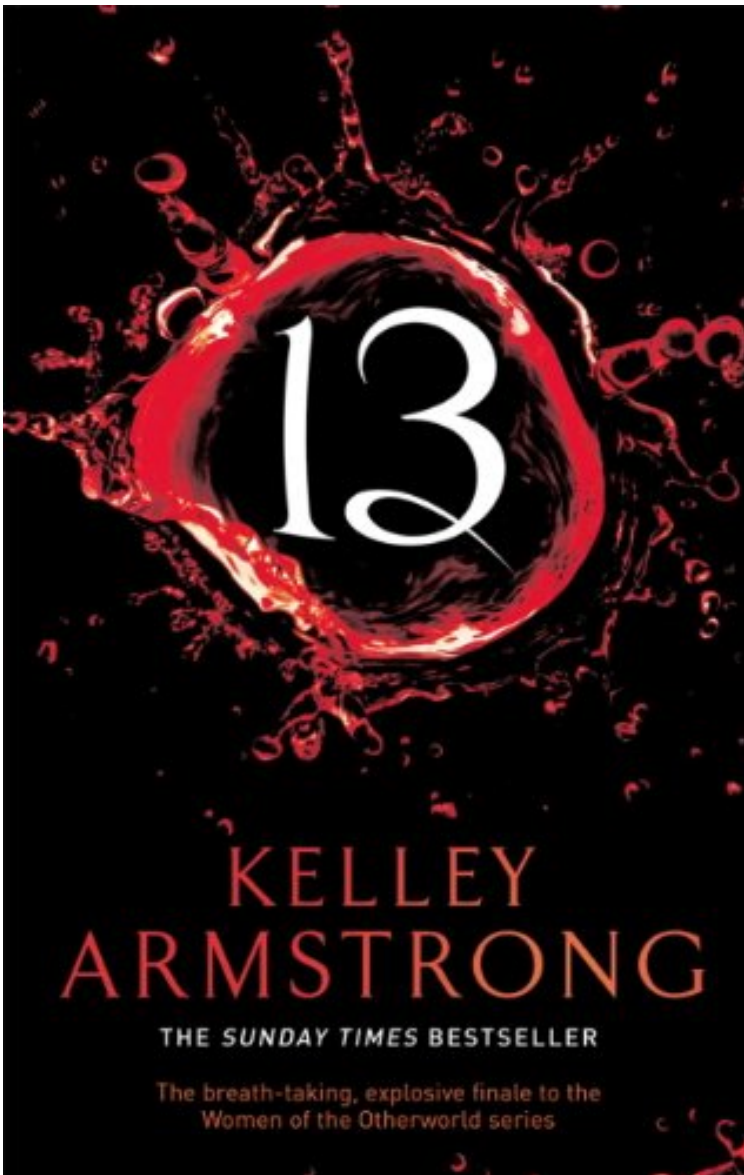


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13: Number 13 in series



Par Kelley Armstrong
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur13. The breath-taking, explosive finale to the Women of the Otherworld series War is coming to the Otherworld. A sinister cult known as The Supernatural Liberation Movement is hell-bent on exposing the truth about supernaturals to the rest of the world. Their violent, ruthless plan has put everyone at risk: from werewolves to vampires, from witches to half-demons. Savannah Levine - fiery and unpredictable - stands at the heart of the maelstrom. There is a new, dark magic inside her, granting her the power to summon spells of terrifying strength. But whether this magic is a gift or a curse, no one knows. On the eve of battle, all the major players must come together in a last, desperate fight for survival - Elena and Clay; Adam and Savannah; Paige and Lucas; Jeremy and Jaime; Hope, Eve and more... They are fighting for

