

# **Every Last Breath (The Dark Elements Book 3)**

By Jennifer L. Armentrout



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Some loves will last 'til your dying breath

Every choice has consequences—but seventeen-year-old Layla faces tougher choices than most. Light or darkness. Wickedly sexy demon prince Roth, or Zayne, the gorgeous, protective Warden she never thought could be hers. Hardest of all, Layla has to decide which side of herself to trust.

Layla has a new problem, too. A Lilin—the deadliest of demons—has been unleashed, wreaking havoc on those around her...including her best friend. To keep Sam from a fate much, much worse than death, Layla must strike a deal with the enemy while saving her city—and her race—from destruction.

Torn between two worlds and two different boys, Layla has no certainties, least of all survival, especially when an old bargain comes back to haunt them all. But sometimes, when secrets are everywhere and the truth seems unknowable, you have to listen to your heart, pick a side—and then fight like hell...



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#### Every Last Breath (The Dark Elements Book 3) By Jennifer L. Armentrout Bibliography

• Sales Rank: #38188 in eBooks • Published on: 2015-08-01 • Released on: 2015-07-28 • Format: Kindle eBook



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#### **Editorial Review**

#### Review

"Armentrout is known for giving chills and thrills...the author knows exactly how to set the scene and direct the plot." -RT Book Reviews

About the Author

# 1 New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout lives in Martinsburg, West Virginia with her husband and her Jack Russell, Loki. Jennifer writes young adult paranormal, science fiction, fantasy, and contemporary romance. She also writes adult and New Adult romance under the name J. Lynn. Find her on Twitter @JLArmentrout or become a fan on Facebook and Goodreads.

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I stood in Stcey's living room as my entire world crashed around me once more. Sam was the Lilin.

Acute horror held me immobile, seizing the air in my lungs as I stared at what used to be one of my closest friends in the whole world. Because of the demonic familiar, Bambi, and being unable to see souls while she'd bonded to me, I'd never seen what had been right in front of my face this entire time. None of us had, but it was Sam—he'd been the one to cause the mayhem at school and all the recent deaths. Instead of stripping souls with a single touch, as I'd known a Lilin could do, he'd taken his time, taking a little here and there, playing with his victims and playing with us.

Playing with me.

Except what was standing in Stacey's house was—was basically wearing Sam's skin, a perfectly crafted costume, because the real Sam... He was no more. The pain of knowing that my friend was dead, had been dead for a while without any of us knowing, cut deep into me, making misery of my bone and tissue.

I hadn't been able to save him. None of us had been able to, and now his soul...his soul had to be down below, where all souls that were taken by a Lilin would go. My stomach cramped.

"You cannot defeat me," the Lilin said, his voice identical to Sam's. "So join me."

"Or what?" My heart pounded like a jackhammer in my chest. "Or die? That's not incredibly cliché or anything."

The Lilin tilted its head to the side. "Actually, I wasn't going to say that to you. I need you to help free our mother. The rest of them can die, though."

*Our mother*. Before I could dwell on the ick factor of being related to the creature that had killed my friend and inflicted so much carnage, Zayne shifted into his true form, distracting me. His shirt ripped up the back as his wings unfurled and his skin deepened to the dark granite of the Wardens. Two horns sprouted, parting his wavy blond hair as they curled back, and his nostrils flattened. When he parted his lips to let out a low growl of warning, fangs appeared. He stepped toward Sam, his massive hands curling into fists.

"Don't!" I shouted. Zayne halted, his head swinging sharply toward me. "Do not get close to him. Your soul," I reminded him as my heart raced. Or what was left of Zayne's soul, considering I'd accidentally taken a nice little bite out of it not long ago.

Zayne backed off, his stance wary.

I turned my attention back to the evil masquerading as Sam. Whatever the thing was standing in front of us, we did share the same flesh and blood. Only recently had I learned exactly how I'd come to be part demon and part Warden. I was the daughter of Lilith and this...this thing truly was a part of me. It had been born out of Lilith's and my blood, and it was just as evil as Lilith. It wanted her freed? Impossible. If Lilith ever ended up topside, the world as we knew it would irrevocably change.

"I'm not going to help you free Lilith." I was so not referring to her as our mother. Yuck. "That's never going to happen."

The Lilin smiled as it watched me with dark, inky eyes. "Get as close as you want." It ignored my statement, taunting Zayne. Heck, taunting all of us. "She's not the only one in this room with a taste for a Warden's soul."

I sucked in a sharp, stinging breath as Stacey let out a whimper. In the space of a second, her relationship with Sam flashed before me. They'd been friends forever and only recently had she recognized that Sam had always, *always* been in love with her. But she hadn't started paying real attention to him until Sam had begun to change.

