



Tales of the Otherworld

By Kelley Armstrong

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New York Times bestselling author Kelley Armstrong has bewitched audiences with her Otherworld series of supernatural thrillers. Now, in this new collection of shorter fiction, some of Armstrong's most tantalizing lead characters appear alongside her unforgettable supporting players, who step out of the shadows and into the light.

Have you ever wondered how lone wolf Clayton Danvers finally got bitten by the last thing he ever expected: love? Or how the hot-blooded bad-girl witch Eve Levine managed to ensnare the cold, ruthless corporate sorcerer Kristof Nast in one of the Otherworld's most unlikely pairings? Would you like to be a fly on the wall at the wedding of Lucas Cortez and Paige Winterbourne as their eminently practical plans are upended by their well-meaning friends? Or tag along with Lucas and Paige as they investigate a gruesome crime that looks to be the work of a rogue vampire?

Now devotees of the Otherworld can share these special moments with some of their favorite characters—as well as discovering deeper insights into the lives of some of the lesser-known players. But even readers new to the

Otherworld universe will find much to love in these seven tales of friendship, adventure, and enduring romance. For when the superhuman men and women of the Otherworld set their minds to a task, they do so with fierce passion and an undivided sense of purpose that make them, in the end, very much human.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Fans and newcomers alike will relish Kelley Armstrong's eerie tales." —*The Globe and Mail*

"Armstrong's longtime fans . . . will be delighted." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Terrific . . . a superb compilation."—Midwest Book Review

About the Author

Kelley Armstrong is the author of thirteen novels of the Otherworld, including *Frostbitten* and *Living with the Dead*. She lives with her family in Ontario, Canada.

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Aaron stumbled from the tavern and gasped as the first blast of cold air slapped him. He paused in the doorway and took a deep breath. Geoffrey jostled him from behind, and Aaron gave him a good-natured shoulder that sent his friend staggering back.

"Move it, you big ox," John said, kneeling Aaron in the rear.

"Just push me out of the way." Aaron shot a grin over his shoulder. "Or maybe you should squeeze past instead. You're skinny enough."

Aaron stepped onto the cobblestone street and grimaced. So much for fresh air. The narrow street stank of shit--horse shit, dog shit, human shit; that's what came of living so close you couldn't take a crap without piling it on someone else's. Give him farm life any day. Plenty of shit there, too, but at least there was room to spread it around. He squinted up and down the street, his ale-soaked brain struggling to remember which way they'd come. That was another problem with towns. You couldn't see a damn thing. The buildings not only crowded your view, they crowded out the moonlight, and the lanterns dotting the street added more smoke than light.

"Inn's this way," Geoffrey said, smacking Aaron's arm. "Come on before the mistress locks the door."

She had locked them out the last time, and it had been a long, cold night on the street. Aaron and Geoffrey came to the city every other month, bringing goods to market. They'd finished their work this morning, but their families didn't expect them back until Sunday night, knowing that any young man who stayed home to help his parents on the farm deserved time to sample the cosmopolitan treats he was forgoing.

One of those "treats" peered out from a side street as they passed. She met Aaron's gaze and batted her lashes in what he supposed was meant to be a come-hither look, but seemed more like soot caught in her eyes. She couldn't have been more than twelve, the bodice of her dirty dress stuffed to simulate the curves she wouldn't see for another few years . . . if she lived that long.

Aaron walked over, and pressed a few coins into the whore's palm. A look--part relief, part trepidation--sparked in her eyes, then they clouded with confusion as he returned to his friends.

John bumped against him. "How drunk are you? You forgot to take what you paid for."

"Oh, Aaron never has to pay for it," Geoffrey said. "When a tart sees him coming, she closes her purse and opens her legs."

"If you don't want it, I'll take it."

John started to turn, but Aaron grabbed his shoulders and steered him forward.

"What?" John grumbled. "It's paid for."

As they stumbled past an alley, a whimper snaked out from the darkness, followed by the crack of a fist hitting flesh. Aaron stopped.

"Ya gotta have more than that," a voice rumbled. "Find it . . . or I will."

"Aaron . . ." Geoffrey said, plucking Aaron's sleeve. "It's none of your business. And, for once, let's leave it that way, or we'll spend another night on the street."