their lives. They are fighting for their loved ones. They are fighting for the Otherworld. I have to. I've been fighting it all night. I'm going to lose. My battle is as futile as a woman feeling the first pangs of labor and deciding it's an inconvenient time to give birth. Nature wins out. It always does. It's nearly two a.m., too late for this foolishness, and I need my sleep. Four nights spent cramming to meet a deadline have left me exhausted. It doesn't matter. Patches of skin behind my knees and elbows have been tingling and now begin to burn. My heart beats so fast I have to gulp air. I clench my eyes shut, willing the sensations to stop, but they don't. Philip is sleeping beside me. He's another reason why I shouldn't leave, sneaking out in the middle of the night again and returning with a torrent of lame excuses. He's working late tomorrow. If I can just wait one more day. My temples begin to throb. The burning sensation in my skin spreads down my arms and legs. The rage forms a tight ball in my gut and threatens to explode. I've got to get out of here. I don't have a lot of time left. Philip doesn't stir when I slip from the bed. There's a pile of clothing tucked underneath my dresser so I won't risk the squeaks and groans of opening drawers and closets. I pick up my keys, clasp my fist around them so they don't jangle, ease open the door, and creep into the hallway. Everything's quiet. The lights seem dimmed, as if overpowered by the emptiness. When I push the elevator button, it creaks out a complaint at being disturbed at so ungodly an hour. The first floor and lobby are equally empty. People who can afford the rent this close to downtown Toronto are comfortably asleep by this time. My legs itch as well as hurt and I curl my toes to see if the itching stops. It doesn't. I look down at the car keys in my hand. It's too late to drive to a safe place. The itching has crystallized into a sharp burn. Keys in my pocket, I stride onto the streets, looking for a quiet place to Change. As I walk, I monitor the sensation in my legs, tracing its passage to my arms and the back of my neck. Soon. Soon. When my scalp starts to tingle, I know I have walked as far as I can, so I search for an alley. The first one I find has been claimed by two men squeezed together inside a tattered big-screen TV box. The next alley is empty. I hurry to the end and undress quickly behind a barricade of trash bins, hide the clothes under an old newspaper. Then I start the Change. My skin stretches. The sensation deepens and I try to block the pain. Pain. What a trivial word. agony is better. One doesn't call the sensation of being flayed alive painful. I inhale deeply and focus my attention on the Change, dropping to the ground before I'm doubled over and forced down. It's never easy. Perhaps I'm still too human. In the struggle to keep my thoughts straight, I try to anticipate each phase and move my body into position. Head down, on all fours, arms and legs straight, feet and hands flexed, and back arched. My leg muscles knot and convulse. I gasp and strain to relax. Sweat breaks out, pouring off me in streams, but the muscles finally relent and untwist themselves. Next comes the ten seconds of hell that used to make me swear I'd rather die than endure this again. Then it's over. Changed. I stretch and blink. When I look around, the world has mutated to an array of colors unknown to the human eye, blacks and browns and grays with subtle shadings that my brain still converts to blues and greens and reds. I lift my nose and inhale. With the Change, my already keen senses sharpen even more. I pick up scents of fresh asphalt and rotting tomatoes and window-pot mums and day-old sweat and a million other things, mixing together in an odor so overwhelming I cough and shake my head. As I turn, I catch distorted fragments of my reflection in a dented trash can. My eyes stare back at me. I curl my lips back and snarl at myself. White fangs flash in the metal. I am a wolf, a 130-pound wolf with pale blond fur. The only part of me that remains are my eyes, sparking with a cold intelligence and a simmering ferocity that could never be mistaken for anything but human. I look around, inhaling the scents of the city again. I'm nervous here. It's too close, too confined; it reeks of human spoor. I must be careful. If I'm seen, I'll be mistaken for a dog, a large mixed breed, perhaps a husky and yellow Labrador mix. But even a dog my size is cause for alarm when it's running loose. I head for the back of the laneway and seek a path through the underbelly of the city. My brain is dulled, disoriented not by my change of form but by the unnaturalness of my surroundings. I can't get my bearings, and the first alley I go down turns out to be the one I'd encountered in human form, the one with the two men in the faded Sony box. One of them is awake now. He's tugging the remnants of a filth-encrusted blanket between his fingers as if he can stretch it large enough to cover himself against the cold October night. He looks up and sees me. His eyes widen. He starts to shrink back, then stops himself. He says something. His voice is crooning, the musical, exaggerated tones people use with infants and animals. If I concentrated, I could make out the words, but there's no point. I know what he's saying, some variation of nice doggy, repeated over and over in a variety of inflections. His hands are outstretched, palms out to ward me off, the physical language contradicting the vocal. Stay back nice doggy stay back. And people wonder why animals don't understand them. I can smell the neglect and waste rising from his body. It smells like weakness, like an aged deer driven to the fringe of the herd, prime pickings for predators. If I were hungry, he'd smell like dinner. Fortunately, I'm not hungry.

yet, so I don't have to deal with the temptation, the conflict, the revulsion. I snort, condensation trumpeting from my nostrils, then turn and lope back up the alley. Ahead is a Vietnamese restaurant. The smell of food is embedded in the very wood frame of the building. On a rear addition, an exhaust fan turns slowly, clicking with each revolution as one blade catches the metal screen casing. Below the fan a window is open. Faded sunflower-print curtains billow out in the night breeze. I can hear people inside, a room full of people, grunting and whistling in sleep. I want to see them. I want to stick my muzzle in the open window and look inside. A werewolf can have a lot of fun with a room full of unprotected people. I start to creep forward, but a sudden crackle and hiss stops me. The hiss softens, then is drowned out by a man's voice, sharp, his words snapped off like icicles. I turn my head each way, radar searching for the source. He's farther down the street.

