and in need of help. If they are to be saved, I must have access to the voice of Huron. I may access the voice through my grandson, Nikolas. Henceforth, I must return him to his proper time in history. In short, good day, sir!” He wrenched the car door away.

The hovertruck kicked a foot, and then twenty into the air.

“Hey . . . HEY! The grant? What am I to tell the endowment board?” The Peruvian punched the air. “Crazy old man!”

The hovertruck stopped its ascent and the driver window rolled down. The silver casing was tossed to the grass. He leaned his head out of the truck and said, “Oh. And if three monstrous creatures appear, looking for me . . . run!”

He rolled up his window, pointed the hovertruck grill northward and launched off into the clouds.

“Monstrous creatures . . . ?” The Peruvian said slowly.

“Told you that guy was a nut,” a voice came from the onlookers.

The Peruvian scanned the ground and found the silver casing. He toddled toward it, clutched it to his chest, stood to his feet and bolted toward a stack of empty briefcases. Finding one, he dropped to the ground and stuffed the artifact into it. With a few taps, the password was set. He wasn’t going to let the artifact out of his sight again.

A llama cried from the outer perimeter. Its bottom lip lolled back and forth as it galloped past.

Cliiiiink, tiiiiink. Cliiiiink, tiiiiink, came the sound of grinding chains, escorted by canine growls. Three shadows emerged from the jungle.

The Peruvian wobbled to his feet. “Now wha—?” his voice trailed off. “Heaven help us.”

What he saw next utterly convinced him that it was time to retire from archaeology and accept his brother Felipe’s open invitation to start a line of clothing apparel

for small dogs. That is, if he could manage to survive the next five minutes. Three monstrous animals lumbered across the site. Someone must have taken the head of a hyena, stuck it on the neck of an ostrich and stitched it to the body of a raptor.

Those were the monstrous creatures the project leader had been babbling about.

One of the creatures, which had bits of chain crisscrossing its torso, stopped at the hole where the Peruvian first discovered the artifact. Its neck dropped to the ground while oily eyes stayed on the archaeological team.

Grung, grung, grung, grung, grung, grung, came guttural sniffs from the bottom of its neck. The Peruvian's lip curled. Instead of nostrils at the end of its face, this creature's nostrils were on the bottom side of its throat.

It stopped and rose up on two hind legs. Membranous skin whipped open from behind both ears while its head moved around like some prehistoric satellite dish.

It found him.

"Reegh!"

The Peruvian scrambled for the closest hovertruck. Sounds of clattering chains moved toward him. He reached for the handle. It was locked. Claws grabbed at his back and forced him down. He flipped over and found himself looking back at a canine mouth. It opened, revealing teeth for gutting set in a jaw for tearing. He heard his own machine gun breath. The creature's neck slithered over until the two neck nostrils found his face.

The nostrils flared, sniffed, growled, and then sniffed unsatisfied. The creature turned to the briefcase in his shaking hand.

“Grrrrh.”

The creature’s gaze returned to the Peruvian. Something rolled through its jaws. His eyes widened as the bottom jaw unhinged from the top with serpentine ease. Between rows of teeth pulsed a tubular, pink throat. He closed his eyes for what he knew would be the last time in his life.

Wet lips brushed his hand.

“Ooh,” he moaned.

The briefcase, which carried the artifact, was ripped away. The creature’s head jerked back several times until the case slid down its gullet.

The artifact that would make him rich now lay in the belly of the monster.

The membrane fans folded behind the creature’s head and it looked back at the other two, who were currently investigating their own team members.

“Schreeg-gah!” It commanded them. In a gravelly voice, it said to the others, “After five long years I have picked up the Lyons boy’s scent. We know where he lives. His grandfather is going to fetch him. We must get there first at all cost! Our master wants the boy alive!”

In one strange movement, all the heads lifted northward and in the direction of the project leader.

And just like that, they marched away.

The Peruvian rolled over. He watched the tip of the last creature’s tail disappear into the jungle. What were they?

He recalled the trackers that Ludwig had mentioned in his letter. The project leader had been on the run from them for a long time. Probably off to hunt down the project leader for all he knew. Then he shook his head and thought, *Project leader leaves babbling about his grandson saving some mermaids? Says he needs to “fetch him” and bring him to his true home? Monsters attack the site? Attack me? It swallows the oldest artifact on the planet and my future in archaeology with it? The only way for me to get it back is to hunt that monster down and gut the artifact from its stomach? I would have to be a . . . hero?*

The Peruvian knew what to do next.

He tapped the inside of his eardrum. A tinny voice answered.

“Communication One. How may I connect you?”

“Felipe Sánchez, please.”

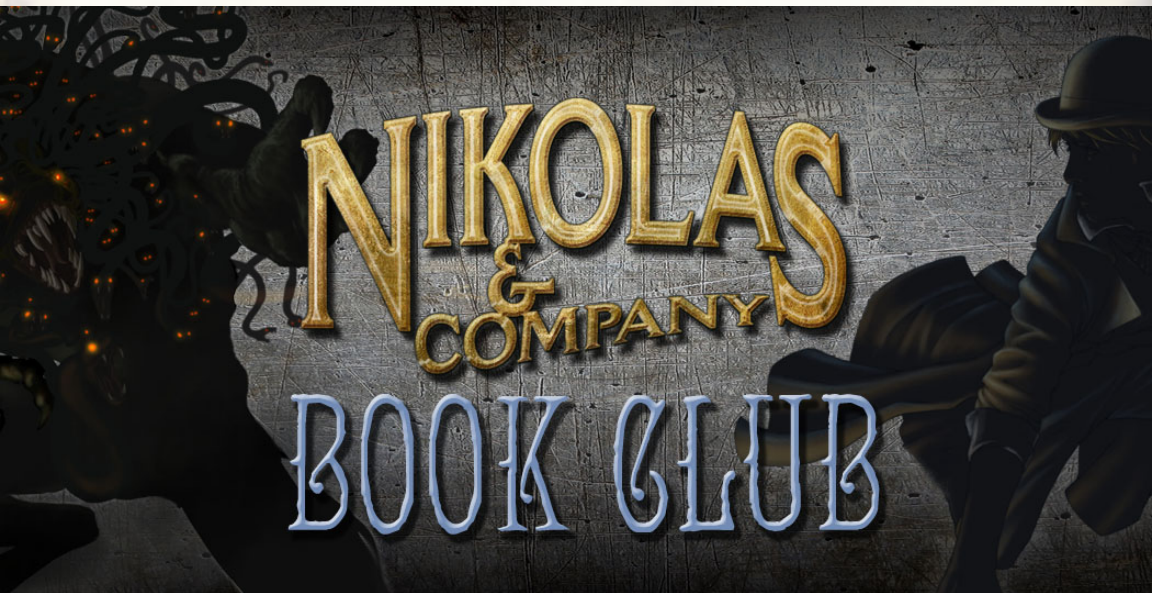
“Connecting. . . .”

“Aló?”

“Felipe. . . .”

The Peruvian retired from archaeology and became a moderately successful producer of scarves and leggings for toy terriers.

And never again did he have to worry about a crazy old project leader babbling on about some girl named Huron, and monsters talking about the boy, Nikolas L—



Book Club Questions

- Who was the protagonist (main character)?
- Who were the other characters?
- Where were they?
- The Peruvian had a plan for the artifact. What was it?
- What did he think he could gain by his plan?
- What did the Peruvian think of the project leader?
- At the end of the chapter the Peruvian decided not to follow the trackers. What would you have done and why?

