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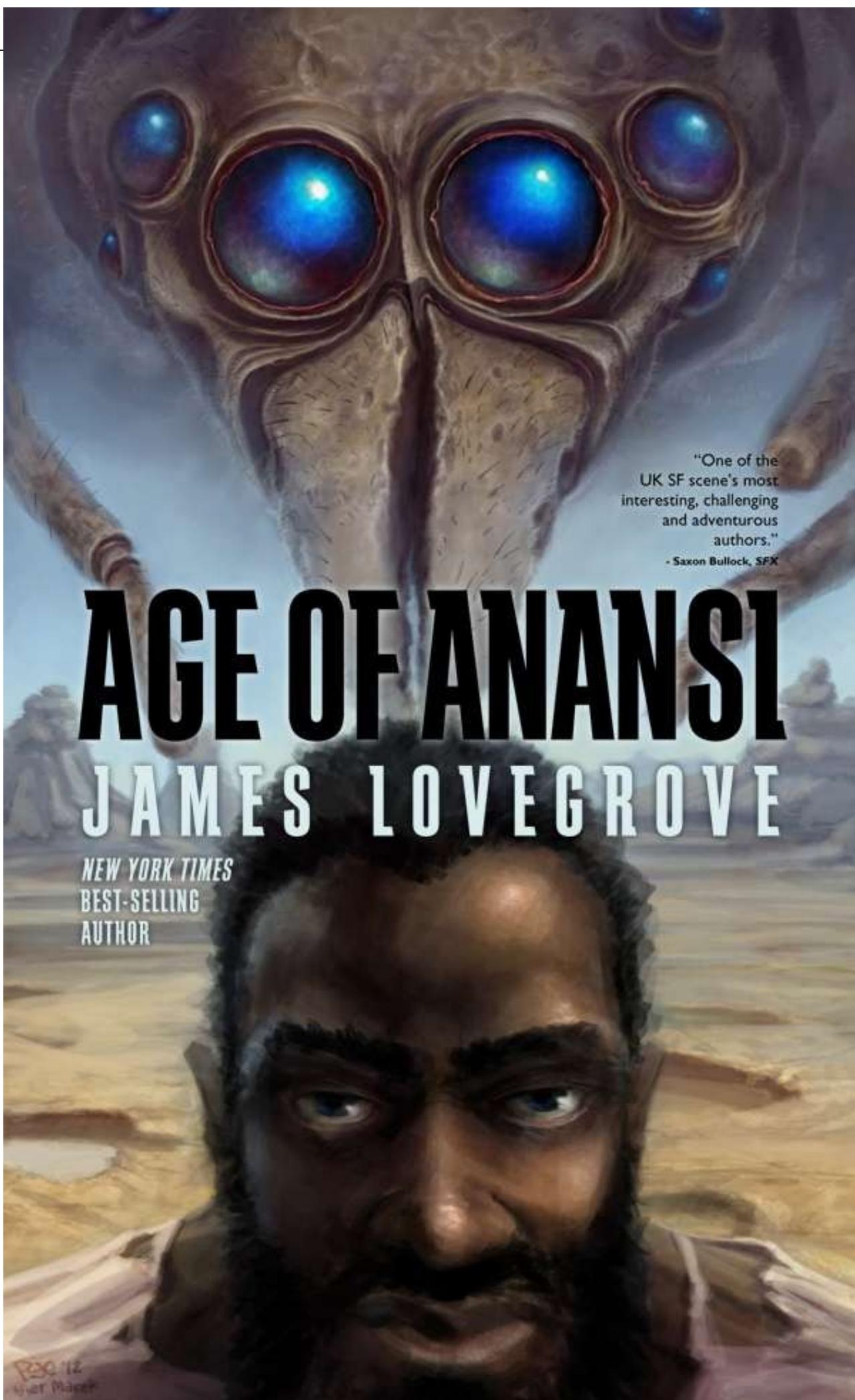
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AGE OF ANANSI

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NEW YORK TIMES
BEST-SELLING
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2007
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RSC '12
Vier Mace

Praise for the *Pantheon* series:

“Mr. Lovegrove is one of the best writers out there... Highly, highly recommended.”
– *The Fantasy Book Critic* on *The Age of Ra*

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– *Strange Horizons Magazine* on *The Age of Ra*

“One of the UK SF scene’s most interesting, challenging and adventurous authors.”
– Saxon Bullock, *SFX* on *The Age of Ra*

“A compulsive, breakneck read by a master of the craft, with stunning action sequences and acute character observations. This is the kind of complex, action-oriented SF Dan Brown would write if Dan Brown could write.”
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“The action, along with some finely observed satire, keeps the pages turning until the end.”
– *Total Sci-Fi Online* on *The Age of Odin*

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AGE OF ANANSI

JAMES LOVEGROVE





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EVERYTHING WOULD HAVE been fine, if it wasn't for the spider.

The spider came along, took a perfect life, a life that was well planned and blameless – *my* life – and wrecked it.

MAYBE I SHOULD begin this the way my grandmother taught me to, by reciting the traditional incantation: “We do not really mean, we do not really mean that what we are about to say is true. A story, a story. Let it come, let it go.”

Nanabaa Oboshie smelled of spices and fat-lady sweat. I'd cuddle up on her capacious lap and she would tell me the old Ashanti myths. Her English wasn't good, thickly accented, but I loved the cadences of her speech, the singsong rhythms, the occasional incomprehensible lapses into Kwa phraseology.

Most of the stories, the best ones, were about Anansi.

Anansi is lord of stories. He won ownership of them off his father Nyame, the Sky God. He bought them by trapping Onini the Python, Osebo the Leopard, the Mmoboro Hornets and Mmoatia the Dwarf, and handing these prizes to Nyame. Through stealth and subterfuge he captured the creatures, and so all the world's stories became Anansesem – Anansi stories.

Which is, of course, a story in itself.

“We do not mean that what we are about to say is true.”

Only *it* is true.

It happened to me.

MY NAME IS Dion Yeboah, and up until not so long ago I was a respectable and respected barrister, specialising in criminal law. I had a sterling reputation as a defence QC, the man you want on your side when you're in a jam, the man whose silver tongue and sharp legal brain could scoop you out of hot water and land you safely on the right side of the bars of a prison cell.

I charged the going rate for my services, which is to say ‘a lot,’ and I can't confess to ever feeling guilty about that. And yes, there may have been a time or two when I acted as counsel for a client whose innocence I wasn't entirely convinced of. But everyone is entitled to a fair trial, and that means a robust defence. Besides, I did my share of *pro bono* work as well, mostly on behalf of kids from rough council estates who'd got unlucky, been busted for first-time possession – drugs, concealed weapons, whatever a random police stop-and-search turned up – or else were facing charges of assault or GBH when they were only trying to protect themselves or their family.

Those kids, they'd look at me in frank wonder sometimes. Never seen someone with the same skin colour as them who wore a suit and spoke the way I did. “What, you posh or summink, bruv? You Prince Charles or summink? How come you don't talk right?”

No, not posh, I would tell them. I come from the same place you do. I grew up on the London street. My parents had no money, same as yours. But I studied hard at school. I went to university on a

scholarship and got a Graduate Diploma in Law. I was called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn. I worked my backside off to make a success of myself.

