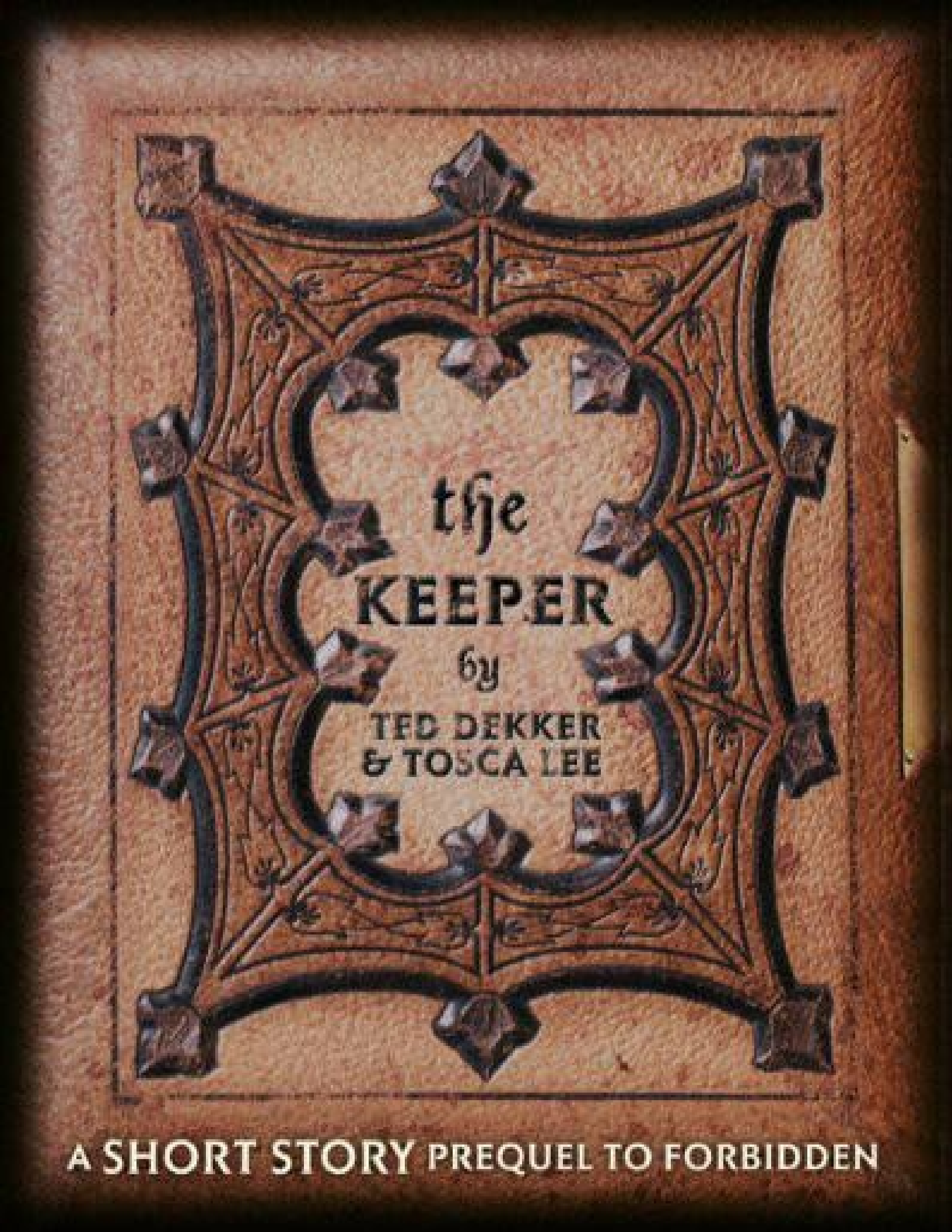

the
KEEPER
by
TED DEKKER
& TOSCA LEE
A SHORT STORY PREQUEL TO FORBIDDEN

The Keeper

A Short Story Prequel to Forbidden

Ted Dekker and Tosca Lee



New York Boston Nashville



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The Keeper

The day Pavel and Gustov Malincovich learned that they were dead was like any other day in the Russian wasteland—hot, dry, and sublimely quiet.

The seasoned twins lived alone in the hovel where they had spent nearly thirty years practicing the near-monastic discipline of the hermit separated from the rest of the world. They were fifty-one years of age—identical in appearance down to their threadbare robes, the blue eyes in their weathered faces, and the grey beards that hung from their chins.

Their existence was a simple affair dedicated entirely to stripping away the distractions of a world gone mad to chase peace through perfect Order. A small price to pay for the promise of Bliss in the life to come.

