

A Creepy Domicile



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The house was old and hadn't been kept up and Blair thought there was something really creepy about it as he looked up at its dark, third-story windows. Standing in the driveway beside his beloved Volvo, head tilted back to stare at the massive structure, he had the distinct feeling someone - *or something* his mind inserted unhelpfully - was watching him.

No one had lived in the Mason House for more than 100 years. Hell, no one ever stayed more than one night there. Even teenagers didn't sneak through the high, spired gates to have Halloween parties at the house. The place was just abandoned.

As his eyes roamed over the house's Gothic architecture, a line from a Shirley Jackson story went through Blair's head, "Whatever walks there, walks alone," and Blair shivered despite the fact that it was not a cold day.

"This is ridiculous," Blair muttered and hefted his backpack. Straightening his shoulders, Blair walked to the front porch. He was supposed to meet Dr. Ruiz and a teaching assistant, Tom Green, here to

inventory and pack some rare old volumes in the library. One of Mason's great-great-grandkids had mentioned her ancestor, Cedric Mason, had recorded all of his travels among the indigenous peoples in the South Pacific one hundred and fifty years ago and had the information bound into books. That was unusual enough for the anthropology department to want to get a look at the writings. A large part of the population didn't read or write back then and you couldn't go to a local Staples to buy paper. So source material about indigenous peoples of the South Pacific would be worth a look.

The current heir had offered to loan the volumes to Rainier's anthropology department. The catch: Margaret Mason refused to go in the house.

"You think it's haunted?" Blair had asked. Dr. Francisco Ruiz, his assistant, Tom Green, and Margaret Mason were all sitting around a conference table in the anthropology department. Ruiz and Tom looked at Blair like he was nuts but Margaret looked down, her cheeks turning pink.

"It sounds ridiculous when you're sitting in a conference room at Rainier," she admitted. "But an old family legend says Cedric Mason brought something back when he came home from his travels." She paused for a moment and looked at the three men. "Every Mason who has ever lived in that house for more than a few days died a violent death."

"Every Mason?" Blair questioned.

"Every Mason old or young."

"So you think the house has some kind of curse?"

"I think I have no desire to go back in there." Margaret paused and glanced at the three men. "I went there once, I guess to satisfy my own curiosity. There were no ghosts with rattling chains but, for all its size, the rooms seem claustrophobic and the walls close in on you. I don't know what's there, but I'm not going back." She pushed a key across the table towards Dr. Ruiz. "I'll give you a key, not that you'll need it. The doors aren't locked. No one goes in the house, voluntarily."

Trying to ignore that conversation, Blair took a deep breath and put his foot on the first step, his hand reaching out to grab the railing. "What the hell," he pulled his hand back shaking several beetles off it. His palm and fingers were covered with some kind of rotting black mold. The stench of it made Blair gag as he reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a tissue, wiping off his hand with quick jerky movements. Looking at the railing, Blair could see it was covered with some kind of black mold and there were huge numbers of beetles crawling through it.

Stepping clear of the railing, Blair climbed the steps and stopped at the door. "I should go in," he told himself but for some reason he felt reluctant. Whether it was Margaret's tale or something else, he couldn't bring himself to put his hand on the doorknob and enter. Not even for the promise of books.

Taking a step back, deciding he would wait for the others, Blair glanced out at the path and the misshapen trees that lined the walk and surrounded the house. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong and it took him a few minutes to realize that it wasn't that there was something wrong; rather there was something missing. There were no sounds of birds, anywhere, no bees buzzing about, no small squirrels running around. The grounds were silent. "Now, you're just scaring yourself," Blair muttered. "Don't let your imagination get the best of you. This is just a house."

With those words, Blair turned and, with a flick of his wrist, opened the door and peered into the house as dust swirled around like a sidewise tornado. “Dusty,” he said aloud to break the silence, but his voice was absorbed into the silence. Feeling like an invader, Blair put one foot in the door, glancing around. The front hall was large and had rooms opening on either side. From his position on the doorstep he could see a massive staircase went up and divided going in two directions with a large gallery that circled and overlooked the main hall, rooms running along the gallery.

He was about to enter when a honk behind him made him jump and he turned, seeing Dr. Ruiz pull up with Tom Green. Ignoring the relief he felt at not being alone, Blair turned in the doorway and watched the two men approach.

“Hey Blair,” Tom called as Dr. Ruiz started up the stairs, grabbing the railing.

“Watch it, there’s mold on the rail,” Blair warned and Ruiz turned and looked at the rail.

“Really? I don’t see any,” he looked closely. “I mean the wood is pitted and weathered but it still looks sturdy.”

Blair came over and looked down. The bugs, the smell and the mold were gone.

“I...ah must have wiped it off,” Blair answered as Tom whistled, looking in the door.

“Wow, this is,” he waved his hand, “majestic,” he finished for lack of another word and entered, Dr. Ruiz following. Reluctantly, Blair followed the two men into the hall and the three looked at the rooms on either side of the hall.

“Let’s find the library and get started,” Dr. Ruiz suggested. “I’d like to get out of here before dark. There’s supposed to be a storm tonight and I’d rather not get caught in it.”

Blair agreed with Ruiz; he wanted out before dark but not because of an approaching storm. Something about this place set his nerves on edge. He wondered what Jim, with his heightened senses, would make of the house. “Everyone has a flashlight?” he asked. Margaret had said there was electricity but in an old place like this it paid to have backup lighting.

“Okay, let’s look around and find the library,” Ruiz suggested and headed left as Tom shrugged and headed right. Blair glanced at the staircase debating whether the library could be on the second floor. Logically, there would be bedrooms and maybe a nursery upstairs, maids’ quarters, too, but it seemed less likely that a library would be there. Relieved that he wasn’t going upstairs, he turned and went down the hall, passing the rooms Tom was exploring and heading for the back of the house.