And you can too.

I WAS A success, I don't mind admitting it. Nice flat in St John's Wood. Tenancy in a well regarded set of chambers based near the Barbican. Steady and enviable income. I kept myself in trim – weight training twice a week, a jog round Regent's Park every other morning. I kept my home in trim, too. Very house-proud, me. Had that instilled into me by my mum. "A clean home is a good home," she'd say as she hurricaned from room to room with vacuum cleaner and feather duster, hands gauntleted in Marigolds. We had a tiny council flat, and it was always immaculate, not a speck of dust anywhere. My pad in St John's Wood was the same – spotless. Windows gleaming bright. Floors swept to within an inch of their lives. Bathroom dazzling. Did it all myself, what's more. I could easily afford a cleaner, but nobody else could keep things to my exacting standards. My mother, God rest her soul, would have approved. She cleaned other people's houses for a living and felt no shame in that, but she did believe a person should be responsible for their own domestic hygiene.

"It's your mess. Don't do you no good paying someone else to make it go away."

I CAN'T REMEMBER when exactly I noticed the first web. Sometime in midsummer, late July, but I can't be any more precise than that. It wasn't big, covering one windowpane. Flick of a dustcloth and it was gone.

The second appeared a couple of days later, stretched between a bookcase and the ceiling cornice. Bigger than the first, but just as easily got rid of.

The flat had never been troubled by spiders before. Insufficient prey. Flies and their ilk didn't flourish at my place. Not enough of the dirt and debris they thrived on.

A week passed, and one day I came home and there were a good half-dozen webs. They hadn't been there when I'd left that morning. One was draped around the light fixture in the living room. One linked the kitchen sink taps to the drying rack. One neatly filled the ring-seat on the toilet.

They were beautiful webs, I have to give them that. Pristine. Exactly how you imagine a spider web should look. The radial strands neatly equidistant, the concentric rings laddering out at steadily large intervals, as though according to some fundamental mathematical principle. A certain silveriness to the silk, a gossamer iridescence. If they'd been anywhere else, anywhere but my home, I'd have admired them, marvelled at them.

As it was, I eradicated them. Angrily. Then I called in a pest control company.

THE MAN IN the Bug Blasterz overalls searched and searched, but couldn't find any trace of spider infestation.

"No eggs," he said. "No cocoons. No husks. Nothing. You're sure they were webs?"

"Yes, I'm damn well sure they were webs," I replied sharply. "What else would they have been?"

"Only asking."

He squirted insect repellent everywhere and advised me to stay outdoors for at least three hours. When I returned, the flat reeked of chemicals but felt somehow purified, as though I'd had ghosts and a priest had come and exorcised them.

My orderly life resumed. For a fortnight, my routine was as it had ever been. Work, fitness, cleaning, sleep. I found time to go on a date – a blind date set up by a well-meaning colleague, who thought I

was working too hard and not “playing” enough. She was a nice enough girl, a solicitor, petite but curvy where it counts. West Indian, though, and sorry, I can’t help it, but my parents’ prejudices are my own. I remember my dad saying, “The stupid ones got caught. The clever ones knew how to run and hide. Those slave traders did Africa a favour, leaving the best and taking the rest.” It’s not true; what many of the clever Africans did was sell their countrymen to the slave traders. That’s how they survived. But we all tell lies to ourselves about our ancestors, to make us feel better, and those lies are persuasive.

So the date ended with a polite peck on the cheek and me about a hundred and fifty quid out of pocket for dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant.

And I got in that night to find my flat *swathed* in spider webs. Literally hundreds of them. Spider webs everywhere.

It was like some sort of practical joke. As though a prankster had broken in and gone mad with those spray cans they use to make cobwebs on movie sets. I couldn’t move without sticky silk wrapping itself round my hands, my legs, my head. I scarcely dared breathe for fear of getting some of the stuff in my mouth or up my nose.

This is insane, I thought. This can’t be happening.

I took myself in hand, told myself to get a grip. It was just spider webs. Just dirt that shouldn’t be there.

I fought my way through the webs to the cleaning cupboard and fetched out dustcloths, broom, brush, dustpan, Dyson upright and Mr Sheen, then tied a bandanna over the lower half of my face and set to work. It took the best part of two hours, but by midnight I’d got the job done. Not a scrap of web remained. It was all inside a pair of large black bin bags, which were stuffed full but weighed next to nothing and which I dumped in the wheelie bin outside with equal parts satisfaction and irritation. But Blasterz would be getting a very stern phone call in the morning. You do not bill Dion Yeboah £175 plus VAT for “services rendered” if said services have patently not been rendered.

IN THE MIDDLE of the night I woke to find a huge spider squatting on my chest.

It was black against the pale bedcovers, lit by the streetlight glow coming through the curtains. Its carapace glinted dully. Eight long legs straddled my torso, their outermost tips reaching from my collarbone to my navel and from one side of my ribcage to the other.

I lay there in a paroxysm of horror. It was the biggest, blackest, ugliest spider I’d ever laid eyes on. I didn’t dare move. I had an urge to hurl the thing off me, but at the same time I didn’t want to alarm it or provoke it. What if it was venomous? A spider that size – if it bit me it would surely kill me.

A dozen shiny eyes regarded me carefully. The mandibles beneath them rustled and clicked, mouthparts folding in and out of one another with machinelike precision.

Dion.

A voice. A whisper inside my mind.

Dion Yeboah. I am here for you. I have come for you.

I WOKE AGAIN. I was still in bed, still on my back, bathed in fear sweat. But there was no spider. No giant black arachnid perched on top of me, gazing at me with myriad jet-coloured eyes.

I’d dreamed it, of course. Spiders had overrun my flat with their webs earlier in the evening, so naturally I’d had a spider-themed nightmare.

Made perfect sense.

I didn’t sleep again that night, however. Not a wink.

MR BUG BLASTERZ came back and did the same as before, namely doubt the veracity of my claims and souse the flat with poison. At least he had the good grace not to invoice me for the cost of the repeat visit.

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, the spider returned.

Dion, it said.

I had no doubt that the whisper I was hearing inside my head – a mental tickling that was as much sensation as sound – was the spider’s voice.

Dion, I have come far. I have travelled thousands of miles to find you. I have chosen you, you out of the many I could have chosen, to be mine.

“Who are you?” I challenged that black monstrosity. Its face, if you could call it a face, was just inches from mine.

Who am I? Its mandibles flared. I heard a raspy chuckle. Oh, you know who I am, Dion. You know full well. I am he whom your grandmother told you about all those years ago. I am Kwaku Ananse. I am Ananse-Tori. I am Nansi. I am Kuent’i Nanzi. I am Ayiyi. I am the god of countless names and countless stories. Everything your Nanabaa Oboshie told you, that is who I am.

“What do you want?” I demanded. “Why are you here? Why me?”

I want to be with you, said Anansi. I want your story to become mine and mine yours. I want our tale to intertwine. I want us to be together. We have work to do.

“Work? What work?”

Let me in, Dion. Let me inside you. See what we can do together, the two of us. See what we can achieve.

“No!” I cried. “No! Leave me alone! I don’t believe in you. You’re just a myth. An African old wives’ tale. A story for children. I have nothing to do with you. You don’t belong in my world.”