But tonight everything the brothers thought they knew about life was about to change.

Pavel sat outside on a log beside his brother, staring in silence at the cook fire crackling at their feet, listening to the wind rustling through the trees at the edge of the clearing. His hands, rough from years of carving a living out of the wasteland, cupped a tin cup filled with water. He did not speak because there was nothing new to say, nothing to do but simply *be*. In that way, fear—the natural enemy of the living—could not control him.

Beyond the periphery of firelight the mud house crouched beneath a scraggly pine. Pavel pushed to his feet, about to go inside, when Gustov abruptly grabbed him by the arm.

Gustov was staring past him to the edge of the clearing.

When Pavel turned, he discovered the reason for his brother's gaze: a man carrying a small lantern, coming toward them through the trees with soft, crunching steps. Fear sliced into Pavel's mind—where had he come from? The nearest town was half a day's walk to the south, where the brothers went once a month for supplies.

The man was dressed in a long tunic with a pack over his shoulder. His beard was almost as grizzled as Pavel's own, though he looked a few years younger.

He was alone.

Gustov was the first to speak their customary greeting. “Welcome to our fire, my friend. Our life is yours.”

The stranger shifted his gaze to Gustov. There was something particularly unnerving about the steadiness of it. “No. It’s not. But if you’re worthy, perhaps my life can be yours.”

“Are you in trouble?” Gustov said.

“Terrible trouble.”

“Who would cause you this trouble—out here, where there is no one?” Pavel said.

“You would.”

“But you are mistaken. We mean no one trouble. Certainly not to a stranger in need of shelter and rest.”

“I’m not looking for shelter or rest.”

“Then what do you seek?” Gustov asked, concern clear in his voice. “We have nothing of value but our hospitality.”

“I seek two dead men who would know the truth.”

This time he could not suppress his own fear.

“You mean to kill us?”

“No,” the stranger said. “You’re already dead.”

He was mad! Mind lost to the wasteland.

And that meant he was dangerous.

Pavel willed the tremor in his hands to quiet and spread them to calm the man. “My friend, as you can see, we’re very much alive, and we would like to stay that way. My name is Pavel and this is my brother, Gustov. Come, unburden yourself, tell us your name.” Pavel motioned to the log across the fire.

The stranger stared at them for a moment, then sat on the log and took a deep breath.

“My name is Talus,” he said. “Today, as I was coming to find you, I passed a gulch where I heard a faint and dreadful crying. So I veered from my course to find the source of such a mournful sound. I couldn’t manage the thought of passing someone in such terrible need, as you can imagine.”

“Of course.” Gustov nodded.

“There in the bottom of the gulch I found a girl who’d fallen from the crest. She might have been twelve—a beautiful, dark-haired girl. Her face was pale—dirtied and streaked with tears. But it wasn’t her sweet face that drew my attention…”

The stranger was staring at them, watching them carefully.

"Yes? Go on," Gustov said after a moment.

"It was her leg. It was badly broken, you see. Her bone had snapped in half and torn jagged through her flesh. Her leg was bent at a terrible angle so that her heel was up by her shoulder."

"God have mercy," Gustov said. It was the appropriate thing to say in such a case.

"It wasn't only her leg that drew my attention," Talus said. "One of her hands was missing. It appeared to have been torn off by a wild animal."

"God have mercy," Gustov murmured again. But Pavel could only stare at the strange unrest in the man's eyes. They shone in the firelight, misted, fixed.

"Tell me. What do you feel when I tell you this story?" Talus said.

"What any decent man would feel at the hearing of such a tragedy. Terrible fear!"

"Fear, and yet you do not weep. Doesn't it break the heart, what I've told you?"

This time it was Pavel who answered, picking his words carefully. "Yes, in a matter of speaking. But our concern, of course, is for her destiny."

"And what of her suffering in *this* life?"

For several long seconds none of them spoke. Talus stared between them both and Pavel felt as though he might have missed something.

"Her fate is settled, my friend," he said, trying again to make him understand. "There's no place for wondering how or why she met it or in tangling our own paths with other concerns."

"Other emotions, you mean."

So he did understand. "Yes. We have renounced emotion to follow a more perfect way—one cleansed of the sentiments that inevitably push mankind to ruin. These are the teachings of Sirin, that chaos follows when the weaker sentiments rule, as demonstrated by the great wars that drove us to these wastelands. Surely you know of them."

"Of course," Talus said.

"Then you also know that Sirin rose up in the aftermath of those wars and taught a new way. A new Order for humanity. We are followers of Sirin and of his Order. We have dedicated our lives to it."