In the distance he could see light filtering in through a back window as he made his way down the hall, and though he knew it wasn’t possible, Blair felt the walls closing in. Every time he looked, the walls were where they belonged, but when he walked, he could feel something brushing against his shoulders. “Get a grip, the walls can’t be moving,” he whispered as he passed a formal dining room on the left and a kitchen on the right. The kitchen seemed to spread all the way to the back wall of the house on the right but there was another room behind the dining room on the left.

At the end of the hall was a window and the light filtering through it seemed to be playing tricks. It made the floor seem like it was writhing and Blair pulled out his flashlight, turning it on and running it across the floor. “Shit,” he cursed and took a step back. He couldn’t see floor at all. It was

covered with swarms of bugs moving back and forth, spilling down in clumps from mold on the window, heading down the hall. Taking another step back, he turned toward the dining room as Tom came up beside him.

“Hey, Blair,” he paused and looked around. “Big dining room, what do you think could be behind it?”

“Bugs.”

“Come on, there’s nothing for a bug to eat in here,” he turned and walked past Blair down the hall. Blair turned to tell him to stop, to stay away from the bugs, but the words died before they left his mouth. The bugs were gone. It was just an old dusty floor.

Coming back, Tom shrugged. “I guess it’s a parlor behind the dining room. The library is either on the other side of the house or upstairs.” Tom turned back down the hall and Blair hurried to follow, hoping they wouldn’t have to go upstairs.

As they started down the other side of the hall, Dr. Ruiz called out, “The library is here,” and Blair and Tom hurried over, entering a large room with floor-to-ceiling shelves around three of the walls. Though it looked dingy, the room was paneled in rich dark pine wood with a coffered ceiling. There was a layer of dust over everything in the room, a filthy Persian rug on the floor, and three of the walls were lined with books. The fourth wall, while having some bookshelves, had a large desk, two smaller tables on either side of it, leather chairs, a rolling bar, a way out-of-date world globe, and a bowed window with seats built in. The velvet drapes and cushions in the window were faded and covered with dust. The window should have looked out on a beautiful garden, but all Blair could see out the window was overgrown weeds.

“Do you think there’s any kind of order to this?” Tom asked, waving a hand around the dusty shelves.

Dr. Ruiz shrugged. “I suggest we each take a wall and start going over the titles. If you see something that might be useful, catalog the name and location on the shelves.” As Dr. Ruiz said this, he moved to the shelves on the left. Tom turned and took the shelves on either side of the door, leaving Blair the right side of the room.

Unslinging and opening his backpack, Blair pulled out a clipboard and paper, his eyes roaming over the shelves as he wondered where would be a good spot to start. Feeling a chill near the window, he moved further over and, grabbing some gloves and a dust cloth, began running over the shelves, reading titles.

The three men had been at it for a couple of hours, conversation at a minimum as they moved through the stacks, when Blair came across what looked like diaries. Each had a year emblazoned on the cover and Blair picked one off the shelf. He was about to open it when there was a loud crash and he jumped, the book falling into his backpack as he looked around. Realizing the crash had come from outside, Blair moved over to the window, Dr. Ruiz and Tom joining him.

“What was that?” Tom asked and Blair pointed to a branch lying on the ground. The sky had turned dark with the promise of a storm, the wind had picked up, and there were flashes of bright lightning and the rumble of thunder.

“The branch must have gotten hit by lightning,” Blair answered, nervously.

"The weatherman did say to expect a storm," Dr. Ruiz agreed. He looked at the library. They had barely done half the inventory. "I know you young gentlemen must have dates in the evening, as it is Saturday tomorrow, but perhaps we could meet here tomorrow morning and finish?"

It was getting late and darker and Blair had no desire to be in this house, certainly not at night. "I can come tomorrow day," he answered and Tom nodded his agreement.

"Say ten?" Ruiz asked and the teaching assistants agreed, grabbing their stuff. On the porch they all stopped and looked at the teeming rain as violent flashes of lightning lit the sky and thunder rumbled.

"Maybe we should wait until the storm dies down to go to the car?" Tom suggested but Blair, looking at his Volvo, thirty feet away, decided he'd rather be wet than here.

"I won't melt," he declared, pulling out his keys and running off the porch.

Dr. Ruiz and Tom, following Blair's example, ran to the second car and both cars passed through the gates, minutes later.

It was only when he was good mile from the house that Blair actually began to feel better. His breathing seemed to ease and he realized he'd been jumpy and nervous the whole time he was in the house. "You're letting haunted house stories get to you," he admonished.

"Yeah," another side of his brain answered, silently. "But why did you, and only you, see the bugs? And why did you feel like something was watching you the whole time?"

"Because I read too many stories," Blair answered aloud, and he reached for the radio, turning on music to drown out his own thoughts.

By the time Blair reached the loft, he had convinced himself that his imagination had been working overtime and he walked in, dropping his backpack by the door.

"Hey, Jim," he called to his roommate. "You're home early."

"You know how the courts are. On a Friday, judges like to get out early. Court finished at three and Simon told me not to bother coming in since I had the weekend off," Jim answered, pulling out two beers and handing one to Blair. "So, I went food shopping. I'm making my special chili. Are you going out or joining me for dinner?"

"Oh, I am joining you for the Ellison chili," Blair walked over and looked down into the pot, sniffing at the cooking food. "Did you buy any cornbread?" he asked, and Jim nodded as he added a dash of red pepper to the pot. "I could heat up the corn bread and make a salad," Blair offered. "Especially, as it is my night to cook."

"Sounds good, Emeril," Jim stirred the pot and turned. "This will be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Great," Blair tied back his hair, washed his hands, and moved past Jim to put the cornbread on a tray in the oven before starting the salad. "You know you could be an incredible chef with your senses. That is, if you wanted a different career."

"I have no desire to go to cooking school," Jim grumbled, but Blair could clearly hear amusement in his voice as they both moved around the kitchen."

“Well, how about a wine taster or no, in your case, an ice cream taster.”

“I think I’ll stick with what I do now,” Jim answered, turning off the chili and grabbing bowls.

As Jim moved away from the pot of simmering chili and over to the table, he frowned, his nostrils flaring. “Ah, Sandburg, what did you bring home?”