Let’s see about that, said Anansi. Let’s just see.

THINGS STARTED TO GO WRONG.

Nothing major, on the face of it. I missed the bus to work a couple of mornings in a row, or rather, the bus failed to turn up as scheduled. The second time, I walked to Edgware Road and took the Tube instead, only for the train to get held up in the tunnel for an hour – a suicide further down the line, apparently. So I was late into chambers both those mornings, and late to court. Everything was a rush but I compensated. None of my clients was short-changed and the verdicts went the right way.

Then a case I’d been nurturing for weeks and feeling confident about suddenly veered off-course and seemed headed for disaster. We were ready to go to trial, but a key witness changed his testimony, deciding almost on a whim that he *had* seen the accused commit violence at the pub that night after all, removing a vital plank in our defence. I scrambled to find someone who could shore things up for us again. Eventually I convinced a lesser witness to be, shall we say, more certain about her facts than she had been previously. I managed to gloss over the discrepancies between her statement to the police on the night itself and her statement in court in such a way that the jurors hardly seemed to notice any difference. Busy, crowded pub. Alcohol imbibed. Under those circumstances, recollection are often clearer some weeks later than they are in the immediate aftermath of the event. Skin of my teeth, but I pulled it off, and our man walked free.

Then I got word from various mutual acquaintances that the girl I’d gone on that blind date with had

begun making disparaging remarks about me. She was saying I'd behaved badly, been rude, snobby, insulting, even racist. It was absurd, of course. I might have been somewhat distracted that evening, maybe not paying her as much attention as she thought she merited, and possibly I'd alluded to the West Indies once or twice in less than complimentary terms, but snobby? Racist? Preposterous. I phoned her to straighten the matter out. She maintained that she'd been misquoted. I suggested that if she was unhappy with the way the evening had panned out, there were better ways of dealing with her disappointment than bandying slanderous accusations about. The conversation didn't end on a positive note, but I felt that I got my point across.

Little things. Minor annoyances. In and of themselves, nothing much.

But this sort of stuff simply did not happen to Dion Yeboah. I organised my life precisely so that there would be a minimum of grief and disruption. I worked hard to maintain my routine and keep everything on an even keel.

I did not like my shipshape little boat being rocked.

"ANANSI," I SAID to my empty flat. "I know you don't exist. I know you're not listening. But – if you *are* there..."

Silence. Only the murmur of traffic outside and the purr of the refrigerator.

"If you *are* there, please go away. Please stop interfering. I've done nothing to deserve this. All I wish is to be allowed to carry on as before. I've done nothing wrong, nothing to offend you. Find somebody else to bother. Leave me be."

I felt foolish, talking to thin air, addressing a spider deity who had appeared to me in dreams alone. I wished Nanabaa Oboshie was with me, so that she could confirm that I had only imagined Anansi. "A story, a story." That was all he was. Nanabaa Oboshie knew that. Much though my grandmother had loved to tell me of Anansi's escapades – his silly stunts that almost always backfired, the tricks he played and the trouble they got him into with his fellow gods and the other animals – she was perfectly well aware that he was a fiction. She herself had learned the tales from her own grandmother back in Ghana, sitting in the wattle-walled hut, by the fire. Anansi existed solely as oral tradition handed down from generation to generation, a way to entertain the tribe on a dark hot night while the lions roared in the hills.

Anansi certainly did not have a place in twenty-first-century London, in the flat of a sophisticated and highly intelligent lawyer.

I kept insisting on this to myself even after the improbably large black spider descended in front of me from the ceiling, suspended from a delicate thread of silk.

SO YOU BELIEVE NOW, do you? Anansi said.

"I don't know what to believe," I said, hesitantly. The truth.

Good. An open mind. That's progress. But you mustn't be afraid, Dion. Above all else, not that. I shouldn't frighten you. I'm here to help.

"Help? How?"

If you'll just accept me – fully, wholeheartedly – then you'll see.

"Accept?"

Am I real?

"You – you *look* real."

Think how you could know for sure.

I thought. I studied the spider's fat round abdomen, the wormy spinnerets that extruded the thread,

the tiny hairs fringing the legs.

“I could touch you,” I said.

Touch me, then, said Anansi. Feel my solidity. There will be your proof.

I was repulsed by the idea. Who would want to touch a spider that size? Who in their right mind would want to go anywhere near it? Even Sir David Attenborough would think twice.

My hand went out, shrank back, several times. Anansi hung there, patient, waiting.

Finally, in a mad dash of bravado, I brushed my fingers against the creature’s back.

For the briefest of moments, barely a millisecond, I felt *something*. The coolness of chitin. The hardness of a living shell.

That was all it took.

The spider vanished.

But it wasn’t gone.

Anansi was within me. I felt him there as surely as I could feel my heartbeat, the air passing in and out of my nostrils, the gurgling of my digestive system. I had allowed Anansi in, and now he was a part of me.

Yes, Anansi said. *Yes, that’s better. That’s so much better, isn’t it, Dion?*

I nodded. I could hardly speak.

So let’s go and have some fun, said Anansi. You and me. I’m looking forward to this.

FUN? I HAD no idea what he meant.

Then, the very next day, I was summoned to HMP Wandsworth. There I met a man who was up on a charge of possession of a class-A controlled substance with intent to distribute and sell. One look at him – gold teeth, a ring on every finger, razored haircut, a plethora of tattoos – told me “drug lord.” No doubt this wasn’t his first time on remand. Nor would it be his last.

“I’ve just ditched my brief,” the fellow said to me. “Useless cunt was wanting me to plead guilty. I’ve heard you’re the dog’s pods when it comes to getting a bloke off the hook. I’m hiring you.”

“I’m very expensive.”

“Money’s no object. Fix this shit for me, and I’ll pay whatever you ask. I ain’t doing another stretch. Too much business going on. Too many irons in the fire.”

The case against this charming specimen of humanity hinged on a single, crucial piece of evidence – an exchange of text messages between him and an accomplice.

Reading the transcript, it looked pretty watertight to me. The conversation was clearly a deal, some sort of transaction, and the weakly-coded references to the drug, cocaine, were unmistakable.

There is a way, though, Anansi whispered in my mind.

Was there? Well, maybe. But it would take an audacious person to pull it off.

And aren’t you that person, Dion?

IN COURT, I tore into the case the police had built up.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you will note the recurrence of the word ‘Colombian’ in these texts, used in connection with weight – pounds and ounces – and monetary value. From that, the prosecution wishes you to infer that the accused and his associate, a trading partner, were negotiating the sale of a quantity of cocaine. This is perfectly possible. But is it not equally possible, if not more so, that the goods in question were of an entirely innocent nature? I put it to you that ‘Colombian’ could easily be taken to mean ‘coffee.’”

There was an audible gasp from the viewing gallery. My learned friend, the counsel for the

prosecution, could barely stifle an incredulous groan. The judge remained impassive, as he should, but I detected a glint of wry amusement in His Honour's wrinkled old eyes.

I soldiered on. Nobody was going to buy this line of argument.

But what if they do? said Anansi.

