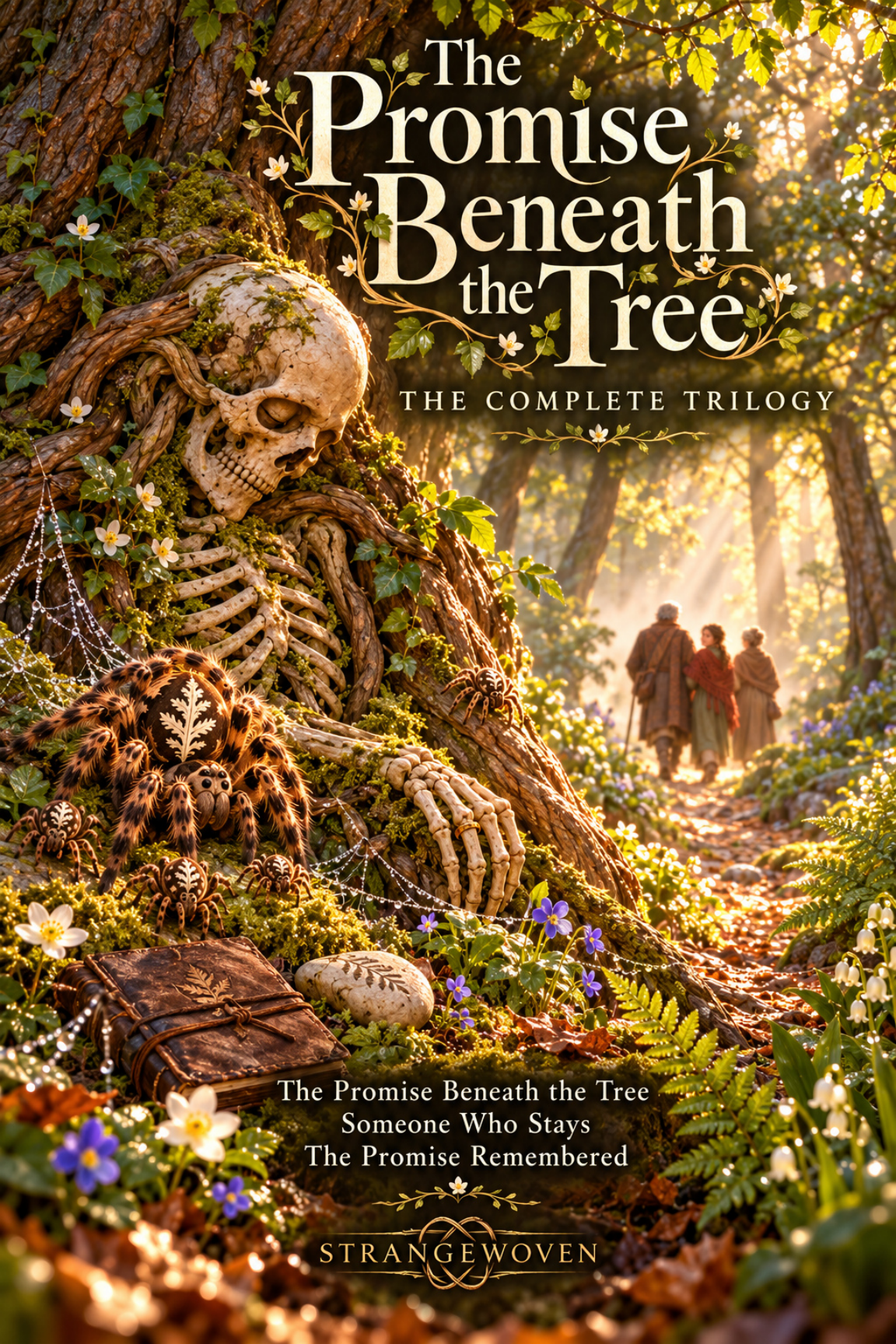

The Promise Beneath the Tree
THE COMPLETE TRILOGY
The Promise Beneath the Tree
Someone Who Stays
The Promise Remembered
STRANGEWOVEN

The Promise Beneath the Tree

THE COMPLETE ILLUSTRATED TRILOGY

Three tales of a promise kept,
a friendship welcomed,
and a name remembered.