“Home?” Blair turned and followed Jim’s glance to his backpack on the floor by the door.

“Your backpack, it smells like there’s something moldy and decaying in it. Did a mouse get in your bag and die?”

Blair frowned and moving over, opened his backpack. “Oh, this is one of the books from the library I was working in. It must have fallen in my backpack when the lightning struck.” Jim wondered about the lightning striking but said nothing as Blair lifted out the book and Jim wrinkled his nose.

“That’s the source of the smell,” he agreed.

“I understand the moldy smell but decay?”

Jim shrugged. “What is that, anyway?”

“I think it’s one of Cedric Mason’s journals. I’d only just found it when we had to leave.”

“It smells,” Jim answered moving back to the table, Blair following. “So, who was Cedric Mason?” Jim asked as he dished out food.

“He was an explorer who traveled around the South a hundred and fifty years ago. One of his descendants goes to Rainier and offered to loan out his journals but she won’t go near the place.”

“She thinks it’s haunted,?” Jim asked.

“Yeah,” Blair answered, stirring his food.

“Sandburg, you were there, did you see any ghosts?”

Blair concentrated on the chili. “I didn’t see any ghosts,” he stated, sentinel soft.

Jim, watching him, frowned. “Chief?” he asked.

Blair took a deep breath, sure he was about to be laughed at. “There was something there, Jim. I could feel it.”

“A ghost?”

“I don’t know but...something and it...I think it was malevolent. The weird thing is the other two people didn’t seem affected but I felt like it was...after me.”

Jim thought about this for a moment, watching his friend. “Blair,” he waited till his roommate looked up at him, saw the nervous look and realized Blair was worried about being ridiculed over this. Certainly, the experience had upset Blair and Jim dropped any thought of teasing after seeing the strained expression. “Incacha passed the way of the shaman to you,” he said, quietly. “And Incacha could see things others couldn’t. In the jungle, he would do rituals and see spirits. He went on spirit walks. He even made me go on a few.”

“Did you see spirits?” Blair asked, relief giving way to excitement.

Jim picked up a piece of cornbread; he guessed it was his turn to be uncomfortable. “I didn’t need a spirit walk to see a black jaguar that no one else could see, except Incacha. He said it was my spirit guide.”

“Cool,” Blair smiled and Jim could see a host of questions about to burst from the anthropologist.

He could tell Blair was getting off track and put up a hand stopping Blair from asking any more questions. “Sandburg, the point is you might have sensed something. Incacha was a master of shaman practice and would not have passed the way of the shaman to you if he didn’t recognize your abilities.”

“I thought he was talking about me helping you with your senses, not shaman practice.”

“I’m sure he meant both. You don’t have to be a shaman to be a guide. There were two other tribesmen who acted as guides when Incacha wasn’t with me.”

Blair put down his spoon and sat back, his blue eyes wide. “I don’t know how to be a shaman. I mean I’ve read about practices and I’ve seen some when I visited a native reservation, but reading and watching is not the same as doing, man.”

“In any case,” Jim came back to the topic at hand, “maybe, you did sense something.”

Blair considered this for a moment. “It’s funny you smelt decay on the book because I kept seeing black mold that no one else could see.” He sighed. “We’re going to finish tomorrow and cart the journals out,” he stood, taking his plate to the sink. “I’ll clean up dinner and then I’m going to read through that journal. Maybe it will give me a hint about what’s going on.”

“Go on and read, I’ll clean up,” Jim took his bowl to the sink. “The sooner you understand what’s going on, the sooner we can get back to what passes for normal around here.”

Blair smiled at the answer and, grabbing his bag, pulled out the book before disappearing into his room. Sitting down at his desk and turning on a light, he opened Cedric Mason’s journal dated 1845.

The first few entries dealt with how he traveled from New Zealand to Fiji and Blair guessed an earlier journal dealt with his travels to New Zealand, “Probably from Australia,” he guessed. Blair slowed down as he read entries about the Fiji people. Knowing he would have to come back to the entries and reread them, he moved forward and read about Mason’s travel from Fiji to Tonga.

Most of the entries dealt with the sights and sounds. There were detailed explanations about the natives’ belief systems and Blair noted one important entry.

“The people of Tonga, as the place is called, have a great many gods and demi-gods. They believe in the supernatural and their priests have many rules called tapus. It is common to find charms here, some of which purportedly can cause misfortune, illness and death. I would not dare take one of the ritual charms home, the punishment for touching one of the sacred icons is death, but I will try to get one of the smaller items and bring it home. One of the smaller god statues, perhaps. It would make a very interesting show piece, as long as I don’t believe in curses.”

Blair stopped reading and sat back, thoughtfully. A lot of people didn't believe in curses anymore, but most people believed in some form of spirituality. And why couldn't a spirit be angry at being removed from his? her? its? home? Especially, if it was a not so benevolent spirit.

Margaret had said every Mason who had stayed more than a few days had died a violent death. Could it have something to do with some spirit trapped in the house? Blair read through the rest of the journal, but there was no reference to Mason bringing back any totems. They would have to look through the other journals and see if there was a mention of an artifact being brought back.

Getting up, Blair walked out of his room. Jim was sitting in the living room of the loft, watching the news. "Hey," Jim looked up at Blair. "The game starts in about half an hour."

Blair glanced at the television. "Good," he went to the fridge and pulled out a beer. "You want one?" he called holding up his beer.

"Yeah," Jim agreed and Blair came over, handing Jim his beer and taking a seat. "So, did the journal help you figure out anything about the house?"

Blair twisted off the cap and took a gulp of beer. "He makes reference to bringing something back from Tonga."

"And you think whatever it is, it's causing problems."

Blair rubbed at his chin, feeling his five o'clock shadow as he took a seat. "I know you're not big on this spirit stuff, but what if Mason brought some malevolent spirit back?"

"Hey, as long as I don't see any ghosts, I'm fine with your thinking that."

"You know it would be interesting to see what your senses would make of the Mason house."

"Don't go there, Sandburg. I have no desire to see ghosts or see if I can see ghosts," Jim answered, turning to watch the television.