"My client is no fool. As we all know, no text-message conversation these days can ever truly be considered private. Who in their right mind would openly, overtly conduct a drugs deal via this medium? I put it to you, members of the jury, that the transcript before you centres on nothing more illegal or sinister than a purchase of ground coffee in bulk, coffee being of course one of the exports for which the country of Colombia is famous. Indeed, I myself drink a cup of Colombian blend every morning."

One or two of the jurors began nodding. By God, it seemed to be working. I was winning them over. "If there is any doubt in your minds that this principal piece of evidence is in any way suspect," I went on, "if it is at all conceivable to you that the prosecution's case rests almost wholly on the misinterpretation of a string of innocuous text messages between two law-abiding individuals going about their legitimate business, then you have no alternative but to acquit the man in the dock and let him walk free from this courtroom without a stain on his reputation."

And what do you know, they did.

The champagne corks popped in chambers that afternoon, I can tell you. One of the senior barristers who was also my former pupil master, professed himself amazed that I'd bamboozled the jury with such an obvious ruse.

"It wasn't what I did," I told him. "It was how I did it. It's all in the delivery."

"Still and all, dear boy," he said, "a fine example of legal sleight of hand. I'm proud of you."

"I had a good teacher," I said.

Yes, said Anansi. *Yes, you did.*

FLUSH FROM THAT success, I decided to exact revenge on my one-time blind date, who was still spouting uncomplimentary things about me behind my back. I phoned the Law Society and gave them an anonymous tipoff that the young lady was conducting an improper relationship with a senior partner in her firm of solicitors. I'd done my homework. I named the man, who was married, a father of two, a churchgoer, a charity fundraiser, a pillar of his local community. Whiter than white, in so many ways. Never in a million years would he be likely to dally at the office with an employee, especially one of colour – which somehow made it all the more plausible that he might, not to mention all the more outrageous.

The bigger the lie, said Anansi, the more credence people will give it.

And he should know. Had he not wooed and won his wife Aso by convincing her he was greatly in demand among the female animals and hence a worthy "catch"? He did this by tying a rope to each of his eight legs and having hidden animal friends tug on the different ropes. He told Aso the ropes were attached to other prospective wives, who were tugging to get his attention. If Aso wished to marry him, she should agree to it quickly, before one of her rivals hauled the oh-so-eligible bachelor off and claimed him for herself.

Unfortunately – and there's almost always an 'unfortunately,' in any Anansi story – Anansi's eight animal friends happened to pull on the ropes at the same time, and with all their might. The result was that Anansi was suddenly and violently yanked in eight directions at once, and his legs, which had been short and stubby, were stretched out like toffee. And that is why all spiders have thin, spindly legs.

But the good news as far as Anansi was concerned was that Aso laughed at the sight of him being

hauled in different directions and stretched like a piece of chewing gum. She laughed so hard that she found herself falling in love with him, and next thing she knew, she was consenting to be his bride.

It was a decision she would come to regret, for Anansi was famously unfaithful, and all his cunning schemes seemed to come to nothing, and he often made himself and his family a laughing-stock. In legend, Aso has become synonymous with the exasperated, long-suffering wife.

My lie, at any rate, gained traction and ran. The Law Society made discreet enquiries, as it was duty bound to do. It found no evidence of impropriety, but the very fact that it was investigating the firm and all caused ructions and sparked rumours. Word got around that the affair I'd conjured up out of thin air might actually have happened. Gossip spreads fast in legal circles, as it does in any close-knit vocational community. The dash of miscegenation added extra flavour to the already spicy broth of workplace adultery. The world of lawyering in Britain is not as progressive and race-blind as it would like to think it is. Nor is it in any sense liberal.

In no time the girl was seeking employment elsewhere. Her departure was heralded as a spontaneous act, one born of the desire to seek new pastures and fresh challenges, and was given the blessing of her superiors. She received a severance package she wasn't, strictly speaking, entitled to, and she didn't have to serve out her notice.

But a sacking is still a sacking, however gilded the circumstances, however gently it's handled.

Bravo, said Anansi. Well played. Couldn't have done better myself.

Was I ashamed? Not for a moment. You do not fuck with Dion Yeboah. The girl had learned that to her cost. Others would too.

FOR THREE, FOUR months, I was golden. Nothing could touch me. Nothing could stop me. More and more cases came my way that, on face value, looked like lost causes. Few other barristers would touch them with a bargepole. I, and Anansi, tackled them with relish.

You may have read in the newspapers about the BBC higher-up accused of taking bribes in return for insisting that a certain mobile phone company's latest product feature prominently in several drama serials he commissioned, in direct contravention of the terms of the Corporation's charter. I was able to get the charges dismissed on the grounds that the items in question were so desirable, so up-to-the-minute, so lusted after by those who love technology and progress, that the BBC would have been remiss in its duties as the Voice of the Nation if it *hadn't* shown them regularly on our TV screens.

You may also be familiar with the plight of a Member of Parliament who chose to claim the cost of a visit to a massage parlour in Pimlico on expenses. Remember the tabloid headlines? "We Pay So He Can Get His End Away"? It wasn't difficult for me to rescue him from ignominy by drawing attention to the stresses and the long working hours that his job entailed. I implied that the use of parliamentary allowances to reimburse him for this particular form of relaxation was in fact a wise investment of public funds. A rested, revitalised politician was apt to make calm and clear-headed decisions, was he not? Certainly more so than a tense, frustrated one.

And what of the footballer with a couple of dozen England caps to his name? Snapped by paparazzi leaving a Mayfair hotel in the company of a girl reputedly several months shy of the age of consent? Obtained a High Court injunction on all reporting of the case and ensured that it never came to trial. Beyond the paparazzi photos, there was no proof of any sexual liaison between the two. Demonstrably my client had adopted an avuncular role towards the child, as evidenced by the arm he placed fondly round her shoulders in several of the pictures and the chaste kiss he gave her on the forehead. I maintained that he and she had enjoyed an innocent breakfast together at the hotel, where the topics of conversation had been his career and her education. Furthermore, the meeting might be regarded as being in the nature of an interview, for the girl had her eye on a media career and could well have been

intending to contribute an article about the footballer to her school magazine as a first step on the road to becoming a journalist. Far from being her lover, he was merely her scoop.

The judge swallowed it. The press were more sceptical but, gagged by the injunction, could do little but mutter obliquely and darkly.

Anansi, inside me, simply squirmed with glee. Pulling the wool over other people's eyes – there was nothing that delighted him more.

PLEASE DON'T GET me wrong, I didn't represent only unscrupulous rogues. There were plenty of cases during this time in which the innocent were exonerated and justice was done. None, however, demanded much in the way of ingenuity or subterfuge; nor was any of them especially dramatic or memorable. It's a sad truth about being a barrister that one gains greater satisfaction from reversing the course of the law than from merely seeing its natural status quo preserved. It is when one is the law's master, not its servant, that one feels one has genuinely achieved something. It is like being in daily battle of wits with the ponderous, imposing bulk of jurisprudence, and sometimes, if one is clever, one wrestles it to the mat.

Anansi is a trickster god, a creature of intrigue and stratagems, weaving artful ploys like he weaves webs.

Perhaps we lawyers are the same, in our way. If we brethren of the law were to worship a god, by rights it would be Anansi.