I abandon the restaurant and go to him. We are curious by nature. He's standing in a three-car parking lot wedged at the end of a narrow passage between buildings. He holds a walkie-talkie to his ear and leans one elbow against a brick wall, casual but not resting. His shoulders are relaxed. His gaze goes nowhere. He is confident in his place, that he has a right to be here and little to fear from the night. The gun dangling from his belt probably helps. He stops talking, jabs a button, and slams the walkie talkie into its holster. His eyes scan the parking lot once, taking inventory and seeing nothing requiring his attention. Then he heads deeper into the alley maze. This could be amusing. I follow. My nails click against the pavement. He doesn't notice. I

pick up speed, darting around trash bags and empty boxes. Finally, I'm close enough. He hears the steady clicking behind him and stops. I duck behind a Dumpster, peer around the corner. He turns and squints into the darkness. After a second he starts forward. I let him get a few steps away, then resume the pursuit. This time when he stops, I wait one extra second before diving for cover. He lets out a muffled oath. He's seen something—a flash of motion, a shadow flickering, something. His right hand slips to his gun, caressing the metal, then pulling back, as if the reassurance is enough. He hesitates, then looks up and down the alley, realizing he is alone and uncertain what to do about it. He mutters something, then continues walking,

quicker this time. As he walks, his eyes flick from side to side, wariness treading the border of alarm. I inhale deeply, picking up only wisps of fear, enough to make my heart pound but not enough to send my brain spinning out of control. He's safe quarry for a stalking game. He won't run. I can suppress most of my instincts. I can stalk him without killing him. I can suffer the first pangs of hunger without killing him. I can watch him pull his gun without killing him. Yet if he runs, I won't be able to stop myself. That's a temptation I can't fight. If he runs, I will chase. If I chase, either he'll kill me or I'll kill him. As he turns the corner down a

connecting alley, he relaxes. All has been silent behind him. I creep from my hiding place, shifting my weight to the back of my foot pads to muffle the sound of my nails. Soon I am only a few feet behind him. I can smell his aftershave, almost masking the natural scent of a long day's work. I can see his white socks appearing and disappearing between his shoes and pant legs. I can hear his breathing, the slight elevation in tempo betraying the fact that he's walking faster than usual. I ease forward, coming close enough that I could lunge if I want to and knock him to the ground before he even thought to reach for his gun. His head jerks up. He knows I'm there. He knows something is there. I wonder if he will turn. Does he dare to look, to face something he can't see or hear, but can only sense? His hand slides to his gun, but he doesn't turn. He walks faster. Then he swings back to the safety of the street. I follow him to the end and observe from the darkness. He strides forward, keys in hand, to a parked cruiser, unlocks it, and hops inside. The car roars and squeals from the curb. I watch the receding taillights and sigh. Game over. I won. That was nice, but it wasn't nearly

enough to satisfy me. These city backstreets are too confining. My heart is thudding with unspent excitement. My legs are aching with built-up energy. I must run. A wind gusts from the south, bringing the sharp tang of Lake Ontario with it. I think of heading to the beach, imagine running along the stretch of sand, feeling the icy water slapping against my paws, but it's not safe. If I want to run, I must go to the ravine. It's a long way, but I have little choice unless I plan to skulk around human-smelling alleyways for the rest of the night. I swing to the northwest and begin the journey. Nearly a half hour later, I'm standing at the crest of a hill. My nose twitches, picking up the vestiges of an illegal leaf fire smoldering in a nearby yard.

The wind bristles through my fur, chill, nearly cold, invigorating. Above me, traffic thunders across the overpass. Below is sanctuary, a perfect oasis in the middle of the city. I leap forward, throwing myself off. At last I'm running. My legs pick up the rhythm before I'm halfway down the ravine. I close my eyes for a second and feel the wind slice across my muzzle. As my paws thump against the hard earth, tiny darts of pain shoot up my legs, but they make me feel alive, like jolting awake after an overlong sleep. The muscles contract and extend in perfect harmony. With each stretch comes an ache and a burst of physical joy. My body is thanking me for the exercise, rewarding me with jolts of near-narcotic adrenaline. The more I run,

