

HOLLYWOOD

**MEDUSA'S
WEB**

A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF *THREE DAYS TO NEVER*

TIM POWERS

MEDUSA'S WEB

Tim Powers



WILLIAM MORROW

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DEDICATION

To Steve and Tammie Malk

With thanks to:

*Manny Aguirre, Chris Arena, Fr. Hugh Barbour, Amelia Beamer,
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Sandoval, William Schafer, Joe Stefko, Rodger Turner, Michael
and Laura Yanovich*

EPIGRAPH

“When you are in the fingers of this unwisely summoned beast, you find yourself in a hundred conflicting motions all in the same moment. You grieve, you dance, you vomit, you shake, you weep, you faint, and suffer enormously, and you die . . . the sovereign and sole remedy is Music.”

—*Francesco Cancellieri, Letters of Francesco Cancellieri to the ch. Signore Dottore Koref Professor of Medicine of the University of Berlin, about Tarantism, the airs of Rome, and of its countryside, and the Papal palaces inside, and outside, Rome, 1817*

THE FRAXINUS-BEO TRANSLATION

“The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.”

—*William Faulkner*

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PART I

The Monkeys Can't Let Go of It

CHAPTER 1

“THAT’S A SINGLE HEADLIGHT, turning into the parking lot.”

The woman stood at one of the tall French windows, peering through the rain-streaked glass down the slope outside. The day had not ever been very bright, and the light in the overcast sky was not fading. “And I can hear the engine—it’s a motorcycle, isn’t it? Probably the same terrible old Honda he had when he moved out.”

Her cousin sighed and rolled his wheelchair across the worn carpet to pause beside her. “It’s a motorcycle,” he agreed. “Now it’s behind the trees.”

“And the engine has stopped. It’s him.”

Her cousin nodded, still peering at the corner of the parking lot visible below. “And that car now probably his sister.”

“Oh, Claimayne, I *don’t* like them coming back here to Caveat.” She reached out and unlatched the window and pushed it open; a gust of cold air twitched at her short brown hair and rolled the chill scent of wet clay through the musty air of the dining room.

Claimayne Madden hiked his wheelchair back. “Relax, Ariel, I heard he’s a drunk these days. Probably all pouchy and fat.”

Ariel Madden turned and scowled at her cousin. “*Shut up.*”

Claimayne grinned and held up his hands.

Ariel pulled her cell phone out of her blouse pocket. “And give me a spider. I want to do a before and after.”

“What?” His eyes were fully open now. “No—for God’s sake, have a drink; chug a glass of bourbon if you have to. Close the damn window and sit down. You’ve been four years clean!”

Peering again down through the wet terraces of waving bamboo and pampas grass, Ariel snapped her fingers and stretched one hand toward him.

Claimayne went on, “A before and after? You won’t be able to *do* anything; you used up your *volition*, years ago! You’ll just sit here blinking at them like an idiot. And your after will just be a hallucination, not any real view of the future—they nearly always are.”

“I haven’t done one in four years,” she said impatiently. “I’m probably a virgin again.”

“Listen to yourself. If you try to force your later self to *do* anything, you’ll probably get a thromboembolism.”

Her hand stayed extended toward him.

Claimayne shrugged and let his hands fall into his lap, and he stared at the carpet for several seconds. Then he dug into the pocket of his silk dressing gown and laid a folded slip of paper in his palm.

Ariel touched the screen of her phone a couple of times, then, without looking, unfolded the piece of paper and held the phone a foot above it and touched the corner of the screen. The phone clicked faintly, and she gave the paper back to Claimayne.

“I’m e-mailing it to myself,” she said, tapping at the on-screen keyboard now. “It better not be just one of your poems.”

“You’re a big girl,” he said, pocketing the paper. “You want to take it up again, that’s your choice.”

“Your disapproval is . . . hypocritical.”

Claimayne sighed. “I suppose, I suppose. Do what thou wilt, child.”

Her voice was mocking: “Thank you, *Tetrarch*.”

She hurried out of the dining room, the knock of her boots echoing in the high arches of the ceiling as she stepped into the tiled hall.

Claimayne rolled forward again and leaned out of the wheelchair to get hold of the wet window latch, but his fingers slid ineffectually off the cold metal, and he gave up and sat back, panting.

When Ariel strode back into the dining room she was folding up a sheet of paper obviously fresh from the printer in the library at the other end of the house. “I *may* not look at it at *all*,” she said defensively as she tucked it into her blouse pocket beside her phone, “much less *twice*. Can you see them yet?”

“I haven’t looked. Do you want to go down and tell them that we’re lodging them in the other apartments by the parking lot? Even with the cones across the garage road, they may imagine they’re staying up here in the main house.”

“If they drag their luggage up here, they can just drag it down again. I’m not going out in the rain.”

SCOTT MADDEN LEANED HIS motorcycle on the kickstand and unhooked the bungee cords that had held a bulky black-plastic bag and a folded tarpaulin against the sissy bar. Setting the bag on the puddle of pavement, he unfolded the tarpaulin and draped it over the motorcycle, careful not to let it touch the hot exhaust pipes, and he picked up the bag and was pulling off his helmet as he trudged across the gleaming asphalt to his sister’s twenty-year-old Datsun. He paused beside it for several seconds, as the rain thumped on his head, then leaned down and opened the door.

“They’ll give us rooms, Madeline,” he said.

“I know.” She swung her legs out and stood up. She was wearing jeans and an old Members Only jacket over a sweater, and she bent back into the car to get a baseball cap and pull it down over her curly dark hair. She seemed thinner than the last time Scott had seen her. “I bet they hate us, though,” she added, straightening up. “They blocked the road up to the house.”

“Maybe the garage road’s washed out. Claimayne doesn’t hate anybody, and Ariel’s hated me for years. God knows why.” He smiled sourly. “And they shouldn’t worry; the will won’t stand up anyway—she signed it an hour before she killed herself. Grotesquely. Hardly of sound mind.”

“At least it’s free food for a week. Assuming they feed us. If not, there’s apples and avocados and lemons growing all over the property.” Madeline nodded solemnly. “Can you carry some of my stuff too? I brought work along.”

