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CONJURING of LIGHT

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A NOVEL

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A CONJURING OF LIGHT

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About the Author Also by V.E. Schwab Also Available from Titan Books For the ones who've found their way home

Pure magic has no self. It simply is, a force of nature, the blood of our world, the marrow of our bones. We give it shape, but we must never give it soul.

MASTER TIEREN, head priest of the London Sanctuary



NS

Delilah Bard—always a thief, recently a magician, and one day, hopefully, a pirate—was running as fast as she could.

Hold on, Kell, she thought as she sprinted through the streets of Red London, still clutching the shard of stone that had once been part of Astrid Dane's mouth. A token stolen in another life, when magic and the idea of multiple worlds were new to her. When she had only just discovered that people could be possessed, or bound like rope, or turned to stone.

Fireworks thundered in the distance, met by cheers and chants and music, all the sounds of a city celebrating the end of the *Essen Tasch*, the tournament of magic. A city oblivious to the horror happening at its heart. And back at the palace, the prince of Arnes—Rhy—was dying, which meant that somewhere, a world away, so was Kell.

Kell. The name rang through her with all the force of an order, a plea.

Lila reached the road she was looking for and staggered to a stop, knife already out, blade pressing to the flesh of her hand. Her heart pounded as she turned her back on the chaos and pressed her bleeding palm—and the stone still curled within it—to the nearest wall.

Twice before Lila had made this journey, but always as a passenger.

Always using Kell's magic.

Never her own.

And never alone.

But there was no time to think, no time to be afraid, and certainly no time to wait.

Chest heaving and pulse high, Lila swallowed and said the words, as boldly as she could. Words that belonged only on the lips of a blood magician. An *Antari*. Like Holland. Like Kell. "As Travars."

The magic sang up her arm, and through her chest, and then the city lurched around her, gravity twisting as the world gave way.

Lila thought it would be easy or, at least, *simple*.

Something you either survived, or did not.

She was wrong.

とII ら

A world away, Holland was drowning.

He fought to the surface of his own mind, only to be forced back down into the dark water by a will as strong as iron. He fought, and clawed, and gasped for air, strength leaching out with every violent thrash, every desperate struggle. It was worse than dying, because dying gave way to death, and this did not.

There was no light. No air. No strength. It had all been taken, severed, leaving only darkness and, somewhere beyond the crush, a voice shouting his name.

Kell's voice—

Too far away.

Holland's grip faltered, slipped, and he was sinking again.

All he had ever wanted was to bring the magic back—to see his world spared from its slow, inexorable death—a death caused first by the fear of another London, and then by the fear of his own.

All Holland wanted was to see his world restored.

Revived.

He knew the legends—the dreams—of a magician powerful enough to do it. Strong enough to breathe air back into its starved lungs, to quicken its dying heart.

For as long as Holland could remember, that was all he'd wanted.

And for as long as Holland could remember, he had wanted the magician to be *him*.

Even before the darkness bloomed across his eye, branding him with the mark of power, he'd wanted it to be him. He'd stood on the banks of the Sijlt as a child, skating stones across the frozen surface, imagining that he would be the one to crack the ice. Stood in the Silver Wood as a grown man, praying for the strength to protect his home. He'd never wanted to be *king*, though in the stories the magician always was. He didn't want to rule the world. He only wanted to save it.

Athos Dane had called this arrogance, that first night, when Holland was dragged, bleeding and half conscious, into the new king's chambers. Arrogance and pride, he'd chided, as he carved his curse into Holland's skin.

Things to be broken.

And Athos had. He'd broken Holland one bone, one day, one order at a time. Until all Holland wanted, more than the ability to save his world, more than the strength to bring the magic back, more than *anything*, was for it to end.

It was cowardice, he knew, but cowardice came so much easier than hope.

And in that moment by the bridge, when Holland lowered his guard and let the spoiled princeling Kell drive the metal bar through his chest, the first thing he felt—the first and last and *only* thing he felt—was relief.

That it was finally over.

Only it wasn't.

It is a hard thing, to kill an Antari.

When Holland woke, lying in a dead garden, in a dead city, in a dead world, the first thing he felt then was pain. The second thing was freedom. Athos Dane's hold was gone, and Holland was alive—broken, but alive.

And stranded.

Trapped in a wounded body in a world with no door at the mercy of another king. But this time, he had a *choice*.

A chance to set things right.

He'd stood, half dead, before the onyx throne, and spoken to the king carved in stone, and traded freedom for a chance to save his London, to see it bloom again. Holland made the deal, paid with his own body and soul. And with the shadow king's power, he had finally brought the magic back, seen his world bloom into color, his people's hope revived, his city restored.

He'd done everything he could, given up everything he had, to keep it safe. But it still was not enough.

Not for the shadow king, who always wanted more, who grew stronger every day and craved chaos, magic in its truest form, power without control.

Holland was losing hold of the monster in his skin.

And so he'd done the only thing he could.

He'd offered Osaron another vessel.

"Very well ..." said the king, the demon, the god. "But if they cannot be persuaded, I will keep your body as my own."

And Holland agreed—how could he not?

Anything for London.

And Kell—spoiled, childish, headstrong Kell, broken and powerless and snared by that damned collar—had still refused.

Of course he had refused.

Of course—

The shadow king had smiled then, with Holland's own mouth, and he had fought, with everything he could summon, but a deal was a deal and the deal was done and he felt Osaron surge up—that single, violent motion—and Holland was shoved down, into the dark depths of his own mind, forced under by the current of the shadow king's will.

