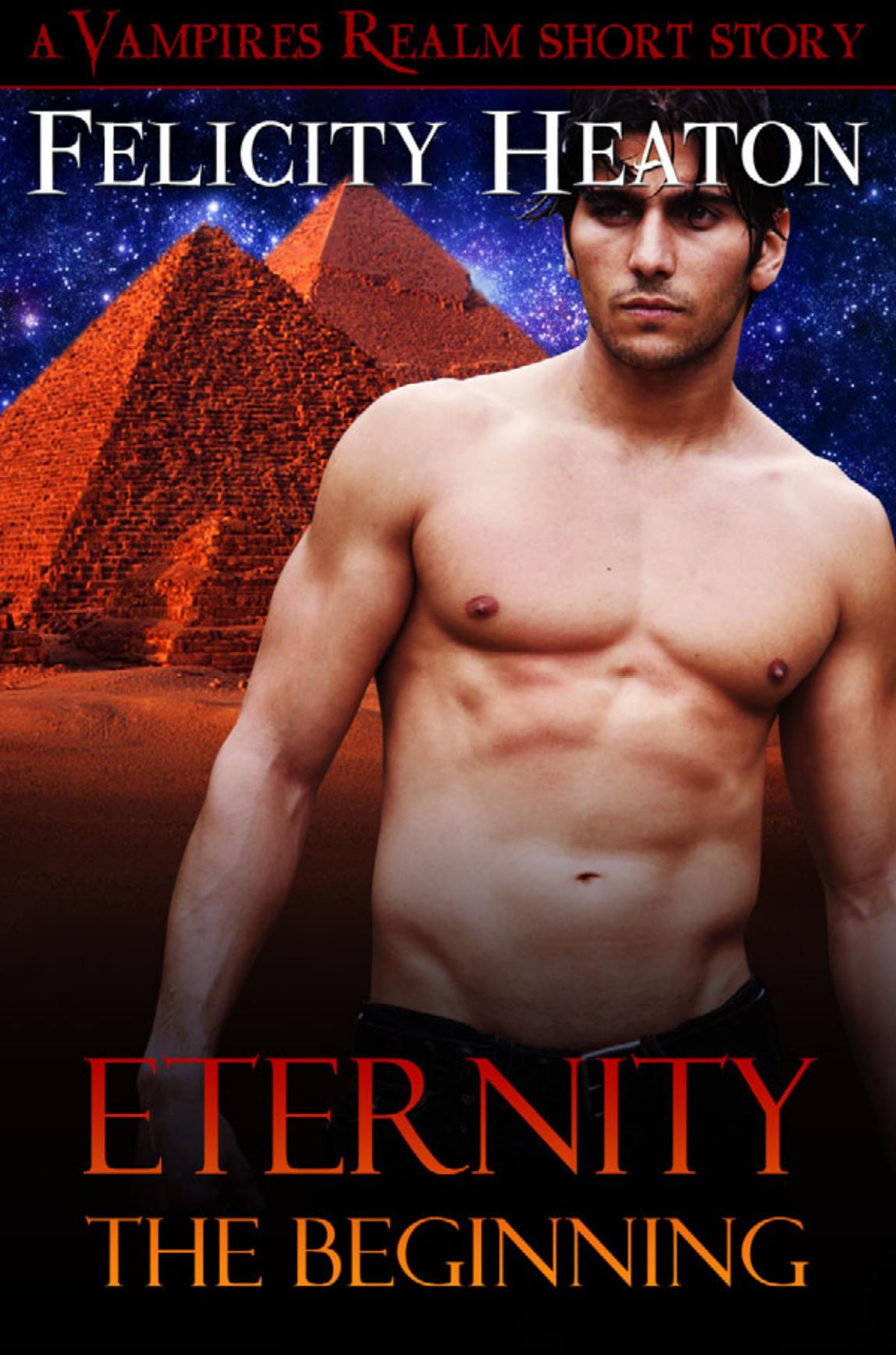


A VAMPIRES REALM SHORT STORY

FELICITY HEATON



ETERNITY
THE BEGINNING

Eternity: The Beginning

Felicity Heaton

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Cover by Felicity Heaton

Eternity: The Beginning

Every vampire has a beginning, a turning point, a moment of being born into the dark world of their species. In 986bc, Hyperion, current lord of the mighty Validus bloodline, discovered the afterlife wasn't as he'd expected.

Condemned to a life as walking death and weak with hunger, he discovers the terrible power he now wields and pays the ultimate price.

Eternity: The Beginning

986 BC was the year that I discovered the true meaning of immortality. It was not the afterlife that my Pharaoh believed in but a dark gift given to those deemed worthy by the creature murdering them.

I was worthy, though I did not know the man who killed me and then granted me my afterlife.

I was left to discover my terrible power alone.

“Brother? Is that you?”

Hyperion pushed the rickety door closed and leaned heavily against it, causing the old wooden beams to strain under his weight. He sighed and swallowed. His mouth was drier than the desert outside and no matter what he drank, nothing quenched his thirst. It only made him feel sick.

“It is I,” he said and wearily moved to a low stool beside the cooking pot. He stared at the bubbling contents. The sight of it turned his stomach.

His eyes automatically moved to his sister when she entered. His tongue traced his lips, wetting them as best it could, and his stomach growled with hunger. He could hear everything, the wind outside, the rush of her blood and her heart as it pounded hard but steady against her chest, and the soft swish of her muslin dress. He could smell her sweet fragrance and the slight salty tang of sweat that laced it. He could smell her blood.

