

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY

## Audiobook Adventures



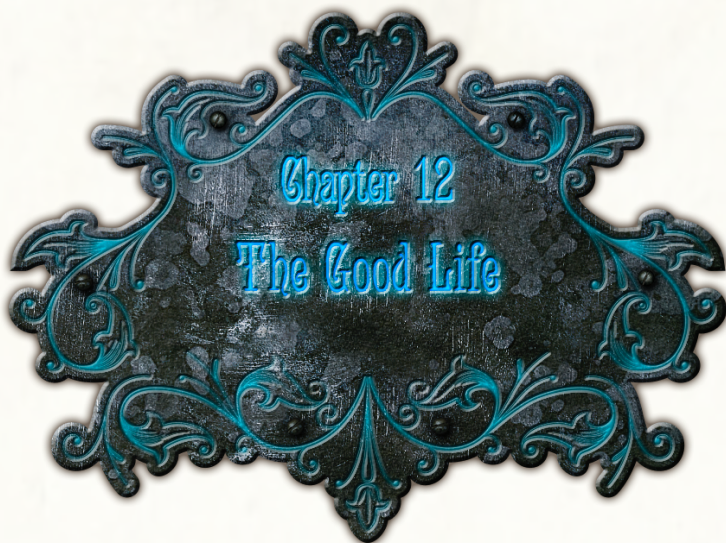
Episode One

THE MERMAN AND THE MOON FORGOTTEN

# NIKOLAS & COMPANY



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**T**he air conditioner grumble covered the soft shuffle of seven kids and one middle-aged man slinking their way through the empty halls of the Private Interplanetary Shuttle Station.

“Oh, Mr. Grand, sir,” Caroline whispered. “I meant to ask you. Where will we live? Do you rent your own house?”

“Yes I own my own house. In fact, I own Oxbar Estates and all the property that resides therein. Over three hundred acres of land, just outside of Huron.”

“Does it have a dining room? Like in the old movies?”

“Yes. Five to be exact. Six floors. And a kitchen the size of a tavern.”

“So—” Brandy waved her hand. “—are there balls and dances and stuff?”

“Coaches studded with diamonds driven by a flock of geese will escort you to the finest balls in the valley.”

Brandy grabbed Caroline’s hand, trying not to squeal herself into a cardiac arrest.

"Now I need access to one of the shuttles." Grand slipped out a green card. "Kings will invite you to dinner, but janitors will get you into the storehouse." He raised his eyes, scanning for anything familiar. "Mason Interplanetary Shuttle. Gate B15 . . . Ah, there ya are. Wait here by the counter now. Stay to the ground."

Nick nodded.

"Oh, one other thing Nikolas," Grand said.

"Yeah."

Grand pointed a flashlight to a small obsidian stone. "I'll need a co-pilot to activate the doorway while I fly the shuttle. May I entrust you with the chronostone?"

"Sure!" Nick caught himself, and whispered again. "Sure."

"That's a good lad. I've written the spell on the piece of paper. Once the potion inside is released, it will mix with the sunlight and open the gate."

Nick slipped the chronostone into the pocket of his khaki shorts.

This all struck him as crazy-weird. A magical stone lay at the bottom of his pocket, among some tissues and an old pack of gum. But that wasn't the only strange feeling he was experiencing. It was there when Grand asked him to take his place as steward. . . .

Responsibility.

That's something adults usually didn't associate with Nick. And they definitely didn't entrust him with powerful magical objects that could open a gateway through space and time. Maybe Nick should tell Grand about all of his misadventures that ended in explosions and fire.

"All right. Need to see about overriding some pass codes to the shuttle. Stay on the ground." Grand moved into the shadows.

Everyone else grunted to their knees and crawled blindly until they found a couple of service counters. Xanthus' hologlasses clicked, flashing two red lights. He reentered the world of Magicgeddon.

"Careful, Haley," Tim said. "The counter's right here. Just ten feet in front of you."

"I know that's not your hand touching my hand," Haley warned.

"No," Tim cleared his throat. "No. My hand is not touching your hand."

"I get it," Tim mumbled to himself. "You're under the Nick spell."

"Excuse me?" Haley scrunched her face.

