Soraya & the Mermaid

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"Estelle's Journey"
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contents

1	Nimbla Moony	7
2	The Face in the Tank	17
3	To the Rescue	29
4	The Yellow Bucket	39
5	Elevator Down	49
6	Unexpected Help	58
7	Underwater Opera	69
8	Bartholomew's Request	83
9	The Stolen Hat	90
10	Latitude and Longitude	101
Magic Adventures Comic: "Estelle's Journey"		113

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Nimbla Moony

Nimbla Moony dipped and swooped through the clouds, tightly grasping onto her flying horse, Ziggy. "Faster, Ziggy!" she cried. "There isn't a moment to lose!"

Soraya could almost feel the breeze on her face and the tickle of the horse's mane blowing in the wind. Just then, Soraya's mom ruined everything by striding into the kitchen. Quick as a flash, Soraya slipped *Nimbla Moony and the Rescue Mission* behind her back.

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"What are you reading, Soraya?" her mom asked, pouring herself some coffee.

"Nothing." Soraya shifted in her seat as she pushed around bits of egg on her plate.

"Is it those comic books again? It's that Mimbla Noomy character, isn't it?"

"*Nimbla Moony*," Soraya said loudly. Then she muttered, "I bet Nimbla Moony never had to eat eggs, *ever*."

"Stop playing with your food, and cheer up. Your field trip today will be a blast. You always loved the aquarium when you were little."

"Back then I thought all the fish were aliens," Soraya said, squishing her eggs with a fork. "Now I'm ten, and I know they're just from the ocean. Plus, back then I didn't have to go with my class."

"What's so bad about your class?" Her mom put down her coffee cup.

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Soraya opened her mouth to say that real people were boring, not like the characters in comic books. Instead she said, "I told you before, Mom. My whole class thinks I'm a weirdo."

Her mother pressed her mouth into a thin line. It was the "I'm-disappointed-and-I'm-not-even-trying-to-hide-it" face.

"Well, maybe if you stopped ignoring them, they wouldn't think that."

Soraya rolled her eyes. Moms had no clue. Why couldn't she have Nimbla Moony's life? Nimbla had hatched out of a magical egg on the planet Zybon. Therefore she had zero experience with annoying parents.

"Anyway," her mom said, "being different is a good thing."

How would you *know?* Soraya thought. But Soraya didn't say that either. She remembered all the sideways looks the other kids gave her. Or they would say, "You're so *weird*, Soraya."

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Like the time Lola was crying because she had gotten a bad grade. Soraya told Lola to do what Nimbla Moony recommended—hold a funeral for the bad grade, at the Bad Grade Graveyard. On the moon.

This didn't go over very well with Lola. She had avoided Soraya ever since.

Another time, Frankie had said he was scared of the dark. Soraya suggested he try asking the ghost of his dead guinea pig to protect him.

That time, Frankie's mother had called Soraya's mother to complain that Soraya had given her son nightmares.

How could her mom possibly understand what it was like to be the weirdest kid in fourth grade? Soraya's mom was exceedingly normal. She had a normal job and wore normal beige clothes and said normal things.

Soraya scooted around on her chair.

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"You know, Mom, Nimbla Moony doesn't even bother with people. She mostly talks to her horse."

"I don't want your hero to be a comic book character who mostly talks to a horse," Soraya's mother said, carrying their dishes to the sink. "I want you to make a friend who is a *real person*. Maybe you can try that on this aquarium trip?"

"I doubt it," Soraya mumbled.

When Soraya looked up, she felt guilty. Her mom was trying to hide it, but she was wearing the worst face of all. The worried face.

"Go finish getting ready for school. And, Soraya, don't take any comic books with you."

Soraya shoved her bag lunch into her backpack and ran up to her room to get some pencils. She stopped in front of her dresser. There was an old framed photo of Soraya and her parents from when she was in kindergarten.

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It was strange to see her dad smiling. That wasn't how Soraya remembered him. He had left her and her mom years ago. Before he left, he had frowned an awful lot. At *her*.

"What are we going to do with you, Soraya?" he would say.

Soraya knew exactly what *that* meant. It was a grown-up's way of saying, *You're so weird*.

Soraya's fists clenched. She hadn't talked to her dad in years. Even her mom didn't know where he was.

Her mom told Soraya it wasn't her fault that her dad had left. Sometimes it was hard to believe that, though. She wanted to throw the photo across the room.

"Almost ready, Soraya?" her mom called out.

Soraya grabbed two of her favorite *Nimbla Moony* comics. She rolled them up and stuffed them into her backpack.

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