He stood sharply when she went to sit near him and moved to the other side of the room.

He shouldn't have come back.

Clenching his fists, he frowned when sharp pain ran up his arms. He uncurled his hands to see a row of half moon shaped puncture marks in his palms and then stared at his fingernails. His eyes widened in horror at the sight of the pointed, elongated claws they had become. Just what was it that the man had done to him?

“You are hurt,” Ineru said behind him and he froze when she placed her hand on his shoulder.

The sound of her heartbeat filled his ears.

His chest heaved with the desire to kill her.

His eyes closed at the heady sensation of pleasure it promised.

She brushed her fingers over the wound on his throat and he moved away from her, throwing her hand off him and growling.

“What kind of sorcery is this?” he whispered to himself when the bones of his face shifted. He raised his fingers up, feeling the sharp points of his teeth. What had he become? Was he one of them now?

The man had almost killed him and only then had he been offered salvation. He had taken it, all too eager to live, but in the process something inside him had died. His fingers clenched his chest and he listened to the eerie silence inside of him.

He'd died.

He realised that now.

The man that had been so desperate to live had sold his soul and now he was doomed to an eternity of life. But not life. No. He was walking death. The intense hunger inside of him told him that. It clouded his mind with the memory of how blood had tasted on his lips, on his tongue, and whispered to him how sweet it would be to feed, to take the life of someone to further

his own, to live off their death. It was a primal need, something impossible to ignore. It was ravenous. It was intoxicating. It was demanding a kill and he was sickeningly happy to cooperate.

He wanted it.

He wanted to taste the blood again, wanted the feeling of it spreading through him and breathing life into his tired body.

He wanted the pleasure it brought, feelings he'd only ever felt during sex, and had never thought possible from anything else.

Placing some distance between himself and his sister, he struggled for control and won.

“It was not a plague that killed our mother,” he said and heard Ineru gasp. He resisted his desire to face her, knowing that the demon he had become was still visible. He could feel his teeth scraping against his tongue as he spoke. He remembered how sharp the man's had felt, how painful they'd been in his neck. But the pain had quickly disappeared, chased away by the shadow of death that had filled him and the cold dread of what was coming. He hadn't hesitated in that moment. He'd taken everything the man had offered with him, not even stopping to ask what the consequences were.

“But it must be...such devastation.”

“It is death that comes for them. Not the merciful kind that takes us in our sleep, but the violent kind. It is a creature of the underworld that feeds on the blood of the living to sustain it in eternity.”

He looked down at his hand and saw his fingernails had returned to normal. Raising his hand, he felt his teeth and found they were blunt again.

He turned to face Ineru, unable to miss the fear in her eyes when he did so.

“How is it you know all of this?” She frowned at him, her beautiful countenance marred by it, and suddenly he realised that eternity without her was a life of torture and pain.

How could he go on without her?

He couldn't leave her alone in the world. She wouldn't make it without him. She needed him now more than she had ever done.

She would understand if he told her.

She was the reason he'd wanted to live after all. She was the reason he had chosen to receive the dark gift he had been offered.

“I have become like them,” he said and moved to block her path when she went to run. She stopped dead, her eyes showing too much white for his liking and the erratic pattern of her heart speaking words to his hunger. She was scared of him. She was scared and it only made the hunger inside of him intensify. “Please, my sister, do not fear me. It was either death or an immortal but cursed life, and I could not leave you.”

“For me?” She sounded as though she'd tried but failed to say the first part of her sentence. He knew what she was asking.

“I would do anything for you, sweet Ineru.” He held his arms out to her, hoping she would come to him and not reject him. He didn't want her to fear him, not only because she was his only kin but because it made him have to fight against his new instincts even more. “I would never hurt you, my only love.”

He closed his eyes when she stepped into his embrace, her forehead resting against his neck and her hands against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her and breathing her in.

“We must leave this place. It is no longer safe for us.” He stroked her hair and waited to see what her response would be.

She pulled back and looked at him with wide eyes.

“You will leave me,” she said and he shook his head, able to sense the fear that went with those words. “Not now, but in many years to come I will be old and die, but you will still be immortal.”

He sighed and wiped the tear from her cheek. “Then I will end my life when yours ends.”

She smiled and then it faded from her face and her look became serious.

“Take me with you,” she said, her fingers grasping almost painfully at his chest, making his instinct rush to the forefront and forcing him to consider what she was asking of him. Could he do that, like the man had done to him? Could he make her one like him? Her eyes were wild, her voice laced with desperation. He could smell the panic as it mixed in with her scent, intoxicating him. “Make me one, too.”

He pushed away from the temptation she'd offered him and found the strength to shake his head.

“No, sweet sister. I could not condemn you to a life as a creature of darkness. Even if I had the heart to, I do not know how.”

She frowned, her eyes silently pleading him. “You must remember what he said or did to you to make you this way. If you are truly one of them, then you must have the power to change me too.”

“We cannot know that. I am new to this life. I do not know the laws or ways. I may kill you.”

“Then you will have to kill yourself and we shall still be together in the afterlife.” She moved away from him and looked around the room. Her eyes fixed on something beside the fire. “If you will not change me, I will kill myself and force you to do it.”

His stomach flipped and twisted. “No!”

