

FORBIDDEN RELIGIONS

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SINNERS AND SAVIORS 5**INTRODUCTION 8****Kneel and Present Your Neck 8****PATHWAYS TO POWER 11****The Shattered Spear 11**

Blood of Sparta 11

The Spark of War 13

Liturgy of the Spear 13

The Soldier's Code 13

Temple of the Spear: Lisbon 14

Perspectives 15

Story Hooks 15

Death Squad 15*Discovering the Tomb* 15**The Withered Ones 15**

Servants of the Monster 16

Ancient Tales, Modern Blood 16

Masks 17

Faith of the Withered 17

Sacred Acts 17

Perspectives 18

Obfuscate 18

Level 2 18*Ghost's Passing* 18

Story Hooks 19

Marked for Sacrifice 19*Willing Victim* 19**The Shepherds of Ur-Shulgi 19**

Hierarchy 20

Heralds 20*Pashas* 20*Shepherds* 21*Fanatics* 21

Organization 22

Beliefs 22

Modus Operandi 22

Perspectives 23

New Rituals 23

Level 2 23*The Shroud of Silence* 23

Story Hooks 23

Hired Gun 23*Heretical Purge* 24**The Praesidium 24**

Ave Pyramidem 24

Cornerstones of the Apex 25

Ave Ordinem 25

Cedant Classes Sanguini 25

Perspectives 28

Story Hooks 28

Old Knowledge 28*Strengthening Blood* 29**DREAMS OF GOLCONDA 31****The Children of Salvation 31**

The First Child 31

The Children 32

Salvation's Hunt 32*The Heresy* 34

Hierarchy 34

Perspectives 34

Story Hooks 34

Caught in the Crossfire 35*A Tasty Morsel* 35*"I was a Vampire once..."* 35**The Butterflies 36**

Blanca's Rapture 36

Reality TV Shows 36

Organization 37

The Family Home 37*Joseph and His Senior Ghouls* 37*Beliefs* 37

The Household Within the Domain 37

Initiation 38

Sacraments 38

Enemies 38

Perspectives 38

Coterie Type: The Household 38

Story Hooks 39

Made the Papers 39*Chameleon* 39*Lost Childer* 39**Eremites 40**

The Saint on the Pillar 40

Organization 41

Stages of Enlightenment 41

Supporters 42*Acolytes* 42*Gurus* 42*Beliefs* 42

Recruitment 43

The Acolyte in the Domain 43

Perspectives 44

Fortitude 44

Level 3 44*Seal the Beast's Maw* 44

Story Hooks 44

Seek Out the Wise Woman 44*Empty Havens* 44*Rampage* 45**Hunters of the Golden Cicada 45**

Where the Yangtze and Jialing

Meet, Peace Can Be Found 45

Lessons of the Past Carry

Forth the Future 45

The Great Teacher 47

Perspectives 47

Chongqing 48

Story Hooks 48

Under Our Protection 48*Prodigal Childer* 48*Pest Problem* 49**ESCHATOLOGICAL THOUGHT 51****The Whispers of the Dead 51**

The Susurrus 52

Behind the Speaker's Mask 52

The Word of the Speaker 53

What Do the Whispers Do? 54

Hierarchy 55

Perspectives 55

Story Hooks 55

Another Toothpick 55*Foul Leakage* 55*Ancient Enmity* 56**The Orphans of Enoch 56**