"It was just an idea," Blair shrugged, sitting back an eye on the television. "You know if there is something there, if I could find it and send it home or away then Margaret could move into her family's home?"

"Margaret?"

"The current owner of the house, she's afraid to live there."

"Just do me a favor and don't bring any ghosts here," Jim answered.

Blair was still thinking of Jim's request the next morning as he drove back to the Mason house. "Don't bring any ghosts here," he muttered, "like I can stop a ghost. And what was that whole thing about me being a shaman?" Blair asked the air as he turned off the highway and headed for the suburbs of Cascade. "It's not like I know anything about being a shaman. Hell, I figure out the sentinel stuff as I go along. Somehow, I don't think Incacha would have considered me much of a guide." Reaching down, he flicked on the radio, mostly to divert his attention from the fact that he was ill-prepared to be a shaman. He worked hard and did a lot of research in an attempt to be a competent guide to Jim, but a shaman? Despite the music, Blair's thoughts went back to the topic.

Blair remembered the anthropology class he had taken on shamanism. It had been interesting, if a bit limited, but the teacher had mentioned that there were still some practicing medicine men on some of the Southwest reservations. "Maybe, I'll take a vacation this summer and go visit a reservation," he decided as he pulled up at the Mason's gate.

Getting out of the car, he pulled open the large iron gates and then went up the drive, parking next to Tom's car. Tom and Dr. Ruiz lived near each other, so Blair guessed they were both here. He was just getting his backpack out of the car when a car pulled up behind him and Dr. Ruiz got out.

"Hello, Blair," he called, walking over. "I see Tom is here. I called him this morning and stopped by his apartment but when I got no answer, I continued on."

"I guess he wanted to get an early start," Blair answered, glancing up at the house. He still felt like someone or something was watching him. It made him feel exposed, and he pulled his jacket closed as he turned towards the porch.

"Perhaps he has a date tonight," the professor answered with a smile and the two went in the house.

Grabbing the doorknob and opening the door, Blair and Dr. Ruiz stopped in their tracks as they took in entryway. Ahead of them, lying on the staircase in a crumpled heap, his head at a strange angle, his eyes open, was Tom Green.

Blair knew he was dead, he could tell from the position of Tom's neck but, after glancing around, he went over and touched Tom's neck. His skin was cold. Without even thinking about it, Blair reached in his pocket and called Jim.

"Ellison," Jim picked up the phone on the second ring.

"Jim," Blair couldn't keep the slight tremor from his voice as he looked down at Tom, getting a close look at the man's face. His eyes were wide and his mouth open in what now amounted to a silent unending scream. Rigor had set in, leaving his face frozen with a look of horror.

"What's wrong, Blair?" Blair could almost physically feel Jim focus his senses on the phone.

"I just got to the house and...and the other TA, Tom Green, is dead here. It looks like he fell down the stairs or something."

"Okay," Jim answered. "Call 911 and then stay out of the house. The authorities will be treating it like a crime scene while they investigate. Give me directions and I'll meet you there."

Blair turned to Dr. Ruiz and indicated that he should step outside as Blair gave Jim directions.

Forty minutes later, Jim pulled up to the gate and, parking his car outside, flashed his badge and walked up the drive. The local police, an ambulance and the coroner were already there. Blair was standing by his car as Jim walked over and rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

"Hey Chief," he said, glancing around.

"Jim, the police are searching the house. They asked us to wait here."

Jim nodded and glanced up at the large house, thinking this was Blair's haunted house. He guessed the architecture gave it a haunted appearance and added to its legend. "*But could it really be haunted,*"

he asked himself. There were some people with their heads in the clouds, ready to believe anything. But Blair wasn't one of those people. For all his New-Age weirdness, Jim thought Blair was a sensible and down-to-earth scientist. Jim ran his hand through his hair. Either the house was haunted or Blair wasn't as sensible as Jim thought he was. Though Jim really would prefer to believe the latter, in his heart he believed Blair was not prone to flights of fancy. *"Okay," he told himself, silently, "it's time to investigate and see what I sense."* Turning to Blair he indicated the officer near the steps. "I'll go over and see if I can get any information," he moved past Blair, walking over to one of the officers and showing his badge.

"Officer Beeder," Jim read the nameplate.

"Detective, you're a little out of your jurisdiction."

Jim nodded. "Sandburg is a friend of mine and a consultant with Major Crimes, so he called me when he saw the body."

The officer nodded. "It looks as though the guy fell down the stairs. CSU is examining the scene but I'm pretty sure it will be listed as an accident."

"Would you mind if I took a look?"

"Go ahead, but I don't have to tell you not to disturb the scene."

Jim nodded and walked up the stairs, glancing around. He could see black mold on the wood railings and maggots and bugs crawling in the mold and kept his hands away from the wood. And the smell! Wrinkling his nose in disgust, he dialed down his sense of smell and entered the hall, feeling a damp chill descend on him as he entered the house. His ears immediately picked up a rustling sound, almost like wind through trees, and he filtered out the sound as he crossed the hall to the stairs. The local medical examiner was there, squatting down beside the body, and Jim walked over and joined her. "Jim Ellison," he said. "I'm a detective with Major Crimes. Blair Sandburg, the man who called this in, is a friend of mine."

"Jill Carter," she glanced over and Jim smiled.

"Any ideas on what happened?"

"I'll do an autopsy but from what I can tell, it looks like he took a fall from the landing sometime last night."

Jim nodded, looking up. He could hear a couple of cops upstairs talking, as they examined the landing. Standing, Jim glanced around the hall and then up at the officers dusting down the railing.

"The photographer got a picture of the floor right?" the first man asked.

"Yeah, one set of footprints coming up the stairs, none going down and only his footprints in the hall. No sign of struggle, so unless there's a perp that can fly, the guy must have fallen."

"Maybe he was drinking or high on something."