#### Oh God.

Stacey had to be breaking wide-open, seeing the boy she finally loved become worse than the monsters that prowled the streets at night, but I couldn't afford to take my focus off the Lilin. It could make a move at any moment, and three of us in this room were vulnerable to the worst kind of attack it could deliver.

"There's nothing like taking a pure soul, but you'd already know that, Layla. All that warmth and goodness goes down as smooth as the richest chocolate." The Lilin tipped its chin up and let out the kind of groan that normally would've caused my ears to burn. "But taking your time, savoring the *taste* is so much more decadent. You should try it, Layla, and stop being so greedy when you feed."

"And you should try shutting the Hell up." Heat rolled off the powerful demon standing beside me. Roth, the reigning Crown Prince of Hell, hadn't shifted yet, but I could tell he was close. Fury dripped from his words. "How about that?"

The Lilin didn't even spare a glance in Roth's direction. "I like you. I really do, prince. Too bad you're going to end up dead."

My fingers curled in, nails biting into my palms as anger flushed through my system, hot and bitter. My emotions were all over the place. On top of everything else that had gone wrong recently, I was standing here between Zayne and Roth, which was about a thousand times awkward on a normal day, but now, after Roth.

I couldn't focus on any of that right now. "You're very brave, making threats when we outnumber you."

One shoulder rose in a gesture so quintessentially Sam it sent a slice of pain through me. "How about I'm just

intelligent?" it queried gamely. "And how about I know more than all of you about how this will end?"

"You talk a lot," Roth growled, stepping forward. "And I mean a lot. Why is it that the bad guys always have to give disgustingly long and boring monologues? Let's just get to the killing part, all right?"

The Lilin's mouth formed a lopsided grin. "So eager to die the final death, aren't you?"

"So eager to be done with you running your mouth, more like," Roth retorted, moving so that once again he stood directly beside me.

"It's been you this whole time?" Stacey's voice trembled under the weight of the pain she must be feeling. "You haven't been Sam? Not since."

"Not since Dean displayed his fists of fury. That was fun." The Lilin laughed as those dark eyes slid in her direction. "Sam hasn't been home in quite some time, but I can assure you, I enjoyed...our time together as much as I'm sure he would've. You know, if that's any consolation for you."

She clapped her hands over her mouth, muffling the words as tears streamed down her pale face. "Oh my God."

"Not quite," it murmured silkily.

I stepped closer to Stacey, drawing the Lilin's attention from her. I was sick for her, absolutely repulsed. "Why?" I demanded. "You've been around us for weeks. Why haven't you attacked any of us?"

The Lilin sighed heavily. "I'm not all about violence, death and gore. I discovered rather quickly that there are a lot of fun things to do topside, things I've thoroughly enjoyed." It winked at Stacey, and I saw red.

My skin tingled like a thousand fire ants were marching all over it. "Don't look at her. Don't talk to her or even breathe in her general direction, and don't even think about touching her ever again."

"Oh, I've done more than that," the Lilin replied. "Lots more. Everything your Sam wishes he could've had the balls to do. But you know, he's not really concerned about those things at the moment. You see, I consumed him—his soul in its entirety. No part of him remains on this plane. He's not a wraith like the others who crossed my path. I didn't play with my food when it came to him, taking tiny bits of him. No, he's gone. He's in—"

Several things happened all at once.

Stacey shot toward the Lilin, her hand rising as if she was about to knock the mocking smile off his face. The Lilin drifted toward her, and while it hadn't taken her soul yet for whatever reason, I now knew there were no guarantees. The Lilin was unpredictable. It had exposed what it truly was, and I sensed it was done playing around. It was within arms' reach of her and I—well, I sort of lost it. Rage lit me up from the inside.

The change came over me without even trying. Like shedding a sweater, I let go of the human form I'd worn for so long, and in a way, had desperately clung to. It had never been this easy before. Bones didn't break and reknit. Skin didn't stretch, but I felt mine harden, become resilient to most knives and bullets. The roof of my mouth tingled as my fangs dropped, teeth designed to cut through even a Warden's skin, and most definitely a Lilin's. Just below the base of my neck and on either side of my spine, my wings broke free and unfurled.

There was a sharp inhale from someone in the room, but I wasn't paying attention.

Moving as quick as a cobra striking, I grabbed Stacey's arm and shoved her behind me. I got between her and the Lilin. "I said, do not touch her. Do not look at her. Do not even breathe in her direction. You do so, and I will rip your head from your shoulders and punt-kick it out a window."

The Lilin jerked, dancing a step backward. Its pitch-black eyes widened. Shock splashed across its face and then its lips curled back. "That's not playing fair."

What in the world? Was that fear I saw in its face? "Do I look like I care?"