The Lost Wander No More 56

Protect the End 57

Orphans Lost and Orphans Found	57	<i>Warlock Fire</i>	70	Story Hooks	77
Build the City	58	<i>Parity Shift</i>	70	<i>A Hair in My Soup</i>	77
Perspectives	59	The Children of the Devourer	70	<i>Live Like a Rockstar</i>	77
Story Hooks	59	<i>Across a Tumultuous Sea</i>	70	<i>Rare Vintage</i>	78
<i>You Are Chosen</i>	59	<i>Ironwood Horror</i>	70	The Soldiers of the Adversary	78
<i>Unusual Habits</i>	59	<i>The Priesthood</i>	71	<i>In the Beginning</i>	78
<i>The Gardener Cometh</i>	60	<i>The Congregants</i>	71	<i>A Time of Revelations</i>	78
The Third Day	60	<i>Obsessions and Convictions</i>	71	<i>The Priesthood</i>	79
<i>Empire of Blood</i>	60	<i>Servants and Tools</i>	72	<i>Perspectives</i>	82
<i>Reign of One Thousand Years</i>	60	<i>Current Activities</i>	72	Story Hooks	82
<i>Antwerp, Belgium</i>	61	<i>Perspectives</i>	73	<i>The Smell of Burning</i>	82
<i>By the Mark of the Moon</i>	61	Story Hooks	73	<i>Diabolic Coup</i>	83
<i>Every Good Gift</i>	61	<i>The Call North</i>	73		
<i>Perspectives</i>	62	<i>Marauding Horde</i>	73	OPTIONAL	
Story Hooks	62	The Penny Dining Club	74	ADVANTAGES	85
<i>The Crawlspace is Full</i>	62	<i>A Gourmet Experience</i>	74	Merits and Flaws	85
<i>Interception Mission</i>	63	<i>The Taste of Pain</i>	75	Looks	85
<i>Victims of the Hunt</i>	63	<i>The Founders</i>	76	<i>Semblance of the Methuselah</i>	85
RUINOUS BELIEFS	65	<i>The Diners</i>	76	Psychological	86
The Bloodless Pilgrims	65	<i>Culinary Invention</i>	76	<i>Penitence</i>	86
<i>The First Pilgrims</i>	65	<i>New Ritual</i>	76	<i>Unholy Will</i>	86
<i>The Path to Purity</i>	66	<i>Level 1</i>	76	<i>Zealotry</i>	86
<i>New Ritual</i>	66	<i>Enrich the Blood</i>	76	Contagion	86
<i>Level 3: Bloodless Feast</i>	66	<i>Level 2</i>	77	Mythical	87
<i>Perspectives</i>	69	<i>Enhance Dyscrasia</i>	77	<i>Cold Dead Hunger</i>	87
Story Hooks	69	<i>Perspectives</i>	77	<i>Pack Diablerie</i>	87
				Loresheets	87



SINNERS AND SAVIORS

By Steffie de Vaan

JADEN

Jaden bowed crisply at the waist as his sire Esmé sank down in a curtsy that left her cerulean gown pooling on the floor. Esmé's brooch, a broken spear wrought in filigree, revealed their membership in the Shattered Spear, but none in Barcelona had indicated their recognition of the signet. Barcelona was an opulent court, both owing to Prince Maria Del Torro trying to outdo her Ventrue seneschal and to it being Barcelona. The famous city had always chosen art and beauty over function. Jaden felt the eyes of the gathered Kindred upon him as they whispered about his choice of attire: impeccable coattails. He ignored them — embraced before hormone replacement therapy was discovered, he was used to stares.

Prince Del Torro waved them up. "Be welcome," she said. "What news of Lisbon?"

The news of Lisbon, of course, was shit. The city, left defenseless by the departure of its elders, was still fighting off inquisition attacks — much like Barcelona itself, and best not to even mention Madrid. Still, things were better than just a decade ago, which was the only reason Jaden and Esmé were able to travel from Lisbon to Barcelona. That, not coincidentally, was the real question

behind Del Torro's inquiry — how safe were the roads, and *why* had they embarked on the hazardous journey?

Jaden zoned out as Esmé waxed eloquently of a new Iberian alliance. They'd practiced the tale exhaustively, and he knew it by heart. He scanned the crowd instead. Del Torro seemed skeptical — she knew better than most how fractured the peninsula was — and her seneschal Jacques Fontaine eyed the pair hungrily. Any alliance between Barcelona and Lisbon would catch Madrid in a pincer and might finally claim it for the Camarilla. Fontaine's wasn't the only greedy expression though, and Jaden observed all of them from beneath thick lashes. Madrid was the largest prize still unclaimed in Europe, a fat pearl in a dark and bloody ocean. It took a certain kind of ambition and bloodthirstiness to snatch it. Those possessed of such characteristics could be the monsters he and Esmé were searching for. One captured his attention in particular: an imperial, dark-skinned woman surrounded by fawning sycophants. She was unlikely to pay Jaden any heed, but he also spied a withdrawn woman at her side: a portly, conservatively-dressed woman with dark eyes Jaden could lose himself in for nights. He glanced briefly at Esmé, and her eyes flickered to the ground to indicate her

approval. His sire would work the imperial elder, and he would pursue his own target.

IVORY

Ivory laughed as Jaden tripped over his words. "Your Mandarin is excellent," she praised him, "but your Wu needs work."

He laughed too, spinning her around the velvet-clad room once before pulling her close. They'd been at it for weeks, pretending to be two love-struck kine. The laughter was false of course, lips never pulled back far enough to reveal sharp teeth, but the facade suited them both. It was easier to negotiate an alliance if all predators involved pretended to be nice people, for a while at least.

Ivory noticed the way Jaden's eyes lingered on her neck. She pulled back. "Your sire is meeting with Primogen Velez again," she said noncommittally.

"Hm," he replied, feigning equal disinterest.