IT WAS A terrific joyride, those months of one spectacular victory after another.

But like all joyrides, it couldn't last. It had to come to a screeching, crashing halt.

I was out jogging when Anansi announced that our partnership would be entering a new phase. It was not long after sunrise on an autumn morning, and there was a misty haze in the air that you could taste as well as see. While I huffed and puffed along the Regent's Canal towpath, Anansi and I chatted, as we often did, about an upcoming trial, the various tacks the prosecution might take and how best to deal with them.

Then Anansi dropped the bombshell.

You realise, of course, Dion, that there's a price for all this, don't you?

"What? What do you mean?"

You don't get the services of a god for free. No one does.

"What are you talking about?"

I'd fallen into the habit of speaking aloud during my conversations with Anansi, even in public. It was easier than keeping them confined to my head. At first I'd received some strange looks when doing this, but I'd got around the problem by the simple expedient of wearing a Bluetooth headset whenever I was out and about. It wasn't switched on or even connected to a mobile, but people didn't know that. All they saw was a man taking a phone call on the hoof. I didn't appear to be different from any number of businesspeople you see on the street, working as they walk. The only distinction was that whereas they were talking to a colleague or a stranger, I was talking to a god.

"Explain yourself," I said. "Is this some sort of joke?"

No joke, Dion. We've been working well together, haven't we? Quite a streak of wins we've had. We make a good team. But who's benefited from it more, do you think? You or me?

"Me," I admitted.

Absolutely. Your stock has never been higher. Dion Yeboah is in demand like never before. You've been billing enough in fees to make your peers and rivals gnash their teeth. Your name has cropped up

in the papers – not just the Law Society Gazette, but the national dailies. You're a star in the legal firmament. But Anansi... Well, what has poor old Anansi got out of this?

"Entertainment," I offered, lamely.

Oh, yes, entertainment indeed. But is that enough? I'm a god, after all. Gods cannot be expected to get by on entertainment alone.

I was passing London Zoo. My pace had slowed. The animals were grumbling and hooting to themselves, a soft, wild dawn chorus.

No, Anansi continued. Our association is a two-way street, Dion. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. You've had your go. I've done you a favour. Now it's my turn.

"You want something from me."

Naturally I do. But don't panic. It's nothing terrible. You might even enjoy the challenge.

"I won't do anything illegal," I said firmly. "I just won't."

Nor would I expect you to. What if I said I'd like to give you the opportunity to exercise your skills of coercion and skulduggery in another theatre of combat, outside the courtroom?

"Go on."

You'd be pitting yourself against some of the greatest swindlers, backstabbers and double-dealers the world has ever known.

"I'd say my career so far has been ample preparation for such a thing."

A pair of pretty women ran past me, bouncing beautifully in Lycra. I followed them with my gaze, and Anansi, with his many eyes inside me, looking out through mine, followed them too. Neither of us could help himself.

Yes – ahem – now, where was I? said Anansi. Oh, yes. You see, Dion, once in every generation an event occurs – an event like no other. You could call it a convocation of likeminded individuals. A competition. A kind of divine Olympics.

"Divine...?"

I am not the only trickster god in existence. You must realise that. There are, oh, dozens of us. Perhaps even hundreds – no one's done a census. Just about every pantheon that's ever been counts a trickster amongst its number. We're kind of fitted as standard. You don't get the full set of gods if it doesn't have one of us, just as you don't get a full pack of cards if it doesn't have a joker in.

"But they don't... I mean, they're not..."

Not real? Anansi chuckled. But I am, aren't I? And if I am, then all gods must be too, surely. Stands to reason.

By this point I had slowed until I was plodding along like a donkey, almost at a standstill. What Anansi was telling me was hard to process. Somehow, without meaning to, I'd become embroiled in something far bigger than I'd thought, far bigger than I could readily imagine. Until now, Anansi and I had just been fooling around, toying with the legal system, enjoying ourselves, getting one over on judges and juries. But this – all at once, this seemed serious. Deadly serious.

"Other trickster gods," I said. "And what do you do when you get together once in a generation? Drink? Party? Dance 'til the early hours?"

There's a certain amount of that, sometimes, said Anansi. Depends on the venue and the circumstances. Mostly we play tricks one another.

"Play tricks? That's it?"

We are, are we not, trickster gods? Clue's in the name. It's a free-for-all contest of chicanery. Each of us attempts to outwit the others. Last one standing is the winner.

"Why do you need me for this?" I asked. I was searching desperately for a way to excuse myself from participating in this contest. Anansi was doing his best to make it sound like it was all just one jolly jape, but I wasn't convinced. I sensed there was more to this contest than he was letting on.

“Does it have to involve me at all? Isn’t there some sort of divine meeting place where all you gods can go, up in heaven or another dimension or wherever?”

That’s not how it works, said Anansi. All of the pantheons dwell in separate, discrete planes that don’t intersect with one another. The only place they do all meet up is here, the mortal realm, where our followers and worshippers are, where our stories are told and retold and spread.

“Earth.”

Exactly. Earth. And the only way we can manifest on Earth is by assuming a living form. For some that’s simply a matter of transubstantiating their incorporeal selves into flesh. For most of us, however, the vast majority, it’s a case of temporarily ‘borrowing’ a host body, usually a human one, and using that as an avatar.

“Rather like getting into a car.”

Rather like, only in my case it’s taking with owner’s consent, not without. I’d never dream of entering a body unbidden. It’s more of a... a cohabitation than an act of possession. Think how it’s been lately, with me inside you. I’m not riding roughshod over you, am I? I’m not making you behave in any way against your own wishes. We’ve just been rubbing along, mutually cooperating, haven’t we? And it hasn’t been so bad. I think you’ve been finding it quite bracing, as a matter of fact. Quite liberating.

I couldn’t deny this. “But,” I said, “perhaps I’m not keen on going any further. In fact, perhaps the time’s come for you and I to discuss dissolving this partnership of ours.”

Oh, I wouldn’t advise that, Dion. Not at all.

“Why not?”

Well, remember how it went for you after we first met? When you refused to acknowledge my existence? Remember how bad things got for you?

I did – the coincidences that had left my secure little world wobbling perilously on its axis.

My doing, of course, said Anansi. And I was hardly even trying. If I wished, I could make your life a living hell. What I did then would seem like paradise compared with what I could do. The torments I could put you through... You’d be begging me to stop, and do you know what I would say? I would say “No,” and just carry on.

His voice had become brittle and awful, like ice cracking underfoot, like tinder sticks breaking, like dry bones snapping. I felt a surge of nauseating dread, unlike anything I’d ever known. I stopped in my tracks and bent double, bracing my hands on my knees. To a passerby it would have looked as though I had paused to catch my breath and maybe work out a stitch in my side, not as though I was fighting to keep myself from throwing up, which I was.

Could Anansi truly do as he threatened and throw my life into utter chaos?

I had no doubt that he could.

But let’s not make this a matter of browbeating and intimidation, he wheedled. That’s really not how I prefer to operate. I’d much rather you just agreed to do as I ask of your own free will. Everything would be much more agreeable that way.

I straightened up. At that moment, the canal looked very tempting. To hurl oneself beneath that greasy brown surface, to expel the air from one’s lungs and let the cold brackish water come flooding in...