STRANGEWOVEN

Contents

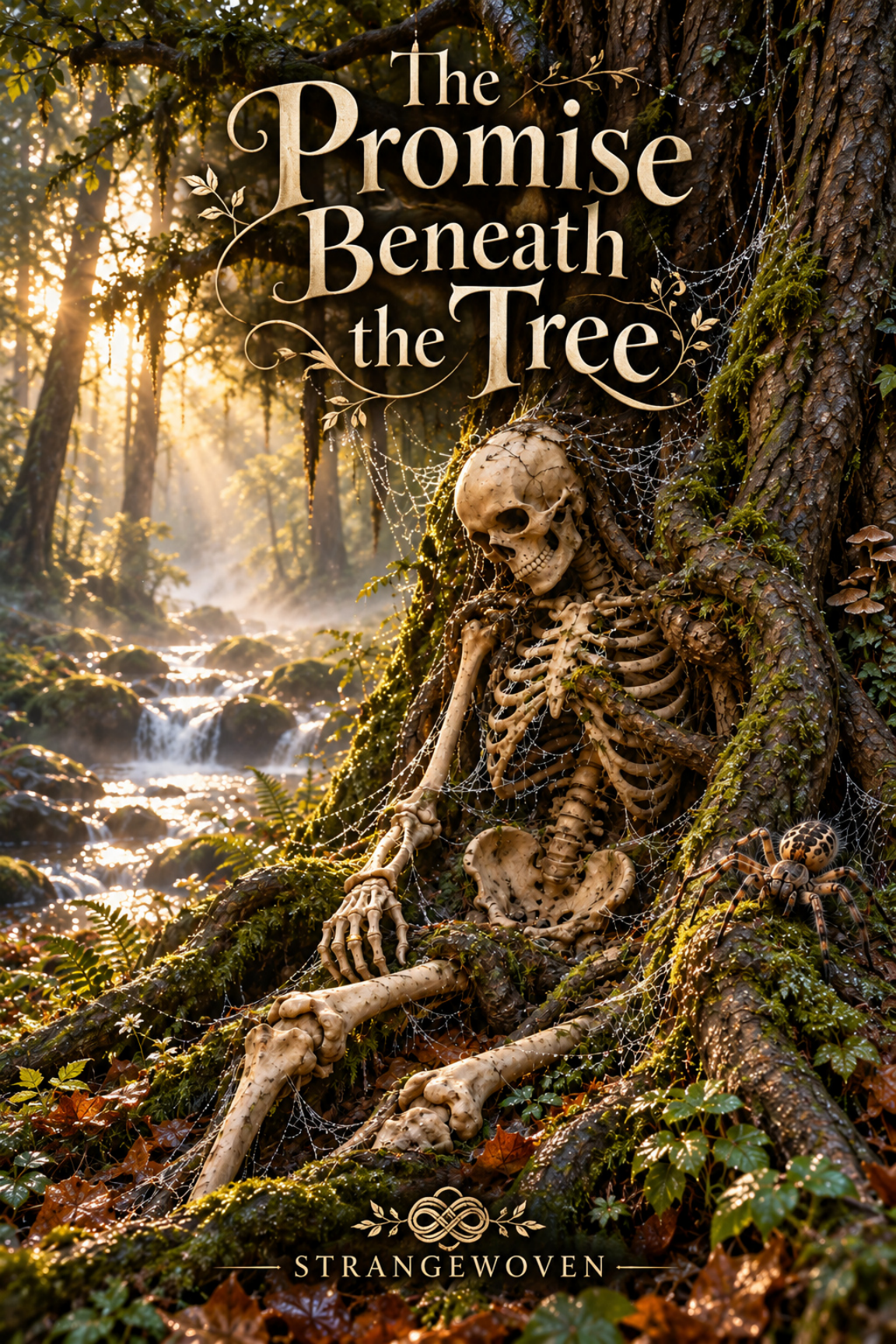
01 The Promise Beneath the Tree

02 Someone Who Stays

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Complete stories with their original covers
and twelve interior illustrations.




The Promise Beneath the Tree
STRANGEWOVEN

The Promise Beneath the Tree

STORY 1 · A STRANGEWOVEN TALE

The man chose the tree because it was the only thing nearby that looked strong enough to lean on.

He lowered himself between its roots, one hand pressed against his chest, and waited for his breath to settle.

It did not.

Beyond the ferns, the stream went on talking over its stones. Sunlight moved through the branches. He had walked this path often enough to know that the village lay less than a mile away.

For a while, that seemed an especially cruel distance.