Jim tuned them out and let his eyes roam over the stairs. Taking a couple of tentative steps up the staircase, he looked at the landing, dialing up his sight. The officers were right. Aside from where the officers were standing there was only one set of footprints going up and on the landing, nothing coming down. He did notice some strange markings on the wall, as though a rope had slid along the

wall, but there was nothing to anchor the rope to and no hooks on the ceiling. Not sure what the marks meant, Jim scanned the walls, seeing the marks continue in a line down the hall.

"It's a shame someone so young falling over the railing," Jill Grant said from behind Jim and he came back down. "The weird thing is he looked terrified, as if he saw something."

"He should never have come here at night," Officer Beeder said from behind them. "You know this house is supposed to be haunted."

Jill turned and shook her head. "You think a ghost scared him? Please. It's far more likely he was on some kind of drug and had a bad trip." She shook her head. "We'll do an autopsy, but all things considered, I'm giving a preliminary ruling of accidental death." She picked up her bag as two assistants brought over a body bag.

Jim walked back outside and over to where Dr. Ruiz and Blair were standing and watching the investigators. "How well did you know the deceased?"

"Tom Green," Blair filled in helpfully. "Not well. We didn't travel in the same circles."

Jim turned to Dr. Ruiz. "Did you know him well?"

"Not well, no. He was one of the teaching assistants," Ruiz answered. "He wasn't actually working for me, he worked mainly for Dr. Hughes."

"Do you know if he ever took drugs or--"

"No, not Tom," Ruiz answered, immediately. "Dr. Hughes told me he has...had a medical condition. It was under control, but he couldn't take recreational drugs."

"What kind of medical condition--something that might make him dizzy?"

"I suppose it could, but as I said, it was under control. He had a form of epilepsy."

"Maybe he got dizzy and that's why he fell," Jim suggested, as he watched the body being carried to the Coroner's wagon. Jim didn't actually believe that, not that he knew why, but he hoped it would ease Dr. Ruiz's mind.

As soon as the body was in the wagon, Officer Beeder walked over. "You said you were here yesterday to do an inventory of some books in the library. Why was Tom Green here last night? Was he still working?"

"No, we all left together," Dr. Ruiz answered. "We hadn't finished when the storm arrived and planned on finishing this morning."

"I see, so Mr. Green had the key."

Dr. Ruiz looked uncomfortable as he gazed at the house. "The owner, Margaret Mason, says she never locks the doors." Dr. Ruiz turned back to the officer. "No one comes in here."

Beeder glanced back at the house and crossed himself. "I'll ask both of you to come in and sign statements by Monday. In the meantime, you can go about your business." He turned and walked back to his partner and Jim could clearly hear him say, "Let's get out of here. I don't want to be anywhere around this place at night."

“Well,” Ruiz turned and glanced at his car. “I suppose we should cancel the inventory. We can pick up in a few weeks. I’ll contact Rainier.” He patted Blair on the arm before turning to his car.

“Jim,” Blair said as soon as Ruiz was out of earshot. “Tom had no reason to go upstairs. And you saw his face. Something scared him.”

“I checked out the stairs. There was only one set of footprints going up and nothing going down. No one’s been up those stairs in years. But there were some strange marks on the wall. The weird thing was the lines were just on the walls not the floor or ceiling. I could see there outline in the dust. Why do you think Tom came back last night?”

“He probably was ghost hunting,” Blair answered, looking up at the windows. “I’m just not sure what he found.” He glanced around and added quietly, “Do you sense anything?”

Jim looked up at the house. “It’s colder inside than it should be considering the weather, and very damp. Also, there’s a smell of decay that seems to emanate from upstairs, and I saw the mold you mentioned.”

“We have to do something; we can’t let other people get hurt.”

“What can we do?”

“Find what Mason brought back and destroy it.”

Jim thought about this for a moment, his eyes on the house. “Okay, we can try but not at night,” Jim answered. Blair glanced up, shivering at Jim’s words.

Blair followed Jim home, his mind buzzing with ideas. He’d have to find out what type of spiritual protection he could get for himself and Jim before they walked into that house. He knew a few people who might be able to help him. So, walking in the door, he made a beeline for his room and grabbed his computer, pulling up an address book. Jim was ordering a pizza when Blair walked out, address in hand.

Swooping to grab the phone as soon as Jim was off, Blair dialed a number.

“Hello, is Rain there?” Blair asked the person who answered the phone. “Hi, Rain, this is Blair. How are you?” Blair listened for a moments smiling and then asked, “Do you still make talismans? I need two.”

Jim shook his head at the question and decided he would be better off getting the mail than listening to the rest of the conversation. When he came back upstairs, mail in hand, Blair was off the phone. “I have to meet with Rain this evening. She makes protective charms.”

“Rain?”

“Yeah, it’s short for Rainbow in the Sky. Her mom and Naomi were friends on a commune.”

“So she’s into spiritual stuff?”

“Sort of,” Blair admitted. “She’s a Goth spiritualist. I think the Goth part was her form of rebellion against her mother. But she knows her stuff and has been making protection charms forever. I figure we could use two tomorrow.”

“Goth spiritualist,” Jim repeated, shaking his head and going over to open the door. A minute later the pizza delivery guy turned up.

Blair watched him, hiding a smile as he considered how easily Jim used his senses these days. Blair guessed he was doing something right as a guide. Jim wasn’t fighting his senses the way he used to. Hell, sometimes he didn’t even realize he was using them. “I’m going to see what she can give us to take with use tomorrow,” Blair explained as Jim put the pizza on the table and Blair grabbed a slice.

Jim held up his hand. “More information than I want, Chief.”

Blair smiled and took a bite out of his pizza. “I’m going to meet Rain in an hour,” he said. “I’ll see if she knows anything about neutralizing a malevolent spirit.”

Jim didn’t answer but grabbed another piece of pizza and turned on a baseball game. “Have fun. I’m going to watch a game.”

“You could come with me and meet Rain. She’s interesting.”

“Sandburg, when your description of someone is 'interesting,' that sets off warning bells for me.”

Blair chuckled, grabbing another piece of pizza. “She’s different, that’s for sure,” he agreed, grabbing his jacket. “I’ll be back later.”