Madeline Madden had been a professional astrologer since moving out of Caveat seven years ago, having learned the craft from an old woman who had been a tenant there back in the days when the aunt still rented out apartments. Scott, in turn, had become a graphic artist under the informal tutelage of a painter who had rented another of the apartments.

“Sure. I may want to stop on the stairs and rest once or twice.”

As Madeline walked around to open the trunk, Scott stared over the roof of the car at the no longer vacant apartment building beyond a row of shaggy eucalyptus trees on the east end of the Caveat.

estate. The long gray two-story box was the newest structure on the property, having been built in the 1970s. ~~The buildings up the hill had accumulated one by one since the 1920s, most of the~~ incorporating bits salvaged from various torn-down hotels and movie sets. Their aunt Amity, affluent from the sales of her series of popular novels, had added to the architectural clutter after she bought the estate in 1965.

He looked up the hill, and he could just see the rooftop gables of the sprawling main house, which was three stories tall in most places. As children, he and his sister had sometimes stood outside and picked out a window and then gone inside to try to find the room behind it, often without success.

Our childhood home, Scott thought with a shiver as he took a canvas bag from Madeline.

The long stairway up to the main house was a curving track through a jungle of trees and vines and the old granite steps were slippery with drifts of soggy dead leaves. Above the panting and scuffing of their progress, the only sounds were raindrops tapping on shiny leaves and the soft clatter of a stream somewhere nearby tumbling over stones—Hollywood Boulevard was only four long blocks south, and the 101 Freeway even closer, but no whisper of traffic or horns found its way over the intervening trees and rooftops to this slope.

Stopping to rest in the rainy breeze wasn't tempting, and the two of them trudged up one uneven step after another without pause, and within a few minutes they stood panting on the rain-flattened grass in front of the main house. The hooded porch light was on, islanding the porch and the narrow yard in an amber glow.

It was the only sign that the place was inhabited. One of the dining room's row of French windows was open, though Scott couldn't make out anyone in the dimness within, and the deep-set windows on the second and third floors and in the three rooftop gables all just mirrored the darkening gray sky with no lights behind them. There might have been smoke trailing from one or both of the square chimneys at the east and west ends of the house, but not enough to be visible. Angular lumps in the grass near the house proved on closer inspection to be fallen roof tiles, the baked red clay mostly covered with green moss.

Scott stepped up onto the marble-railed porch and set his bundle and Madeline's bag on a cement bench. She came puffing up beside him and set a suitcase and a valise beside the bag.

Her brother was facing south, away from the light over the front door, and Madeline turned the way too. The 101 Freeway was a string of red and white lights across the middle distance, and the stacked-disk tower of the Capitol Records building beyond it was a spottily lit silhouette dimly visible through the veils of rain.

Just as Scott took a deep breath and turned around to knock, the lock clunked and the door was pulled open; for a moment there was nothing to see but the dark entry hall, and then Claimayne's slipped feet, and a moment later the entirety of him in his wheelchair jerked into view from behind the door.

Scott barely recognized him; Claimayne seemed at once older and younger than he remembered. The man's face was smooth and unlined, but it had the tight, glossy look of excessive cosmetic surgery, and he was gleamingly bald. Under a dressing gown, he wore a green velour shirt with what appeared to be a two-inch gold spring on a fine chain around his neck.

"Cousins!" said Claimayne jovially. "I'm afraid you've been put to some unnecessary exertion—"

A tall woman in a long black skirt and short denim jacket stepped up from behind him, holding a folded sheet of white paper—and though she was slimmer now and her dark hair was a good deal shorter than it had been when he had last seen her thirteen years ago, Scott recognized Ariel. And he realized that he was reflexively smiling, for Ariel had been a bright and welcome companion in the

days before he had moved out of Caveat in 2002.

~~She's three years younger than me, Scott thought, two years older than Madeline—she's thirty-three now.~~

To his surprise, she was smiling too, with evident wry humor. Her eyes were the pale brown of dry sherry wine.

“Claimayne means you’re *going* to be put to some exertions,” she said, and her voice was the same husky contralto that he remembered vividly. She tucked the paper carefully into her blouse pocket. “You’re to stay in your old suite upstairs here at the main house, but nobody’s dusted in there yet and there’s only bare mattresses on the beds.”

Claimayne’s eyebrows were halfway up his pale forehead; clearly this was a surprise to him. I bet a couple of the apartments down the hill have got freshly made beds, Scott thought. And if that’s so, we’d really be better off staying in them.

Beside him, Madeline shifted her sneakers in the splashing puddles; Scott guessed that she too would be happier staying down the hill.

But for more than a decade he had had no contact with his cousin Ariel—for the first few years after he had moved out of Caveat he had sent cards and letters only to have them returned unopened and he had called only to have her hang up the telephone at the sound of his voice—and he realized that he couldn’t refuse this not-entirely-convenient offer.

“*Just*,” drawled Claimayne, “for the week my mother specified in her *will*, of course.”

“Of course,” Scott said to him; then, looking back up at Ariel, he added, “And thank you. We’ll be happy to fix up the rooms ourselves.”

Ariel stepped behind Claimayne’s wheelchair and pulled it out of the way. “For God’s sake, come in out of the rain.”

Before turning to the luggage on the bench, Scott glanced at the word engraved in the stone lintel over the door—the word *CAVEAT* survived on the left side, but whatever had followed it on the right had long ago fallen away.

As in *caveat emptor*, he thought. Let the buyer beware. But the noun here, whatever it had been, was long gone.

“Will you come *in*, Scott?” said Ariel.

“Right, right.”

When the newcomers stood dripping on the tiles of the entry hall with their bags in a pile beside them, Ariel gripped one of the handles at the back of Claimayne’s wheelchair and then leaned against the wall. “Sheets and pillows where they always were,” she said quickly. “I’m afraid I won’t have time to help. Dinner’s at six, and in the meantime there’s cookies in the kitchen—if you don’t knock the plate on the floor.” She added the last with a faint smile, making Scott wonder if he had once done that. “Dinner was ench—ench—” She stopped speaking and looked down at the floor.

“Enchiladas is my guess,” said Claimayne. “I think Ariel will be wanting a lie-down about now. He waved one hand toward the stairs. “You two remember the way, I’m sure. There’s a spare electric heater in the laundry room—I think you’ll want to have it running in the doorway between your rooms. This place gets cold at night.” To Ariel he added, “Hold on to the handles and shuffle along, my dear. I’ll steer you to a chair.”

