

Dead Men's Tales

A Loveraftian Mystery for **Secrets & Lies**

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Introduction

"Dead Men's Tales" is a hardboiled detective story that draws from some of my favorite Lovecraft stories, principally "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward." If you've never read it, you should. I'm not gonna go out of my way to explain the finer points of necromancy.

Here's your premise: In 1934 New Orleans, an undead necromancer is blackmailing a family of Creole cannibals. Those cannibals hire a group of clueless investigators to help put a stop to it. Hijinks ensue.

Timeline

1700's - Pirates & smugglers set up shop in tunnels & caves outside New Orleans.

1788 - Shortly after the Great Fire, a Spanish pirate named Zacarias Castillo is convicted of Satanism and Witchcraft, based largely on the Testimony of a French woman named Isabelle Manners. He is hanged by the neck until dead, then buried in an unmarked grave.

1840's - Pirate tunnels are used by abolitionists as part of the Underground Railroad.

1882 - While preparing for the 1884 World's Fair, construction crews unearth several pirate tunnels beneath what will become Audubon Park.

1920's – The Saint Cyr family gets involved in moonshine and bootlegging. They amass a small fortune and establish themselves in the New Orleans underworld.

1933 – A young man named Tomas Jackson raises Zacarias from the dead.

1934 - Now

2 months ago - Tomas purchases a town home near Audubon Park on Zacarias' behalf. He pays entirely in Spanish doubloons. They restore access to the pirate tunnels beneath the house and begin raising interrogation subjects from the dead.

3 weeks ago - Zacarias vampirises Tomas and regains his full vitality. Raises one of the Saint Cyr family's victims and discovers their terrible secret.

Yesterday - Having exhausted his pirate coffers, Zacarias attempts to blackmail Cyrus Saint Cyr.

Today - Cyrus hires a team of local investigators to track down the blackmailer.

The Investigation

This scenario has a little more structure than is typical for "**Secrets & Lies**," but most of it is in the set-up. Make sure your players actually carry out the plan Cyrus gives them (see below) and you should hit relationship map territory in no time.

The Job - Saint Cyr Estate

Cyrus owns a newly-built, plantation-style mansion on Basin Street, abutting the red light district. The fact that his family made its money on moonshine and bootlegging is an open secret. (The cannibalism thing, on the other hand, is a *secret* secret.)

The protagonists are greeted by servants and taken into a sitting room. Let them catch glimpses of Emory and Chastity, just so they'll all recognize each other later on. Cyrus tells them he's being blackmailed (won't tell them why, of course) and the drop is going down tonight. He wants them to tail the blackmailer or, more likely, his courier back to whatever rock he's hiding under. Then, report back and let him take care of the rest.

Your players are free to conduct any initial investigations they like with the rest of the day, but they have to be in position at Saint Mary's cemetery before midnight.

The Chase - Saint Mary's Cemetery

Promptly at midnight, Emory Saint Cyr pulls up to one of the gates and enters the cemetery with a canvas bag over his shoulder. He deposits it in the entryway to the "Manners" mausoleum, then leaves. An hour or two pass before anyone else approaches: a hunch-backed figure in rags and a deep hood (Isabelle Manners). It walks with an awkward limp that doesn't seem to slow it down. The courier heads straight for the mausoleum, picks up the bag, and heads for the opposite side of the cemetery. If the protagonists want to keep up, they'll have to shake a leg.

At first, the chase is all about Nerve. Give it a soft boil with a flop of 3; if any of the protagonists fail, the courier gets wise and takes off like a spider monkey with a hotfoot! With a hit to the Guts, they manage to track the courier to a drainage pipe just outside Audubon Park. Inside, the only clue is a thick, oak door that's barred from the inside. Above this door sits a row of town homes. Figuring out which one the door connects to, if any, will require some legwork.

Legwork - Audubon Park

The investigators can take Savvy hits to look up property records, news stories about the Worlds Fair dig, or the Manners family (who are remarkable only for being long-time residents and Isabelle's testimony against Zacarias Castillo). They could use Moxy to go door-to-door and politely interrogate the residents, though Zacarias won't answer. In fact, it doesn't really look like anyone's home. If asked, his neighbors will say they see him leave about once a week and return with groceries or other supplies, but that's about it. Otherwise, they'd never even know he was there.