Jim waved absently as Blair left.

Rain lived near Rainier University so Blair didn’t think about directions as he drove. Instead, he tried to imagine how the conversation about the Mason house problem might proceed. Pulling up in front of Rain’s small house, he parked on the street and walked up to the door. There was no doorbell but a giant knocker that looked like something out of "A Christmas Carol." Blair used it to knock on the door.

A minute later the door opened and Rain smiled at Blair. Opening the door wider, she invited him in and then gave him a quick hug. “It’s been a long time, Blair,” she welcomed, as she led him into her living room. Blair, following, noticed she had toned down her appearance. Still dressed in black, she wasn’t loaded down with crystals. To Blair, she looked less Goth and more ethereal.

The living room was earthy with yellow lighting and muted colors. It looked like an ordinary living room, with couches, a television, stereo. The one out of place item was a large bamboo tray filled with polished stones on the coffee table. Indicating that Blair should sit, she disappeared into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of water, lemon wedges floating in the glasses, and a bowl of fruit. She placed the items on the table and then glanced at Blair expectantly.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” she said, looking at him critically. “Your aura has evolved. I knew it would but it’s a deep, dark purple.”

“What does a deep purple aura mean?”

Rain stared at him a moment more, her eyes moving over his whole body. “People with a purple aura tend to be psychic and empathic and very attuned to others’ needs. They love learning and exploring and connect with nature. Generally, they have more acquaintances than friends but the friends they do have are very loyal.” She sat back. “Your aura is very strong. If I were to turn out the lights I could see around this room by the light of your aura.”

"I guess that is a good thing," Blair answered uncomfortably before taking a sip of the lemon water.

Rain smiled, "I've made you uncomfortable, I apologize. What can I do to help you?"

Blair put the glass back down and sighed and then related all he knew about the Mason house. At the end of the story, he glanced down at the stones. "I don't want people dying in that house."

"It does sound like there is an angry spirit bound to the house," she said, thoughtfully, leaning down to pick up one of the smooth stones and run it between her fingers. "To release the spirit you will have to find the totem and destroy it, preferably in an open area where wind, sun and air can help send it on its way."

Blair considered the area around the Mason house with its misshaped trees closing in the property. "How do I identify the totem?"

Rain considered the question. "Was there anywhere specific that you felt uncomfortable?"

Blair wanted to say everywhere but, thinking back, he remembered he didn't want to go upstairs and Jim had sensed that whatever the decay was, it was coming from upstairs. Slowly, he nodded.

"Then, you can find it," Rain answered, rising and walking out of the room. She returned with two leather necklaces, each braided with a silver stone in the center and handed them to Blair. "The silver stones will offer spiritual protection and have been blessed. Keep faith that what you are doing is right and don't go alone."

Blair nodded, taking the talisman necklaces. He noticed they felt warm to the touch.

"Go in daylight, it would be best if the day were sunny but in Cascade," she shook her head, not finishing.

"What do I owe you for the talisman?"

"I don't make a living from spiritualism. It is a gift to be honored, it is not for profit. When you have succeeded in releasing the spirit, come back and bring me some flowers to plant in my garden and the debt will be paid."

"I look forward to it," Blair stood and gave her a hug before heading to the door.

"Blair," she said as she stood in the doorway. "Honor the spirit, even as you fight it. Respect it and its power. Remember it was harmed by being moved and bound to the house, it is a victim."

Blair nodded his understanding before heading back to the loft.

On the ride Blair considered what Rain had said. Off-handedly, he wondered what aura Jim would have if Rain looked at him. Something energetic and intense he decided, but blended with sensitivity (not that Jim would ever consider himself sensitive). Chuckling at the idea of how Jim would look if Blair ever called him sensitive, Blair let his thoughts turn to more sober thoughts of the Mason house. Tonga was in the same triangular area as Rapa Nui aka Easter Island. Blair could visualize the giant mysterious statues staring out from the island. "If I had to guess," he said aloud, "we're looking for a statue, probably a wooden one, considering the area. And since he brought it back with him, it couldn't be too large."

It was a theory and as good a starting point as any. Pulling up in front of the loft, Blair went up to find Jim watching the news. “Hey, Sandburg. Dr. Ruiz called. He let Rainier know about the accident.”

“Good,” Blair walked over and handed Jim one of the leather necklaces. “You need to wear this tomorrow. Rain says it will offer us some protection.”

Jim made a face but reached out a hand to touch the silver stone and then frowned. “It’s warm, and you know I can actually feel it pulsating.”

“Really?” Blair held out his own necklace. “I didn’t feel anything. Is this one pulsating?” Jim took it and nodded before handing it back.

“Well, that just goes to show Rain knows her stuff.” He stretched and glanced at the television. “She says we need to find the totem and burn it out in the open. I’m guessing but I think the totem will probably be some kind of wooden statue. If we find the totem we should take it near Sands Bay. We could burn it and then scatter its ashes to the wind.”

“If the weather cooperates,” Jim agreed with a glance at the window.

Blair nodded as Jim wished him good night and headed upstairs.

Blair doubted he could sleep but, after climbing into bed, was surprised when the next thing he knew Jim was shaking him awake. “Hey, Sleeping Beauty, we’ve got things to do today. Get up; breakfast and coffee are made.”

“Jim?” Blair blinked awake and rolled over.

“Who else are you expecting?” Jim asked, straightening and turning to the door.

“A Tongan Priest,” Blair groused, sleepily. More than anything else, Blair wanted to roll over and go back to sleep. He had had weird dreams of South Pacific rituals all night and, sitting up, he felt muzzy and lightheaded. Knowing they needed to deal with the Mason house in the daylight, he got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. When he emerged from the bathroom, showered, shaved and dressed, Jim put a plate of pancakes down in front of him and a cup of strong coffee.

“You didn’t sleep well last night,” Jim observed, taking his own seat. “I could hear you tossing and turning and mumbling all night.”

“Sorry if I woke you,” Blair apologized, before biting into a blueberry pancake.