IN THE DINING ROOM Ariel let go of the wheelchair and sagged into a chair by the window.

For nearly a minute she just stared blindly ahead, gripping the arms of the chair. At last she lifted her hands and stared at them as she alternately stretched her fingers and clenched them into fists.

“They’re your hands,” said Claimayne softly, “whatever shapes they may assume.”

“I remember.”

“Take your time. It’s been four years.”

Finally she took a deep breath, let it out, and was able to frown directly at Claimayne. “I saw the in the flash-ahead; they were still here. Will still be here, when I look at your damned spider again and do the after.”

“If it wasn’t just your subconscious serving up an hallucination,” said Claimayne. “It near always is that, you know. It’s not a reliable method of precognition.”

“I know, I know. But this looked real. They told me it was Friday, three days from now, where the were; we were upstairs here, at night, the lights were on. They better not have been lying, it better not have been any further in the future than that. I told them they’re ghouls and grave-worms, and then was back here and now, hanging on to your wheelchair.” She rubbed her eyes. “How long was I gone?”

“Maybe half a minute,” said Claimayne.

She scowled at him. “I looked at the spider just before you opened the door, so I only saw them in the flash-ahead, but he looks fine then, not pouchy and fat. Is that right?”

Claimayne rocked his head judiciously. “‘Fine’ might be overstating it, but . . . yes, he looked presentable enough.”

“So it probably *wasn’t* a hallucination. His litter mate is a scrawny little thing, though, isn’t she? Always was.” She swiveled her head toward the window with some effort. “Did they go back down the hill?”

“No, my dear, you told them they could stay up here, in their old family suite. They’re upstairs now.”

“I did not. Did I? Why would I say that? Was I smiling?”

“Yes. So was he.” Claimayne raised one eyebrow. “I see a *rapprochement*.”

“I don’t. And there was never anything to *rapproche*! He would have married that pie-wagon Louise if she . . . hadn’t had at least the minimal sense to cancel the engagement.”

“It’s unlikely to have been a real view of this upcoming Friday. Maybe your subconscious that evening decided, purely from pragmatism, to try to marry one of the imminent owners of Caveat.” He gave her a heavy-lidded look and smiled. “You’re not blood related, you recall.”

“Then my subconscious is a masochist. I’d marry . . . *you*, first, and I don’t like you at all. Owner of Caveat. That will be a joke.”

“I do think a judge will agree with you about the will. Oh, and you told them to join us in here for dinner. Apparently Rita is going to make enchiladas. Will you feel up to it?”

Ariel sat up straight with some evident effort and rolled her shoulders and flexed her fingers. “Just three days ahead, and into my own body,” she muttered, “and it feels like I dug ten ditches.”

Her cousin spread his hands. “You’ve evidently forgotten what it’s like.”

Ariel stood up unsteadily and moved her feet around till she was facing the hallway door. “Yes, I’ll be here for dinner. I want to see him get pig drunk.” She began walking carefully out of the room.

“That might help,” called Claimayne.

CHAPTER 2

“ARE YOU COMING?” ASKED Madeline. Scott had set down his bundle and one of her canvas bags halfway along the dim hallway that led to the three connecting bedrooms their family had once occupied.

One wall of the corridor was paneled with a row of mismatched old doors; they had been salvaged from a number of long-demolished hotels and apartment buildings, and though there was only plaster behind them, he knocked at the one that was supposed to have come from the Garden of Allah bungalows on Sunset Boulevard, torn down in 1959.

In the shadows he saw Madeline’s reluctant smile. “Aunt Amity always knocked on that one whenever she went by,” she said. “I remember.”

He picked up the bags and walked up to where she stood. “And she always said, ‘When is a door not a door? When it’s a wainscot.’ That’s paneling. Which all these doors are, now that they’ve just got a wall behind them.”

“It was from that woman’s home, wasn’t it? That silent-movie actress.”

“Nazimova,” Scott agreed. “After she went broke and made her estate into bungalows so she could live in one of ’em.”

He dropped the bags again to open the door of their parents’ old room. They shuffled in slowly.

Madeline clicked the wall switch up, and the bare overhead bulb cast a harsh yellow glow over the bare floor and the cobwebbed shelves.

The ceiling above the bed was mottled brown, and a foot-wide section of plaster had at some time fallen onto the mattress, which appeared to have been soaked by at least one winter’s leaked rain. Two short wires stuck out of the wall above the baseboard where the telephone had been connected.

Scott wrestled open the north window to air out the mildew smell, though the breeze was cold.

“God,” whispered Madeline with a visible shiver, “they’re *really* gone now, aren’t they?”

He knew what his sister meant; in the days when their parents’ room had still been regularly dusted and swept, it had been possible to imagine that their mother and father might one day return with reassurances and unimaginable explanations. But Arthur and Irina Madden had disappeared in 1991, when Scott had been twelve and Madeline had been seven, and redundant evidence at this late date shouldn’t have been needed to confirm that they were gone for good.

“When I had money,” he said quietly, “I hired a private investigator to look for them. Social Security numbers, dates of birth—nothing.”

Madeline sniffed and nodded. “That’s good, anyway, that you did that.”

“Let’s look at our rooms,” he said, stepping past her and pulling open the door that led to Madeline’s old room. He leaned in to switch on the overhead light. “Look, yours isn’t bad at all!”

Scott took Madeline by the elbow and led her across the bare hardwood floor into her old room where a poster of the Woody character from the movie *Toy Story* was somehow still tacked up on the wall, and then he walked on into his old room and turned on the light there.

Fortunately the roof had not leaked over their rooms, and the ceilings were hammocked with

cobwebs but unstained. As Claimayne had said, though, the rooms were chilly.

"I'll fetch that heater," Scott said.

Madeline crossed her arms and leaned into the connecting doorway. "She doesn't seem to hate you anymore. These rooms could use some air too." She walked across to his window, twisted the latch and tugged, but it didn't move.

"I'll get it in a sec," he said. "You're right, she seemed downright friendly. I'm glad." He brushed some dust off an empty shelf. "Claimayne looks pretty weird these days, doesn't he? I wonder how long he's been in a wheelchair."