the lighter I feel, the pain falling free as if my paws are no longer striking the ground. Even as I race along the bottom of the ravine, I feel like I'm still running downhill, gaining energy instead of expending it. I want to run until all the tension in my body flies away, leaving nothing but the sensations of the moment. I couldn't stop if I wanted to. And I don't want to. Dead leaves crackle under my paws. Somewhere in the forest an owl hoots softly. It has finished its hunting and rests contented, not caring who knows it's around. A rabbit bolts out of a thicket and halfway across my path, then realizes its mistake and zooms back into the undergrowth. I keep running. My heart pounds. Against my rising body heat, the air feels ice-cold, stinging as it storms through my nostrils and into my lungs. I inhale, savoring the shock of it hitting my insides. I'm running too fast to smell anything. Bits of scents flutter through my brain in a jumbled montage that smells of freedom. Unable to resist, I finally skid to a halt, throw my head back, and howl. The music pours up from my chest in a tangible evocation of pure joy. It echoes through the ravine and soars to the moonless sky, letting them all know I'm here. I own this place! When I'm done, I drop my head, panting with exertion. I'm standing there, staring down into a scattering of yellow and red maple leaves, when a sound pierces my self-absorption. It's a growl, a soft, menacing growl. There's a pretender to my throne. I look up to see a brownish yellow dog standing a few meters away. No, not a dog. My brain takes a second, but it finally recognizes the animal. A coyote. The recognition takes a second because it's unexpected. I've heard there are coyotes in the city, but have never encountered one. The coyote is equally confused. Animals don't know what to make of me. They smell human but see wolf and, just when they decide their nose is tricking them, they look into my eyes and see human. When I encounter dogs, they either attack or turn tail and run. The coyote does neither. It lifts its muzzle and sniffs the air, then bristles and pulls its lips back in a drawn-out growl. It's half my size, scarcely worth my notice. I let it know this with a lazy get lost growl and a shake of my head. The coyote doesn't move. I stare at it. The coyote breaks the gaze-lock first. I snort, toss my head again, and slowly turn away. I'm halfway turned when a flash of brown fur leaps at my shoulder. Diving to the side, I roll out of the way, then scramble to my feet. The coyote snarls. I give a serious growl, a canine now you're pissing me off. The coyote stands its ground. It wants a fight. Good. My fur rises on end, my tail bushing out behind me. I lower my head between my shoulder bones and lay my ears flat. My lips pull back and I feel the snarl tickling up through my throat, then reverberating into the night. The coyote doesn't back down. I crouch and I'm about to lunge when something hits me hard in the shoulder, throwing me off balance. I stumble, then twist to face my attacker. A second coyote, gray-brown, hangs from my shoulder, fangs sunk to the bone. With a roar of rage and pain, I buck up and throw my weight to the side. As the second coyote flies free, the first launches itself at my face. Ducking my head, I catch it in the throat, but my teeth clamp down on fur instead of flesh and it squirms away. It tries to back off for a second lunge, but I leap at it, backing it into a tree. It rears up, trying to get out of my way. I slash for its throat. This time I get my grip. Blood spurts in my mouth, salty and thick. The coyote's mate lands on my back. My legs buckle. Teeth sink into the loose skin beneath my skull. Fresh pain arcs through me. Concentrating hard, I keep my grip on the first coyote's throat. I steady myself, then release it for a split second, just long enough to make the fatal slash and tear. As I pull back, blood sprays into my eyes, blinding me. I swing my head hard, ripping out the coyote's throat. Once I feel it go limp, I toss it aside, then throw myself on the ground and roll over. The coyote on my back yips in surprise and releases its hold. I jump up and turn in the same motion, ready to take this other animal out of the game, but it scrambles up and dives into the brush. With a flash of wire-brush tail, it's gone. I look at the dead coyote. Blood streams from its throat, eagerly lapped up by the dry earth below. A tremor runs through me, like the final shudder of sated lust. I close my eyes and shiver. Not my fault. They attacked me first. The ravine has gone quiet, echoing the calm that floods through me. Not so much as a cricket chirps. The world is dark and silent and sleeping. I try to examine and clean my wounds, but they are out of reach. I stretch and assess the pain. Two deep cuts, both bleeding only enough to mat my fur. I'll live. I turn and start the trip out of the ravine. In the alley I change, then yank my clothes on and scurry to the sidewalk like a junkie caught shooting up in the shadows. Frustration fills me. It shouldn't end like this, dirty and furtive, amidst the garbage and filth of the city. It should end in a clearing in the forest, clothes abandoned in some thicket, stretched out naked, feeling the coolness of the earth beneath me and the night breeze tickling my bare skin. I should be falling asleep in the grass, exhausted beyond all thought, with only the miasma of contentedness floating through my mind. And I shouldn't be alone. In my mind, I can see the others, lying around me in the grass. I can hear the familiar snores, the occasional whisper and laugh. I can feel warm skin against mine, a bare foot hooked over my calf, twitching in a dream of running. I can smell them: their sweat, their breath, mingling with the scent of blood, smears from a deer