Then a spider descended in front of his face.

She was small and brown, with a pale marking on her back. She stopped at eye level and turned slowly on her thread.

The man watched her.

“You make that look easy.”

The spider climbed a little higher.

He tried to smile. His hand slipped from his chest to the root beside him.

“Keep an eye on me, would you?” he whispered. “I’d rather not be alone.”

The spider lowered herself onto his sleeve.

He felt the faintest movement through the cloth.

“Thank you.”

Those were the last words he spoke.

The spider remained until evening.

When darkness came, she stretched a thread from his shoulder to the bark and settled near his ear.

She had never been asked to look after anyone before.



The forest found him before people did.

Rain darkened his coat. Leaves gathered against his boots. Once, distant voices traveled along the stream, calling a name the spider did not understand. She ran across her web toward them, but the voices moved away.

She could not fetch them.

She could stay.

She built above his face, where falling needles caught in the silk. When a beetle wandered toward his eye, she hurried down and drove it away. When a curious mouse began pulling threads from his cuff, she chased it along the root until it left.

There were things she could not stop. Weather. Winter. The slow changes beneath his clothes.

She learned the limits of her small body and worked within them.

By the time she laid her eggs in a sheltered crease of bark, her web joined the man to the tree in seven places.

When her young emerged, she showed them the branches where flies gathered and the hollow that stayed dry in rain.

Then she showed them the man.

“This is the one we watch over.”

“Why?” asked one of the young.

“He asked.”

For the spider, that was explanation enough.



Winters passed.

The coat became scraps. The boots softened and split. Roots thickened beneath the man’s legs, and the tree laid new wood around the shoulder resting against its trunk.

The spiders learned to leave room for it.

Each generation built its webs a little differently. Some stretched broad sheets above his lap. Others preferred fine nets between his ribs. One industrious daughter tried to cover the entire tree and spent the remainder of her short life repairing a project she refused to admit was too large.

But every mother taught the same duty.

This is the one we watch over.

They turned ants away from the small bones of his fingers. They bound loose scraps of cloth before the wind could steal them. When a fox tried to carry off a bone, spiders poured from the bark and climbed its muzzle until it dropped what it had taken.

Afterward, six of them spent most of a night securing the bone where it belonged.

The man’s name disappeared from the village. The path shifted after a fallen tree blocked the old crossing. Saplings grew where people had walked.

Beneath the great tree, the watch continued.

* * *

The young spider inherited her place beside his skull on a cold morning near the end of autumn.

She was larger than the first guardian had been, broad-backed and long-legged, with a pale pattern like a leaf upon her body.

Her mother rested beneath a ridge of bark.

“Check the lower threads after rain,” she told her. “And do not trust squirrels.”

“Any squirrels?”

“You will know the sort.”

The young spider waited for more instructions. There had to be more to guarding someone for an entire life.

Her mother moved one leg toward the bowed skull.

“Stay close enough that he knows.”

That evening, the young spider took her place on the root beside him.

She inspected the empty sockets, the fine cracks in the bone, the wood curving around his shoulders.

“I don’t know whether you can hear,” she said.

The stream murmured below them.

“But I’m here.”

* * *

The traveler arrived three mornings later.

He pushed through the ferns with a walking stick, following the sound of water. When he saw the skeleton, he stopped so suddenly that his boot slid in the wet leaves.

For a long time, he simply stared.

Then he stepped closer.

The guardian raised her front legs.

The traveler did not notice her. He was looking at the skeleton’s hand.

A narrow gold ring still circled one finger.

He crouched.

“Won’t be needing that, will you?”

His hand passed through a web stretched between the roots.

The broken strands snapped against the guardian’s feet.

She ran onto the skeleton’s wrist and lifted herself in warning.

The traveler jerked back.

“Big one, aren’t you?”

He picked up a fallen twig.

She had driven beetles from this hand. She had repaired its webs after frost. Nothing in her brief experience had prepared her for a shadow that could cover the whole of it.

The twig came toward her.

She struck the warning thread with her hind legs.

Twice. A pause. Twice again.

Beneath the bark, something stirred.

The traveler brushed the twig across the skeleton’s fingers. The guardian held her ground, though the wood caught one of her legs and nearly lifted her away.

Then a spider appeared above his knuckle.

Another climbed out between the ribs.

Along the trunk, dozens emerged from crevices. Small ones gathered across the ring. Larger ones took their places on the wrist and forearm. Threads trembled all around him.