Anyone who spends some time watching the place realizes (with a Savvy hit) that they're not the only people conducting surveillance. A small group of black men and women appear to be taking turns watching the place from the park. They'll take an interest in the protagonists, if not beaten to the punch, leading to some mutual surveillance or a quick confrontation.

Unless something goes *really* wrong, the watchers will be happy to tell the protagonists why they're there: someone they know went missing a few weeks ago and they think the man in that house had something to do with it. If they want to know any more, they'll have to go see Shoeless John.

Optional: The Houngan - Out on the Bayou

Shoeless John is an elderly black man who lives in the swamp outside New Orleans. (He once swore to a Loa that he'd always keep the Bayou beneath his feet.) He's a quick judge of character and won't hesitate to tell the protagonists all about his wayward student, Tomas. He suspects that "the bokor" (aka. Zacarias) was tutoring Tomas in black magic. He fears that Tomas has been sacrificed to some dark fiend, but he doesn't know for sure. He needs answers.

If the protagonists appear cooperative, he'll give them some gris-gris bags that he claims will protect them from black magic when worn against their skin. (They may or may not reduce Flops against Zacarias. Regardless, the players can put a new relationship on the table.) He'll also warn them about working for someone as "evil" as Cyrus Saint Cyr, even if the investigators never mention it. If they want to know why, he recommends they take a look around the Saint Cyr estate...

Optional: Trespassing - The Saint Cyr Estate

Sneaking around the mansion requires a Nerve roll; talking their way in takes Moxy. A failure means they get caught in the act, probably by Chastity, but not before they make the following discovery: Cyrus' massive kitchen looks like a slaughter house. Blood splatters and scraps of meat litter the floor and tables. In boiling pots and trash bins, they find bones that are unmistakably human. (Remember to hit their Savvy hard!)

Dealing with a failed roll will take some ill-advised violence (Guts) or a lot of very fast talking (Moxy). In the former case, Chastity is surprisingly strong and resilient (Flop 4). Even once they've subdued her, the protagonists will have to figure out a way to keep her quiet while they figure out what to do. Whether that means killing or kidnapping her, Nerve rolls may be in order.

In the latter case, the players may have a chance to build a new relationship. Chastity, like her brother, is eager to depose Cyrus and seize control of his organization. She might see a way to use the investigators to lure her father and brother into a vulnerable position, like in the middle of raiding a blackmailer's hideout, and make sure it goes poorly for them. Whether or not the protagonists want to follow through with such a Faustian bargain is up to them.

In either case, put a new secret on the table: The Saint Cyr family are cannibals.

Revelations - In the Necromancer's Lair

If you're short on time, feel free to skip over Shoeless John and the Saint Cyr's skeletons. What lies in the tunnels beneath Zacarias' townhouse should be all they really need to see.

Getting down there isn't difficult; it just requires a little breaking & entering (Nerve). The house itself doesn't appear lived-in. There's very little in the kitchen and most of the furniture is covered in a fine layer of dust. In the basement, a large swath of the floor has been excavated to reveal an old well. A rope ladder dangles down into the abyss.

The bottom of the "well" opens into a short tunnel with two adjoining rooms. The first appears to be a study: desk, lamp, chair, and a straw mat on the floor. The desk is covered in arcane books and loose notes written in some inscrutable code. The only thing they can make out is a ledger of names. Tomas and Isabelle are among them.

The second room is a cramped, cylindrical chamber whose walls are covered in arcane diagrams and incantations. (The Yog-Sothoth invocation, used to raise or put down the dead, sticks in the mind like a bad jingle. Take a Savvy hit.) At its center sits a reinforced, oak chair with iron restraints built into the arms and legs. It's stained black with soot. Jars full of ash line the far wall, each marked with a symbol that matches one of the names in the ledger. Tomas' jar is full, but Isabelle's is empty.

Beyond these rooms, the tunnel becomes a stone staircase and descends further into the earth. Down here, another tunnel leads to the oak door they found earlier. The tunnel's walls are lined with crude cells, each of which contains a whimpering creature clothed in rags. They're emaciated beyond anything a human could survive. The protagonists might recognize one of them as the courier from the cemetery. (You might want to call for a soft boil on Savvy or Nerve, just to see if anyone flips out.)