killed in the chase. The image shatters and I am staring into a shop window, seeing nothing but myself reflected back. My chest tightens in a loneliness so deep and so complete I can't breathe. I turn quickly and lash out at the nearest object. A streetlamp quavers and rings with the blow. Pain sears down my arm. Welcome to reality-changing in alleyways and creeping back to my apartment. I am cursed to live between worlds. On the one side, there is normalcy. On the other, there is a place where I can be what I am with no fear of reprisals, where I can commit murder itself and scarcely raise the eyebrows of those around me, where I am even encouraged to do so to protect the sanctity of that world. But I left and I can't return. I won't return. As I walk to the apartment, my anger blisters the pavement with every step. A woman curled up under a pile of dirty blankets peers out as I pass and instinctively shrinks back into her nest. As I round the corner, two men step out and size up my prospects as prey. I resist the urge to snarl at them, but just barely. I walk faster and they seem to decide I'm not worth chasing. I shouldn't be here. I should be home in bed, not prowling downtown Toronto at four a.m. A normal woman wouldn't be here. It's yet another reminder that I'm not normal. Not normal. I look down the darkened street and I can read a billet on a telephone post fifty feet off. Not normal. I catch a whiff of fresh bread from a bakery starting production miles away. Not normal. I stop by a storefront, grab a bar over the windows, and flex my biceps. The metal groans in my hand. Not normal. Not normal. I chant the words in my head, flagellating myself with them. The anger only grows. Outside my apartment door, I stop and inhale deeply. I mustn't wake Philip. And if I do, I mustn't let him see me like this. I don't need a mirror to know what I look like: skin taut, color high, eyes incandescent with the rage that always seems to follow a Change now. Definitely not normal. When I finally enter the apartment, I hear his measured breathing from the bedroom. Still asleep. I'm nearly to the bathroom when his breathing catches. Elena? His voice is a sleep-stuffed croak. Just going to the washroom. I try to slip past the doorway, but he's sitting up, peering nearsightedly at me. He frowns. Fully dressed? he says. I went out. A moment of silence. He runs a hand through his dark hair and sighs. It's not safe. Damn it, Elena. We've discussed this. Wake me up and I'll go with you. I need to be alone. To think. It's not safe. I know. I'm sorry. I creep into the bathroom, spending longer than necessary. I pretend to use the toilet, wash my hands with enough water to fill a Jacuzzi, then find a fingernail that needs elaborate filing attention. When I finally decide Philip has fallen back asleep, I head for the bedroom. The bedside lamp is on. He's propped on his pillow, glasses in place. I hesitate in the doorway. I can't bring myself to cross the threshold, to go and crawl into bed with him. I hate myself for it, but I can't do it. The memory of the night lingers and I feel out of place here. When I don't move, Philip shifts his legs over the side of the bed and sits up. I didn't mean to snap, he says. I worry. I know you need your freedom and I'm trying. He stops and rubs his hand across his mouth. His words slice through me. I know he doesn't mean them as a reprimand, but they are a reminder that I'm screwing this up, that I'm fortunate to have found someone as patient and understanding as Philip, but I'm wearing through that patience at breakneck speed and all I seem capable of doing is standing back and waiting for the final crash. I know you need your freedom, he says again. But there has to be some other way. Maybe you could go out in the morning, early. If you prefer night, we could drive down to the lake. You could walk around. I could sit in the car and keep an eye on you. Maybe I could walk with you. Stay twenty paces behind or something. He manages a wry smile. Or maybe not. I'd probably get picked up by the cops, the middle-aged guy stalking the beautiful young blonde. He pauses, then leans forward. That's your cue, Elena. You're supposed to remind me that forty-one is far from middle-aged. We'll work something out, I say. We can't, of course. I have to run under the cover of night and I have to do it alone. There is no compromise. As he sits on the edge of the bed, watching me, I know we're doomed. My only hope is to make this relationship so otherwise perfect that Philip might come to overlook our one insurmountable problem. To do that, my first step should be to go to him, crawl in bed, kiss him, and tell him I love him. But I can't. Not tonight. Tonight I'm something else, something he doesn't know and couldn't understand. I don't want to go to him like this. I'm not tired, I say. I might as well stay up. Do you want breakfast? He looks at me. Something in his expression falters and I know I've failed again. But he doesn't say anything. He pulls his smile back in place. Let's go out. Someplace in this city has to be open this early. We'll drive around until we find it. Drink five cups of coffee and watch the sun come up. Okay? I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Shower first? he says. Or flip for it? You go ahead. He kisses my cheek as he passes. I wait until I hear the shower running, then head for the kitchen. Sometimes I get so hungry. prologue Typical guy. You fight through hell literally, hacking through legions of beasts and zombies and demon-spawn to sneak home and spend a few stolen minutes with him . . . and he's not there. Eve grumbled as she paced around the tiny houseboat, multihued blood dripping from her sword. Where the hell are you, Kris? Her angel partner, Trisiel,

couldnt cover for her much longer, and shed really wanted to check in with Kristof. Hed been keeping an eye on the living world for her, watching as his sons and their daughter got caught up in this mess. There really wasnt much a ghostly father could do to help, but the check-ins made them both feel better. He wasnt at the houseboat, though. Nor was he at the courthouse. Eve had gone there to find the justice building shut down. The guard on duty had muttered something about magical wards needing repair, just regular maintenance.