"So you are telling me that you feel nothing else. No sorrow. No empathy."

"No," his brother replied. "And it is our prayer that we never do."

The stranger's eyes lingered on them for a few seconds before he lowered his

gaze to the fire, looking suddenly exhausted. Pavel glanced at his brother, not sure what to do or say.

“Don’t be afraid of what we tell you,” Pavel said, trying again. “Sirin teaches __”

“Taught,” Talus said, eye darting up.

“Pardon?”

“Taught. Past tense. Sirin no longer teaches.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand…”

The man reached for something in his vest. For an instant, Pavel wondered if it would be a knife or a weapon, and if indeed he meant them harm. But he pulled out an old newspaper, brittle and yellow around the edges.

“Haven’t you heard?” he said, holding up the headline:

Sirin Assassinated

Pavel sat back, fear filling him like an icy current. Gustov stared with bulging eyes.

“Do you even know what year it is?” Talus asked.

Pavel’s mind was racing. Gustov looked at him with wild eyes.

“It’s…” Pavel quickly tried to add it up. “It must be…I’m not entirely—”

“It is Year Two,” Talus said.

“*Two*?”

“With Sirin’s passing a new calendar was set. It is two years since Sirin’s assassination. His successor, a man named Megas, has taken those teachings of your beloved master Sirin and twisted them into something darker than any fear you knew before. Do you think you have schooled your emotion so well that you feel no hope? No sorrow? No happiness or anger? I’m telling you that you don’t feel them because you are dead, and not by your choosing.”

“This is madness!” Gustov said, hands on his head.

“Yes. It is.” Talus dropped the newspaper clipping to the ground and reached into his tunic again. “I should know.” He withdrew a soft leather cloth wrapped around something from his pack. “I created the means by which it was done.”

“Means?” Pavel said. “What means?”

“The virus that has taken your humanity.”

His brother stood. “You must go. You, who say these terrible things. Harbinger of death. You will infect our path to Bliss with your fear!”

Talus remained seated on the log and carefully untied the string that bound the cloth. Inside lay a clear vial containing a liquid the color of blood. He set the small vessel in a knothole next to him. Firelight flickered over the rounded glass surface.

“If only you were right. I would go into the wilderness never to return! The truth is that you are the first people I’ve had contact with for two years, and because of my isolation I’ve retained my humanity. But now my life is no longer in humanity’s interest.”

“The first human you’ve had contact with? What about the girl?”

“Only a story to judge your reaction. I had to know.”

“Know what?”

“That you were indeed among the dead.”

“Dead men don’t walk and breathe and bleed!” Gustov said.

“They don’t?” Talus said quietly.

Gustov started to object again, but Pavel held up his hand to stop him. Perhaps it was better to allow the man his delusion.

“Let him speak. Please, Gustov, sit.”

His brother hesitated, then complied, and Talus continued.

“Under Sirin’s message of hope, the world found peace. But that peace began to crumble while you were hidden here in the Russian wasteland. It was then that I made the discovery that crushed the world.”

Pavel could not deny his intrigue at the man’s tale.

“I was among seven elite geneticists who oversaw a secret mission to unravel the genetic roots of emotion. I developed the program, the computer models that helped us understand our research. None of us knew who ran the project, only that we had limitless resources at our disposal. Do you know what DNA is?”

“DNA? Yes.”

Did all madmen speak with such precision and clarity?

“It was I, Talus Gurov, who identified the genetic components that make us superior to animals and define our very humanity—the DNA responsible for controlling specific functions of the limbic system where the emotions reside.”

“But it is our *spirit* that makes us human!” Gustov cried.

“Did God create only spirit? Or did he create the human who loves and laughs and hopes?”

“Who are you to teach us about God’s intentions?”

“I am a human! I am filled with laughter and hope…and tonight with sorrow and fear and a terrible anger.” Talus took a deep breath. “What I didn’t know was that my findings were being used to create a highly contagious virus named Legion, which contains the power to strip away our very humanity. It also rids man of all emotions but one. The only one required to control the masses.”

Pavel knew it before the stranger even said it.

“Fear,” he whispered.

“Yes. Fear.”

“But Sirin would never condone such a move—”

“You’re right,” Talus said. “He didn’t. When he refused the recommendation to infect the world as a permanent solution to the ambition and hatred that plagued mankind, Megas had him assassinated and set the virus loose. That was two years ago. Now it has infected every living human on Earth. You feel no emotion except fear, Pavel and Gustov Malincovich, because on one of your

visits to an outpost, you contracted Legion and lost your humanity. Haven't you noticed an increase in your fear these past two years?"