“No,” I said, determinedly.

No?

“I mean yes. Yes, I’ll do it. Not because you’re forcing me to. Because, never let it be said that Dion Yeboah does not repay his debts.”

Excellent. I knew I could count on you.

“But Anansi?”

Yes?

~~“If we do this, we do it to win. Get me? No half measures. I do not take on a challenge unless I’m going to go flat out, all guns blazing, to come out on top. That is my way.”~~

Of course, of course.

“You have brought me further along in just a few months than I could ever have managed alone. I owe you for that, and I will honour my side of the bargain, but in return I must have your full and unstinting collaboration. I must be able to rely on you.”

You will, believe me, said Anansi.

“Good. I’ll hold you to that.”

Oh, I have chosen well. I could feel him inside me, happily rubbing his forelegs together. *It was worth leaving Africa to find you. Aso told me I should stay home, content myself with someone local again, but she was wrong. I’ve tried that so many times and it hasn’t worked. You may not be African African, Dion, but your bloodline is still strong in you. You’re only one step removed from your true homeland, and you carry its traditions within you, with all the sophistication of the industrialised West. You’re the best of both worlds, and with you, I’m sure, this time I will take the crown.*

“We,” I corrected him. “We will take the crown.”

THERE WERE PRACTICAL preparations to be made. The contest was taking place at the end of the month in America. I needed to book tickets and block out a week of holiday in my hectic work schedule. There was also research to be done. I hate to go into anything half-cocked, uninformed. Just ask any of my juniors. We know our brief inside-out before we enter the courtroom. We’ve looked up the precedents and nailed down the references and made provision for every contingency we can think of. Nothing should catch us by surprise, if we’ve done our homework properly beforehand.

And so it was in this instance. With Anansi’s help I drew up a list of our potential opponents and studied them and their histories and habits. Not every trickster god makes it to every contest. Some balk, some fail to recruit a suitable avatar in time, and some are so neglected and forgotten about that they lack the will or the strength to put in an appearance. A god is only as mighty as the obeisance he or she can command. The less revered, the less remembered, the less empowered.

Not all the contest entrants are gods, either. At least, not in the sense that we understand the term “god.” Figures from folk tales also attend – the wily fictional characters whose exploits have been celebrated down through the centuries and become the stuff of legend. Adored, if not necessarily worshipped, by many, they have carved out a place for themselves among the trickster fraternity. Lesser cousins, perhaps, but entitled to show up and compete nonetheless.

I researched them all, focusing especially on a core of regular attendees. In my spare hours I trawled the internet, finding out what I could about them. I haunted the Mythology sections of bookshops, buying armfuls of material. I immersed myself in lore, rather than law, for a change. Within a fortnight, I was as well informed as any comparative religion student on the subject. I was armed with knowledge, and ready.

I FLEW FROM Heathrow to Las Vegas on a grey Thursday morning. As I approached the departure gate Anansi proposed we try a little stunt. *It might work, it might not,* he said. *Let’s see.*

I had bought a Club Class ticket – though I have money, I’m not reckless – but at Anansi’s prompting I elected to give myself an unofficial upgrade. When the plane was fully boarded but not yet moving, I sauntered through to the First Class cabin and plumped myself down in the nearest empty seat. I acted as though I belonged there and nobody had the right to tell me otherwise. I waited to be questioned,

challenged, checked, but none of the team of flight attendants batted an eyelid. One of them poured me my complimentary glass of champagne. Another took my meal order.

Sometimes it's all about balls and bravado, said Anansi as the plane taxied towards the runway. *A confidence trick doesn't involve just gaining a victim's confidence. It's your own confidence that matters too. Have plenty of it, and results are more or less guaranteed.*

We took off, and England and its sheath of cloud fell behind. I sat back in my seat, lacing my hands behind my head and stretching out into the acres of legroom available. Eleven luxurious hours later, we were descending over the dry sunburnt plains of the American south-west.

AT MCCARRAN INTERNATIONAL, I witnessed what turned out to be the contest's first elimination.

In baggage reclaim, as I waited for my suitcase to appear on the carousel, I caught sight of a Middle Eastern man haring across the hall. He was being pursued by half a dozen plainclothes and uniformed security officials in full cry, all demanding that he stop. The man darted a glance over his shoulder, then collided headlong with a luggage trolley. He sprawled to the floor and the security men pounced. The man struggled, and someone produced a Taser. There was a high-voltage sizzle, and the man shrieked, writhed and lay still. The security men carted him off unceremoniously. A passenger asked them what was going on. The curt reply: "Terrorist suspect."

It was enough. It was all anyone needed. Almost everyone present started cheering and applauding, and a couple of suggestions were offered as to what should be done with the Middle Easterner: essentially, imprisonment, interrogation and execution.

That's no terrorist, Anansi scoffed. *If he's an Islamic extremist, I'm a tarantula. That's Juha, that is.*

I didn't have my Bluetooth on just then, so I gave a kind of mental shrug, as if to say *Really?*

Oh yes. Undoubtedly. Juha's avatar. And if I don't miss my guess, one of our opponents "dropped a dime on him," as they say.

It made sense. In the paranoid post-9/11 United States, anyone looking remotely Arabic was automatically under suspicion. A phone call to the authorities, or a tap on the shoulder and a few words whispered in the right ear, and people would see bomb vests and phials of anthrax where there were none, and overreact accordingly.

Juha, who, annoyed by his local muezzin's calls to prayer, cut off the man's head and threw it down a well, then threw a ram's head down there too in order to allay suspicion...

Juha, who sold his house but drove a nail into the wall before he left, then kept coming back on the pretext of inspecting the nail, meanwhile preying on the new owner's hospitality until eventually the new owner fled the property in high dudgeon without asking for his money back...

Juha, who borrowed a large sum of money off his rich-but-stingy neighbour and refused to return it then asked the neighbour to lend him his horse, robe and shoes as they made their way to see the judge, who he hoodwinked into believing that Juha himself must be the rich one and the neighbour a liar...

Now out of contention.

One entrant down already, and the contest hadn't even officially begun.

THOUGH IT PERHAPS ought to have been, Las Vegas was not the location of the contest. Our ultimate destination lay some one hundred and fifty miles outside the world capital of tourist fleecing: a tiny town that went by the name of Sweetwater, stuck out in the Mojave Desert.

So, after a night in a decent enough hotel some distance from the lights and hurly-burly of the Strip I caught a westbound Greyhound. The bus rolled away from the city into a landscape so arid and

barren it almost hurt to look at it. Everything that was not rocks was scrubby, barely-there plant life.

Anansi was enthralled. *Reminds me of the savannahs of home*, he said wistfully. *The Serengeti. The Rift Valley. Olduvai Gorge.*

"I'm a city boy," I told him. "All I see is wasteland, without a Starbucks or a Marks and Spencer in sight."

"Is like Mars," said a voice from across the bus aisle.

"Excuse me?"

He was big and thickly bearded, with a lumberjack shirt and a snake tattoo on his forearm. His accent put him somewhere east of the Caucasus. "I said is like Mars. All this red desert. No wonder peoples is always seeing flying spaceships out here. If Martians are coming to this planet, here is where they are likely to be landing. Somewhere like their own home."