Which was bullshit. Afterlife court was closed because the higher powers were racing around commandeering forces to put out fires both on earth and in the afterlife. But they werent telling the shades that their world was on the brink of war. No, that wouldnt do at all. Just pretend everything is fine. And if you see a monstrous beast racing down Main Street, it most certainly is not a hellhound that escaped its dimension. Er, but you should probably notify demon control anyway. Eve walked into the bedroom and looked around. Their bed was made, the sheets drawn drum tight. Kristof had grown up with maids and cooks and housekeepers, and though hed happily shed all those trappings after his death, he kept his world here just as neat and orderly as if he still had staff. Eve wiped her sword on the gazillion-count Egyptian cotton sheets. For a moment, they were smeared with a satisfying rainbow of blood. Then it evaporated into the white cotton. She sighed and sheathed her sword. Fine, Ill leave a proper note. She conjured paper and a pen. Dear Kris, Heaven and hell are being torn asunder as angels and demons battle themselves and each other. In the living world, supernaturals continue to barrel toward a war between those who want to reveal themselves to humans and those who know such a revelation will destroy all we hold dear. The veil between the realms grows thinner with each passing moment as we plummet toward catastrophe. Hope all is well with you. Hugs and kisses, Eve. Shed just finished when she heard a patter behind her and wheeled to see . . . nothing. Another patter sounded on the polished hardwood floor and she looked down to see a white rabbit. It rose on its hind legs. Eve Levine, the rabbit squeaked. Mighty daughter of Balaam, lord of darkness and chaos. I prostrate myself before you. The rabbit attempted to bow gracefully, but its body wouldnt quite complete the maneuver and it flopped onto its belly. When it looked up at her, its pink eyes glowed with an unearthly light. Eve concentrated hard and a second shape superimposed itself on the rabbit, that of a toadlike lump with jutting fangs and eyes on quivering stalks. She blinked and the bunny reappeared. Nice choice of form, imp, she said. I considered a kitten, but that seemed unwise when meeting a dark witch. Witches dont kill cats. Especially not witches whove been recruited to angelhood. She grasped her sword and lifted it. Rabbits, however? Rodents. Vermin. Nothing in the manual against that. The rabbit backed up. Please, my lady. Balaam has a legion of imps scouring every dimension for you. He is most eager to speak to you. Is he? And what could my lord demon father want from me? She gasped in feigned surprise. Wait . . . Does it have something to do with this big reveal Ive been hearing about? Yes, yes! The rabbit thumped a back leg with excitement. You have heard of the glorious plan, then? After centuries of hiding, supernaturals have finally found the willpower to reveal themselves and take their rightful place as rulers of the human world. About time. The rabbit leaped up. I knew you would agree. You will help your father, yes? You will join the fight here and you will persuade your earthbound daughter to do the same. Savannah? Eve tried to keep her voice calm. Of course. She is a mighty spellcaster. Mighty indeed. And very well connected in the supernatural world. Lord Balaam has approached her himself, but she has refused his generous offer. Balaam went near my Eve stopped short as her sword glowed blue, infused with her fury. But the rabbit-imp didnt seem to notice. She took a deep, steadying breath. Foolish girl. Of course Ill speak to her. She listens to her mother. First, though, youll need to tell me everything you know about my fathers plans so I can properly explain them to her. The rabbit told her everything and she thanked it most graciously . . . then lopped off its head, which flew into the hall at the very moment the houseboat door opened. A tall, broad-shouldered figure filled the doorway. As Kristof Nast stepped in, the rabbits head bounced off his polished Italian loafers. Eve? he said, peering at his feet as she walked into the main cabin. Then he saw her and smiled. If there are decapitated rabbit heads flying, theres only one explanation. Eve is back. He stopped as he saw her expression. Whats wrong? Its Savannah, she said. Shes in trouble. Well, bigger trouble. We need to. Light flashed. Kristof disappeared. The houseboat evaporated and Eve found herself in another dimension, surrounded by misshapen beasts, Trsiel at her side, her sword still in hand. Oh, hell, she muttered as the beasts charged. one lled my half brother Bryce away from the rubble of the exploded lab, ignoring his protests, and ignoring Adam, who was sticking close and wincing every time Bryce coughed. I couldnt blame Adam for worrying. The Supernatural Liberation Movement had injected Bryce with something called a vaccine against mortality, which sounded lovely, until you figured out that meant it contained DNA from vampires, zombies, and god only knows what other creatures the gang had rounded up