The traveler went very still.

A spider stepped onto his sleeve.

He withdrew his hand carefully.

The spider stepped back onto the root.

He stood, breathing hard, and glanced toward the ring once more.

Every spider waited.

“All right,” he said.

He laid down the twig.

“All right. I understand.”

He backed through the ferns until there was room to turn, then hurried toward the stream.

The guardian remained on the hand until his footsteps faded.

Only then did she lower herself.

Her leg hurt. Three webs were broken. Around her, her family began checking the damage.

One of the smallest spiders climbed onto the gold ring.

“Was that a squirrel?”

“No,” said the guardian.

She tested her sore leg against the bone.

“Worse manners.”



The traveler returned the following morning.

He stopped well beyond the outer webs.

The guardian watched him from beside the skull.

He carried no twig this time. In one hand he held a small bunch of flowers, their stems tied with grass.

“My wife said I ought to be ashamed of myself,” he told the tree.

He looked at the ring, then down at the flowers.

“She was right.”

He placed them on a stone beyond the roots.

For a few moments, he stood with his head bowed. Then he left.

The spiders allowed the flowers to remain.



By dawn, mist had filled the hollow.

Fresh webs crossed the broken places. Dew gathered along them, brightening as sunlight reached through the trees.

The guardian settled beside the man’s cheek.

Under his resting hand, several young spiders were learning to fasten their first threads. Above him, the tree held his shoulders in its slow embrace.

There would be weather to mend after. There would be hungry mouths, careless feet, and squirrels of a certain sort.

For now, the hollow was quiet.

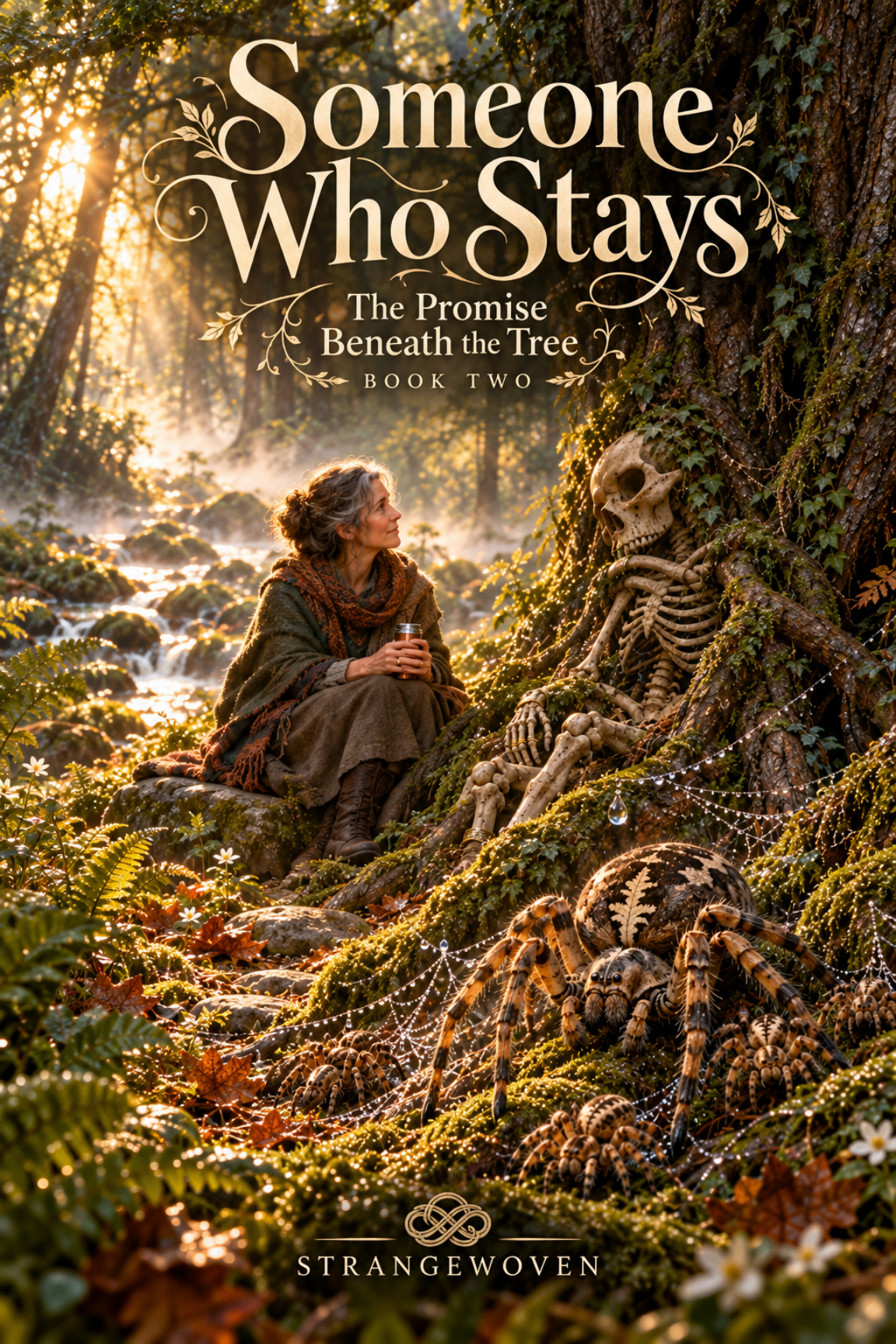
The guardian touched one foot to the old bone.

