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Regina
By Leslie Hyla Winton Noble
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CHAPTER 1: A MAGICIAN VISITS

‘What am I going to do this afternoon?’ Lady Regina-Valerie asked Tickle, her large and ferocious Siamese cat, and he gave one of his customary long ‘Mee-e-e-ow’s in response. He had been named because of what he had frequently done after crawling inside any top she was wearing, when he was a kitten and she was a tiny girl, but he’d grown at a faster rate than she had and now wouldn’t fit.

As the girl spoke, she felt a sort of ‘popping’ in her ears, and a wall of her bedroom seemed to become hazy, but she thought her eyes and ears must have been affected by a recent session of swimming after lessons – her school had a heated pool and just about every other luxury one could think of.

The words behind Tickle’s meow were saying, ‘Always, lately, it’s, “What am I going to do.” What about, “What are we going to do,” again for a change? You used to take me everywhere.’

‘Well, you couldn’t really come with me on a horse, for example,’ she replied. ‘Nor could you...’ then she abruptly tailed off, clutched her head, and sat down hard on the end of

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the bed. ‘Wait a minute,’ she gasped. ‘I’m always talking to *you*, but you’ve never talked back in words before!’

Regina (which is the shortest form of her name anyone was inclined to use – she simply wasn’t a ‘Reggie’, or ‘Gina’, or ‘Ginny’ or ‘Jeanie’ type of person) seemed to be the luckiest girl alive. Her parents, Lord and Lady de Lancewoode, were talented, rich, and spoilt her rotten. She had no brothers or sisters to get in the way. She was clever and had a photographic memory, so that she had been moved ahead of her age group as far as the rules would allow, but was still top of class in everything. She also won any inter-school quiz or the like, chess match, or project competition she cared to enter, whether for science, mathematics, invention or essay writing. Not only that, but she was naturally good at music, and played the piano, violin and flute quite well enough to have been in the school orchestra. She wasn’t. That was a team thing, and she didn’t do team things.

Her cat gave another meow, and again words seemed to form in her head as he did. ‘Of course I talk back, all the time. Only, you’ve been too stupid to know what I was saying. Except when I wanted to go out for certain reasons, or be fed, or have my head scratched, or be stroked.’ Then he blinked, and gave his back a quick lick. ‘Come to think of it,’ he added

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with a puzzled sound to the meow, ‘that just about covers what I used to be saying. I seem to have more, all of a sudden.’

‘It can’t be sunstroke, because that pool is indoors. I must have caught a fever, or something. I’m imagining things,’ said Regina, clutching her head again. This should have ruffled her hair, but didn’t.

The cat looked thoughtful. ‘No, that can’t be it,’ he mewed. ‘That wouldn’t affect me in any way. Of course, it might just be that I have cat ‘flu and *I’m* doing the imagining.’

‘Don’t you go stealing my imaginings; they’re *mine!*’ Regina exclaimed, glaring at him.

Tickle stuck his tongue far out in a rude way before licking himself vigorously. Then he paused, still canted over sideways. ‘I suppose it could be a spot of magic wafting around?’ he mused..

‘No such thing!’ declared Regina. ‘Nothing exists that cannot be tested scientifically. You’ll be talking of ghosts, next.’

All the cat’s hair suddenly stood on end, his tail fluffed out like a bottlebrush, and he stared at the wall - the one that had seemed fuzzy - ears back and fangs showing. ‘As...ss...sss a matter of fact...’ he hissed.

Regina swung to look. A vague figure of a man seemed to be taking shape in the shimmer. Her hair didn't stand on end – being as long as it was, it really would have had to work at it - but it felt that way.

Then the figure broke through, as if coming out of a bubble. All at once, a thin-featured man in high boots, tight leggings, and a brightly coloured blue jacket with silver buttons was standing in the room, while the surface instantly re-formed itself behind him. He staggered and stooped a bit, took a small stick out of his jacket, and waved it, muttering, 'Bad place, this! An all-purpose fixing spell may help.' What looked like a small tube of toothpaste appeared on the end of the stick. He snatched it off, removed the top, squeezed it, and smeared some of the contents onto his face and hands. Then he straightened, looking much better.

He may have looked better, but the way he looked at Regina could scarcely have been worse. He regarded her with the deepest disapproval from trainers to jeans to pullover top and back again, ignoring the fact that Regina had instantly gone into a slight crouch. As well as being brilliant, she was extremely fit, with lightning reactions, and good at sports – not team sports, of course. However, she was the school fencing and eventing champion, the inter-schools singles tennis

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champion for two age groups above her, the girl swimming champion in all strokes, and the County archery champion (all ages). She had been thrown out of the unarmed combat course for being too rough with the boys - the girls hadn't even been matched with her. She also excelled in all forms of gymnastics and athletics, and nobody could get within sight of her heels in cross-country running. She could even ski and skate well. There wasn't enough space for her trophies in her bedroom, large though it was, so her father had placed them in a special show-off room in their ancestral mansion.