"All of you are," Tim sneered. "This has nothing to do with the Geneva virus and living in a big house. You guys are just under the crazy 'Let's do whatever Nick says 'cause he's so cool, even if he tell us to cover ourselves in gasoline and run into a burning building' spell. Might I remind everyone that Nick's ideas end in pain and death? Are you really going to follow him into crazy world because you think he's cool?"

Nick waited for someone to disagree because "cool" would be the stupidest reason to take a risk like this.

All eyes moved away from Tim.

"See, that's what I thought."

"Hey," Haley snapped her head around.

"What?"

"Shutup, Tim."

She got up and sat next to Brandy.

Nick heard those familiar motherly sounds of purse straps and flats. "Hey, Caroline."

"Hungry?" Caroline said. Nick's eyes adjusted enough to see Caroline's maternal nod.

"Hungry? I'm a hormonally-induced food receptacle. When am I ever not hungry?" Nick smiled.

"Always with the smiles." She opened her beige purse and fumbled through a jumble of pencils, notepads, and sewing kits. Nick was convinced that in the event of a plane crash Caroline's bag could double as a flotation device.

"Peach, blueberry or chocolate?" Caroline said.

"Um, chocolate."

“Dark chocolate, milk chocolate or white chocolate?”

Nick blinked.

“Have to make sure there are plenty of options for the boys. Daniel really likes white chocolate when he’s researching, multi-grain blueberry granola when he’s thinking. And Xanthus . . . well, he just likes to eat. I bet you’re a dark chocolate kinda boy?”

“Yeah. Love me some dark chocolate.”

Without even looking down, Caroline plunged her hands deep in the purse and retrieved a Mr. Good Crunch dark chocolate bar. He grabbed the chocolate bar from her hands and tore into it.

“Thanks.” Nick’s salivary glands were already firing up.

“Tim’s into Haley, isn’t he?”

Nick thought about blowing off the question, but Caroline wasn’t really asking.

“I hope he doesn’t get hurt,” Caroline said. “Did you hear about the Christopher McCaffrey incident, Nikolas?”

Nick shook his head as the dark chocolate and caramel started to gum up his teeth.

“Christopher McCaffrey lived in perimeter 415. You know, back at the refugee camp. He liked Haley a lot, and I mean a lot. Wrote her a love ballad. Well, actually just played Guitar Champion for her, and changed some of the words up. I think it was Steellica’s “Wherever I May Roam.” His version was “My Love is like the Colorado Superdome.” She wasn’t very kind to him at all. Or the guitar. Or the pavement.”

“I think Tim is just trying to wait her out. You know, wear her down,” Nick said, choking down a thick piece of dark chocolate.

Caroline didn’t respond immediately. She gingerly peeled off the wrapper of a white chocolate bar and broke off a piece just big enough to fit between her fingers. “You don’t know her very well. Do you, Nikolas?”

“Sure I do,” Nick said. “People aren’t that hard to understand. Haley hates love. Brandy loves fashion. Tim’s a

wuss. Daniel: evil scientist. Xanthus: dragon nerd. And you: good cook.”

Pain flashed behind Caroline’s horn-rimmed glasses.

“People aren’t cut-outs you know.” She closed her purse.

Nick felt his own stomach bottom out. “I know—I—just, sometimes, we make everything too complicated, you know. Just keep it simple, keep life simple. Why do you think I want to get out of here so bad?”

“Anyway—” Caroline chose to abandon that line of conversation. “—I just don’t want Tim to get hurt. Haley doesn’t know how to let boys like her. I suspect that’s why she’s into martial arts—to keep boys away. We’re from Seattle, you know, and our lives weren’t much better before the refugee camp, either. My father died in a boating accident when Mom was pregnant with Brandy. I was two, Nikolas. I don’t even remember him. I do remember all of Mom’s boyfriends though. Lots and lots of boyfriends. Coffee shop workers, restaurant managers, fishermen. I didn’t mind them too much when they weren’t drinking, but Haley, well, she hated them all, and hated Mom for having them. Always got into arguments, accusing Mom of choosing her boyfriends over us. Mom said she needed the help, couldn’t get through life alone. Mom and Dad married straight out of high school. She won Miss Teen Washington that year, and it was the last job she ever had. Mom was very pretty, you know. They said I have her ears.” Caroline paused.