“Still here,” she told him.

A drop of dew slipped down the web beside his cheek.

She waited until it fell, then began repairing the thread.




Someone Who Stays
The Promise Beneath the Tree
BOOK TWO
STRANGEWOVEN

Someone Who Stays

STORY 2 · A STRANGEWOVEN TALE

The woman noticed the web before she noticed the bones.

She stopped at the edge of the hollow, lifted a strand away from her sleeve, and searched for somewhere safe to put it.

The guardian watched from beside the skull.

People usually broke the first thread without noticing. This one stood awkwardly on the wet slope, holding her arm aloft while a small spider hurried toward the bark.

Only when it reached safety did she lower her hand.

Then she saw who rested beneath the tree.

“Oh,” she said.

The guardian raised her front legs.

The woman stayed where she was.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone was here.”

She looked toward the stream, then back along the way she had come. Her face crumpled. She pressed her lips together and sat on a flat stone beyond the roots.

“Would you mind if I sat a minute?”

The guardian kept her legs raised until they began to ache.

The woman did not move closer.

Eventually, the spider lowered herself.

* * *

At first, there was only the sound of water.

Then the woman began to cry.

The smallest spiders withdrew beneath the bark. One climbed onto the guardian’s back to see what was happening.

“Is she broken?”

“I don’t know.”

“She’s leaking.”

“I can see.”

The woman wiped her cheeks with a handkerchief. Water kept coming anyway.

The guardian studied her hands. There was a gold ring on one of them, like the ring they protected. She turned it with her thumb until it caught against the knuckle, then pushed it back into place.

“He would have liked this,” she said at last.

The spiders waited.

“He always wanted to know what was round the next bend. Even when we were late. Especially then, I think.”

Her mouth moved toward a smile and failed to reach it.

“We were supposed to come here together.”

She sat until the light began leaving the hollow. When she stood, she folded her handkerchief carefully, though it was far too wet to put away.

“Thank you,” she told the tree.

The guardian followed her along the roots until she passed out of sight.

Nothing had been taken. Nothing had been broken.

The stone where she had sat remained damp for a while.



She returned two mornings later.

This time, she brought a small cushion and a flask.

“Just me,” she said from the ferns.

The guardian recognized her voice before she saw the ring.

The woman settled on the same stone. She poured something warm into the flask’s lid and held it between both hands.

“His sister came yesterday. We sorted the shed.”

Steam drifted past her face.

“Seventeen empty jars. All washed. All with lids. Apparently we were expecting an emergency involving seventeen very small things.”

She gave a short, surprised laugh.

Then she covered her mouth.

The guardian waited for the water to begin again.

It did, but only a little.

After that, the woman came often. Sometimes she spoke. Sometimes she watched the stream. Once she brought a book, read the same page three times, and closed it without turning it.

The spiders learned the weight of her footsteps.

They learned that she set her cushion down before she sat, that she always checked it for visitors, and that crumbs from the bread she brought attracted ants.

They disapproved of the crumbs.

“I know,” she said one morning, watching the guardian intercept an ant upon the root. “I’ll be more careful.”

She brushed the stone clean before leaving.

* * *

The difficulty began with a web.

It was a very good web. A young spider had spent most of the night fastening it between the tree and a hazel branch. By dawn, it crossed the narrow opening through which the woman usually came.