The question struck a chord of alarm in Pavel. How could this man know of their change these past two years?

"We mastered our emotions through terrible struggle," Gustov objected.

"No! The struggle you faced was *before* Legion took your humanity, two years ago. What you have embraced as a victory through these last two years of solitude and discipline was the onset of Legion. You did not *overcome* your emotions. Legion overcame you."

"And not you?" It was all absurd!

"I fled to the wasteland where I've lived for two years in complete isolation with all of my research and samples, searching for a way to defeat Legion. I think I have found the means at last. Now one day…one day, with your help, the world might be free."

"Madness!" Gustov said, rising again. "We will not help you. We reject these lies!"

"You speak out of fear. And if you deny the truth I bring, you will spend the remainder of your days in death. I chose you because as disciplined hermits your minds must be strong. Now you must entertain the truth of what I say."

Talus picked up the vial, pulled the cork free, and quickly dipped his index finger into the liquid. It came out red, like blood.

He held his bloodied finger up in the firelight and drilled them with a piercing stare. "I can prove that what I say is true."

"Blood?" Gustov said.

"A single drop of this blood on your tongue and you will know." Talus brought his hand to his mouth and touched the tip of his tongue to the blood. "Just a drop."

The fear and alarm coursing through Pavel's veins thickened his pulse.

"What is so special about this blood?" he asked.

"What does it matter?" Gustov cried. His eyes were wild. "It's poison, that's what it is!"

"Do I look poisoned?" Talus asked. A faint smudge of the blood colored his lower lip.

"Poison takes time. This means nothing."

The stranger suddenly stared over Gustov's shoulder and spoke in a hushed tone. "Are you protected from robbers?"

Pavel jerked his head around, following the stranger's stare. The night looked

empty. But before he could inquire, a finger was shoved into his mouth from the side.

Leaping to his feet, he flung out his arm and knocked the stranger's hand wide. The coppery taste of blood was unmistakable in his mouth. He spat onto the ground, trying to rid his mouth of the stuff.

Gustov stood back, face stricken with terror. "You've poisoned my brother! God have mercy, you've killed him!"

Talus lifted his palms in a sign of surrender, index finger now only half-bloodied. "Wait. Wait and see."

"Wait for what?" Pavel demanded, fighting back dread at the thought he might indeed die.

"A hint, that's all."

"What have you done to me? A hint of what?"

"Of *life*, man! Haven't you been listening to me? This vial holds the key. You have no idea the pains I undertook to acquire this last remnant of the blood."

Gustov was calling the man a lunatic, crying out that he had poisoned his brother, but now a faint tingle began to rise through Pavel's chest.

Talus watched him expectantly. "It's the last of the blood that defeated the Raison Strain so many years ago, taken from a man named Thomas Hunter. It is known now only as 'TH' blood, its source a closely guarded secret. Its properties were never clearly understood, but it has some effect on the virus."

"He's speaking madness!" Gustov cried.

But Pavel was now infected with the blood and he had to know more.

"Then the blood defeats the virus?"

"No. But I'm confident that it's strong enough to push death back for a few years if enough is ingested. I've given you only a single drop—a brief taste, as I've said."

Pavel was now only half listening. His heart was beating far too hard. A well of emotion he had long forgotten began to rise through his throat. He opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn't find the words.

"There's only enough left for five," Talus said, "And only for a time. You feel it, don't you?"

Pavel did not merely feel it. Emotions long dead now crushed him with such force that he found he could not move.

"I…I…" His tongue felt thick in his mouth.

"You've drugged him!" Gustov cried.

Pavel turned toward his brother and nearly buckled beneath a wave of sudden

tenderness toward him. Of love. Vital. Too vibrant. Gustov, his loyal brother, his friend! His vision swam beneath the onset of tears. “I…I forgot. I have forgotten.” And suddenly, it became clear to him: He and Gustov must help the world to remember. What it meant to feel. To bleed compassion, to soar with tenderness. To drown in love.

“It’s not a drug,” Talus was saying. “And this is not a gift for now—but for the future when it will be needed by a dead world.”

Sorrow, unlike any he could remember, suddenly swallowed Pavel—too sudden, too raw. Too real.

He dropped to his knees, grabbed his beard with both hands, threw back his head, and wailed at the dark sky. Tears flowed over his cheeks. He wept for his brother, gaping at him now, for the stranger, bearing his impossible burden…and for himself. He wept for the world because he knew that everything Talus had said must be true.

They were dead.