The goal for this scene is to suss out Zacarias' secret: that he's a revenant and can be destroyed using the Yog-Sothoth invocation. First, your players might just put it together based on the physical clues: the interrogation chair, the wall carvings, the revenants in the

lower tunnel, etc. If not, Isabella could tell them; she'd love nothing more than to see her tormentor sent back to hell. Finally, Shoeless John can put it together if anyone describes the tunnels to him. Once that's on the table, you're ready for the big finale!

Conflagration - The End is Nigh

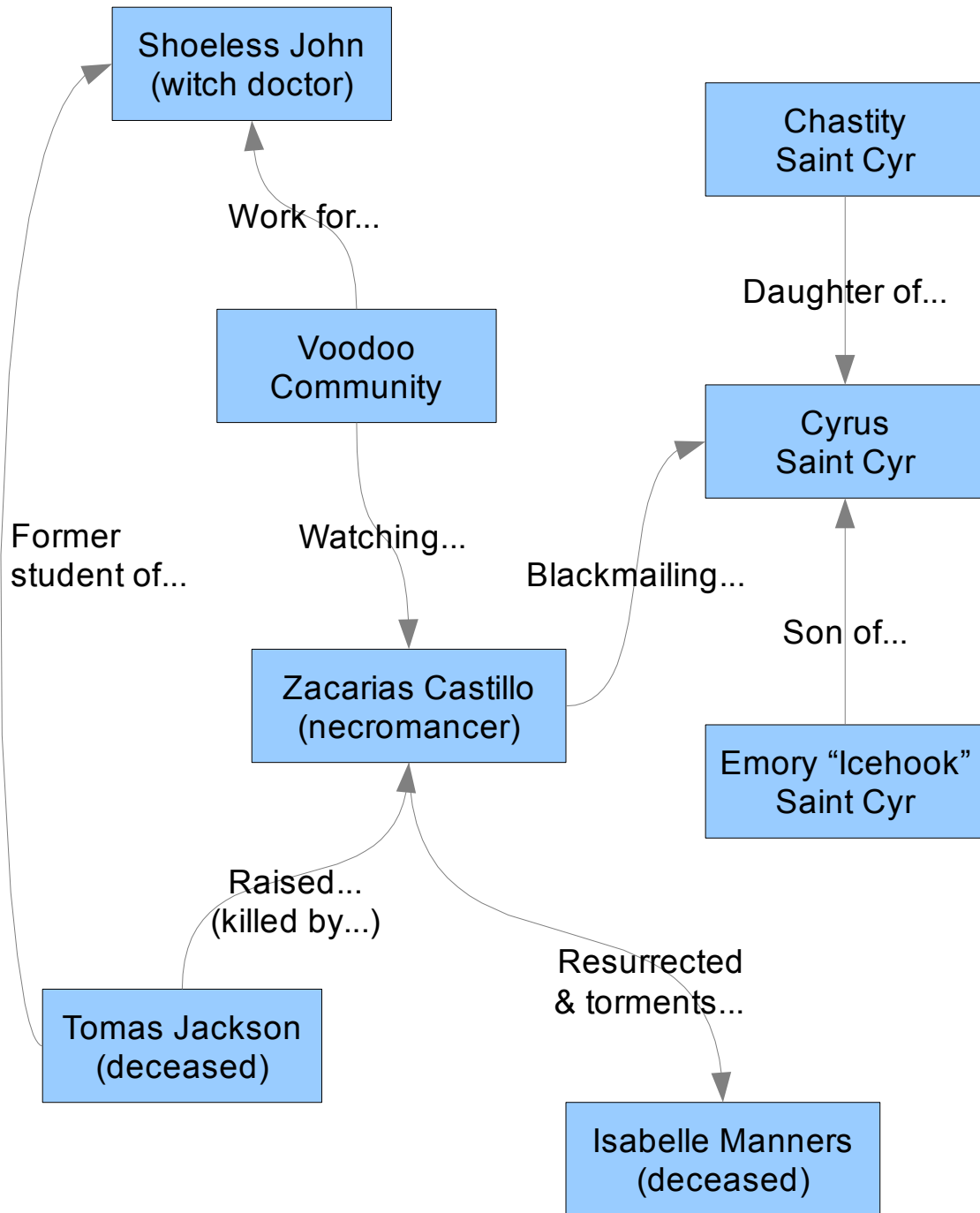
There are many ways your players could resolve the shit storm they've found themselves in. First, they could just do their job and point the Saint Cyr family in the right direction. Second, they could side with Shoeless John and, with his mojo behind them, take out Zacarias on their own. Third, they could just get the hell out of town.