for their experiments. So I really didn't want to catch whatever Bryce had either. Before we'd escaped, the woman who'd injected him had suggested it was transmittable. I had to trust they weren't crazy enough to make it easily transmittable. And if they were? Well, then, I was already screwed. The only way out of the lab had been to drop into a pit of water connected to an underground sewer. Bryce was so weak he'd almost drowned and I'd had to help him. I'd stopped short of giving him mouth-to-mouth when he woke on his own, but we'd had plenty of contact. So I could be infected. But that was a concern for later. Right now, I was just happy to have survived, especially when the whole place had come down on our heads as the liberation movement blew up their own lab. I'd never been so glad to be tramping wet, smelly and dirty down a New Orleans alleyway. Or to see Jeremy Danvers, the werewolf Alpha, or Jaime Vegas, his necromancer girlfriend. Or Adam. Most of all Adam. Bryce might be my half brother, but I've known Adam since I was twelve. Bryce? Well, let's just say we aren't close. Well, turn onto the road up here, Jeremy said. He was scouting the way, limping from the blast. We should be far enough from here. He stopped and tilted his head, werewolf hearing picking up something we couldn't. When he frowned, Adam moved up beside him and whispered, Trouble? I can hear a police radio. They're looking for two men and a woman seen leaving the blast site. Two guys covered in dust and bruises? Adam said. And a girl who looks like she went swimming in a sewer? Jeremy nodded. I looked down at my soaked clothing. The only unscathed one was Jaime, who'd been blocks away when the building went up. Jeremy said, Anita Barrington set off an alarm, meaning there will be members of the reveal movement looking for all of us. You're going to need to hole up until Jaime finds us clean clothing. I'll go with her while she does. I'll be Jaime began, then cut herself short. As a necromancer, she had no innate defensive skills. As a forty-seven-year-old on the celebrity circuit, she didn't have any acquired ones either: All she usually had to deal with were hecklers. I need backup, but I don't think it should be you, she finally said to Jeremy. Bryce needs a guard with superhearing and superstrength. I just need someone to watch my back. Savannah can do that. She isn't battered and bruised. Her jeans are black and won't look wet from a distance. Jaime gave me her jacket, a cute leather one that we'd bought on a trip to Milan. It was a little short, she's five-five and I'm nearly seven inches taller, so on me it looked fashionably cropped. With the help of her brush and scarf, we tied my wet hair back and I stopped looking like a drowned rat, even if my sneakers sloshed with every step. We found the guys a quiet spot to wait. Then we set off. The Supernatural Liberation Movement. I gave them a vowel and called them SLAM. Their mission was to reveal the existence of supernaturals to the human world. There was a very good reason we hadn't done this already because it was stupid. Every time the world found out about us, heads rolled, our heads. Even if we could argue that this wasn't the Middle Ages anymore, we weren't just different in gender, skin color, religion, sexual orientation, or any other equality issue. We had powers. Often deadly powers that gave us an advantage over humans. You can bet your ass we wouldn't be welcomed with open arms . . . except maybe by military research facilities. So why was this movement gaining traction? First, the majority of supernaturals are not as tuned in to our world as I am. Through the Cabals and my connection to the interracial council, I had the advantage of seeing things from a global and historical perspective. Second, there are a lot of disaffected supernaturals out there, especially young ones who don't understand why the hell they shouldn't flaunt their abilities. For most of my twenty-one years, I'd have agreed with them. I had power, so I used it. All these young supernaturals needed was a man with a plan. And they found him in Giles Reyes, a charismatic leader who'd convinced them that a bunch of unusual events in our world, including me, a sorcerer/witch hybrid, fulfilled some kind of prophecy that declared it was time for the big reveal. It didn't hurt that Giles claimed he was really a fifteenth-century French nobleman who'd stumbled on immortality and had, after centuries of experimentation, found a way to grant it to all his followers. That was the vaccine he'd given Bryce. I thought of my brother, who was ready to keel over. Apparently it hadn't quite been perfected yet. Now, because of us, Giles's vaccine had been destroyed before it could be perfected. He was going to be pissed. I really wished I could stay to see that, but we had places to go, things to do, a world to save. When police cars zipped past, sirens wailing, Jaime caught my arm and gestured wildly, laughing, as if sharing a juicy bit of gossip. We were nearly to the commercial district when a police cruiser whipped around the corner, cut us off, and slammed on the brakes. Play it cool, Jaime whispered. I hadn't planned to do anything else. Hey, guys, Jaime said as the officer, a slender, middle-aged woman and a stocky young patrolman climbed out of the car. We heard the sirens. What's going on? A bomb was detonated a few blocks over. Seriously? Jaime's eyes rounded as she scanned the rooftops. Where? I have a blog, and if I could get photos, that would be um, bomb, Jaime? I cut in. Normal people run the other way. Because normal people don't have a Twitter feed with a hundred thousand followers. She took out her