He caught hold of her and his demonic visage emerged. Before he had a second to consider what he was doing, he'd bitten down on her neck and was drawing great gulps of blood from her. She writhed in his arms and instinct made him hold her tighter. He tried to remember what the man had done to him, knowing that he was fast running out of time. Her heartbeat began to slow and she became weak in his arms. He released her neck and bit into his wrist. The blood bloomed and ran down his arm. He stared at the trail of red and then at Ineru's ashen face where she rested limp in his arms. He couldn't live without her.

Bringing his wrist to her mouth, he pressed it against her lips.

“Drink from me, take what I am offering you,” he said and listened to her heart slowing. “You have to drink now, Ineru.”

She opened her mouth the tiniest amount and her tongue poked out, small and pink. It brushed against the cut and became red. He watched it disappear into her mouth. She licked her lips drowsily and then drew in a deep, shuddering breath.

He growled in pain when she bit into his wrist, her hands coming up to hold it against her mouth. She drank deep, drawing his blood from him and making desire like he'd never felt before race through his veins. He held her tightly when she finally succumbed to sleep and carried her to her bed, gently laying her down on it.

He stared at her and then at his wrist. In the darkness, he could see the blood staining it. He could smell it. It called to him, begging him to lick it clean. He lowered his head and raised his arm at the same time, letting them meet in the middle. Wrapping his lips around the wound, he closed his eyes and licked it, savouring the taste of his own blood.

He opened his eyes and looked at Ineru.

Now he had to wait. Her death had abated his hunger. It had taken him a full day to awake from his own death. By tomorrow night, he would know if he had been successful.

Then eternity would be theirs for the taking.

Sitting down by the fire, he licked his lips clean while he stared blankly at the flames. They created patterns in front of his eyes. His focus remained with his thoughts for a few minutes and then he looked down at his bloodied wrist. The blood was black in the dim light but the sight of it still made him feel sick. What had he done? In the heat of the moment, he'd known exactly how to make her like him. It had been instinct.

He glanced at Ineru where she lay on the bed and his stomach lurched. His teeth itched with the taste of her blood. It lingered in his mouth, taunting him, tempting him. How could he have granted her wish so easily, condemning her to a life as a shadow?

His stomach twisted again. He pressed his hand against it, his face contorting in pain. Intense hunger swept through him, even worse than before. His canines extended before he even realised what was happening and he roared at the fire when the pain thrumming in every nerve and vein of his body became too much to bear.

Standing, he grabbed hold of the stool and threw it against the far wall of the little hut. He breathed heavily, his fingers burying themselves deep into his hair and twisting it around them. Closing his eyes, he clenched his jaw, waiting for the desperate need for blood to pass. It abated but didn't disappear as he wished it to. It seemed to linger in the pit of his stomach and the depths of his heart.

His eyes came to rest on Ineru again.

What had he done to her? How would she ever cope with such a life as he had given to her?

Turning away, he flung the door open and stepped out into the early morning light. The sight of it soothed him. The desert plain was red like fire, warm and enchanting as the heat of the impending day made the distance shimmer. He looked down the row of small houses, nothing more than huts like his one.

The door of the one he was staring at opened and a young woman stepped out. He knew her. She was the daughter of the boat builder. He stared at her, remembering the time she'd kissed him. It had been at a ceremony. They had been but fifteen. He'd never forget the sweetness of her lips and the dizzying rush they had given him.

“Are you ill?” she said and he held his hands up, silently begging her not to come any closer.

She was safe at a distance. He could control himself when he couldn't smell her blood so easily. She frowned at him, confusion reigning in her dark eyes. She was even more beautiful now than she had been that night. He'd been convinced that they would marry one day. Now that dream could never be a reality.

“You look truly ill.” She gave him a look of concern and he forced a smile, wishing she would leave him alone now and not taunt him with what once could have been his. “You are as pale as this cloth.” She showed him the white fabric of her dress. “It is not like you.”

“I am not sick,” he said and hoped it would make her go back to what she was doing. “But I thank you for your concern.”

The smile that had been about to grace her lips disappeared and she frowned again, this time at the cold tone his voice had adopted.

She hesitated for a moment, her internal conflict written across every line of her face as her mouth opened and then closed, her brows knitting tighter together and her eyes darkening. She regarded him for a few seconds more and then turned away.

He watched her walking away, his eyes studying the soft curves of her body where they were barely hidden beneath her muslin dress. Desire speared through him, begging him to go after her and give her exactly what she'd wanted from him. It had been written in her eyes and the seductive language of her body. All he had to do was surrender to the beast inside of him and he could make her his for eternity. He could have her always.

“No,” he said to himself and clenched his fists. They trembled with rage. The muscles of his arms tightened until they were shaking too. “I will never do that again.”

He had already taken one life out of petty need. To take another for the purpose of getting himself an object of love would be to succumb to the beast completely. It was not his choice to make. He had been given one of those at least, barely so, but he had been presented with two options—die or become the living dead. He had not given Ineru the option. He should have been firmer with her, should have told her that they would be together still even if he was a creature of darkness and she was flesh and blood. It wasn't necessary for her to surrender her life.

Yet he had taken it all too quickly. In the heat of the moment when he had been faced with losing her, he had condemned her to a life like his own.

His head snapped around when he felt the sun rising and saw the shadow he was standing in shrinking. Cold dread filled him as he watched the bright golden light creeping towards him. He backed away from it. Intense desire to flee loomed up inside of him, making his eyes dart about in search of safety. He swallowed as the light continued to creep towards him, the shadow of the hut growing long. Backing towards the door, he fumbled around behind himself searching for the handle.