"Since a couple of years before I moved out in '08."

"What's wrong with him?"

"I'm—not sure."

"Oh." After a pause, Scott went on, "What's that gold thing he wears around his neck?"

"It's supposed to be the DNA coil. Double helix. He likes to look at it."

"Well, he's a poet, right? It's probably a metaphor for something."

Scott had dumped the contents of the plastic bag he used for luggage onto his bare dusty mattress and he flipped through the pile of damp shirts and socks till he found a pack of Camels. Blobs of water were visible under the cellophane, shifting as he handled the pack. "My trashbag leaked," he observed glumly. He began pulling out the damp cigarettes and laying them in a line on a dusty shelf.

When he turned back to the bed, he noticed the corner of an envelope under a crumpled shirt, and he pulled it free and held it up.

"Have you opened yours yet?" he asked.

"The lawyer said her instructions were to wait till we were here. 'In residence.'"

"Well, we're here. Maybe there's a five in it." Their aunt Amity had always put a five-dollar bill inside their birthday cards.

"I hope so," said Madeline. "It's probably all we'll get."

"She meant well, with that last will."

The envelope had stayed dry, and Scott tore it open. All it contained was a folded slip of paper about six inches square, and he unfolded it and looked at it—

—And he tried to fling it away, but he couldn't move. Inked on the paper was a jaggedly eight-limbed abstract figure, and he could feel a strong alien reciprocity between it and its reversed image on his retinas; the figure seemed to rotate, or to be about to, and the corners of the limbs were suddenly bristly with finer lines, and now it appeared to consist of a dozen fissipating legs, curling and spinning.

He was breathless and his heart was suddenly pounding, and for a long, long moment he was not even conscious of his own identity.

Eventually he was aware of shifting shapes with vertical sides and no comprehensible scale, and he knew that their apparently infinite height was an optical illusion.

The shapes moved aside and he fell through them, and he found himself sitting up in a bed with sunlit curtains flickering to one side. The colors were muted and the things in front of him were hard to focus on. He saw a banner, with letters on it, and he tried to make unfamiliar eyes read the words. At last he pieced it out—*WELCOME HOME SCOTT*. He swung his field of vision to the side and recognized a four-cornered shape as a blue bedside table. Among a cluster of small orange cylinders was an oval object with a handle on it—probably a mirror, and he pushed a spotted old hand toward it, clutched it, and brought it to a point in front of him. It was indeed a mirror, and he was able to recognize the face it showed him.

It was his aunt Amity's face, expressing his own alarm in wide eyes and bared dentures.

~~The shapes lost their distinction, and again he was aware of the endlessly-vertical-seeming shapes~~—but they parted once more, and he seemed this time to be *pulled* between them, and then he was staring at a brown rectangle with a stylized Medusa head imprinted in gold on it. The hand he moved toward *it* was slim and smooth, with long, tapering fingers and long nails—evidently a woman's hand—and around its wrist was a silver bracelet made of links in a chain. The hand was clutching what he could peripherally see was a slip of paper with another eight-limbed pattern on it, so he quickly focused instead on the brown rectangle, which he now saw to be a folder of coarse-textured deckled edged paper, with a ribbon and a red wax seal holding it closed.

He remembered having seen that folder before, long ago.

He voluntarily reached out and touched it—and the air quivered around it, and a profound rolling vibration made a blur of his consciousness—

—And then he was sprawled awkwardly facedown across the springy surface of a dusty mattress panting against crumpled damp flannel.

Scott rolled over and sat up, gasping at sharp new aches in his shoulders and jaw, and he clawed the mattress and his tumbled shirts and socks to fix himself into the real world. He could feel that the square of paper was still in his hand, damp with sweat now, and he tore it to pieces without looking anywhere near it.

He was aware that he could see, but the shapes of what he knew must be wall and shelf and window all seemed to be just patches of varied color at no contrasting distances.

His heart was thudding rapidly in his chest, and he was panting through clenched teeth. “Don't,” he managed to say, “look in your envelope.” I'm back, he told himself; I'm here, I'm myself in my own body, and I won't go there again.

“I won't,” Madeline squeaked. More levelly, she went on, “You told me to, a second ago, but I won't. Scott, you're scaring me. Are you all right?”

He peered up at the tall, narrow angularity that he knew was his sister and forced himself to comprehend that her shape and the number of her eyes didn't actually change when she turned her head from side to side, profile to full face to profile.

“Sorry,” he said. “I—think I'm okay now, or I will be.” He slid his shoes back and forth on the floor, glad to feel the texture of the wood through the soles. He looked in her direction and forced his voice to be steady as he asked, “Do I look all right? My face? Am I slurring my words?”

“You look fine,” she said anxiously. “What, do you think you had a stroke? You're talking fine.”

“Not a stroke.” *I hope to God*, he thought. He waved his hand, with shreds of the paper still clinging to it. “It was the same thing that happened that time when we were kids.”

Her head shifted, evidently nodding. “I saw it was a spider,” she whispered, “on the paper, just glimpsed it.”

“A . . . spider? I didn't see any spider. No, it was the symbol, like that other time. It must have triggered a flashback of that old shock . . .”

“That kind of symbol is called a spider. I guess Aunt Amity left one for each of us.”

Scott shifted on the mattress to stand up but sank back, wincing. His face was cold with sweat. —damn,” he said, “I feel like I need a wheelchair myself. I told you to look at yours? While I was out?”

“Yes. Your voice was all wobbly. Are you normal again?”

He shook his head. “Getting there. Why the hell would Aunt Amity give us those?”

“She was crazy, at the end. She killed herself.”

Scott's gaze flickered around the bare room, and he was at least able to note the darkness in the horizontally divided window rectangle. "How long was I out? Miss dinner?"

"No, not even a full minute." Madeline leaned against the connecting doorway. "What happened?" He sighed deeply. "I—I had a hallucination. A couple of them. Aunt Amity herself, with 'Welcome Home Scott' banner, was one of them." He wiped his hand on the mattress and then rubbed his face hard. "*Don't* open your envelope. You might not have the same reaction, but we both had the same shock back in '92." He leaned back and stared at the corner where the ceiling met the walls, and he was very relieved to see the relative depths of the junction in perspective. "You remember what was like?"