This too, was part of their game. Jaden and his sire Esmé weren't in Barcelona to pursue an Iberian alliance, no matter the pretty tales they spun. Ivory hadn't figured out why they were really in Barcelona though, which made Jaden a shiny new toy. It helped that he hailed from

Lisbon, the purported resting place of Artemis Orthia. If the Children of Salvation could sink their fangs into that methuselah... The thought made Ivory salivate. First though, she had to unwrap the mystery of Jaden and his sire.

"Del Torro's hold on Barcelona is absolute, you know," she continued, feeling a pang of possessiveness towards her clan.

He laughed at her. "You think we'd approach a Lasombra Primogen to overthrow a Lasombra Prince?" Then, after just a beat to let his mockery sting: "Although it would be like your clan. But no, we're not here to unseat the Prince."

Ivory moved, using her superior strength to push Jaden against the wall harder than befitted their playful facade. "Then why are you here?" she demanded, running her tongue hungrily over the thin, sensitive flesh concealing his carotid artery.

He tilted his head back, offering himself — daring her to take him. Ivory let out a rough grunt and released him. She withdrew to a safe distance, lest he tempt her again. Jaden chuckled, exulted in his victory. Instinctually, Ivory leaned forward, fingers curling with malicious intent. Only the teachings of Salvation allowed her to maintain a grip, though she resolved to find her lover once the Hunt began. He would experience the depths of her hunger then.

"Come, sweet Ivory," Jaden cajoled, recognizing that he'd gone too far. "Let there be peace between us. Peace and perhaps more?" He bowed in that beautifully fluent movement that had first drawn her attention. She growled again, though not in frustration now. This time, when he offered himself, she accepted. She would press him about Lisbon later.

JADEN

"You're certain?" Esmé asked. "She admitted her sins?" In the privacy of

their own quarters, Esmé had traded the gowns of Barcelona's court for the leather attire favored by the Shattered Spear. She looked like an Amazon of ancient myth, ready to slay her enemies — which was precisely what she was in Barcelona to do. The spear she hefted in her fist was coated with blood, and her flush cheeks temporarily lent her the radiance of the living. Esmé liked to hunt kine, literally, when feeding.

"Hmm," Jaden hedged. Ivory was bold, even irreverent. She pushed and pressed about almost everything that struck her fancy — but not Lisbon, and the Church of Orthia had come up only once in their conversations. She was a lioness looking every which way but at her prey. "I'm sure she is one of them, honored sire," he said, "but I don't know whether she's committed any sins yet."

Esmé fixed him with a frown from beneath her hard, dark brows. "Nonsense. Addicts do not choose how and when they sin."

That was precisely it, though — when Ivory drank from him, she drew it out, savoring every drop. Surely a foul diablerist would lack such self-control? Still, he was in no position to question Esmé. "What's our next step, sire?" he asked.

"We must uncover their leader, and the hellish pit where they perform their dark blasphemy," Esmé insisted. "Primogen Velez has given me nothing. Keep working the ancilla."

IVORY

"Can you recruit him?" Sofia Velez drawled.

Ivory considered. She felt passingly fond of Jaden, although their escapades with one another were rapidly pushing her from false affection to obsession. And better still, the feeling was mutual. Jaden was elusive and secretive, but she could read his body and emotions clear as night. Even so, he *was* holding back.

"I think so, yes."

Velez snatched Ivory by the throat, gripping her with her sharp fingernails and lifting her into the air. "You *think* so?" she hissed.

"I know so!" Ivory choked out. "He is mine." Velez's grip tightened, nails seeking the precious vitae below. Ivory felt a terrible pop, and could barely wheeze, "Ours! He is ours!" through her damaged windpipe. Velez dropped her child to the plush carpet. Ivory knew better than to rise, instead prostrating herself before her sire.

"Let's set a deadline," Velez purred. "It will help you focus. A week?" It wasn't really a question.

Mute, Ivory acquiesced, still making herself as small as possible.

JADEN

Lying on his back next to Ivory, Jaden kicked one leg from beneath the blankets, trying in vain to relieve his discomfort. The bed had too many pillows. The feather blanket was too thick. Everything in Barcelona was soft and opulent, as if to disguise bloody daggers underneath. He resisted the urge to throw them all on the floor, and instead rolled onto his side to trace lines on Ivory's skin.

"This Church of Salvation," he whispered. "Explain it to me again?"

"It's not that complicated," Ivory sulked, exasperated. "We lift each other up."

"To salvation?" he asked, not for the first time.

"Yes."

"From," he gestured broadly, "this?"

"Yes."

The conviction in her voice was absolute. Although she wasn't lying, Jaden knew Ivory was skipping a few steps. "I help you secure a haven and herd, and boom, no more curse?"

Her silence spoke volumes — she was leaving out the key details. They'd