“You didn’t keep me awake,” Jim answered, with a shrug. “I was having trouble sleeping.”

“Why? Was it your senses?” Blair’s attention turned to Jim, giving him a once over.

“No, I kept dreaming of an owl flying down and turning into Incacha. He kept saying something about metal destroying wood.”

“Metal?” Blair answered thoughtfully. “I kept dreaming about rituals where wood was carved with large metal knives.” Blair took a bite of his pancake and then nodded. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of Feng Shui?” Jim shook his head no and Blair continued. “There’s a belief that five basic elements need to be in harmony: Wood, Fire, Water, Earth, and Metal. In Feng Shui there are

productive cycles, reductive cycles and destructive cycles. For example, in a productive cycle, water nurtures wood and wood nurtures fire. In a destructive cycle you are trying to eliminate one of the elements. The way to eliminate wood is with metal.”

“I would think it would be fire,” Jim answered.

“The cycles are tied, one producing something in the next, and wood feeds fire and fire makes earth, etc. But chopping up wood using metal doesn’t produce anything, ergo, it’s destructive.”

“So, I need to bring an axe?” Jim asked.

“Yeah, if my theory is right and the totem is wood, we’ll need to chop it up with something made of metal and then we can burn it and scatter its ashes.”

Jim didn’t comment but gave a sigh and, pushing his plate away, started to clean up breakfast.

An hour later, Jim stopped the truck at the large spiral gates outside Mason house and Blair jumped out, pushing them open.

Climbing back in the truck, Blair touched the necklace and checked to make sure Jim was wearing his before they drove up to the house. There were still signs around the outside of the house that the police had been there, but Jim and Blair ignored them, as Blair took a metal toolbox from the back seat and the pair walked over to the porch

“Do you see the mold on the railing?” Blair asked, his voice pitched between excitement and fear.

Jim nodded and glanced at the door. “You have a key?” he asked.

“Margaret said she never locks the door; no one comes in here.”

“Let’s see if the police did,” Jim reached over and grabbed the handle. He could feel resistance as if the door had been locked but then it opened, turning almost of its own accord, and the two men peered into the dust-filled space. “She’ll need a better lock,” he observed in an effort to break the tension they both felt.

“Do you sense anything?” Blair asked, quietly.

Jim stepped into the hall and glanced around. “There’s a smell of decay. It’s definitely stronger upstairs and I hear movement, like something rustling.”

Blair nodded. “I guess the thing, whatever it is, is upstairs.”

Jim nodded and moved to the staircase, stopping and looking up. “Chief,” he said softly, a hand going to his neck where the silver stone rested. “Do you feel it?”

“The stone is pulsing. I can feel it,” Blair agreed, joining Jim at the stairs and peering up.

“Why don’t you go in the library and see if you can find what we’re looking for and I’ll check out upstairs.”

“No way,” Blair whispered. “I think we need to stay together. Whatever it is, we are stronger if we face it together.”

“Okay,” Jim agreed. “Then let’s take a quick look upstairs and if we don’t find anything, we’ll come back down to the library.”

Blair nodded and followed Jim up the stairs, both men moving cautiously. Blair knew his heart was beating fast and he found himself wondering if Jim was as nervous as they moved cautiously up. At the top of the stairs he stopped and took a deep breath. “Can you hear anything?”

“The rustling,” Jim answered, grabbing Blair’s arm and pulling him away from the railing, so both men were closer to the doors. “Let’s keep clear of the railing,” he indicated a spot and Blair shivered as he realized he was about to lean on the same spot Tom had fallen from.

“Thanks. What do you think the rustling is? Rats, maybe?”

Jim shook his head, “There’s no heartbeat. The only heartbeats I hear are yours, beating like a jackrabbit’s, and mine, which is beating just as hard,” he admitted. He turned back and scanned the hall, indicating a door in the distance. “That’s where the noise is coming from. Let’s go.”

Straightening and taking a steadying breath, Jim turned and strode down the hall. As he reached the door, he winced turning his head away, putting a hand over his nose.

“Dial down smell,” Blair instructed, putting a hand on his arm. Jim nodded, taking a moment to center himself, and then reached a hand out for the doorknob. He stopped, his hand poised just above the knob.

“Chief,” he whispered in a strained voice and Blair peered past him and noticed the black mold dripping from the handle.

Before Jim could reach over and turn the handle, Blair pushed his hand away. “Let me open it. We don’t know what that could do to your senses.” Gritting his teeth, Blair reached out a shaky hand, feeling mold move over and cling to his fingers as he turned the knob and pushed open the door.

Both men gaped as they stared at the room and Blair found himself wondering what a normal person would see. “It looks like some kind of primordial jungle,” Jim whispered in a strained voice and Blair nodded.

“It must be what the spirit’s home looked like,” Blair whispered.

There was barely any floor visible. Instead, there seemed to be a rooted system of long thick vines. The walls were covered with the vines as well and, above their heads, moss hung down from the ceiling, practically touching the floor. The smell of decaying vegetation was strong and Blair made a conscious effort to breathe through his mouth.

As Jim took a step into the room, he could see the vines moving about and, in a soft voice, whispered to Blair, “Remember I told you there were strange lines on the walls but not on the floor or ceiling,” Jim indicated the vines. “Better get out the axe.” Blair looked at the vines and then at the toolbox he carried. Placing it on the floor just behind him in the hall, he grabbed the axe in both hands and stepped next to his sentinel.

“You think the vines could have pushed Tom over the rail?” he asked, tightening his hold on the axe handle.

Jim didn't answer but scanned the room, his eyes coming to rest on a pair of malevolent yellow eyes glaring at him through some dense foliage. Pushing his sight up a notch, he looked a bit closer at the eyes. "Sandburg," Jim pointed across the room. "Behind the moss over there," he pointed to the right. "There's something."

Blair glanced where Jim was pointing. "It must be the statue," he answered, handing Jim the axe and reaching for the metal toolbox. "Can we get to it?"

Jim looked down at the floor. "The vines are moving," he warned, his eyes following the tentacle-like movement as they inched across the floor, moving nearer, lifting toward the men. "I'll try and keep them at bay and you see if you can get to the thing."