And now he could clearly see that Madeline was only nodding her head, not changing the shape of it. "That was twenty-three years ago," she whispered. "You didn't—see Usabo again?"

"Usabo." Scott managed a weak laugh. "That's right, we called it that. Yes, I think I did, actually, though he . . . I didn't see him this time. In the hallucination he was inside that brown cardboard folder, like before, but this time it stayed sealed, it didn't get opened."

Madeline was hugging herself, gripping her elbows, and she cast a quick glance over her shoulder toward their parents' room. "If the folder didn't get opened, how did you know it was him?"

"Oh, Maddy, you remember how it felt—like magnetism, shaking air—" He was shivering. She nodded. "The roaring that's just outside your hearing. Him *aware of you*."

"That sensation, anyway." Scott exhaled as if ridding himself of the visions, then inhaled deeply. "Our subconsciouses have monsters in them. How old were we?"

"It was the summer after mom and dad went away. 1992. I was eight, in second grade; you were thirteen, in seventh."

Scott nodded. "That's right."

SEARCHING THEIR PARENTS' ABANDONED room in the lonely summer of 1992, they had found a section of upright wooden molding on the closet doorway that had swung aside when pressed on the door-side edge, revealing an opening in the wall. Scott found it ironic now that when he had reached into the gap, little Madeline had warned him about spiders. What he had found propped on a two-by-four foot below the opening was a manila envelope.

It had proved to contain a dozen small white envelopes; each bore an obscure handwritten label, eleven in black ink and one in red. The carefully printed label on that one was *Oneida Inc*, and the envelope wasn't sealed. In it was a piece of folded paper much like the one he had looked at her moments ago.

And young Madeline and Scott together had unfolded it and looked at the eight-limbed symbol inked on it. And together they had fallen through the moment of breathless loss of identity into the perception of the featureless vertical things that Madeline later called the Skyscraper People, because the things were infinitely tall but seemed alive . . . and then—as they had always recalled it afterward in any case—they had found themselves sharing the experience of sitting in a leather-covered chair in a rocking room with a porthole in one paneled wall. The body they had seemed to occupy moved around the spoke, but—unlike Scott's recent ability to move "his" hand in a hallucination—the two children were passive viewers of the moment. The pair of tanned hands in front of them was holding the stiff brown paper folder with the Medusa head printed on it in gold, and the hands broke the seal and shucked off the ribbon—while, somewhere off to the side, a voice was raised in sudden protest or warning—and then flipped the folder open.

And, experiencing it at one remove through the view of the man in the chair, Scott and Madeline

had looked at what Madeline later referred to, in fearful whispers, as Usabo.

It had been another of the eight-limbed symbols. This one was more minimal and uniform, at first then its eight arms had quickly bloomed with a spinning infinity of filaments and spilled the young siblings again through the world of vertical surfaces into, not one vision, but thousands of them.

Later, Scott would try to diminish the experience by comparing it to riffling through a million snapshots at once—with brief but animate glimpses of cars, faces, bodies clothed and naked, cityscapes viewed far too briefly for any hope of recognition, guns firing—or comparing it to spinning inside an enormous sphere made of active television screens; but he could never manage to forget the vast, unseen, inaudibly roaring creature around or within whom all these visions whirled like fragments of houses in a tornado.

When the visions subsided, they had found themselves still in their parents' room; Scott was gripping the telephone receiver and pressing it to his ear.

In a few minutes they had been able to walk and see clearly, and they tore the paper into dozens of tiny pieces; then, fearful at having destroyed something that grown-ups had evidently considered important, Scott had cut out a similar-sized piece of typing paper and hastily drawn a random eight-limbed figure on it, then folded it and put it into the *Oneida Inc* envelope and tucked that back into the big manila envelope with the others. When they pushed the redial button on the phone, they found that the number Scott had apparently tapped out while in the vision had only four digits.

Their aunt Amity had noticed their lack of appetite and their clumsiness and evident exhaustion and they had been too enervated to lie about what they'd done—Scott gave their aunt the big envelope and admitted that he and his little sister had looked at the “squiggle” in one of the envelopes inside. And Aunt Amity hadn't been angry—instead she had shuffled through the dozen little envelopes, then wordlessly clasped the package to her chest before hurrying out of the room, and when she returned without it, she had taken Scott and Madeline out to the Snow White Café for as much ice cream as they wanted to eat.

SCOTT STOOD UP NOW from the mattress and his scattered clothes, and though he held his hands out to the sides, his balance seemed mostly restored; but he found that he'd taken an involuntary step toward the hallway door.

“It was that way,” he said, pointing at the wall to the right of the door. “West of here, and a block south. The folder. A woman was holding it.” Slowly he lowered his hand, though he was staring at the wall as if trying to see through it and out over the clustered lights of Los Angeles. “I almost feel like I could find the place. It feels like I'm partly still there.”

Madeline nodded. “That wears off. It's supposed to be sort of a hangover the spider visions give you.”

Scott turned to face her. “The spider visions?” He shivered. “What, does this happen a *lot*? To other people?” He recalled something she had told him earlier. “You said symbols like that are called spiders. Who calls them that?”

“Claimayne and Ariel. You moved out of Caveat thirteen years ago, before they started doing them.”

“Doing them? *Looking* at them, you mean?”

She nodded.

“Good God. But it can't be like this,” he asked, waving a still-shaky hand at himself and the mattress, “for them?”

“I think it is. I never saw them do any, but a lot of times they seemed like they'd been beat up. And

Claimayne was in that wheelchair before I moved out.”

“But—” Scott’s chest felt hollow and cold. If the spider symbols had the same effects on his cousins as this one had just had on him, then his experience couldn’t be dismissed as the unique triggering of an old personal trauma.

How can eight lines on a piece of paper do that? he thought. Some kind of static, impersonal hypnosis? Maybe it’s something like those stereogram pictures, clusters of dots that some people can see images in; suppose there are some that just invite your subconscious to provide the images.

“They look at these, these *spider* things, deliberately?” He shook his head. “*Ariel* does it?”

Madeline nodded unhappily. “Claimayne says it hurts but it keeps you young, and you saw he does look sort of younger, or something. And I think he and Ariel were using them for fortune-telling—when I was in high school, they were making money for a while, like with the stock market. They’re not.”

