

## Mernation

### Episode 6

#### *Meet the new Girl*

By A. C. Zito

"So what's your brother like?" I asked, unsure if I wanted to know. Down Under boys will take your heart and rip it into a million pieces. Well, at least, that's what my mama always said. She said she met my dad in one of the levels. But, I wasn't born in Mernation. I was born Up Above. My mom said I got lucky for not ending up as one of the Under children. Lora Under; she would always call me that when I was being an unruly child. Like, for instance, playing music from Down Under that got snuck Up Above; or when she caught me with some blow fish that my friend's older brother brought back from Down Under. I scared her half to death as she caught me lying in a pool of vomit as I tried taking more of the drug to get the withdrawal pain to go away. I was in the hospital for two weeks being pumped a certain seaweed fluid that drains out the toxins. I never touched another blowfish again.

"Enough is enough, kid, I can't hang around you much longer than I already have. I've got to fend for myself just like you have to fend for *yourself!* Everybody's got to fend for themselves. It's *Mernation*, for Christ's sake!" I felt bad for saying it, but I didn't really care.

"I know, I know," he didn't seem surprised. "I just want you to meet my older brother. He could get you a job down here, you know." I agreed, reluctantly, but after fifteen minutes of going back and forth through back alleyways and different no-name shops that had a man or a woman with a bottle of jellyfish poison aimed ready in case you tried any funny business, I was already second-guessing if this was such a good idea. The main roads aren't for the regulars. Unless you're one of the big wealthy people of Mernation, you take the long way. And when I mean the long way I mean side roads, underground tunnels, anything, but the main roads. The rich Unders use the main passageways for the vendors and the traders and anyone looking to get stabbed in the neck and hung out to dry. I was going to have to risk my butt and go out into the middle of that street asking around, looking to see if I could find a job, if this brother of Michael's didn't work out. Because, of course, that's the first thing you do when you get down here. It's way too ironic. You have to put your life on the line the moment you come to Mernation so you'd be able to make it in the long-run. It's like going up to the biggest kid at recess and punching him in the face so you'd gain some respect; except, in my case, there's way more to lose. And let the record show, that includes an artery, a couple limbs, maybe my liver, and don't forget the intestines, can't forget that!

"Look, there's the main street where everyone is." Michael pointed. I looked through the crack in the wall to see important-looking people with up to three to five bodyguards watching over them as they walked around to all the vendors, looking to see what expensive fish would be good to buy. "They don't let other people buy their fish for them because they know it'll be poisoned by whoever buys it. The vendors, on the other hand, won't poison their own food. That would just run their business dry. Especially if word got out that their goods were killing off the top Unders." Michael brought this up as I

watched a man in a suit that must have been made out of a fine shark material walk by. It looked to be embroidered with silver metallic pins that could've possibly been recovered from sunken ships found by Level explorers that aren't afraid to venture out into the Water Deserts. His shoes looked to be made from parts of a turtle's shell and when he turned around I was surprised to see the beautiful design etched into his rich suit. With various different seashells, the rich Under had a mural making up thousands of broken pieces of shells coming in all shapes and colors to come together to make what looked to be a terrifyingly descriptive octopus.

"Who's that?" I asked Michael. Michael squinted his eyes to see the rich Under pick up, examine a nice, hefty-sized tuna, and then put it down, motioning to one of his men to check it out.

"Oh, that's Nigel Bordario. He's part of the Bordario family, you don't want to get near him."

"Why not?" I asked, curiously. Michael looked at me wide-eyed and grave.

"The Bordario family is one of the nine families that run Level 5. They control a good portion of the real estate. Maybe the West-side of the Level; I don't exactly know, maybe it's the East-side. What I do know is that with a flick of his wrist, he can get rid of you just like that. Any *one* of the nine families could. They have control of the Level and anyone in it." Michael then pointed to the mural on his back. "See that; *all* of the Bordario's have that octopus on their back to signify who they are, who they represent, and what they can do. Trust me, Lora, going up to him and asking one of his men for a place to stay, a place to eat, a place to rest, a place to work, and a place to exist is like asking the devil for a front-row seat in hell. There are better people to trust when finding a place for yourself down here; come with me." So I nodded, still in a trance by the mural of the octopus on his back, but quickly shook myself out of it and headed on my way out of the dusty antique shop and into another back alleyway.

*Knock knock knock*

"Who is it? Go away, I'm busy." I looked down the steps that brought us to this apartment. The view overlooked the edge of the Level and into a colorful coral reef that had fishes with reds, yellows, blues, and oranges. It was like living next to an aquarium; except, Level 5 pretty much *was* the aquarium.

"It's your younger brother. It's Michael." Michael was met with a silence that was then followed by a thudding of steps. The door opened with the man behind it letting out a sigh as he said:

"Michael, can't you see that I'm busy? I'm working. I have to complete a very big order today."

"But J.J., can't this wait another second?" His face peeked through the slightly cracked open door. He looked at me with curiosity.

"I'm with Tyrone. I don't want another one of your drug addicts looking for more blowfish. I told you two weeks ago, I don't *sell* that type of merchandise anymore. I'm strictly a metal manufacturing business. Those sunken ships don't find themselves. Now get out!" He slammed the door shut, leaving me feeling heated as ever. Turning to Michael, I snapped out:

“Did he just call me a *junkie*?” I felt the anger swelling up as my face burned hotter and hotter with rage.

“He didn’t mean it. He’s just stressed out with having to go out into the Water Deserts day in and day out and, most of the time, having no luck.” I shoved Michael out of the way as I stood now directly in front of the door.

“NO ONE,”

*SLAM* I brought my foot back and slammed it into the door leaving to where it came crashing down on the apartment floor.

“CALLS ME,” I took two strides in to where J.J. was sitting with one other guy and three girls, one on each side of them. They looked up at me, wide-eyed and confused as I screamed out: “A JUNKIE!” The three girls got up and hurried out of the apartment. As I neared J.J., ready to bring the lightning now that I’ve already let out my thunder, when he screams out:

“Why’d you bring this crazy bitch to my apartment, Michael?” But before Michael could answer, I had my fist already swung back as I screamed with a burning rage ready to end this dope-dealing wannabe once and for all.