A thin strip of light touched his foot.

He cried out in agony as it burnt as though the sun itself had scalded him.

Shoving his way into the dark interior of his home, he slammed the door behind him and pressed his back against it. Fiery pain tore through him, the toes of his left foot throbbing with it.

He stumbled to the fire and collapsed onto the floor there. Grabbing hold of his foot, he pulled it towards him and stared at the charred flesh on his toes. He tentatively touched it, breathing in sharply through his teeth when the pressure made new pain lance through him. He stared at his toes, his mind racing to understand what had happened.

It was fitting he supposed.

What creature of darkness would be fit to walk in the glory of the sun?

He was cursed. Even the sun itself was against him. What had he done? What strange life had he been born into after death?

Starving for blood, hungry with desire, and cursed to a life in the shadows.

What more horrors awaited his discovery?

He looked down and frowned when he saw that his toes were less swollen. He gingerly prodded them and was surprised when all the pain he felt was a dull ache. Turning his arm over, he ran his fingers over the wound on his wrist and couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was healing. Not as a normal person would, but faster.

His stomach growled, reminding him that he was still hungry. He glanced at the pot that was bubbling away. The acrid smell of its contents told him that it was ruined and inedible. He doubted it would have been edible even if it hadn't become burnt.

The only thing he craved, the only thing that he knew would abate his hunger, was blood.

The warm, subtle and delicious taste of blood.

He growled and closed his eyes. He could almost taste it. He glanced at the door, already knowing that leaving his home in order to find something to eat would be impossible, but letting his feet take him there anyway.

He opened the door a crack, only enough for him to see the world outside. Sunlight was streaming down the alley between the buildings. There was no way he could leave, not until dusk.

The smell of the warm sand and sunshine made his head heavy. He leaned against the doorway and fought the overwhelming urge to sleep but it quickly became impossible. His whole body felt tired, drained of all energy, and he was barely able to shut the door and slump to the floor beside it.

Closing his eyes, he pulled his knees up to his chest and rested his chin on them.

He had to sleep. Tonight Ineru would awake. He had to be there for her when she did, so she wouldn't be as frightened as he was on waking to discover what had happened to him.

This was their life now, a life of horror and death.

A life they knew nothing about.

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“Brother?”

His eyelashes fluttered on hearing her voice reaching out to him through the darkness.

“Brother, are you awake?”

He smiled. She sounded like she was a child again, her voice full of quiet eagerness. He could picture her on the back of the boat

builder's donkey, her eyes bright with laughter and her raven curls falling messily around her shoulders.

Opening his eyes, he looked at the woman she'd become. Her eyes were dark as sin and her lips were a graceful rose coloured curve. Her skin was darker now, tanned by the sun, and was a marked contrast against her pale dress. Her hair still fell in curls down her back.

“What is it, Ineru?” he said without thinking and then remembered what he'd done.

He looked at her properly, this time seeing the monster he had made her into.

“Your eyes are purple,” she said when she knelt in front of him where he was still sitting by the door.

Instinct told him that the sun had set. He could feel the cooler night air creeping in under the door. Its scent called to him, luring him out into the darkness and reminding him of his hunger.

“Purple?” He frowned and looked around for something shiny to see his reflection in.

He could feel the sharp points of his teeth against his lip and wondered if the change in colour of his eyes was something to do with the monster he'd become.

Ineru held a worn metal plate out to him and her eyes reflected the sadness in her voice. “There is no point. I could not see myself.”

He took the plate and rubbed it clean with a square of cloth, trying to make it shine. It didn't. The dull metal was hardly a good object for seeing himself in. He held it up anyway and turned it in all directions, trying to catch a glimpse of his eyes and his sharp canines, but found that his sister was right.

There was nothing reflected back at him but a dull brown wall.

This wasn't possible.

Getting to his feet, he grabbed Ineru's hand and led her out into the night. He walked down the alley between the rows of huts until he reached the river. The bright moon shone down on the world, illuminating it with a cold light and turning everything blue. He let go of his sister's hand, knelt on the bank and leaned over the water.

Nothing but the moon greeted him.

He watched Ineru do the same, her hand reaching out to touch the water when she couldn't see her reflection. He hovered his hand above the rippling water and frowned when he couldn't see it reflected back at him. The bones of his face shifted, allowing his teeth to recede, and he grimaced at the scraping feeling of it.

“Are we so cursed that we do not even exist?” Ineru said.

He shook his head. “We exist, but we are shadows of life, walking death. We are shunned by the sun and cursed by the land. It will have nothing to do with us, so it banishes us from existence by refusing to reflect what the light makes of us.”

“Or maybe it is the light that refuses to see us.”

Glancing across at her, he saw her eyes full of fear, her soft skin washed out with it. He placed his hand over hers, showing her that they were still tangible. They were still made of flesh. They weren't ghosts.

“Do not be scared, dear sister.”

“I am not,” she said and managed a smile, “and nor should you be, beloved brother.”

“We have much to learn about ourselves. We must find the man who did this to me. He will know the answers to our questions.”

Standing up, he held his hand out to her and watched as she slipped her delicate fingers into his. He assisted her to her feet and kept hold of her hand when she went to move.

“Ineru,” he said and hesitated a moment before continuing. “This is not the life I wanted for you.”

“But it is the life I wanted for myself. I would rather live like this with you, than live as a mortal alone.”