Now, in her crouch, her hands were held just above waist level with one slightly in front of the other, fingers extended. Any one of the boys from Regina's previous unarmed combat course would have taken one look and fled, but the man merely sniffed, looking at her trainers again. 'Most improperly dressed, for a handmaiden,' he snapped, 'and a most unmaidenly posture. Now, where is your master?'

Astonished and insulted, Regina stood frozen. Being looked at as if she were mouldy cheese wasn't something she was used to. Of course, after being so brilliant at lessons and sports, being pretty as well would have been just *too* much. She wasn't. Nor was she plain, or ugly. Actually, she was completely stunning, with perfect features and complexion and

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large, striking amber eyes that flashed green when she was angry. On top of that (literally) she had thick, long blonde hair, which seldom developed the slightest tangle and even after swimming returned to gorgeously flattering waves and sweeps in no time. Even so, she had wanted to cut it, but that was about the only thing her mother and father really laid down the law about – and nobody, seeing that lovely mane, could blame them.

In fact, the only things that spoilt Regina from being the most utterly perfect girl imaginable were that she always tried to turn her naturally up-slanted lips down, her way of being pompous and ‘stuck-up’, as her schoolmates called her behaviour, and her habit of being rude to everybody in an exaggeratedly polite way. She refused to go to school as a boarder (which most people thought a pity, because it might have brought her down a peg or two) and was chauffeur-driven daily in one of the family’s Rolls Royce motorcars.

Regina may have been frozen by the man’s disapproval, but Tickle wasn’t. He fizzed and prepared to leap. The man suddenly caught sight of him, and staggered back looking as though something had just come through a bubble at *him*. ‘Stay your strange beast!’ he called urgently.

‘I’ll “strange beast” you, you fzzst!’ Tickle hissed furiously.

‘Take one step forward and I’ll... ’ His front end crouched, while his back end started to wobble from side to side in an ominous manner.

‘I mean no harm,’ said the man. ‘I am Court Magician to the War-king, and am come for your master on a matter of great urgency. I did not realise that you are a witch – you have not the look, in spite of your disgraceful apparel.’ He seemed to forget all about Tickle, who felt a bit ridiculous moving his behind to no good effect, so stopped. Reaching into his jacket again, the man now pulled out what looked like a large inchworm. Holding the wriggling creature, he advanced towards Regina in a casual manner, and placed it on the top of one extended hand, just behind the thumb.

The worm perched with front and rear ends clinging gently, while the back arched in a narrow, upside-down ‘U’, or like the ‘Omega’ in Greek lettering. Regina didn’t mind insects except the stinging kind, so she simply stared at it in astonishment. A faint glow appeared on the uppermost part, as if a little light were coming on there, and the man snatched the creature with a look of satisfaction and put it away. ‘So!’ he said. ‘The magitester-worm shows you have only slightly above-normal magic levels. Nowhere close to a witch. The beast must belong to your master. Inform him that I am present.’

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Like Tickle, Regina began to feel rather ridiculous. Her temper was still *UP* - so she straightened *up*, drew herself *up*, and looked *up* at the man with one of her best green glares before speaking *up*. 'I am Lady Regina-Valerie, daughter of Lord de Lancewoode,' she announced imperiously.

The Magician did not seem to be put down by her being so uppity. 'A lady of title, as befits one who is handmaiden to your master,' he responded smoothly, nodding a little. 'However, you forget your manners. As a gentleman and magician, I too am to be addressed as "Master", as you should know.'

'I call nobody master!' burst out Regina, her temper getting a booster-rocket.

'Then your master is far too lax with you. A good whipping or two would soon mend your insolent ways. But we waste time. Where is he?'

'Are all magicians batty?' Tickle yowled, 'or is it just you? What "master" are you dithering on about?'

The man swung on the cat, eyes flashing above his thin, hooked nose. 'You were not addressed. I suspect some strangeness here, with a beast such as this present. I trust no evil magic has brought our endeavours to naught! I am

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referring, of course, to the one who was summonsed to this place at this hour, to aid us at a time of great need. The Champion Knight, who will be able to assist us.’ He looked hard at Regina, and seemed to take note of her expression of complete bewilderment. His voice softened. ‘Come, let me have the Sword of the Test brought in, that you may know the import of the matter and will delay no further in calling the Champion to us.’