Blair nodded, his grip tight on the box as Jim stepped into the room and moved to the left away from the statue. Blair watched in morbid fascination as the vines moved with him. Seeing the movement, he could imagine what had happened to Tom. He had come up the stairs and the vines had reached out for him, pushing him, maybe even carrying him over the railing while he screamed.

Glancing at Jim, Blair could see the vines were reaching for him. He could hear the swing of the axe and then Jim's yell for Blair to go. Not looking back, knowing if he did, he'd go to help Jim and they'd both be in trouble, he sprinted across the room, pushing aside the moss. Before him, in a niche in the wall, was a statue, its eyes glowing malevolently.

Throwing open the box and putting it on the floor below the statue, he reached out, but before he could grab the wooden idol, the moss circled his wrists, holding him back. He could hear laughter and it seemed to be coming from the statue. Yanking, he tried to pull free as moss began to circle his waist and he felt himself being lifted off the floor.

In the distance he could hear Jim shouting and the swish of the axe but as the moss began to close around his neck, he couldn't turn to look at Jim. The moss circled his neck, tightening but then loosened as it touched Rain's stone. Where it touched Rain's stone, it shriveled. Seeing his only opportunity to get the statue, Blair swung his legs up, his feet knocking the statue off its perch. Knocking it into the toolbox and he swung his legs to close the box.

Instantly, the moss let go and he fell to the floor with an "umph," as Jim ran over and latched the box. "Chief, are you okay?" he asked, his breath heaving with exertion.

Blair took deep breath and nodded, looking around. The room seemed to be changing, the vegetation wilting. "You okay, Jim?" he asked.

Jim nodded rubbing at his neck. "The vines tried to strangle me but when they touched the stone, they shriveled."

"The same thing happened to me," Blair whispered. He looked down at the box. "We have to take the statue, chop it up and then burn it, out in the open."

Jim reached down and grabbed the box before turning and looking at the room. There was a pile of severed vines on the floor where he had used the axe but it was all losing color, fading away, the room's light green walls and parquet flooring appearing. "Let's get this thing to Sands Bay and get rid of it," Jim answered, and the two made their way down the stairs.

At the door, Blair stopped and looked back at the house. "It feels different, doesn't it?" he asked.

“Yeah it feels empty; like something’s gone from the house,” Jim agreed, and they made their way to the truck.

Through the entire ride to Sands Bay, Blair kept one hand on the latch of the toolbox, making sure it stayed close. Arriving, Blair carried the box over to a rocky outcrop and put it down in the sunlight as Jim carried over some kindling and doused the small pieces of wood with kerosene.

Blair watched him but when he picked up the axe and reached for the toolbox, Blair said, “Wait.” Going to his backpack Blair pulled out some white powder. “Salt,” he informed Jim and then made a circle around the box and kindling. “Salt is supposed to be a purifying agent, so I’m guessing it can’t hurt to use some.”

Jim watched as Blair again reached in his bag and pulled out a pair of gloves studded with metal. Nodding to Jim, he carefully stepped over the salt circle and opened the box, pulling out the wooden statue and dropping it on top of the kindling before stepping back, careful not to break the salt circle.

As soon as Blair was clear, Jim swung the axe, the blade coming down hard and chopping the statue in half. Split right down the middle, the statue didn’t look quite the same, the eyes were no longer yellow and the statue seemed like just so much wood. As Jim stepped back, Blair struck a match and threw it on the pile.

In seconds the wood broke into flame and Blair gasped. “Jim,” he said, his voice strained as he took a step back.

“I see it,” Jim answered, his voice tense. Before them, the statue was moving, trying to fit back together, standing; the wooden mouth moving as it screamed with an inhuman voice. Jim covered his ears, watching in morbid fascination as it caught fire and whirled round and round within the circle of salt and flames. And then the flames engulfed it and it became silent.

The pair stood on the rocky point of Sands Bay for two hours, feeding the fire until there was nothing left but ashes, which Blair sprinkled into the wind. Turning back, they made their way to Jim’s truck and then the loft.

Pulling out a bottle of Scotch, Jim poured two glasses, added ice cubes, and handed one to Blair before ordering Thai delivery. Tossing money on the counter for the food, Jim carried his drink over and sat down beside Blair.

“Jim,” Blair began, but Jim put up his hand.

“Don’t Sandburg. I don’t want to think about any of this, I don’t want to talk about this, I just want to forget it.”

“But-“

Jim shook his head. “I have an idea. Let’s just forget about what happened today and never talk about it.”

Blair looked over at Jim. Jim’s body language screamed tension as he sipped at the scotch. Realizing Jim wasn’t ready to talk about spirits or the part he had played in exorcising one, at least not yet, Blair decided to let the discussion go, for now. “Okay,” he said, agreeing. Sitting back with a sigh of

contentment, he considered the glass of scotch. "Rain asked that I bring some flowers for her garden in payment for the talisman. I think I'll buy her a large rosebush tomorrow."

"Buy her two, I'll pay for one," Jim agreed. "And tell her, thanks."

Blair guessed that was as far as Jim wanted to go in acknowledging the whole event. "I will," Blair answered taking another sip, listening as the ice cubes clinked together. "There is something else I have to consider," he warned, and Jim glanced over at him. "Since Incacha did pass on the way of the shaman to me, I have to learn to be that shaman."

Jim considered this for a moment, his glass tinkling. "How do you learn?"

"I'll start with research but then I'm going to contact an acquaintance I know on a reservation. I'm going to find out if I can work with their medicine man. If he agrees, I'll need to go there." Blair paused. "If possible, I think you should come. I'd be willing to bet there's things they can teach us about being sentinel and guide."

Jim considered the idea and then sighed. "I have some vacation time I could use," he agreed and Blair smiled, holding out his glass.

As Jim clinked it, Blair said, "To us."

"To us," Jim agreed, and then added, "sentinel and guide."

Blair decided not to say aloud, "Exorcists Extraordinaire."