Aaron brushed his friend off and strode into the alley. As he walked, his steps steadied, the effects of the ale sloughing off as he focused on the voices. He pulled himself up to his full height and peeled off his jacket. That was often enough--tower over the thug and flex his muscles, and most decided they really didn't need that few pence tonight after all. As he approached the black-haired lout and quaking shopkeeper, his gaze went to the ruffian's hands, looking for a weapon. Nothing. Good.

Aaron grabbed the man's shoulder. "You want to rob someone? Try me."

The lout's hand slammed forward. A flash of metal. Where had that come--?

The blade drove into his chest. Aaron shoved the man away and staggered back. His hands went to his chest. Blood pumped out over his fingers. The man came at him again, but the sound of running footsteps made him think better of it and he ran off into the darkness.

"Aaron? Aaron!"

Aaron tried to take a step, but faltered and hit the wall. He stood there, knees locked, forcing himself to stay upright. Then he crumpled.

Aaron twisted in his bed. The damned thing dug into both of his shoulders and butted against the top of his head and bottoms of his feet. Inns. Cram as many people into a room as they can, and if you're more than average height, well, that's not the inn's fault.

Eyes still closed, he took a deep breath. Flowers and a faint musty smell. The mistress probably set out fresh blooms to cover the stink, so she wouldn't have to change the bedding more than once a month.

He should open his eyes. He knew that--but he also knew that first blare of morning sun was going to feel like Satan's imps stabbing his eyes with pitchforks. He shouldn't drink so much. He wasn't used to it, and he paid for his folly every morning after.

Speaking of folly . . . He let out a groan as he remembered the man in the alley. Next time he decided to rescue someone, he'd take an extra moment to make damned sure the lout wasn't concealing a knife. Now he

really didn't want to get up. He'd been stabbed in the chest once before, and it had taken him weeks to recover.

The last time, he'd been unable to lift anything heavier than a piglet for a month. His father had to do all the chores, and he'd kept sighing and muttering "Aaron, Aaron, Aaron," his weathered face wrinkling. But he kept his gaze down when he said it, to cover the pride in his eyes.

"A big strong boy with a good heart," he'd boast to the neighbors when he thought Aaron couldn't hear. "What more could a father want?"

"God gave you strength," his mother always said. "Always remember that it's a gift, and gifts from God are to be used in his service. Help those less fortunate than you, and you'll please him."

Helping others, though, did not mean getting stabbed and being unable to help his father. His mother would be very firm about that.

"Be careful, Aaron," she'd say. "You're too quick to act. Take a moment to think as well."

Maybe he could persuade one of his brothers to come back home for a month and help. Even as the thought occurred, though, he dismissed it. They had their own families and jobs and farms. He was the only one left. His father relied on him.

He groaned again.

Enough of that. Time to grit his teeth and get up.

He pulled up his knees and they struck something with a hollow thwack. He opened one eye. The wavering glow of candlelight cast a dim glow in the dark room. Was it still night? He reached sideways to brace himself as he sat up, and his hand smacked against wood. A bed with sides on it? Had Geoffrey and the others dumped him in a horse trough again?

He opened the other eye. Then, grabbing the sides, he heaved himself up, bracing for the throb of pain through his chest. It didn't come. Had he dreamed the stabbing? His fingers moved to his chest. It felt fine . . . fine and whole. That damned cheap ale was giving him nightmares now.

He sat up and blinked. He was in a dark, empty room, lit only by a few candles. It looked vaguely familiar. There was a board across his boxlike bed, pushed sideways away from his head and chest; that's what he'd hit his knees on. A black-robed figure sat near his feet, head bent forward in sleep. Aaron rubbed his eyes. Where the hell was he? It looked familiar. Then he blinked as the memory clicked. It looked like the inside of the family mausoleum. Well, not really a mausoleum; it was made of rough-hewn wood. A mausoleum for a farmer's family was ridiculous, as every neighbor had at some point whispered to another. But that was the condition of marriage his mother had made. "My children must be buried aboveground," she'd told his father. "It is our way."

His father hadn't argued. Who knew what her ways were? She was a Jew and a foreigner, and all he knew was that this beautiful young woman he'd met in London was willing to marry a forty-year-old bachelor and bear his sons. She could have said she wanted him to build her a tower to the moon, and he'd have done it.

As for why Aaron was waking up in the mausoleum . . . well, obviously the ale was giving him nightmares.

Damn. He'd really hoped the stabbing part of his evening had been the dream, not the waking.

He went to lie back down when his knees knocked the board again, this time sending it clattering to the floor. The figure in the chair jumped up, her hood falling back, and he saw a dark-haired woman, gracefully sliding into middle age--his mother.