cell phone and propped up her shades. Do you know the address? I can foursquare it now, then tweet photos after we get there. We are not going to a bomb site we are going to your interview. I turned to the officers, mouthed, Hollywood, and rolled my eyes. Can we see some identification? the woman asked. Absolutely, Jaime chirped, then giggled. But the date of birth is between us, right? Gotta say this Jaime has the ditzy C-lister routine down pat. The male officer seemed ready to hop back into the car, but his partner insisted on the ID. Jaime showed her cards and offered to send autographed eight-by-tens. She explained who she was Jaime Vegas, renowned spiritualist, as formerly seen on The Keni Bales Show and more. The male cop said he'd heard of her and that his sister-in-law would love a signed photo. That's . . . an interesting way of making a living, said the female officer Medina, according to her badge. You're free to go on to your interview, Ms. Vegas. It's your friend here who needs to come with us. What? Jaime screeched. No. She's not my friend. I mean, yes, of course you are, dear. A pat on my arm. But she's my publicist. I need her for the interview. Then you'll have to reschedule, because she's coming with us. She was seen entering the bombed building before the blast, then leaving it shortly after. Wouldn't I need to have left before the bomb, considering I'm still alive? Medina's look warned me not to be a smart-ass. We just want to speak to you. Then speak here. Miss, we have multiple eyewitness reports. That's enough to arrest you on, but we'd like to give you the chance to talk to us first. Provide some insight into your co-conspirators. Co-conspirators? I waved at Jaime. This is the only person I've been conspiring with today. Does she look like a criminal mastermind? You were seen in the company of two men. Two? Jaime swatted my arm. Oh my God, you're so selfish. What did these guys look like? I asked. The officers exchanged a look. The woman cleared her throat. We have preliminary descriptions, but we're hoping you can add to those. It will certainly help your situation if you can. In other words, the only description they had was the one Jeremy heard two guys covered in mortar dust. Whatever they had on me was bullshit. Yes, I'd been inside that building, but I'd gone in through the roof, meaning no one had seen me enter. I'd exited through the sewer. I had a feeling their witnesses were members of SLAM. If anyone saw me near this building, there's an explanation. But I'll come downtown if that helps. I turned to Jaime. You go on, do your interview. Absolutely not, she said. This young woman is my publicist, and you can't treat her like a terrorist. I came here to check out venues for a possible charity appearance. That's right charity. New Orleans has been through hell, and if you want tourists coming back, you can't arrest them on the street . . . She continued her diva rant as Medina started leading me toward the cruiser. It's okay, I said to Jaime, trying to shut her up. You stay here. Let Adam know I've been delayed. Hell have to postpone the interview. I won't be long and Take your hands off her! Jaime yelled at the cop. She's not touching me, I said. Listen, Jaime She aimed a kick at Medina's shins. It didn't come close. Intentionally so the one thing Jaime can do is kick with the precision of a stiletto-clad kung fu artist. The younger officer Holland grabbed her. Cut that out, he said. Or you'll be going to the station with her. Jaime wrenched free. Don't you dare lay your hands on me! She feigned another kick and lost her balance, stumbling. You tripped me! Get her in the car, too, Medina said. As Holland muscled her toward the car, Jaime put up little resistance. Once in the backseat, she slid over, making room for me. What the hell? I whispered as Medina shut the door. You're my backup and I'm yours, she said. If they take one, they take both. While I appreciated the support, I'd rather she made sure Jeremy and Adam got Bryce to a doctor. Before I could protest, the officers climbed into the front seat and we pulled away. Jaime handed me her cell and whispered, Call Paige. I didn't. I called Lucas. After he'd answered, I leaned into the gap between the front seats. I'm calling Jaime's manager to cancel the interview. That's okay, right? Medina looked ready to say no, but her partner nodded. Just keep it short. Lucas was waiting patiently, having realized from my comment to Medina that something was up. Hey, I said to him. Can you call Adam at the Daily and postpone that interview and photo shoot. Jaime and I . . . we kinda got ourselves arrested. Adam's waiting for us with the photographer. Bryce something-or-other. Dare I ask what's going on? Mmm, better not. Seems someone thought they saw me near an explosion, which is total bullshit. I've been baby-sitting I cast a quick glance at Jaime, who faked a scowl. Um, keeping Jaime company. Anyway, it's a big misunderstanding that I'm sure will amuse everyone at the office later. I'm hoping this will be cleared up soon, but tell Adam to wait no more than thirty minutes. I know he has important things to do. All right. Lucas paused, then asked, Are you both okay? Were fine. We didn't embarrass ourselves too badly, so no emergency intervention required. Another silence on his end. Really, I said. Medina twisted to look back at me. A short call. Gotta go, I said. All right. Let me know if you need legal help. I'm sure we won't. It's just questioning. Medina signaled for me to cut it off. I said goodbye and handed the phone back to Jaime. **Revue de presse NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER NATIONAL BESTSELLER**"Fast-paced and plot-driven.... The conclusion to the series is so strong that one might

wonder why Armstrong is not planning to continue the books. It speaks to her wisdom as a writer to know when to stop, or at least take a breather.... It is clearly a conscious choice on Armstrong's part to wrap it up, and it is a good one. In her final note, she says that this is how she envisioned the series ending. This reader is looking forward to seeing what new worlds Armstrong will explore in future novels." The Globe and Mail"Like Stephen King,...Armstrong not only writes interesting page-turners, she has also achieved that unlikely goal, what all writers strive for: a genre of her own." The Walrus