“But you would not have been alone.” He squeezed her hand and smiled. “I would have remained with you until the end, as I promised.”

“I am not so sure. The world you walk in would have been so much different to my own. It would have drawn you away from me in time. It is better this way.”

Her soft look of understanding and acceptance of what she'd become made him sigh. She had taken it better than he had.

Leading her towards the flickering torches that lit the market square, he hoped that he would be able to find the man. Surely he would want to know that his transformation into whatever it was he'd become was complete.

When they drew close to the market, he could see the people still bustling around. The sight and smell of them made his stomach growl. It twisted painfully and the sickening hunger returned, overwhelming him until all he could focus on was his need for blood. His eyes followed the people as they packed away their goods, closing their stalls for the night. He frowned when he spotted the boat builder's daughter again. She paused and smiled at him before walking away.

Keeping hold of Ineru's hand, he led her slowly into the crowd. He could feel her hand trembling in his and he knew why. She was hungry and trying to come to terms with the new sensations inside of her. Something inside of him was speaking words into his head. It told him how many people were surrounding them and each time he looked at them, he was automatically calculating how difficult it would be to kill them or feed from them.

When he had finished scanning the people present, he realised that the man who had killed him here two nights ago was nowhere to be seen. Had he moved on? Why would he do such a thing after turning himself into the same wretched creature as him?

His eyes widened when something pricked his senses and he spun on his heel to face the man who was about to touch his sister. He growled and tugged Ineru to safety, placing himself between her and the man.

The man was of a broader build than him and his apparel told him that he was of high standing. Gold bracelets adorned his arms, glimmering in the moonlight. He didn't recognise him and a glance at Ineru said that she didn't either. Her eyes were full of fear while she stared at the man. What right had he to attempt to touch her? He'd see to it that it never happened again. He slowly released Ineru's hand.

Staring into the man's eyes, he waited.

When the man made a move, he sprang at him. His fist flew, striking him hard across the jaw. His other one was moving even before his first blow had connected. He hit the man in the chest and watched in stunned amazement as the man flew backwards into one of the stalls thirty foot away.

The crowd immediately gathered around the fallen man.

He reached out behind him for Ineru's hand. He could smell the blood tainting the air and could hear the man's heartbeat slowing to a stop.

“We must go,” he whispered and started backing away with Ineru.

She kept behind him the whole time. When the people turned to face them, he felt her arm wrap around his and she clung to him. Her breathing was fast and he could sense the panic in her.

He tightened his grip on her hand.

“What did you do?” The daughter of the boat builder stepped forwards, her face a mask of disbelief.

He swallowed hard but didn't say anything. It wasn't that he couldn't think of anything to say in order to defend himself; he just felt as though he didn't have to. Why should he apologise to these people for what he had done?

He shook his head, trying to rid it of such thoughts. These were the people he had grown up with. They had raised him as much as his mother had and had supported him when she had been murdered.

Now he had killed one of them.

And the violence inside of him wanted more.

Backing away, he gave her a look of regret and then turned around. He ran swiftly with Ineru, keeping a firm hold on her hand and not letting her lag behind. When they reached the temple on the outskirts of the small settlement, he stopped and released her. He pressed his hands into the wall and hung his head.

What had he done?

A single punch had sent the man flying across the square. How was that possible?

He'd killed him with two strikes of his fists.

He pushed away from the wall and stared at his hands. Was this another ability?

"Ineru," he said and looked over his shoulder at her before turning to face her. "Come to me."

She did as instructed. He noticed that her hand was constantly rubbing her stomach and it brought his own hunger back out again. He had to find them both something to eat soon. Even when he was newly awoken after dying he hadn't felt as hungry as he did now. Since tasting Ineru's blood, the intensity of his craving had become unbearable. He wondered if it would always be like this.

He pushed it back down inside of him, grabbed hold of Ineru's waist and lifted her up. Her eyes widened and she pressed her hand against his shoulders, giving him a look that said she thought he'd gone insane.

She was as light as a feather. He'd picked her up in the past and had struggled after a minute or so. Now he was holding her and it felt as though he could carry her for days.

When she pushed harder against him, he set her back down.

"We seem to be strong," he said.

A frown marred her fine brows. "Strong?"

He looked at the wound on his arm and saw it was almost fully healed. "Not only that but this curse seems to bless us with the ability to heal at speeds almost a hundred times faster than humanly possible."

Her slim hands appeared in view and she ran her fingers lightly over the shallow marks on his wrist—marks that she had added to when she'd bitten him.

“How is this possible?” she said and looked straight into his eyes.

Even in the dim light of the nearby torches on the temple walls, he could see every fleck of colour in her dark eyes. He could see them as clearly as if it had been day.

“Our senses seem to have heightened. I can smell things that are far away and those that had otherwise gone unnoticed before. Scents of the night are as clear as your perfume and when we were back in the square I could smell the blood and the food.”

He stared back in the direction of the marketplace and tried to shake the memory of how it had felt to be able to sense everything so clearly. It was replaced by the image of the boat builder's daughter. He was right when he had decided that this land was no longer safe for them. There was no way they could continue like nothing had happened. People would start to notice that something was different. They didn't belong here anymore. This place was no longer their home.

His eyes roamed to the distant desert and the sandstone peaks that rose from the flat plain. The moon highlighted them, casting a silvery line over the backbones of their silhouettes to show him where they were. It was like looking at a ghost of the landscape he had once had the pleasure of seeing bathed in the warm light of day.