“Um. Nice ears.” Nick guessed at the non-verbal cue.

“Thank you very much, Nikolas. Anyway, I made a mistake. I told Haley she looked just like Mom, that she was really pretty and would have all the boyfriends she ever needed. I was twelve then. She was thirteen. Haley was angry, and I think it made Brandy a little jealous, too, which makes sense, if you know Brandy. Anyway, Haley wouldn’t talk to me for a month. It would have been longer Nikolas, except that’s when Mom died of the virus . . .”

Caroline’s voice trailed off.

"Hmm," Caroline cleared her voice. "Anyway. Just a hint to Tim. Don't try to help her—"

Daniel waved, then pounded the floor. Everyone froze.

A white glow moved from the ceiling to the floor. All heads turned to the counter, looking for the source. A holographic image of a middle-aged woman appeared, followed by a white square box.

"Another nannydrone," Nick groaned.

They did their best to shrivel into the plastic floor.

"Nick?" the nannydrone said.

"Yeah . . ." Nick said slowly.

"Due to a lack of concern for other life forms and a propensity toward violent behavior, I am to administer the neural inhibitor, R-5235—"

"Aw geez." Nick pushed himself from the counter.

Suddenly, the drone's head retreated.

"Where did it go?" Brandy said. "What'd you do Nick?"

"I don't know," Nick said. "And I don't ca—" A warm drop of liquid plopped onto Nick's hand. Everyone's eyes moved back to the counter. The nannydrone's face returned, but its body was trapped between a row of canine teeth. The mouth unhinged and squeezed the drone down a pink gullet. Flashing red lights were the last to be seen.

It was a scucca.

Gunk. Gunk. Gunk, came the sound of its neck nostrils sniffing. The scucca extended its head over the counter. "REEEIGGHH!!" it called.

All three scuccas lifted to their hind legs and their membrane crowns flicked out.

"The trackers found us," Grand yelled. "To the shuttle!"

Grand had suddenly appeared holding a massive battle-axe. Where did he get the battle-axe from? Nick didn't know, but there were more pressing matters. Like how fast could he make it to the shuttle while maintaining all bodily functions. Everyone flung themselves through the door, down the steps, and onto the tarmac. There, off in the distance was a lone

shuttle titled: "Mason." Nick charged ahead, reached the stairway first, and flew up with his fist aimed for the access button. He punched the door open button, but it responded back:

Access denied.

Access denied.

Access denied.

Access denied.

"Keycard. Keycard. Grand has it!" Nick turned back to the spaceport. On cue, glass exploded followed by a mass of trench coat and battle-axe flying through the midnight air. Grand tumbled inches from the shuttle. He groaned and fell unconscious.

"Get the card! Grand's keycard. It's green." Nick pointed at Grand. Haley and Xanthus were already trolling through his pockets.

The scuccas fumbled through the new opening.

"Here." Haley pressed the card into Nick's shaking hand. He slid it into the key slot.

Beep. Beep. Access granted. Welcome, Mr. Lyons.

"Get inside. Now!" Nick commanded.

Hands grabbed for Grand and the axe. With much heaving and iron scraping, they rolled him through the hatchway and tumbled in themselves. Nick punched the door-closed symbol.

BAAANGH! BAAANGH! BAAANGH! Several bulges punched from the other side of the door. The scuccas were ramming the hull.

"We need to call the police, Nick." Tim said, trying to catch his breath.

Talons started to rake the hull, looking for any sign of weakness.

"Nick?" Haley said, wiping Grand's blood off her cheek. "What are we gonna do?"

BAAANGH! BAAANGH! They rammed again.

"Nick, the police?" Tim said.

Nick scanned the shuttle. Fear was on everyone's face as they listened to three monstrous freaks clawing at the hull. He looked down to his grandfather. He wasn't going to wake up any time soon.

Come on, Grand, Nick thought. What are we supposed to do?

"Police, Nick?" Tim said.

Suddenly, Nick understood.

This was all on him.

He got to his feet and looked to the front of the shuttle.

"Police, Nick?" Tim repeated.

"Move." Nick pressed Tim to one side.

"Are you listening to me?"