Gustov was beside himself, trying to get him to stop, citing the teachings of Sirin in a vain effort to silence his cries. Talus was speaking to him, urging calm, but Pavel hardly heard them. His mind was staggering under the weight of new life.

And then, more suddenly than it had come, the emotions left him only minutes after he’d first felt them. His cries trailed off. Silence settled over the camp.

Death swallowed him once more.

He pushed himself to his feet and stood wavering by the fire.

“You see?” Talus said.

“I had forgotten,” Pavel said, with the sense that, were the blood still with him, he would mourn this very fact.

He glanced at Gustov’s stricken face and then back at Talus. Yes. There was something there, in the stranger’s face, that he had not seen in years. Hope.

“Now you too will die?”

“I will be like you within weeks.”

“You came here knowing you would die.”

“Yes. But I cannot save the world alone.”

“It was a suicide mission.”

“In a manner of speaking. Yes.”

Pavel paced behind the log.

“Tell me what I should do.”

“Join with me to form a new order. An order of Keepers dedicated to protecting these secrets. We three will take this truth forward and keep the blood for the day when it will usher in a new kingdom. A world of mortals.”

“Mortals?” Gustov cried.

“We will all take wives and bear children to keep the truth.”

“Wives?”

Pavel ignored Gustov’s outcry—he would see soon enough.

“What else?”

“You will learn the secrets of my science before they too are buried forever. And you will learn how to fight.”

“First marry, now fight? It undoes every vow we’ve taken!”

“Make no mistake, this secret brings terrible danger that must be guarded with our very lives. The struggle has only begun in this world where life itself is now outlawed. Forbidden.”

“But all the while we will remain dead.”

“Yes. The dead Keepers of truth. Of life.”

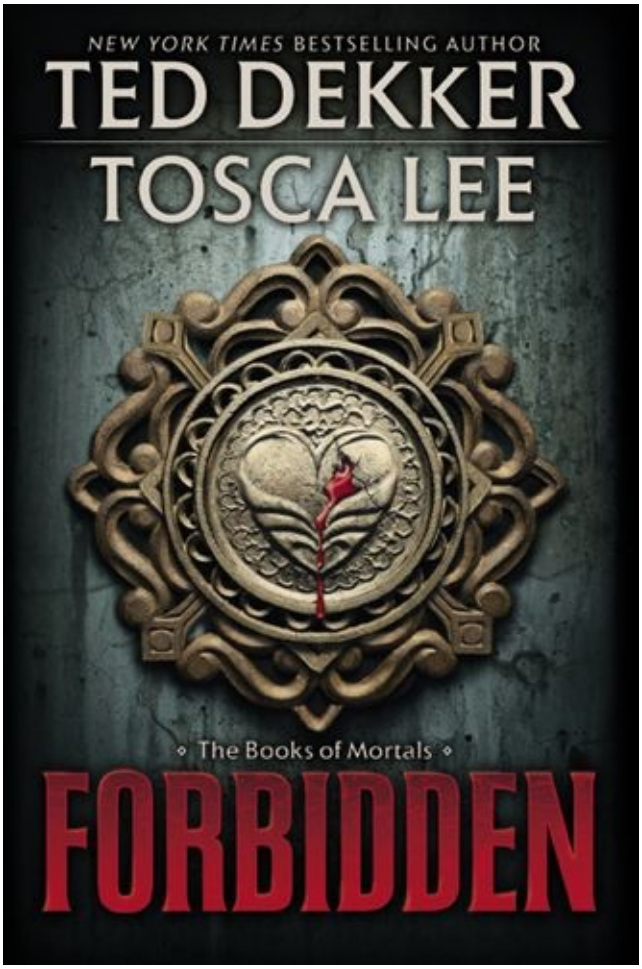
A breeze stirred through the clearing, lifting the creased newspaper page from the ground, sending it skittering a few feet into the fire. As Pavel watched, Sirin’s face contorted and blackened within its flames.

He lifted his eyes to Talus. “Make me a Keeper,” he said.

Talus nodded, then turned his gaze to Gustov’s blanched face. But it was Pavel who spoke first.

“It’s your turn, brother,” he said.

The Epic begins four hundred and seventy one years later…



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About the Authors

Ted Dekker is a *New York Times* bestselling author of more than twenty novels, with a total of more than 5 million books in print. He is known for thrillers that combine adrenaline-laced plots with incredible confrontations between good and evil.

Tosca Lee left her position working with Fortune 500 companies as a senior consultant for the Gallup Organization to pursue her first love: writing. She is the critically acclaimed author of *Demon* and *Havah* and is best known for her humanizing portraits of maligned characters. She makes her home in the Midwest.

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