“Do a lot of people do this? I’ve never heard of it.”

“People who do it don’t talk about it, I think,” Madeline said. “Apparently there’s pretty bad predators.”

“So how did Claimayne and Ariel learn about them? They’re both recluses!”

Madeline made a face. “He learned about them from spying on his mother.”

“Aunt Amity did that—” he began incredulously, then reminded himself that his aunt had left one of the things for him, and presumably one for Madeline too; and he remembered how happy she had been when he and Madeline had given her the manila envelope they’d found in the wall. “Did you even do it?”

“After Usabo? No.”

“You’re not missing anything.” Except for that timeless moment of nonself, he thought. He woke up on quickly, “Just a bunch of goofy hallucinations, and sore muscles afterward. If they made money consulting the things, it was just luck, like—” He stopped, for he had been about to say, *like doing what your horoscope advises*. Instead he finished with, “And Claimayne had some plastic surgery.”

“You don’t think the visions are real?” Madeline asked. “Views of real events?”

Scott squinted at the wall again, then shivered and shook his head. “No, how could they be real? I saw Aunt Amity just now, and she’s dead.” I even seemed to *be* Aunt Amity for a moment, he thought uneasily.

Madeline shrugged. “Usabo seemed pretty real, when we were kids. And we both saw the same thing then, that folder with the Medusa head on it, and the Usabo spider inside it. Can two people have the same hallucination?”

“They can believe they did,” he said firmly, “if they’re kids, and they talk it over afterward. We saw the spider symbol that was in the envelope, so we imagined a scarier one and came to believe we’d actually seen *it*. These *visions* are no more real than the Wizard of Oz. And the Medusa folder was obviously just one of us thinking of the Medusa mosaic on that wall in the garden, and putting it into our story. Our shared story.” He nodded, reflecting that what he was saying made sense. He went on, “It’s bad enough to—”

He stopped talking, for a loud grinding and clanking had started up in the walls. “What the hell!”

Madeline smiled and bit her lip. “That’s Claimayne’s elevator. They installed it after you moved out—it wasn’t quite as noisy as this at first. I guess it’s time for dinner.”

“Oh!” Scott made himself relax. “Okay. So let’s—forget about all this morbid old stuff, and don’t look in your envelope, right?”

“Right.”

“We should get into dry clothes. Drier, anyway. I should have brought a tie—Claimayne won’t say anything, but he’ll be disappointed.”

Madeline nodded and stood away from the door frame. “He’s not much of a Martian.”

Scott blinked at her, wondering if he’d missed a sentence. “I, uh, suppose not.”

“I mean, Mars is the ruler of Scorpio, and he’s a Scorpio. But Mars must not have been in Scorpio when he was born, or he’d be more assertive.” She turned to her own room and took hold of the doorknob, but paused. “Why did we call it Usabo? I forget.”

Scott laughed shortly, still very shaky and wishing she would let the subject go. “Right afterward we saw a storage yard, and the letters on the sign had been messed up by the wind. It was supposed to say, SEE US ABOUT OUR SPECIAL, but—”

“I remember now. It said SEE USABO U TOUR SPECIAL. And we pretended it was talking about what we saw. What we thought we saw.” She gripped the doorknob tightly. “I don’t ever want to see him and tour special again.”

Scott looked down at the shreds of the paper on the mattress, and he wiped his hand on his damaged jeans. “I don’t either,” he said. But he remembered that initial moment of being outside of time and losing his own identity, and he had to repeat, more to himself this time, “I don’t either.”

Madeline was peering at him and opened her mouth to say something, but he waved at her and said, “I’ll see if I can fetch that heater up here without falling down the stairs.”

CHAPTER 3

THE DINING ROOM TOOK up most of the southern side of the ground floor, with a narrow kitchen tucked up against the west chimney behind a pair of swinging doors. Lights in frosted-glass wall sconces cast a lemony glow over the long room and threw shadows against the plaster ceiling from the open-work beams high overhead, and two of the French windows were opened now onto a view of the rainy night and the freeway lights in the distance. The air in the dining room shifted with the smells of wet vegetation and hot enchilada sauce.

The walls were cluttered with framed pictures and mirrors and shelves crowded with tiny figurines, and a pair of glass-fronted bookcases flanked the door to the entry hall. Four places had been set at the long table, two on each side, and two bottles of wine stood in the center; the place at the head of the table, where their aunt Amity had always sat, was bare.

Claimayne, wearing an embroidered dressing gown and a blue silk scarf, had already maneuvered his wheelchair to the place that would have been on his mother's right, with his back to the window, and Ariel was just sitting down beside him when Scott and Madeline stepped in from the hall.

"Ah," called Claimayne, "our future landlords!" Ariel scowled fiercely at him.

Scott pulled out a chair on the other side of the table for Madeline. "We'll let you both stay on rent-free," he said lightly as she sat down.

"We might let *you* stay," said Ariel, "as the handyman. Isn't that what you do these days, now that you're always too drunk to be an *artist* anymore?"

Scott had begun to pull out a chair for himself, and after a momentary pause, he continued the motion and then sat down carefully.

Madeline shifted beside him. "Scott's an apartment manager," she said, "at a complex off Sunset. Not a handyman."

"We all have a whole week together," said Claimayne to Ariel, carefully pushing one of the bottles of wine toward her. "Would you pour? According to my mother's will. It would be more effective theater if you began amicably, so that your venom later will have some prominence."

"Her *will*?" said Ariel, almost spitting. Claimayne pushed the bottle again, and she picked it up with both hands, a bit shakily. "She killed herself before the ink was dry on it! Didn't just kill herself—got out of bed and climbed up onto the roof, with a *grenade*!—and blew herself to pieces! Sour mind, my ass!" She rubbed her jaw, as if it hurt to speak, and glowered at Claimayne. "And you were no help—in your room with the door locked, crying and cussing while she did it, and then sick in bed for four days while *I* arranged her funeral, which you didn't even *attend*."

"And pour," Claimayne prompted. As Ariel splashed wine into his glass and hers, he smiled. "Hamlet said 'The Everlasting hath fix'd his canon 'gainst self-slaughter'—she opposed the canon with a grenade!" He shook his head and added thoughtfully, "I'm afraid that for a long time she had entertained thoughts of suicide."