Abruptly, he swung round and vanished into the ‘bubble’ again, to reappear a few seconds later with four men behind him, in some sort of livery of a blue identical to that of his jacket. They staggered through carrying a normal-sized sword between them as if it were heavier than purest gold, and placed the sheathed weapon on the floor at the foot of the bed with a great deal of labour. Giving terrified looks at Tickle, they shuffled off the way they had come in what seemed meant to be a fast walk but made a rotten job of it.

By this time, Regina was convinced she was dreaming. ‘Never mind *curiouser*, it’s *peculiarer* and *peculiarer!*’ she giggled to herself. ‘Alice-in-Wonderland, you aren’t in the same league, dream-wise, so wake up! And, wow! - I hope I’ll remember all this when *I* do!’ As nothing was real, she thought she might as well enjoy herself. She looked at the

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sword with interest, stooped to lift it, and took it out of its beautifully embossed sheath. It was certainly heavier than the sabre she fenced with, and far more so than her foil or epee, but only as much as one would expect from a good fighting weapon. It was of a strange, liquid-silver metal, and the hilt and pommel were inlaid with magnificent small gemstones. She swished it through the air in a clear space near her dressing table. For all its length, it felt quite comfortable in her hand.

Then she noticed the expression of the Magician, which was now as if ten Ticks had leapt at him from all sides. He collected himself with an effort. 'What great Champion is this,' he breathed, 'that even his handmaiden can wield the Test blade!'

'What makes you think *she* isn't this Champion?' Tickle asked, looking a little nervously at the point Regina was waving about.

The look of horror returned. 'That could never be!' the man declared passionately. 'No maiden could ever take up arms in our Circle! It would be against Nature, against Custom, and against The Proper Order of Things. Women have their station in life, as do warrior knights, as do magicians, as do kings, and none must seek to fill the role of another. That a

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woman's station is lowly is not demeaning, for they are there to support their masters or husbands just as the knights and fighting gentlemen support their king.'

'It really doesn't sound as if Women's Lib has ever been anywhere near this Circle place,' Regina thought. 'It would be fun to stir things up a bit there – a pity the dream probably won't last long enough.'

The Magician was looking at her doubtfully. 'Perchance you have been to the Forest Magic Circle? That would explain matters, somewhat, if the banned *Epic of Baa* is to be believed,' he said.

'What Forest? What Epic? What is a Baa?' Regina asked in more bewilderment, using the hand that wasn't occupied with a sword to clutch her hair yet again in a way that should have messed it up completely, but for her created even better sweeps than before.

'Baa is a black lamb that defeated a great enemy in the Forest Circle,' explained the Magician. 'The Epic was banned in our Circle because of a ridiculous reference to a princess who, instead of remaining in a castle to do her duties as handmaiden to the hero, is said to have led some knights into battle in one of the great encounters.' He shuddered. 'Naturally, the work was banned forthwith.' Regina couldn't

imagine a lamb, black or otherwise, defeating anything much, and thought it was far more likely for a princess to be leading knights. She kept quiet, however.

‘But I see that such is not the explanation for your pretension in assuming manly garb,’ the Magician went on, and looked at her trainers again with considerable distaste. ‘Your customs here must be most unacceptable, and I can only trust that your master the Champion - doubtless your brother, as is quite usual? - will conform better. Now, call the Lord...de Lancewoode, I think you said?’

Regina thought quickly. She didn’t see much point in trying to convince him that *she* might actually be the Champion they were seeking in this surprising dream. ‘He is unavailable at present, Master Magician,’ she said meekly (she drew the line at ‘Master’, but thought that might do, and it was true her father was away that afternoon), ‘so perhaps you can explain what’s required so that I can tell him. He’ll want me with him, of course.’ Tickle stared in amazement. He had never heard her speak meekly in his life, and had no idea what ‘he’ she was referring to.

The Magician nodded approvingly. ‘You do remember your manners,’ he said. ‘That is good. Perchance it may be best if you accompany me to see for yourself, and then report to him.’

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Regina stepped forward in the direction of the bubble, but he held up a restraining hand, walked right up to her, and seemed to be checking which of his silver buttons was level with her neck. ‘Wait while I seek suitable apparel for you.’

Regina flung open the door to her walk-in wardrobe. ‘Won’t one of these do?’ she asked sweetly, indicating row after row of dresses and frocks, and tops, and skirts, and slacks, and shoes and sandals of all descriptions and colours. The man studied them closely, and then shook his head. ‘Terrible!’ he muttered, and turned towards the bubble. ‘I shall return shortly,’ he said, and in a second his ghost-like figure was fading on the far side.