"Aaron!"

She rushed to him, hands grabbing his shoulders, fingers digging in. Her face loomed over his--blotchy with tears, eyes swollen, hair bedraggled.

"Say something," she whispered. "Please."

"I drank too much. Again." Her arms flew around him, head going to his chest, burrowing in, shoulders convulsing in a silent sob.

"I prayed it would be you," she whispered. "I know it's not right for a mother to have favorites, but I always hoped that if God chose one of my children for the blessing, I hoped it would be you. And then after . . ." She hiccuped a sob. "I prayed, Aaron. I prayed you'd be the one."

"What one?" He pulled back to look at her. "I really think I drank too much. Maybe if I go back to sleep--"

He tried to lie down, but her fingers dug into his shoulders.

"No! There's no time. Your father wants to seal the coffin. It's been three days. It must be sealed."

"Seal? Coffin?" Aaron looked down. "I'm sleeping in a coffin?"

His mother took his hand and pressed it to a spot above her breast. "What do you feel, Aaron?"

His fingers almost trembled with the beat of her racing heart. Before he could answer, she moved the fingers to his own breast . . . and they went still.

"Now what do you feel?"

"Noth-- Bloody hell!" He jumped, almost tumbling back into the coffin. "What--"

"You're alive. A different kind of life, Aaron, but you are alive, and that's all that matters."

"All that--? I'm not breathing! I don't have a--"

"You died, and you've been born again. It's a gift of my blood, told to each woman before she weds. Every generation, only a few are blessed. They die, and return to live again . . . to live and live, and nothing can kill them. A blessing beyond measure."

"So I'm alive?" He chewed his lip, then nodded. "All right. But what do we tell Father?" Her gaze dropped. "We can't tell him, Aaron. You can't ever see him again." She hugged him again. "I'm so sorry, but he wouldn't understand. What you are . . . they have a name for it. They do not understand it."

"What am I?" he asked slowly.

When his mother didn't answer, he reached up, wrapped his hands around her upper arms, and pulled her away from him, his gaze going to hers. "Mother, what am I?"

She wouldn't look him in the eye. "They call it a . . . a vampire, Aaron, but they don't understand--"

"A vampire?" "It is not what they think, Aaron. You are not some soulless demon. You are still my son--still as good and as God-fearing a man as you ever were."

He forced her chin up, to meet her eyes. "And the blood-taking, Mother? Is that a lie, too?"

"You must feed, yes. On human blood. But it is only feeding, like taking milk from a cow or eggs from a hen. You'll do no harm."

"So I don't need to kill?"

A long hesitation before she hurried on, words tumbling out, almost incomprehensible. "Only once a year, before the anniversary of your death."

"And if I do not?"

Her gaze met his then, eyes blazing. "You must, Aaron. You must!"

"Kill another person to prolong my own life?"

She hesitated again, and the struggle in her eyes sliced him to the core--the conscience of a moral woman at battle with the ferocious instinct of a mother.

"You can make careful choices," she said softly. "Find those who are dying, and relieve them of their suffering. It is only once a year, Aaron. There are people--many people--who are not long for this earth. Take their lives and do some good with it. Honor God in that way, and he will understand."

God? Aaron bit back the word before it flew from his mouth. He suspected God had very little to do with this "blessing," but if his mother had convinced herself that it was so, then he would not destroy her faith by questioning the origin of this taint in her blood. And, as he sat there, holding her, listening to her cry, he knew he would not destroy her hope either. He'd been a loving, loyal son in life, and so he would be in this nonlife.

She said he couldn't see his father, which meant she'd expect him to leave. If he were to decide his new life lay in the New World before the year was up, she would understand.

He had a year. A year of feeding on the blood of men. But if she was right, and it did them no harm, he could stomach that. He would visit her, and feign contentment for her, and before the year was up, he would leave and let her believe he was still walking this earth, somewhere. That much he could do for her.

Aaron slunk through the alley looking for passed-out drunks. Like a stray dog rooting for scraps in the trash. He'd been a vampire for nearly a month now, and it wasn't getting any easier. Instinct showed him how to feed, but he despised every second of it.

It didn't seem to have much effect on the humans--his mother had been right about that. Yet skulking through alleys like a scavenger, preying on the weak . . . It made his stomach churn. Or it would, if his stomach could still churn. The only thing his gut did these days was complain when he wasn't paying it enough attention.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Nathan Lawhorn:

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