Helpless, trapped within a body, within a deal, unable to do anything but watch, and feel, and drown.

"Holland!"

Kell's voice cracked as he strained his broken body against the frame, the way *Holland* had once, when Athos Dane first bound him. Broke him. The cage leached away most of Kell's power; the collar around his throat cut off the rest. There was a terror in Kell's eyes, a desperation that surprised him.

"Holland, you bastard, fight back!"

He tried, but his body was no longer his, and his mind, his tired mind, was sinking down, down—

Give in, said the shadow king.

"Show me you're not weak!" Kell's voice pushed through. "Prove you're not still a slave to someone else's will!"

You cannot fight me.

"Did you really come all the way back to lose like this?"

I've already won.

"Holland!"

Holland hated Kell, and in that moment, the hatred was almost enough to drive him up, but even if he wanted to rise to the other *Antari*'s bait, Osaron was unyielding.

Holland heard his own voice, then, but of course it wasn't his. A twisted imitation by the monster wearing his skin. In Holland's hand, a crimson coin, a token to another London, Kell's London, and Kell was swearing and throwing himself against his bonds until his chest heaved and his wrists were bloody. Useless.

It was all useless.

Once again he was a prisoner in his own body. Kell's voice echoed through the dark.

You've just traded one master for another.

They were moving now, Osaron guiding Holland's body. The door closed behind them, but Kell's screams still hurled themselves against the wood, shattering into broken syllables and strangled cries.

Ojka stood in the hall, sharpening her knives. She looked up, revealing the crescent scar on one cheek, and her two-toned eyes, one yellow, the other black. An *Antari* forged by their hands—by their mercy.

"Your Majesty," she said, straightening.

Holland tried to rise up, tried to force his voice across their—*his*—lips, but when speech came, the words were Osaron's.

"Guard the door. Let no one pass."

A flicker of a smile across the red slash of Ojka's mouth. "As you wish."

The palace passed in a blur, and then they were outside, passing the statues of the Dane twins at the base of the stairs, moving swiftly beneath a bruised sky through a garden now flanked by trees instead of bodies.

What would become of it, without Osaron, without *him*? Would the city continue to flourish? Or would it collapse, like a body stripped of life?

Please, he begged silently. *This world needs me*.

"There is no point," said Osaron aloud, and Holland felt sick to be the thought in their head instead of the word. *"It is already dead,"* continued the king. *"We will start over. We will find a world worthy of our strength."*

They reached the garden wall and Osaron drew a dagger from the sheath at their waist. The bite of steel on flesh was nothing, as if Holland had been cut off from his very senses, buried too deep to feel anything but Osaron's grip. But as the shadow king's fingers streaked through the blood and lifted Kell's coin to the wall, Holland struggled up one last time.

He couldn't win back his body—not yet—not all of it—but perhaps he didn't need everything.

One hand. Five fingers.

He threw every ounce of strength, every shred of will, into that one limb, and halfway to the wall, it stopped, hovering in the air.

Blood trickled down his wrist. Holland knew the words to break a body, to turn it to ice, or ash, or stone.

All he had to do was guide his hand to his own chest.

All he had to do was shape the magic-

Holland could feel the annoyance ripple through Osaron. Annoyance, but not rage, as if this last stand, this great protest, was nothing but an itch.

How tedious.

Holland kept fighting, even managed to guide his hand an inch, two.

Let go, Holland, warned the creature in his head.

Holland forced the last of his will into his hand, dragging it another inch. Osaron sighed.

It did not have to be this way.

Osaron's will hit him like a wall. His body didn't move, but his mind slammed backward, pinned beneath a crushing pain. Not the pain he'd felt a hundred times, the kind he'd learned to exist beyond, outside, the kind he might escape. This pain was rooted in his very core. It lit him up, sudden and bright, every nerve burning with such searing heat that he screamed and screamed and screamed inside his head, until the darkness finally mercifully—closed over him, forcing him under and down.

And this time, Holland didn't try to surface.

This time, he let himself drown.

CIIIS

Kell kept throwing himself against the metal cage long after the door slammed shut and the bolt slid home. His voice still echoed against the pale stone walls. He had screamed himself hoarse. But still, no one came. Fear pounded through him, but what scared Kell most was the loosening in his chest—the unhinging of a vital link, the spreading sense of loss.

He could hardly feel his brother's pulse.

Could hardly feel anything but the pain in his wrists and a horrible numbing cold. He twisted against the metal frame, fighting the restraints, but they held fast. Spell work was scrawled down the sides of the contraption, and despite the quantity of Kell's blood smeared on the steel, there was the collar circling his throat, cutting off everything he needed. Everything he had. Everything he *was*. The collar cast a shadow over his mind, an icy film over his thoughts, cold dread and sorrow and, through it all, an absence of hope. Of strength. *Give up*, it whispered through his blood.

You have nothing. You are nothing. Powerless.

He'd never been powerless. He didn't know how to be powerless. Panic rose in place of magic. He had to get out. Out of this cage. Out of this collar. Out of this world. Rhy had carved a word into his own

Rhy had carved a word into his own skin to bring Kell home, and he'd turned around and left again. Abandoned the prince, the crown, the city. Followed a woman in white through a door in the world because she told him he was needed, told him he could help, told him it was his fault, that he had to make it right.