My favorite option, however, is playing both sides against the middle. Make sure Cyrus goes into those tunnels when Zacarias will be ready for him, then secure the exits and let them murder each other. The only problem with any of these plans is that the necromancer cannot be killed by violence; someone *must* put him down with the Yog-Sothoth invocation.

Before that happens, he's got more than enough juju up his sleeve to wipe out Cyrus and all his thugs. Don't let the protagonists see it themselves, at least not at first, just present them with the aftermath: charred corpses wearing masks of agony, men whose blood has been turned to dust, other who gouged out their own eyes, etc.

Zacarias fights like a madman, even when he's not calling down the wrath of the Outer Gods. He has nothing to fear from violence, so wades into it with abandon. Abandon and a machete. A failed roll against him is bad, bad news for the protagonist. Hopefully, they brought back-up to finish the invocation for them...

Relationship Map



Zacarias Castillo - Necromancer, murderer, and blackmailer.

During the 1780's, this Spanish pirate learned many dark secrets from Haitian witch doctors, including methods for raising the dead from their essential salts. He was resurrected by a disgruntled student of voodoo, who wanted a mentor in black magic. Bad idea. Zacarias used his would-be student, then vampirized him to restore his vitality.

His town home sits atop a series of secret tunnels, where he resurrects and interrogates the dead. His altar to Yog-Sothoth includes an invocation that anyone can use to raise or a properly-prepared corpse... or reduce it back to its essential salts.

Flop: 5 vs. magic or violence.

Secret: Is himself a revenant; can be reduced to his essential salts by anyone uttering the Yog-Sothoth invocation carved on the walls of his summoning chamber.

Isabelle Manners - Zacarias' killer, victim, and errand girl.

In 1788, she uncovered Zacharias' diabolism and had him hanged. She died many years later and was buried in Saint Mary's cemetery. In 1934, Zacarias intentionally hybridized her with animal remains and resurrected her for the sole purpose of torture. He sends her to pick up the ransom money, which is to be left at her grave.

Flop: 3 vs. pursuit or violence. (Has claws & powerful legs.)

Shoeless John - Voodoo witch doctor.

Even the oldest and wisest of houngans know relatively little about the mythos. However, this one knows well enough to keep the spirits appeased, rather than asking them for favors. Whether or not his magic is of any use to the players is up to you.

Secrets:

- Cannot set foot in the city. (Believes he is oath-bound to a Loa.)

Cyrus Saint Cyr - Criminal, patriarch, and cannibal.

This ruthless Creole crime lord is much, much older than he looks. He learned about cannibalism from an old book; he's illiterate, but the pictures gave him ideas. Prohibition made him a player in the criminal underworld, but he had expanded into other rackets well before its repeal in 1933. He loves his children too much to recognize the gleam of betrayal in their hungry eyes.

Flops:

- 4 vs. physical threats of any kind.
- 1 vs. threats against his children.

Secret: Is a cannibal. Yummy.

Emory "Ice Hook" Saint Cyr - Son of Cyrus Saint Cyr.

Cyrus' enforcer fancies himself the *real* head of the Saint Cyr crime syndicate, since he handles its day-to-day affairs. There are only two things stopping him from serving his father up for dinner: 1) he's not sure the old man can be killed and 2) he knows his sister would stab him in the back before the old man's blood had cooled.

Flops:

- 4 vs. physical threats of any kind.
- 1 vs. any appeal to his greed or ambition.

Secret: Loves the long pig. (That means he eats people.)

Chastity Saint Cyr - Daughter of Cyrus Saint Cyr.

When you grew up eating human flesh, it's not easy to suffer other societal taboos. This is especially true for the only female Saint Cyr. She dreams of taking her father's place, but lacks the support of the rank-and-file. Both Cyrus and Emory would have to die in ways that could not be linked to her. Then, none of the thugs would dare challenge her.

Flops:

- 4 vs. physical threats of any kind.
- 1 vs. any appeal to her greed or ambition.

Secret: Loves the long pig (see above).