He would never see it like that again.

“I wonder how else we are changed,” Ineru said and his attention returned to her.

“I do not know,” he said and placed his arm around her shoulders when she rubbed her stomach again, “but I am certain we shall find out in time. Right now, we must find you something to eat.”

He frowned when her eyes shifted to his neck. There was no way he would let someone do that to him again, not even his sister. Besides, he didn't think that his blood would be of much use to her now. She needed fresh blood, not his dead blood. He wondered if his would sustain her in any way. Would it abate her hunger until she found something fresh to drink?

His stomach turned at the image that flitted across his eyes when he blinked. The sight of her killing someone wasn't something he'd ever thought he'd see. She had always been good-natured and never once had she shown any malicious tendencies. To see her kill someone would shatter his memory of her and he wanted to keep it for as long as possible.

He would kill for her.

“Come, Ineru, we should keep moving. We must reach somewhere safe to rest before the day comes.” He held his hand up to silence her when she went to speak. He could see in her eyes what she was about to say. “We cannot go home. We are no longer safe there. You saw the people in the square and their reaction to me. We are vulnerable during the day. If they come for me, I will not be able to defend myself or you. The daylight seemed to make me drowsy and weak, and the sunlight burnt me.”

“Where will we go?”

“We shall journey north up the river. I think we will be safe enough if we always find shelter long before the day breaks and we stay close to civilisation so we do not go hungry. It will be a long journey, but we must make it. We cannot stay in his land.” He held his hand out to her but she didn't make a move to take it. Looking into her eyes, he could see the horror in them over what he'd said.

“You mean we must leave Egypt ?” She gave him a look that made him feel as though he was breaking her heart by suggesting such a thing. “But where would we go?”

“I have heard of a great sea that some have crossed. Maybe the sun will not shine so brightly there.” He shook his hand, trying to get her to notice it and take hold of it. When she gave it a black look and drew her hands up to her chest, he sighed. “I know this is hard, sister, but the sun presents too much of a danger to us and I fear we will not always be able to find shelter in this arid land.”

“Maybe things will be better in the north and we will not have to leave our land after all,” she said with an air of hope in her voice. “Maybe we shall find the man you seek.”

“Let us hope so.” He smiled at her when she uncurled and held her hand out to him.

Taking hold of it, he started back towards the river with her. There were likely to be men working on the boats there or heading out to do some night fishing. If luck were with him, he would be able to find them some transport and get something for Ineru to eat at the same time.

There had been reports of deaths in the north similar to those in their area. Traders from numerous cities had told tales of spates of brutal murders and people disappearing. There was a chance that if they remained close to the river and the cities along its banks, they would find another like them that may be able to answer his questions.

He slowed his pace as they neared the riverbank. His eyes scanned along the boats and he frowned when they all appeared to be empty. There were vases of goods standing near one of the boats. Surely someone had to be onboard. No sensible man would leave goods unprotected during the night.

Withdrawing into the shadows when a light appeared, he kept a tight hold on Ineru's hand. He led her around as he watched a man appeared, his face visible by the flickering torchlight. It cast a warm glow about the man, illuminating the sand and the vases. The man shoved the end of the torch into the sand so it stood

without assistance, and then began hauling the vases onto the boat.

Releasing Ineru's hand, he turned her around so she was facing away from the boat. He signalled for her to remain where she was and keep silent. She nodded and tried to look over her shoulder, but he caught her cheek and stopped her. He frowned, his eyes hardening to show her that he was being serious. She couldn't look, no matter how curious she became. He didn't want her seeing her brother kill. It was bad enough that he'd killed her. He didn't want to know what she thought of him now, but he hoped she didn't love him any less. If she saw him kill, she could lose that love for him.

Slinking through the shadows, he used his newly discovered senses to check the area around them. The only heartbeat that came to him was the man's. He circled closer, keeping to the darkness and using the torchlight to his advantage. It would blind the man, making it harder for him to see into the shadows around him, even with the bright moon.

The man hummed a tune as he came back out and his eyes widened when he realised it was the boat builder. He shook away the desire to leave that rose into his mind. He had to kill him, for the sake of his sister. It was a long journey ahead and she needed to feed. So did he.

They were leaving anyway, turning their backs on their home before it turned its back on them, so what difference would it make. One more death on his conscience was nothing. He knew that in the years to come, he would have thousands to deal with. He had to kill in order to survive. Instinct told him that with each twist of his stomach. It called for blood like it had once called for food—desperate and impossible to ignore.

When the boat builder had placed the last of the vases onto the boat, he stepped out of the shadows.

The man turned around, barely seconds from picking up the torch. He smiled at him and went to open his mouth to speak.

The words came out as a garbled cry as he grabbed the man by the throat, choking him and lifting him off the floor. He tightened his grip, swallowing down the guilt that squirmed inside of him, and telling himself that it had to be this way. Either the man died, or he and his sister did. He couldn't let her die again, and he certainly wasn't willing to see what torment awaited him in the afterlife.

Bringing the man to him, he sunk his fangs deep into his neck, sucking the blood from him as greedily as he had Ineru's. He drank as much as he needed in order to kill the man and then released him.

“Ineru,” he said.

She turned to face him just as he was wiping his hand across his mouth. Her eyes were wide as she walked towards him, staring at the dead man.

Her eyes met his.

He nodded and held the man out to her by his throat.