Control panels lit at the presence of a human. Hello. Welcome to the Mason.

BAAANGH! The shuttle rocked.

The control board was a dizzying array of gauges and lights. After a few scans, Nick found a hexagon-shaped disc with a green light emanating from it. He pressed it.

It blinked in red letters: Access denied. Retinal verification required. Next to the warning was a small circle with one digital eye.

Nick stood straight, wiping the sweat off his forehead. He looked back at Haley, and then Grand. She read his mind. They both picked up Grand by his massive shoulders and lifted him to the retinal scanner. It was strange handling his grandfather's head like some bearded football, but he didn't really have a choice. Nick pried an eyelid open, revealing an unfixed pupil. The retinal system began to scan.

Welcome, Mr. Lyons, to the Mason Transworld Shuttle. Forgive me for asking, but you seem a bit peakish. Are you feeling well this evening? Ibuprofen perhaps?

Grand's chin bobbed to his chest.

BAAANGH! BAAANGH! The scuccas continued to search for the hull's weakness.

“Nick!” Tim yelled. “Are you listening to me? Grand’s unconscious or worse. We’re trapped. How’re we getting out of here?”

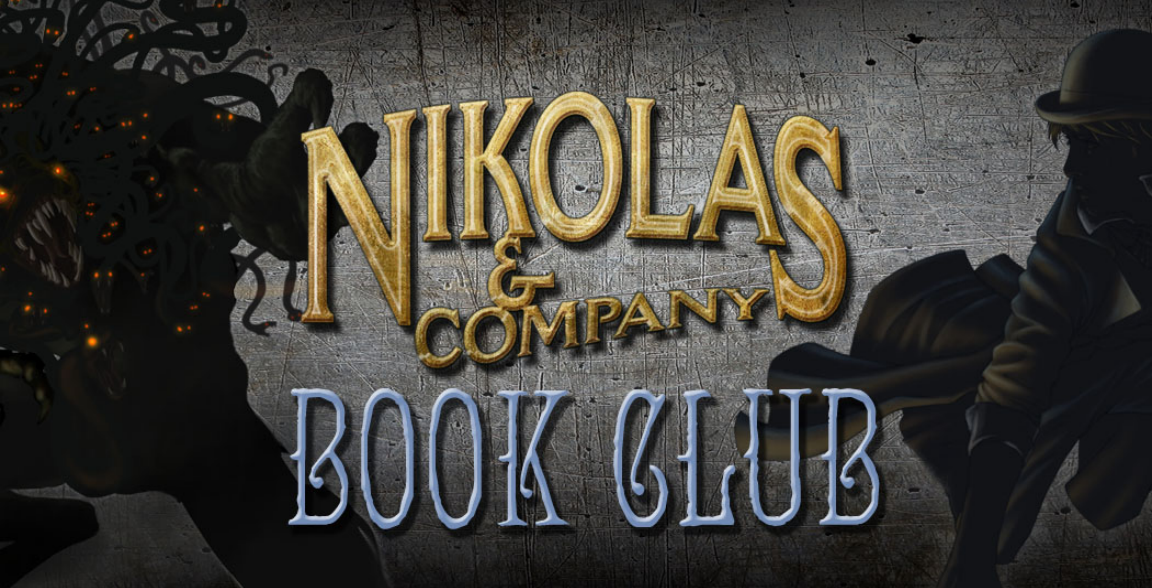
Nick tried to subdue the small rise of his cheek, but it was mutinous.

“Hey—Are you smiling?” Tim said. “You’re thinking something, Nick.”

“I have an idea,” Nick said.

“Idea? What do you mean, idea?” Tim took in the scene playing out in front of him. “No!”

“I’m gonna fly it,” Nick shrugged.



# NIKOLAS & COMPANY'S BOOK CLUB

## Book Club Questions

- Where did Grand take them?
- Nikolas upset Caroling. Why? What does that say about the way he sees people?
- The nannybot found Nikolas again. Why is it chasing him?
- Do you believe Nikolas is dangerous?
- Nikolas at the end decides to fly the shuttle. Is this something he would normally do, or is he acting out of character? Explain your answer.
- What would you do if you had to fly a multi-million dollar shuttle through outer space? Would you or wouldn't you do it and why?