"Oh. Yes. Fair point."

"Do I know you?" The man squinted at me, his bushy eyebrows knotting together like a pair of caterpillars mating. "I am thinking we have met before."

"No, I'm sure I –"

Veles, whispered Anansi.

"I'm sure we –"

He is Veles. Trickster god of the Slavic folk.

I consulted my trove of research data. *Veles*. Storm god. Able to transform himself into various kinds of animals and even people. Protector of sheep and cows. Famous for...

Anansi chipped in. *Famous for fighting Perun, god of war, after stealing Perun's wife, or his son, or some of his cattle – depends which version of the story you read. Their battle raged in the heavens as lightning storm. Veles lost, and his blood fell like rain. He looks after peasants, bringing them wealth and is also the god of sorcerers. Those who weave spells as well as those who weave wool look to him for patronage and inspiration.* He concluded, *Slippery customer. These shapeshifter types always are.* *Keep your wits about you, Dion.*

"Yes," said the man. "I am recognising you. We are both here for the same reason, no?"

Without being invited, he heaved himself across the aisle and squeezed his bulk into the seat next to mine.

"Ivan Rodchenko."

I shook a hot, powerful paw.

"Dion Yeboah."

"Someone is riding with you, yes? As with me." He tapped his skull. "A secret traveller."

I glanced around at our fellow passengers. The bus was a quarter full. Nobody seemed to be interested in us. People were dozing, reading, messing around on their phones and tablets, or listening to music through earbuds. Nobody was eavesdropping.

I nodded to Rodchenko.

"Yes," he said. "I thought so. I know for sure when I am hearing you talk to yourself. Is hard sometimes to remember to not speak aloud when you are having conversation with guest in head. Maybe, to others, you are looking like mad person, or too much this..." He mimed glugging down alcohol.

"Normally I'm careful," I said. "I must be feeling a touch of jet lag."

"We have come long way to compete," said Rodchenko. "Others are coming from even further. China, Japan, Australia, all over. Is big world. Many gods. Only a few from America itself. Including last time's winner."

"Coyote."

"Yes, yes. The oh-so-wily Coyote. He wins, meaning he is getting to choose site for next contest. H

chooses home turf. Well, of course. Why not? And you are being from... England, is correct?"

"Is correct."

"You are with Robin Goodfellow, then? Also known as Puck?"

I shook my head. "Anansi."

"Ah, Anansi! You speak like Englishman, but your ancestry is African. Interesting. I suppose, wherever we live, wherever we go, we are always carrying our true roots with us. If I am not having my home in Mother Russia, maybe Veles is still finding me and asking will I help anyway."

"Comfort stop coming up," the bus driver announced over the intercom. "Fifteen minutes and not a second more. You ain't back in your seat by the time I fire up the engine, 'fraid I've got to leave without you. Rules are rules. Can't mess with the timetable."

WE ALL DECAMPED into a roadside pit stop that boasted a gas station, a car wash, a fast-food outlet, a minimart and a tolerable set of toilets. I relieved myself, washed my hands with my usual fastidiousness, then went to see what snacks and refreshments were on offer at the minimart. Candy, carbonated drinks and vast bags of corn and potato products were the main fare available, all of which as a man conscious of his health and appearance, particularly his waistline, I shun. I opted for a pack of peanuts and raisins, some beef jerky, and a large bottle of mineral water.

I joined the queue for the till – as luck would have it, directly behind the considerable girth of Rodchenko. He glanced round at me and winked. In his arms were great quantities of the very things I'd avoided, including what appeared to be a gallon bottle of Coca-Cola. He looked as content as only a Russian could on finding himself a voyager in the Land of Excess.

"Must stock up on energy," he said. "For when fun and games begin tomorrow."

Yes, tomorrow, said Anansi. The official start of the contest. But why wait? Someone took Juha out of the running early. Let's do the same with Veles.

On the counter, just by my right elbow, stood a spinner rack filled with Zippo lighters. They had a map of the state engraved on them – the outline reminiscent of a guillotine blade – along with the quote *I GOT BURNED IN NEVADA*. I checked out the minimart's security cameras. The one trained on the counter was tightly aimed at the till clerk, no doubt to ensure the honesty of employees as well as of customers. There was another camera in the far corner of the premises, but I was well out of its range. Best of all, a Highway Patrol officer had just ambled in through the main entrance and was busy denuding the Krispy Kreme doughnut stand of most of its stock.

Quick, Anansi hissed. Now.

I palmed a Zippo off the rack and slipped it into Rodchenko's back pocket.

Two minutes later, Rodchenko was heading out across the forecourt to the Greyhound and I was informing the patrolman that an act of thievery had just taken place.

"Him," I said, pointing at the burly form of Rodchenko. "I saw him. He took a cigarette lighter without paying for it. It's in his back pocket."

"Big fella with the plaid shirt?" said the patrolman. "You sure?"

"Saw it with my own eyes."

I sounded plausible. My clean-cut English diction helped. I set my face, as any good lawyer can, in the expression that said, *Would I lie to you?*

The patrolman set down his box of doughnuts and hurried outside. "Hey! Sir. Excuse me, sir? Hey! want a word with you."

I sauntered by as the patrolman grilled Rodchenko. The Russian fixed me with a curious frown. I feigned obliviousness.

Out of the blast-furnace heat, back in the air-conditioned bliss of the bus, I watched as Rodchenko

obeyed the patrolman's instruction to empty out his pockets. He evinced surprise at finding the Zippo on his person. The patrolman demanded to be shown the receipt for Rodchenko's purchases. It didn't take him long to establish that the Zippo was not on it. He led Rodchenko indoors by the elbow, the Russian protesting and remonstrating volubly.

Just before he was taken back inside the minimart, Rodchenko turned and aimed an angry look towards the bus. His gaze met mine. He spat out some curse in his native language. I smiled serenely at him and waved.

"Guess he won't be rejoining us, then," said the bus driver. "Doors closing. Everybody, please take your seats. Next stops: Roach, Primm, Sweetwater."

Excellent work, said Anansi, congratulating both me and himself.

I wondered whether what I'd just done might be considered cheating.

Cheating? Cheating!? Anansi dismissed my concerns with a scornful laugh. *In a contest of tricksters, what's fair and what's not? I'll tell you. Everything and nothing. Just because hostilities haven't been declared yet, doesn't mean we can't get in a pre-emptive strike or two. Veles would have done the same to us, given half a chance. Initiative and ruthlessness. That's how we're going to survive to the end, Dion. Initiative and ruthlessness.*

SWEETWATER, JUST ACROSS the state line into California, had once had something going for it, namely large lake. In the 'fifties and 'sixties, the town had been a handy stopover point for people travelling from Los Angeles to Vegas, and a resort besides, even if it had lacked the lure of the slot machines and gaming tables that lay in wait just a few miles further east. Boating, swimming, fishing, water sports in general: these had been its attractions, on a lake filled with cold limpid snowmelt straight from the slopes of the Sierra Nevada.