Regina jumped up and down with excitement. ‘Isn’t this the most amazing dream,’ she said happily.

The cat stared at her with narrowed eyes. ‘Have you gone completely off your rather-overdone-but-gorgeous blonde head?’ – his meow had a growl in it. ‘This is no dream, but could very well turn into a nightmare, from all I’ve heard so far. What do you think you’re trying to do?’

‘Play along!’ laughed Regina. ‘I want to see where all this is taking us.’

‘What’s this “us” business?’ The cat’s growl was deeper, but his tone lacked conviction. She smiled at him. It was so

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pleasant, having someone to talk to that talked back. Tickle had always replied, of course, but not in actual words. Her parents always seemed to be away or busy, and she had no friends. Although most people promptly turned the shade of a healthy lettuce with envy every time they saw Regina, almost everyone tended to dislike her intensely. Nobody who knew her would ever have guessed that she was actually lonely and miserable.

This was mainly because the boys and girls she would have liked to be her friends seemed to be violently uncomfortable with her. She was just *too* good at everything and *too* beautiful. Also, she was rude and unapproachable. Some did try and toady up to her for reflected glory or out of snobbishness, but they weren't the sorts of people she wanted anything to do with, so she was especially rude to *them*.

She might have overcome her problems in getting along with others had she been able to show them her naturally merry and humorous disposition. The trouble was, she had been kept away from other children as a little girl, simply because her parents hadn't even thought of trying to arrange playmates for her. Both her mother and father were dears, but seemed to take life tremendously seriously. Regina had been expected to join them as an Honorary Adult at an early age.

By the time she met other children she was painfully shy, and seemed to be responding to their approaches of friendship with rudeness, so they were rude back.

Things had gone from bad to worse. She had wanted friends, but simply didn't know how to get them. To cover up her desperation, she had developed a habit of being politely insulting in a razorblades-in-honey way, and had started acting as though she didn't want anyone near her. In due course she even convinced herself that she didn't need anybody else, and that most people were beneath her. Her parents were proud of her self-sufficiency. They were even more proud when she turned her feelings of frustration into trying to do everything better than anyone else, and making an amazingly good job of it.

It was only a minute or so before the Magician returned, replacing his small wand in a pocket, and holding what seemed to be two long strips of blue cloth patterned in gold, and fastened together with a lot of straps. 'Not sure where I got this pair of dress-cloths from,' he said. 'Oh, gold. It must be one of the Princess's. Now, let's see...' and he held it against Regina, where it hung from below the shoulders to ankles. 'Just right,' he said, with satisfaction. 'Put it on, girl.'

Regina dived into her dressing room, got out of her clothes,

and wriggled her way into the garment. It hung from two shoulder straps, so that one strip of cloth was covering her in front and the other behind. Straps with adjustment holes were attached to the inside of the cloth at the back, extending from either side, and these met buckles extending from straps on the inside of the front. One set was under the arms, another at lower rib level, a wider strap was at the waist, and there were three more sets down the legs. The strips were not, apparently, meant to meet at the sides, or the owner of this pair of cloths was a lot thinner than Regina, because down either side of her the only covering was straps - still, it was a lot less daring than most evening dresses. She found that she could hardly walk with the leg straps done up, so she loosened them again. Then she slipped her feet into fashionable sandals with slightly high heels, and returned.

The Magician's gaze travelled from head to waist with some approval, and from waist to feet with great disapproval. 'Do all those straps up,' he snapped, 'and girls and women have no need of footwear.' He paused, and then said magnanimously, 'You may tighten the upper and waist straps no further than full breathe-in position, and may leave the leg straps at the outer adjustment, unless you displease me.'

'Why would anyone want to tighten them any further than

that?' Tickle asked, blinking at his strapped-in friend.

'As punishment for petty misdemeanours, of course,' the Magician replied. 'Even for some not so petty, actually. A good two or three notches on either side at the waist is often even more effective than a whipping. Stops overeating, too,' he added cheerfully.

Still meekly, but with a lot of green dancing in her eyes, Regina kicked off her sandals, fastened all the leg straps, took the deepest breath she could, and tightened the top ones until the garment fitted her exactly while her lungs were full. 'Whatever side he's on, I'm on the other one,' she whispered to Tickle, now standing on the dressing table next to her. She picked up the sheathed sword, tried to tuck it into the straps, gave up, and carried it.

Then the Magician beckoned, and the two followed him through the bubble wall, Regina taking rather ridiculously short, fast steps from having to keep her knees close together.

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