

Mernation

Episode 4

*My new Home*

By A. C. Zito

We began swimming back at more of a stroll than anything else. I didn't feel the need to be in a hurry, but, at the same time, I wanted to go inside. I wanted to breathe the air.

"I was born here as you already know." The boy told me, "My name's Michael. I was told I was named after Saint Michael, the archangel that is supposedly the one that will one day kill the devil." I nodded. It's a good name; I had to give him that. And you need a good, strong name when born Down Under. Life isn't as easy for kids who live down here unlike the kids who live Up Above. I'm pretty sure I have a niece down in Level 3 who decided never to come back up when her parents had finished up their time.

"Michael Under; do you like having that last name? It's a shame that they don't call the Down Under kids by their real last names, Michael. I'm sure one of your parents would be happy to give you their surname; your father, especially, most likely *despises* the practice." Michael shrugged.

"I don't mind that much. A lot of the Down Under kids like having the last name Under. And that's really only a thing we're given whenever or if ever we decide to go Up Above. They think it's a way to mock us for being the children of prisoners, but it's more or less a way, we think of it, to show how tough we are. It's not easy making it out and being a kid and all down here." I nodded, feeling kind of proud knowing that the first person I've been able to make friends with down here is one of the Underchildren. And you don't find many Underchildren in Down Under. Most people wouldn't dream of setting loose a child out into the dangerous worlds that make up Mernation.

"You seem like a brave kid. You need that in this world. I'm Lora Drake. It's nice to meet you Michael Under." He shook my hand and we made it back to where his mom was just minutes before. "Where'd your mom go?" I had to ask him, feeling a little concerned about if she cared or not about his wellbeing. He shrugged, looking down at his webbed feet.

"I turned ten a couple weeks ago so it's been like this lately. It's my job now to fend for myself. I have enough brothers and sisters that are younger than me that she has to worry about." I didn't know about this part of Mernation before coming down here. This took me aback for a second feeling deeply concerned for the young child.

"But that's absurd. You're too..."

"YOUNG?" he finished for me. He laughed at this and picked up a starfish lying nearby on the sandy floor. "This is what I'm called down here." Pointing to the starfish, "I'm known as one of the starfish because I made it to the age of ten. Do you know how often that happens for kids in

Mernation?" I didn't think I wanted to ask what the answer was. It already frightened the hell out of me enough as it is that it was already his job to fend for himself. And at *his* age *too!* I quickly thought to change the subject... but then again...

"Hey, well your parents are always still going to be there for you at least... right?" But that was when he gave me a worried look. He shook his head, replying:

"No... no, they won't. They'll be leaving in a couple of weeks to go back to the Up Above world leaving me here." I stopped in my tracks looking over at him stunned beyond belief.

"They can't just do that!" He nodded back, saying:

"Oh, but yes they can. And they have no choice. I'm ten down here now. I can do what I want. And I told them I'm staying!" I felt angry with Michael now. He seemed like a bright, young kid, but this seemed like the stupidest thing I've ever heard of in my whole, goddamn life!

"Who would you even *stay* with?" I asked feeling the question was too impossible to answer. But he shot one right back at me, replying as quickly:

"My older *brother*," Now, this was when he smiled at me. It made me feel a little bit uneasy. "He's about your age." He was quick to add, not adding but more discomfort to the whole entire situation. "I can't wait to bring you back to Level 5 and tell him how I found a girlfriend for him."

"Now, wait just one minute, *buddy-boy!* What makes you think...?" He looked at me like he already knew what was to come right out of my mouth. Frowning, he stopped me right then and there and said:

"He told me how he had someone in his life Up Above too. It stinks, doesn't it? How ten times out of ten it's the one that's staying that says they don't see the point of moving forward anymore. Even though they're not the one going to the *Sinner Lands* and will be risking their butt to stay alive on a day-to-day basis. They aren't the one that will be losing all connection with the people they hold most dear to their life. They aren't the one... the one that's actually going *down under.*"

We came up on the entrance to Level 5. It was just a mound of mud, nothing special. A decoy for any of the radars that have been made to try to detect the Levels with any fancy satellites, sonar, and other miscellaneous equipment that have been made over the years to keep it hidden from the Up Above world. And I'm sure airplanes, boats, submarines, and satellites pass by it all the time still unable to detect it. The surveillance teams that watch over the Levels make sure they go undetected. Each and every day; it's their jobs! And the more advanced equipment Level Hunters get in order to try to find Mernation, the more advanced equipment the surveillance teams get in order to help keep Down Under hidden.

"How long did it take you to get your own Level card?" I asked, curious.

“Two years,” he told me. “My parents put in the request when I turned six. It made me so *mad* because all my friends from Level 4 got theirs when they turned seven and were able to go hang out at the Coral Reef Hangout Points whenever they wanted when I had to wait a whole ‘*nother year!*” I laughed at this but immediately saw that he thought there was nothing funny at all about the whole entire situation.

“You win some, you lose some,” I replied meekly as I scanned my card for the first of many times to come. Michael scanned his as well. “I mean... look at where I just ended up. A prisoner I am. A prisoner I’ll be. A prisoner I’ll stay for the duration of my time here at New Guantanamo Bay.” I tried to remember what person said those few words that hold such a romance and eerie lure to them.

“Yeah, that reminds me,” Michael said. “Why *are* you here?” But before I could answer I was already through the door.