

Anansi: Scene 2 - The Spider and the First Stories

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Summary

The Woman starts the Girl's education with a riddle: what part of you stays free when your arms and legs are tied? The Girl cannot answer. She insists that all of her is tied. The Woman presses her: tell me what you see. Through a crack in the roof there is a little light, and in that light a spider is building a web.

The Girl watches the spider struggle. He climbs to the beam, falls, climbs again, falls again. She wonders why he does not give up. Then one thread sticks, and the web begins. The Woman names him: Anansi. The Girl is dismissive at first. Spiders are pests. At home she would throw them outside or squash them flat. But the Woman tells her that this small spider was once a king, and that she will tell his stories.

The Forest of Stories opens. Anansi introduces himself to the audience in rhyming couplets: small and quick, never without the smartest plan, keeping from getting dead by thinking faster than everyone bigger than him. Tiger enters. Everything in the forest freezes when Tiger passes: flowers close, birds pretend to be flowers, monkeys pretend to be birds. Tiger tells Anansi he wants the great stories of the forest named after himself. Anansi talks him into a wager: if Anansi can bring Snake tied to a pole, the stories will be named after Anansi instead. Tiger agrees, certain it is impossible.

Anansi tries two obvious traps on Snake: a pig with a noose, then a chicken on a string. Snake sees through both easily. Then Anansi changes approach. He tells Snake that the prize for Longest Creature of the Year might go to a bamboo tree. Snake is outraged and insists on measuring himself against it. He stretches himself out alongside the tree to prove his length, and Anansi ties him to it. Tiger arrives to find Snake trussed up as promised. The stories are named after Anansi from that day on.

Back in the hold, the Woman sums up what the Girl has just watched: Anansi was the weakest and strongest at the same time. She tells the Girl that she must be strong the way Anansi is strong: strong on the inside. She says that Africa is the Girl's mother, and that the stories she is about to teach are a treasure no one can steal, even from someone whose body has been taken.

The Boy writes in his cabin that he heard singing from the hold the night before. The sound was as deep as the sea, but warm, not cold.

Analysis

This scene is the heart of the play's argument, stated early and clearly: intelligence is the only power that cannot be taken. The Woman's first riddle has a physical answer (the eyes, the mind) but its real answer is the soul. She does not give it immediately because the lesson has to be lived, not told. Watching Anansi fall and try again is the Girl's first lesson, and Campbell is deliberate in making it happen through the Girl's own observation rather than through the Woman's instruction.

The Forest of Stories is introduced here as an imaginative space that overlaps with the ship. Campbell's stage directions describe the hold's beams and ropes becoming visible as branches and creepers when the forest sequence begins. The two worlds are physically linked, not separate. The Girl is tied up in the hold but present in the forest; the stories are not an escape from her situation but a lens through which to understand it.

Anansi's rhyming couplets mark a deliberate shift in the play's language. The ship scenes are in flat, naturalistic prose. The forest scenes are rhythmic, energetic, and often comic. This is not decoration; it signals that different rules govern the forest. In Anansi's world, wordplay and wit are the primary currencies, which is exactly the point Campbell wants to make about the oral tradition.

The two snake traps Anansi tries and abandons are important. They are not failures; they are preparation. He lets Snake feel clever for seeing through them, which inflates exactly the pride that Anansi then exploits. The bamboo tree is the real trap, and it works because Snake's ego does the work for Anansi. The audience, watching from a position of knowledge the snake does not have, is drawn into Anansi's scheme. This alignment is structural: Campbell wants the audience to be on the side of the trickster, and by extension on the side of the enslaved.

The Boy's diary entry about the singing below is a quiet but pointed detail. He cannot identify what he hears, but he feels it: warm, not cold, as deep as the sea. He is receiving the vibration of the oral tradition from a distance, without understanding it. The Girl is inside it.

Exam Tip

The Woman's first riddle is a structural hinge. The answer she builds toward is not "the eyes" or "the mind" but "the soul." This connects directly to the web symbol and to the play's central argument that slavery can imprison the body but cannot reach the soul. Track how the riddle is posed, partially answered, and finally completed in later scenes.

Themes

- **Oral Tradition and Storytelling:** The Woman begins the formal transmission of the Anansi stories in this scene, naming them explicitly as a treasure no one can steal. The stories are not entertainment: they are survival tools passed from one generation to the next in conditions where no written record is possible.
- **Resourcefulness:** Anansi's defeat of both Tiger and Snake depends entirely on understanding each opponent's psychology and using it against them. He needs no physical power: he needs only to ask the right question and let vanity do the rest. The Woman frames this as the model for the Girl's own survival.
- **Deception and Trickery:** Both tricks in this scene operate through deliberate misdirection. Anansi lets Snake feel clever by seeing through two obvious traps, then springs the real one. The lesson is not that deception is wrong but that it is a necessary tool when the alternative is being overwhelmed by superior force.
- **Strength and Resilience:** The Anansi spider building his web, falling and trying again, is the scene's central image of resilience. The Woman's point is that strength is not about size or power but about the will to keep building from whatever is available inside you.
- **Family:** "Africa is your mother" is the Woman's reframing of the Girl's grief into something broader than one lost parent: a relationship to a whole culture and tradition that cannot be taken by chains or distance.
- **Anti-hero and the Duped:** Anansi is the anti-hero, operating through flattery and misdirection. Tiger and Snake are the duped, each led into a trap by their own ego. The audience, knowing Anansi's plan in advance, is made complicit in his scheme.