Then, however, the main river that fed the lake basin had been diverted and dammed some way upstream to create a reservoir and a hydroelectric plant, providing hungry, ever-expanding LA with power and leaving Sweetwater with nothing but a swampy pond fed by a trickle of a stream, and sad memories of its boom days. The town was mostly forgotten now, in spite of the billboards lining the freeway at five-mile intervals announcing to drivers that they were getting closer to The Best Little Burg You'll Ever Pass By. Most people seemed content to do just that, pass by, and Sweetwater had sunk slowly into sand and obsolescence.

That was certainly the impression I got as the bus turned off Interstate 15 and followed the narrow road into town. Everything about Sweetwater appeared to belong to a bygone era. A gas station with clockface-dial pumps. Diners that looked like railroad cars. Everywhere, that low-slung American architecture that spoke of space-age optimism and the capacity to spread outwards into infinite acres of wilderness. Sprawling aingle-storey structures. Polygonal blocks of concrete and plate glass and steel.

The bus halted opposite the town's one remaining hostelry, the Friendly Inn And Conference Center. Only I alighted. For a moment, as I felt the weight of the midday sun on my head, I wavered. It wasn't too late to climb back aboard and go elsewhere.

No, warned Anansi.

And then it *was* too late. The Greyhound pulled away with a diesel growl, executing a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and sending a fine cloud of dust over me that stung my eyes as it trundled back to the interstate.

I crossed the street, tugging my roll-along suitcase behind me.

~~THE FRIENDLY INN And Conference Center had one of those cheap display signs outside it, the kind you see almost everywhere in the USA, with simple cutout letters that clip onto thin rods. It read:~~

THE FRIENDLY WELCOMES
18TH ANNUAL JOKE SHOP
PROPRIETORS JAMBOREE!!!

I couldn't help but smile to myself. I'd read a feature about this little trade fair a couple of years ago in the *Sunday Times Magazine*. The article described how retailers and wholesalers in the American novelty retail industry got together once a year to compare notes, buy and sell the latest items, and discuss the ins and outs of their rarefied business. I recalled photographs of rather odd-looking men, and a few women, poring over trestle tables laden with stink bombs, hand buzzers, sachets of itching powder and suchlike. The tone adopted by the journalist had been a mix of wistful and snide. Joke shops were dying out, he averred, kids in our computer age no longer as attracted to pocket-money prank wares as kids used to be. How brave and foolhardy these people were who strove to uphold the tradition.

In that respect, Sweetwater was the ideal spot for such a convention to be held. For all concerned, their heyday had passed.

A joke shop trade fair was, of course, perfect cover for a gathering of trickster gods to come and conduct their tournament of one-upmanship. Amid all the plastic hilarity of squirting buttonhole flowers and fake dog turds, who would notice us divine avatars fooling and foiling one another? Who would care? We would blend right in, camouflaged like tigers in the jungle. No one would look twice at us.

I CHECKED IN at the reception desk, which was staffed by an elderly lady with a beehive hairdo and those pointy-tipped schoolmistress spectacles that I didn't think anyone made any more, let alone wore. Gladys, as identified by her name tag, wished me a pleasant stay in a voice like gargled gravel.

"Friendly by name, friendly by nature, that's us," she drawled, a motto that had been leached of all warmth and meaning through decades of repetition.

The hotel was a ramble of long corridors and branching annexes, arranged in a complex geometrical pattern around a sun deck and a drained swimming pool. My room, which overlooked Sweetwater's main drag, proved to be small but serviceable. There was a TV set from the era when no technological device was complete without fake-wood panelling; a window-mounted air-con unit that crackled and wheezed like a catarrh sufferer's windpipe; and a bed which crunched when sat on. The mattress had a deep hollow in the middle, and I imagined countless coupled bodies thrusting up and down, hammering out this concavity over the years – then tried not to imagine it.

Just jealous, said Anansi.

"Am not."

You need a woman. Why don't you have a woman in your life?

"You sound like my mother."

You're thirty-two. Why aren't you married yet?

"You're married. Has it made you happy? Complete?"

Of course.

"And yet you're a serial philanderer."

A man has needs, Anansi said defensively. Besides, my marriage has brought me children, and they definitely make me happy. He reeled off his offspring's names. *Akaki. Toto Abuo. Twa Akwan. Hwe*

Nuso. Adwafo. Da Yi Ya. And my precious little Intikuma. I love them all more than life itself. I fought Death for them, did I not?

“I know.”

If you had children of your own, you'd realise how important it is, being a father, said Anansi. How it fixes your priorities and grounds you in the nitty-gritty of life. Then you would understand, too, why I dared trick Brother Death to protect them.

“You were so brave.”

I was. I was. I know you're being sarcastic, but I was. Death had us cornered in our house...

“After you antagonised him by eating his food and drinking his water and not thanking him.”

True, but let's ignore that, shall we? I and my family were clinging to the rafters while Death prowled below us with a burlap sack, catching each of us one after another as we lost our grip and fell, until only I was left, grimly clinging on.

“But you persuaded him to use the flour barrel to catch you instead, saying it meant you'd be nicely crumb-coated for him, all ready to be fried and eaten.”

And I landed on his head and his face went in the flour and he was blinded for a moment, and we all escaped. Hee, hee, hee! Anansi wriggled inside me, overcome with his own cleverness. But, Dion, he continued, serious again, I mean it. You need a family of your own. Nanabaa Oboshie, wherever she is, must be beginning to think there's something wrong with her grandson. A proper Ghanaian, by your age, should have a brood of rug rats scuttling around him and a nice plump wife in the kitchen.

“Busy,” I said. “High standards. And I'm British, not Ghanaian.”

Too uptight, Anansi opined. Too self-obsessed.

“Are we here to criticise Dion Yeboah or are we here to win a competition?” I said testily.

A pause. Then: *A competition.*

“Very well. So let me rest. I'm worn out.”

I lay down on the much-used bed and closed my eyes, trying to blot out all distractions.

But it was hard when one of those distractions was a rustling voice inside my head that wouldn't even be fully silent but perpetually whispered and nagged, nagged and whispered...

THAT EVENING, WE gathered in one of the hotel's small conference rooms, the Sagebrush Suite, for a preliminary meeting. Several of the joke shop people wandered in with a view to joining us, then wandered out again. Instinctively, they sensed this sidebar event had nothing to do with them. They didn't belong. One man, dressed in full mime makeup and costume, pretended he kept bumping up against an invisible wall just inside the doorway which wouldn't allow him into the room. The wall could almost have been real. If you weren't a living vehicle for a trickster god, something inside told you you were barred from entry.

We took our seats on plastic chairs, eyeing one another up. It was weird, seeing the faces of all these strangers, random individuals culled from across the planet, and somehow recognising them. It was like meeting one's own extended family. We looked utterly unlike and yet there were similarities, something in the set of everyone's features, a shared look behind the eyes, unifying us.

Susanoo-no-Mikoto, said Anansi, indicating a young Japanese man with an imperious, brooding air. *And over there, that's Crow*. A thickset Australian Aborigine with impossibly black eyes, as though he had no irises, only great dark pupils.

Between us we put names to several other faces. A Chinese man with a certain simian cast to his appearance was Sun Wukong, the Monkey King. A swarthy little chap with quick green eyes had to be Gwydion from Wales. A young Greek with long ringleted hair who kept relentlessly checking his text on his mobile phone was clearly Hermes, while next to him squatted a middle-aged Latino whose

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