He couldn't take his eyes off her as she changed in front of him. Her canines sharpened into points, the lower set extending slightly too. Her eyes shone in the firelight, reflecting like a mirror. Is this what he looked like when he changed?

When she took the body from him, he turned away, not wanting to watch her feeding. He ran his fingers down the length of his canines and frowned. Besides the change in teeth and eyes, it seemed that he still looked human. Ineru didn't look like the monster she was. Maybe this was how whatever they had become survived so well. The man who had killed him, turned him into this monster, had seemed normal at first glance too.

“Brother?” Ineru's quiet voice stole into his thoughts.

He turned to see she was standing close to him. A thin red line streaked down to her chin. He sighed and wiped the blood away with his thumb, and then gave her a smile when she looked awkward and cleaned her mouth. Checking their surroundings again with his senses, he went back to the body and picked it up. He had to do something with it. He couldn't just leave it here in the open.

Dragging it towards the riverbank, he slung it as far as he could into the water. The crocodiles would take care of it.

He stared across the river, watching the moon playing on the water and the trees on the opposite bank.

“You are leaving?” A familiar female voice called out to him.

He spun on the spot to face her, his eyes darting about to find Ineru. She was gone, but he could smell her nearby. She had probably run into the darkness when she'd felt someone approaching.

His attention returned to the boat builder's daughter.

“The man in the square is dead. You have killed him, but I think somehow you knew that, and that is why you are here.” Her voice was gentle, soothing.

She stepped closer to him and he backed away. At this distance, he couldn't smell her blood clearly, but if she came any nearer, he would be able to and he didn't know whether he'd be able to control himself.

The hunger was returning.

“You are scared?” she said, her head tilting to one side and her expression soft in the firelight.

She was beautiful, her dark eyes showing so much concern and her dark hair tumbling down over her muslin dress covered breasts. His gaze lingered there, tracing the subtle curves of her body beneath the thin material.

“Is it me that you fear?”

He shook his head, almost laughing at her question. “No, it is myself. I am not the same man. I am changed.”

She sighed quietly and then took another step forwards. He matched it with a backwards one.

“I see.” A frown flickered on her brows as she looked at him. “The man was not a good man. You need not leave.”

“I must,” he said, resolute. If she wanted to presume he was leaving solely because of the dead man, she could. He wasn't going to tell her any different. In a matter of minutes, he would leave his old life behind completely, taking nothing with him but his sister. It was best this way. This world was not theirs now.

“When will you return?” she said. Her voice trembled and he could sense something when he focused on her. It was fear, but she wasn't frightened of him. She was scared of something.

She took another step towards him and the torchlight illuminated her face more clearly. In her eyes, he could see what she feared, and although he wished his answer to her question was a different one, it wasn't.

“I will not.”

Her gaze lowered to the floor and she was still for a few moments. He said nothing, not because he didn't know what to say, but because he couldn't say what she wanted him to. He had to leave, and he had no plans to return.

She moved closer to him, her eyes coming up to meet his again. He shook his head, holding his hands up as the back of his foot touched the water and he realised he couldn't keep the distance between them. He steeled his jaw when the first tempting waves of the delicate scent of her blood washed over him. His stomach turned over and twisted tightly. Hunger returned, fierce and demanding.

“Leave,” he said in a tortured whisper, unable to speak any louder while he battled with his hunger.

It begged him to kill her.

It begged him to take her sweet blood like he wanted to.

She shook her head, and moved closer. His fists clenched and his nails dug into his palms. He felt the cool stickiness of blood against his fingertips. The distraction it gave him from the smell of her blood and sound of her heart was momentary. His senses seemed to fix on it, even against his own will, and the need to have her blood was overwhelming.

He swallowed hard when she stepped right up to him, her body so close to his that he could feel the heat radiating off her. He wanted to reach out and touch her, to run a single finger lightly down her arm and feel her shudder. He wanted to tangle his fingers in her hair, and crush her lips under a passionate kiss.

He wanted her.

He didn't know what to do when she leaned towards him, her breasts pressing against his bare chest and heating his skin through. Her hands were against his shoulders, grasping them, steadying her. His eyes dropped to her mouth and he watched as it neared his.

“Leave,” he whispered again, offering her one last chance to see that this could only end in disaster.

“I want to remember you,” she said, her mouth so close to his that her breath washed over his lips.

He could taste her in his mouth.

His whole body tensed when her lips touched his, barely brushing against them but growing bolder by the second. His hands moved, hovering on either side of her waist as he battled with himself. He had to push her away, but he knew that if touched her, it would be over—he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

He was surprised when her tongue ran along the crack of his lips, parting them. It brushed against his teeth, sending a shiver through him and making his fangs itch. He could taste her warmth, and her desire. He could taste her need for him.

Grabbing her waist, he pulled her flush against him, moulding her body against hers and letting her feel just what she was doing to him. He pressed into her, kissing her hard as his tongue plundered her mouth, but holding himself back so he wouldn't go too far.

When she let slip a quiet moan and her fingertips dug into his bare shoulders, fiery heat burned through him—desire mixed with hunger, tainted with need. His canines began to extend and he desperately tried to hold them back, to stop them, but it was too late. They caught on his tongue, and then on hers as she kissed him, and the combined taste of their blood was too much.

His claws grew again, cutting through her muslin dress. His canines fully extended and she gasped as she caught her tongue on them again. Holding her tightly, he sneered against her mouth, kissing her deeply as he tried to get a better taste of her blood. She struggled slightly, her palms pressing into his chest as she tried to push him off her. He growled, low and guttural, and kissed along her jaw. His arms wrapped tight around her, immobilising her and crushing her against his chest.

