

Mernation

Episode 3

*Where to go?*

By A. C. Zito

They didn't see me slowly glide into the water. I had to get away. They were going to have the search team after me in no time. I took two cards from them; a red card and a green card. Out of all the ten Levels there were, which meant which? Green must mean four and red must mean five but how am I supposed to know that? They could be for Level 9 and 10. If so, I was beyond screwed!

But what choice did I have? Go back up and deal with two shitheads that don't know left from right? They were the only two passes that would admit me into one of the cities. I heard they were beautiful. The Cities of the Impossible Life; the destination that every family wanted to take but no one dared to do so. Where, which, they were able to breed seaweed from Down Under and trees from Up Above to get the greenery to grow properly. The vegetation covered the streets making it especially majestic at night when the glow it created along with the combination of the water and the moonlight made the nighttime walks all the more majestic.

"Hello," I said to a passenger swimming by with a catch already flung over his back. He spoke Fish to me, in return, which immediately blew me back because I entirely forgot my manners. Fish is a creole language. What it is comprised of, I'm not exactly sure, but it is taught at a very young age. Speaking Fish and not speaking Fish is the difference in Down Under from living or dying. No one will talk to you in anything but! I replied in Fish:

"Sorry, I'm new," the stranger went about his business, swimming back to his Level. I wanted to follow him but, at the same, I didn't know what Level he would be going back to. And I couldn't ask him. He'd know I was a fugitive belonging to two Levels. It's not allowed. You can only belong to one. Mernation Headquarters have spies Down Under that will give you up for money. And a lot of it; enough to where you'd be able to buy a Down Under mansion. And those aren't cheap. You'd be able to buy transportation to get around and all the booze and drugs you could find. And word around town is Down Under booze and Down Under drugs aren't anything like the ones you get Up Above. They're *better*; but they don't come cheap either. Which, it isn't surprising due to how everyone's a criminal in Down Under. But to make them requires a lot of hard work and patience. But when you're Down Under, survival is everything. You'd do anything to get by. Hell, I'd even try out the rumored Shark's Den where prisoners go when they're shit out of luck, can't get food anywhere else, had their Level card taken, and had every single one of their weapons either stolen or lost. Wandering around aimlessly in the deep blue darkness that is the ocean is far more agonizing than just having a couple of sharks just end it there for you so the misery could go ahead and get cut short.

*But that's the last place I'd go.* I thought to myself, shaking off the feeling of getting torn to shreds. The stillness of the water was already making me homesick. I took a breath of water and felt the

salty taste go down my throat and into my fish organ. Yes, I said it. Prisoners had to get surgery when the program first started out but soon enough people were born with it again. The gills stopped disappearing during the fetus stages like they used to when humans weren't as technically advanced. Now, the human race isn't even the same as it was half a century ago. I heard stories about it from my grandparents and their friends but no one really likes to think about it. Their skin looked so much weirder than human skin is today. The people that still have it today Up Above look like freaks! From their hair to their eyes to the rough texture of their skin, they're monsters! I've had friends that have gone to see the mutants at carnival shows, and they say touching them is like touching an oil canvas. The dry, wrinkly texture of their skin not just freaks you out but makes you sad because they didn't go ahead with the surgery so they wouldn't look hideous. And the worst part is hearing of some getting sent Down Under and having their skin shrivel up and fall off leaving them to die a painful, gruesome death; just because they wouldn't go about getting the surgery done! It makes you shake your head because it should be *mandatory*! Just like having the fish organ surgery done was mandatory for the poor, old saps!

"I could do it, Mom! I could wander the ocean like the stories of the hermit crabs before me!" I wanted to laugh at hearing the child say to his mother, '*hermit crab*.' Hermit crabs are just hermits Down Under that wander the ocean aimlessly, sleeping in caves and some possibly escaping Mernation and telling the tale.

"William; becoming a hermit crab is like a hermit from Up Above wandering the vast terrains of the desert! It's just not possible!" But the child wasn't having it. I saw that he already had his backpack flung over his back and a dart gun he must've gotten from one his birthdays that just passed. He swam out towards the coral reefs and past onwards into the barren landscape.

"Ma'am, get your child! He won't survive out there on his own!" An older gentleman, floating nearby, remarked. But the woman seemed already preoccupied with one of her other little ones that the farther the child went, the more of a speck he became in the distance. Right before he almost vanished from view was when I decided I couldn't take it anymore. I was already off, swimming after him as the older gentleman squealed out: "Ma'am; your child! He won't survive! How will he get fresh water?" I caught up to him and grabbed him by the wrist. His face scrunched up, angrily, protesting:

"Mom; I'm not a child!" As he turned around, he realized I wasn't his mother but a stranger.

"There's no fresh water where you're going! How do you plan on surviving in the Water Deserts?" He turned his head away, blushing as I could see he didn't think it through.

"I'm sorry," he whispered out. "I just can't keep living in Level 5... all my friends live in Level 4, and they make so much fun of me because of it!" I felt sorry for him, for I could understand, growing up, having your friends live on one side of town while you lived on the other. I quickly turned around and ripped up my green card and then whipped out the red card, replying:

"Well, not *all* of your friends live in Level 4!" I tensed up at the thought of my actions, but it was too late now. Plus, the look on his face lighting up made all the difference. I squeezed my arm, glancing

back at the ripped up piece of plastic, hoping that wouldn't come back to bite me. But making a new friend when in an ocean that can feel bigger than life itself, every step you take has to be the step towards a better tomorrow.