For a moment no one had anything to say, and the hiss and clatter of the rain outside the open

French windows was the only sound; then, evidently to break the silence, Madeline said, “Entertained I can see . . . harboring thoughts of suicide, indulging them . . . but not *entertaining* them.”

Scott simply held still, waiting for the tingling in his face to subside. Wow, he thought shakily, Ariel’s cheerful welcome an hour ago was clearly faked, a calculated setup for this attack.

He leaned back and opened his mouth, and instantly Ariel was staring at him; he shut his mouth and looked away.

What she had said was true. He had resented computer-generated art and the alleged necessity of using social media like Facebook, and when he had neglected or skimped several commissions because of being drunk, he had soon found himself effectively blackballed as a commercial graphic artist. After that, he had tried to sell his paintings—at juried shows, then at nonjuried shows, and finally at any sidewalk arts-and-crafts fair, often alongside booths selling food dehydrators and innovative mops—and finally he had thrown out all his paints and brushes and lights and air brushes and compressors, and bitterly vowed that he would never again even sketch a sleeping cat.

White light flared silently outside the French windows, and a moment later Scott twitched as thunder cracked and rolled its echoes over the dark hills. Ariel half stood up, apparently meaning to close the windows, then just shook her head wearily and sat back down. Scott noticed that she was now wearing a little silver gyroscope on a chain around her neck.

“She was in very poor health, these last few years,” Claimayne went on imperturbably. “Colon cancer, chemotherapy, several operations—during the last year she had no rectum to speak of.”

“For God’s sake,” Ariel burst out, “who’d *want* to speak of it? We’re indifferent to your mother’s rectum.” She winced and closed her eyes, then gingerly rubbed the corners of her jaw.

Scott’s own jaw was aching, and he had just reached up to massage it, and he was wincing too when she opened her eyes and stared at him; both of them lowered their hands, and after a few seconds they looked away from each other.

Madeline said, he thought, that Ariel does spiders.

The swinging doors to the kitchen opened then, and white-haired Rita, who had been the housekeeper at Caveat for as long as Scott could remember, sidled in carrying a wide tray.

“Rita!” exclaimed Madeline. “We’re back!”

The elderly Mexican woman smiled warmly at her. “Not to stay long in this terrible place, I hope, Madeline sweetie!”

Claimayne ignored her and waved toward the far side of the table. “Do have some wine,” he said. “Ravenswood zinfandel, 2009.”

Madeline picked up the bottle Ariel had poured from and filled the glass in front of her.

When Rita had shifted four steaming plates from the tray, Scott said, “Rita, is there maybe a Colby in the refrigerator?”

“I think maybe there is, Scotty,” she said and carried the tray back into the kitchen.

“On the wagon for all to see and admire,” observed Ariel, “with a bottle upstairs for dessert.”

“Scott hasn’t had a drink in more than a year,” said Madeline, cutting into one of her enchiladas with a fork. “He told me so.”

“Oh,” said Ariel, “*well* then.” She turned to Claimayne. “And we’ve got a bunch of high-brow strangers coming over here on Saturday. Do you have any *other* intruders lined up?”

“That man is coming over here on Thursday,” said Claimayne, “at one thirty, to talk about my mother’s unpublished books.”

Ariel nodded. “That Ferdalisi guy. Your mother refused to see him.”

“She was paranoid in her old age. Thought the gas man was an agent from the Vatican.” Claimayne

tried to lift his wineglass, but only managed to make the base of it rattle against the table. “‘Dip in the wine thy little red lips,’” he said to Ariel, “‘that I may drain the cup!’”

Ariel scowled at him, then sighed and rolled her eyes. “I am not thirsty, Tetrarch.”

In spite of his aching muscles and his embarrassment at Ariel’s unexpected scornful remark, Scott couldn’t repress a reminiscent smile, for Claimayne and Ariel used to do this Salomé-and-the-tetrarch routine when all four of them were living at Caveat. It was lines from the dialogue frames of a silent black-and-white movie called *Salomé* that their aunt Amity had watched frequently.

Claimayne had been a teenager in those days, older than the rest of them and too resolute, sophisticated and ironic to see any value in the strange, slow old movie his mother was so fond of, and his cousin Ariel, eight years younger, had happily cooperated in his mockery of the stilted sentences on the dialogue frames.

Ariel, as Claimayne had frequently observed, was a genuine Madden. She had been orphaned at the age of seven, but her father, Sam Madden, had been the brother of Edward Madden, Claimayne’s father, and the fifteen-year-old Claimayne had had no objections when his mother took the girl in to live at Caveat. Scott and Madeline’s father, Arthur Madden, had merely been adopted by the grandfather, and though they had grown up with Claimayne and Ariel, Claimayne had never regarded them as real family. Young Scott and Madeline had laughed at Claimayne’s jokes but had seldom made any of their own.

Scott recalled that Aunt Amity had stopped watching the movie when he had been in the sixth grade.

Claimayne was still holding his wineglass and blinking at Ariel, who impatiently took his glass and drank off half the wine in it. When she clanked it back down on the table, it was light enough for Claimayne to lift it in his trembling hand.

“Aunt Amity’s unpublished books?” ventured Scott. “Thank you,” he added when Rita brought him a glass of Coca-Cola and ice.

“It’s good you quit the drinking,” old Rita said to him quietly. “You be careful here.” Scott nodded and mouthed *Thanks*.

Claimayne gulped some wine and then began cutting up his enchiladas, gripping the knife and fork tightly. “*The Shores of Hollywood*, in 1992, was my mother’s last published novel. She kept writing them after that—a good two dozen of them—but even in ’92 her vogue had passed.”

“The ones after ’92 were no good,” spoke up Ariel.

Claimayne pursed his lips as he tried to work his fork under a bit of cheese and tortilla. “No worse than the previous ones, I think, or not much worse. The only real difference was that the novels she wrote after *Shores of Hollywood* were all written in the third person—that one was the last of her first-person novels.”

“Are they all,” asked Scott, “the unpublished ones, still about Cyclone Severiss?”