His lips coursed over her skin, travelling down her neck and tasting the saltiness of her sweat. It was mixed with the soft hint of her scent and the sweetness of her blood. His mouth latched onto a spot where he could feel her pulse and he suckled on it, focused on the feeling of her heartbeat against his tongue.

She stilled in his arms, her breathing fast and harsh in his ear. Her heartbeat thundered through his body, encouraging him to take what he wanted. He smiled against her throat and then bit down hard. She started to scream but he covered her mouth, stifling her cry. Blood flooded his mouth, hot and delicious, sating his hunger. It flowed into him without him having to pull on it, filling his senses as he gulped it down. Intense pleasure like he'd never felt before swept through him, making him dizzy. He slowed his drinking as the feeling ebbed and flowed through him, warming every inch of him and sedating him.

It was only when he heard her heart slowing that he realised what he'd done.

He dropped her, stumbling backwards into the water and knocking into the boat as cold chased away all the warmth he'd been feeling.

She fell to her knees and he stared at her, wide eyed and horrified at what he'd done. He'd told her to leave. Why hadn't she listened to him? Why had she had to kiss him?

He shook his head to clear his senses and went to her. Her face was ashen, her eyelids heavy, almost closed. He cradled her in his arms, his fingers dancing across her cheek, his whispered words of sorrow and apology doing nothing to rouse her.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and then wrapped her up in his embrace, holding her head against his chest. He rocked with her, struggling to come to terms with what he'd done. She shifted slightly. He could hear her heartbeat faltering and when he looked at her, he wasn't surprised to see fear in her eyes. She knew what was coming.

She raised her hand and touched his face, her lips managing a smile that broke his heart.

How could she look at him with such forgiving eyes when she knew what he had done?

He caught her hand and held it against her cheek when she no longer had the strength to.

She sucked in a breath and the fear returned to her eyes. Her heart missed a beat. His fingers grasped hers more tightly.

“We will meet again...my love...” she whispered, her eyelids drooping and her body going limp in his arms, “...in the afterlife.”

He pressed his forehead against hers as he heard her heart stop. Closing his eyes, he cursed himself and this life he'd been given. He felt destined to kill everything he cared about. Happiness was never to be his. Love was never to be his. A creature like himself didn't deserve such things. He deserved a life in the shadows, a tortured life of watching others live.

“What have you done, brother?”

He dropped the body and looked up at Ineru. She was staring at him with eyes that reflected the disbelief that had been in her voice. He looked down at the body when her gaze moved there. He stared at the woman, feeling the full force of what he'd done hit him. He'd killed her. He could have offered her an afterlife with him, but he'd let her die instead.

Getting to his feet when Ineru approached, he kept his eyes fixed on the body.

He'd vowed not to make someone like him just to get himself someone to love. He hadn't even wanted to give her a choice. It was better she had a good afterlife than become the living dead.

Taking hold of Ineru's hand, he led her towards the boat. She went onboard, leaving him standing on the bank. He stepped onto the boat and pushed off while Ineru raised the sails.

Looking back at the woman he loved, he thought about his future and what she'd said.

“We shall meet again,” he whispered as she disappeared into the distance, the flickering torch marking her place. “Even if it is in the afterlife.”

He took control of the boat and Ineru sat down near the bow, hugging her knees to her chest.

He glanced back at the distant bank.

His old life was behind him now. He had to watch out for Ineru and protect her from this world he'd brought her into, all the while trying to deal with it himself. He got the feeling there were still many things they had to learn about the creatures they'd become, but during their journey, they might find the man who had changed him.

It wouldn't be long until they reached the next town.

Beyond that lay the northern country.

And a new world they could make their own.

Little did I know that it would not be until the age of Cleopatra that we would leave our beloved homeland behind and venture forth into a new world, a world where Rome dominated.

A world where I would finally learn the feared name of what it was I had become.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicity Heaton is a USA Today best-selling author who writes passionate paranormal romance books as Felicity Heaton and F E Heaton. In her books she creates detailed worlds, twisting plots, mind-blowing action, intense emotion and heart-stopping romances with leading men that vary from dark deadly vampires to sexy shape-shifters and wicked werewolves, to sinful angels and hot demons!

If you're a fan of paranormal romance authors Lara Adrian, J R Ward, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Gena Showalter and Christine Feehan then you will enjoy her books too.

If you love your angels a little dark and wicked, Felicity Heaton's best selling Her Angel series is for you. If you like strong, powerful, and dark vampires then try the Vampires Realm series she writes as F E Heaton or any of her stand alone vampire romance books she writes as Felicity Heaton. Or if you're looking for vampire romances that are sinful, passionate and erotic then try Felicity Heaton's new Vampire Erotic Theatre series.

In 2011, five of her six paranormal romance books received Top Pick awards from Night Owl Reviews and Forbidden Blood was nominated as Best PNR Vampire Romance 2011 at The Romance Reviews. In 2012, she was awarded the GraveTells Author of the Year Award, and Heart of Darkness was announced as a 2013 Epic Ebook Awards finalist in the Paranormal Romance category. Many of her books receive five star reviews from readers and review sites alike.

To see her other novels, visit: <http://www.felicityheaton.co.uk>

If you have enjoyed this story, please take a moment to contact the author at author@felicityheaton.co.uk or to post a review of the book online

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