"Oh, you're going to." The Lilin backtracked, moving toward the door. "You're so going to care."

Then the Lilin was gone, spinning right around and exiting the house with a quickness that left me standing there, staring foolishly at the empty doorway. I didn't understand. The Lilin hadn't batted an eyelash at Zayne or Roth, but I'd shifted forms and it had tucked its tail and run away?

Uh.

"Well, that was...anticlimactic." I turned around slowly, tucking my wings back. The first one I saw was Zayne.

He'd returned to his human form. Zayne always, even when he appeared exhausted, could've stepped out of a *Town and Country* magazine. His good looks went beyond all-American and straight into swoonville, population every girl on the planet. He looked like I imagined angels would. Vibrant blue eyes and near-heavenly features, but he stared at me with his mouth hanging slightly open. His absolutely gorgeous face was pale, which made the unforgiving shadows under his eyes stand out starkly. He stared at me like he'd never seen me before, which was bizarre, because he'd grown up with me. I felt like some kind of specimen.

A trickle of unease ran down my spine as my gaze switched to the couch. At some point, Zayne had moved closer to where Stacey had landed. I expected to find her rocking in a ball, but she too gaped at me, her hands pressed against her cheeks, and any other time I would've laughed at that expression. Not now.

My heart rate kicked into overdrive as I swung toward the back of the room, where Roth was standing. My gaze collided with eyes the color of amber. His were wide, his pupils vertical. Even so, he was a sight to behold.

Roth was—well, there was no one that walked this earth that looked quite like him. Probably had to do with the fact that he was in no way human, but he was stunning. Always had been, even when he'd styled the black hair into spikes. I preferred the lesser look he rocked now with his hair falling over his forehead, brushing the tips of his ears and the arches of equally dark eyebrows. Golden eyes were slightly slanted at the outer corners. He had cheekbones and a jaw you could cut glass with, a face any artist would die to sketch—or touch. And those full, expressive lips were parted.

His tawny skin wasn't pale and he didn't gape at me like I belonged under a microscope, but he was watching me in astonishment just as Zayne had.

The unease turned into balls of dread, settling heavily in my stomach. "What?" I whispered, glancing around the room. "Why are you all staring at me like...like there's something wrong with me?"

It couldn't have been because I'd told the Lilin I'd rip his head off. Yeah, I was a little less violent on most days, but in the past week or so, I'd thought I was the Lilin, had been kissed by Zayne and nearly took his soul, was subsequently chained and held in captivity by the very clan that had raised me, was almost killed by that same clan—deep breath—was then healed thanks to Roth and a mystery brew provided by a coven of witches who worshipped Lilith, and now I'd just discovered that my best friend was dead, his soul was in Hell, and the Lilin had taken his place. You'd think a girl could be cut a little slack.

Roth cleared his throat. "Shortie, look...look at your hand."

Look at my hand? Why in the world would he be asking me to do that in the midst of all the cray?

"Do it," he said quietly and too gently.

The dread exploded in my gut like buckshot, and my gaze dropped to my left hand. I expected to see the weird marbling of black and gray, a mixture of the demon and Warden that existed inside of me and a combination I'd become almost familiar with by now. My nails had lengthened and sharpened, and I could tell they were hard enough to cut through steel, as hard as my skin, but my skin...it was still pink. Really pink.

"What the...?" My gaze traveled to my other hand. It was the same. Just pink. My wings twitched, reminding me that I had shifted.

Zayne swallowed. "Your...your wings..."

"What about my wings?" I almost screeched, reaching behind me. "Are they broken? Did they not come out—" The tips of my fingers came into contact with something as soft as silk. My hand jerked back. "What..."

Stacey's watery eyes had doubled in size. "Um, Layla, there's a mirror above the fireplace. I think you need to look in it."

I met Roth's gaze for a second before I spun around and all but ran to the fireplace I was sure Stacey's mom had never used. Clutching the white mantel, I stared at my reflection.

I looked normal, like I did before I shifted...like I was going to class or something. My eyes were the palest shade of gray, a watered-down blue. My hair was so blond it was almost white, and a mess of waves that went in every direction like usual. I looked like a colorless china doll, which was nothing new, except for the two fangs jutting out of my mouth. I wouldn't show them off at school, but that wasn't what caught my attention and held it.

It was my wings.

They were large, not as massive as Zayne's or Roth's, and normally they were almost leathery in texture, but now they were black...black and feathered. Like legit *feathered*. That soft, silky thing I'd felt? It had been tiny feathers.

Feathers.

"Oh my God," I whispered at my reflection. "I have feathers."

"Those are definitely feathered wings," Roth commented.

I whipped around, knocking over a lamp with my feathered right wing. "I have feathers on my wings!"

Roth cocked his head to the side. "Yeah, you do."

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