Cyclone Severiss was the protagonist of all Aunt Amity’s published novels; the Severiss character had been a female private investigator in the Los Angeles of the 1920s. Scott had read most of the published ones and had always privately thought that Aunt Amity had tried so hard for periodic accuracy that the pace of the books dragged.

“The ones I’ve looked at,” answered Claimayne. The food dropped off his fork, and he patiently set about recapturing it. “In any case, this fellow Ferdalisi wants to look at them, and any notes she might have kept.”

“He’s a publisher?”

“Or an agent, or something. We’re hosting a memorial party here on Saturday, as Ariel mentioned

with some literary and film folk, so maybe he believes there could be a resurgence of interest in my mother's work."

"And some money," put in Ariel. Looking across the table, she added, "You two will still be in residence, to act out the charade of her insane so-called 'last will'—but you don't need to mingle at the party."

Scott kept his attention on the food in front of him and just nodded, but Madeline looked at her cousin across the table. "There was a cannon too?"

Ariel stared at her in incomprehension, faintly shaking her head.

"Claimayne said there was a cannon," Madeline went on, "as well as a grenade."

"Canon law," said Claimayne, smiling at her over the mess he'd made of his plate. "God's law is Canon with only one 'n' in it. My mother went against it, you see, with her grenade. I'm sorry I wasn't clear about that."

Madeline nodded magnanimously. "Well, it's hard to be clear about grenades," she allowed.

Claimayne nodded vaguely, then turned to Ariel. "Salomé!" he said. "Bite but a little of the enchilada, that I may eat what is left!"

Ariel glanced at his plate. "No," she said. Then she gave Scott a narrowed look. "On her last day she made these stupid banners for you two, with a felt marker and an old box of accordion tractor-feed paper—'Welcome home, Scott,' and 'Welcome home, Madeline.'"

Scott's expression didn't change, but he felt his scalp contract and he carefully laid down his fork. He didn't look at Madeline.

"Oh?" he said in a neutral tone.

Ariel gave him a thin smile. "You won't see them. I threw them in the trash."

"Oh," said Scott.

"Oh," echoed Madeline weakly.

Claimayne smiled. "Our Ariel just is *not* sentimental, is she?"

BEFORE GOING DOWNSTAIRS TO dinner, Madeline had found sheets, blankets, pillows, and pillowcases in the same linen closet they'd always been in, and she and Scott had made their beds and got the windows open. Madeline had found a broom to sweep the worst of the dust and cobwebs away, and Scott had carried up the electric heater and plugged it in and stood it in the connecting doorway between their rooms.

Now, the awkward dinner having finally come to an end, they had trudged back up the stairs, and Scott had absently knocked at the Garden of Allah door, and they were in Madeline's room. The air was now comfortably warm. Madeline was leaning back on her elbows on the bedspread and Scott was sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor.

After several seconds of silence, Madeline sat up and exclaimed, "No more real than the wizard of Oz!"

After a pause, "Maybe Ariel was listening, outside the door," Scott began, "when I was talking about the Welcome Home banner . . ." But he shook his head unhappily. "Maddy, damn it, how could they be real visions? What is this, some kind of—"

"It could have been like a psychic Instagram," interrupted Madeline. "Like Aunt Amity recorded a message, a video, on that spider you looked at."

Scott grimaced. "So what are you saying . . . when we were kids, we really did see an actual guy open a boat open that folder and look at the Usabo spider?"

Madeline had drawn up her knees, and all Scott could see were her wide eyes as she said, "W"

didn't see him, we were him, remember?"

Scott got stiffly to his feet. "I think Ariel was listening at the door."

Madeline straightened her legs and sighed. "Maybe."

For several seconds neither of them spoke.

Then Madeline said, "She is awful mean, Ariel. Do you want to stay here for a week?"

Scott was glad to abandon the disquieting spider topic. "Do you?"

"I don't know. We *might* inherit the place," Madeline said, and continued even as her brother was shaking his head, "if we stay the week, like Aunt Amity put in her will. And it's free food for a week and a quarter off the month's utilities at my apartment. That's not nothing."

And I'll have to at least split my week's pay with Ellis for filling in for me at the Raven Apartments office, thought Scott. Better eat a lot of the free food.

But, "True," he said.

"Ariel liked you, when we first got here. Then she didn't. What's up with that?"

Scott felt his face heating up again. "She was pretending, at first."

"You think so? I don't think so."

Madeline got up and crossed to the open window and knelt on the floor to look out at the rain at night. Scott knew that the view was of the long garden that sloped up to a row of garages at the top of the hill.

The breeze blew Madeline's curly dark hair away from her face, and the house creaked like an old ship at sea.

"We could look at all our old places, while we're here," she said. "The garden looks the same, as much as I can see. I can just make out the wall that's got the Medusa mosaic on it, unless all the stones have fallen out by now." She pursed her lips, perhaps finding that an uncomfortable subject and went on quickly, "And we could check out the basements. I wonder if our scare-bat is still down there."

Scott smiled reluctantly and shook his head. In their childhood explorations of Caveat, they had not neglected the extensive cellars that stretched under all the buildings on the hill, and even under the gardens and lawns. In a brick alcove under the main house their flashlights had found a gold-painted four-armed lug wrench stuck upright in a yard-wide square of lumpy concrete; Madeline had eventually stapled together scraps of cloth to make a coat and hat to hang on it, and Scott had painted a clown face on a plastic egg that somebody's stockings had come in, and hung it under the hat. Madeline had decided that since no crows were ever likely to venture into the cellars, they should call the little figure a scare-bat. She had taken to dressing it for the seasons—red-and-white felt and a conical red hat in December, a witch's hat and black dress in October . . .

"If we can still fit through all those passages," he said.

"Sure, we weren't little kids anymore by the time we found the basements."

Then she stiffened. "Scott," she said sharply, "that cat is walking in midair."

Scott got up and crouched beside her.

She pointed out the window. "There!"

Off to the left, a white cat fifty feet away in the darkness was picking its way along in a straight line. It didn't seem to mind the rain.

"It's on that wall with all the seashells stuck in it," Scott said. "The old croquet court is on the other side."

"No," said Madeline, "I remember that wall, but it's gone now, look!"

Scott peered through the rain, and in fact it did seem that the old wall was gone—the darkne

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