The guardian inspected it.

“She walks here.”

“She can walk somewhere else.”

There was a steep bank on one side and a thick tangle of thorns on the other.

The young spider tested a strand proudly.

“Look how well it holds.”

When the woman arrived, she stopped before the web.

She leaned one way, then the other. The guardian watched her consider the bank. Her boots were still muddy from the climb.

“You’ve been busy,” she said.

She stepped back.

For a moment, the guardian expected her to fetch a stick.

Instead, she sat beyond the web, where she could scarcely see the tree at all.

She stayed only a short time that morning.

After she left, the guardian climbed to the hazel branch.

“We need an opening.”

“Then flies will get through.”

“Some will.”

The young spider pulled a strand taut beneath one foot.

“This is the one we watch over,” she said, looking toward the bones.

“Yes.”

“She isn’t.”

The guardian rested upon the branch. Beneath her, the empty stone stood in a patch of sunlight.

“She’s careful with us,” she said. “We can be careful with her.”

Together, they moved the lower anchor threads.

The altered web was narrower and slightly crooked. Its builder examined it with considerable disappointment.

“It was better before.”

“It was wider before,” said the guardian.



The next afternoon brought rain.

It struck hard enough to shake drops loose from the highest branches. Water ran down the trunk in channels the spiders knew, and in several new ones they did not.

The guardian hurried along the skull to check a sheltered pocket beneath the man’s shoulder.

The smallest young had gathered there. Now a thin stream was creeping toward them over the wood.

She began moving them higher.

Beyond the tree, the woman rose from her stone.

“Oh, you’ll all be soaked.”

She stepped toward the roots.

A warning thread tightened beneath the guardian’s feet.

Her family emerged from the bark.

The woman stopped. In her hand was a broad piece of fallen bark.

“Only a roof,” she said softly.

She crouched and leaned it against a broken branch above the flooded pocket, keeping her fingers clear of the bones.

The dripping slowed.

Then it stopped.

The guardian stood among the young, one leg still raised to strike the alarm.

The woman waited until the spiders beneath her hand had moved away. She withdrew it slowly.

“There.”

A tiny spider climbed the inside of the new shelter.

“Is she allowed?” it asked.

The guardian touched the dry wood.

“Yes.”

Across the tree, the others lowered themselves.

The woman returned to her stone. Her cushion was wet now, and water dripped from the end of her nose.

She looked at the dry pocket beneath the bark.

“He’d have laughed at me for that,” she said. “Then he’d have held the other end.”

She stayed until the rain softened.



On the morning she did not come, the guardian checked the opening twice.

By midday, she had checked it six times.

“Perhaps she found another tree,” said the young web-builder.

The guardian returned to her place beside the skull.

There were threads to mend. A beetle had become troublesome near the fingers. The smallest young were learning to descend on silk and had chosen several unfortunate places to practice.

She attended to all of it.

The stone remained empty.

The woman came the following afternoon, carrying her cushion beneath one arm.

“My sister’s children visited,” she said, settling down. “They wanted me to help build a boat.”

She opened her flask.

“It sank immediately. We built another.”

This time, when she laughed, she let herself finish.

The guardian rested on the root nearest the stone.

* * *

Before the first frost, the woman brought a small bag.

“I’m going to stay with my sister for a while. There’s a room with a window over the garden.”

She looked around the hollow as though trying to remember where everything belonged.

“I thought I ought to tell someone.”

From the bag, she took a smooth stone, pale and round, and placed it beside the one where she sat.

“From our garden,” she said. “He kept moving it when he mowed, and I kept putting it back.”

Her fingers lingered upon it.

“I’ll come again.”

When she stood, the guardian climbed a fern beside the opening.

The woman noticed her there.

“Thank you for sharing your place.”

She passed beneath the hazel branch without disturbing a thread.

For a while afterward, the guardian remained on the fern.

“Shall we close it?” asked the young web-builder.

The path lay empty. Beyond it, the woods were bright with the last leaves of autumn.

“No,” said the guardian. “Leave her room.”

That evening, she returned to the man beneath the tree and checked the silk around his resting hand.

The ring was secure. The young were sheltered. Beside the visitor’s stone, a few drops from the rain still shone on the pale pebble.

The guardian settled near his cheek.

“She’s gone to her family,” she told him.

Then she turned toward the opening and kept watch.




The Promise Remembered
The Promise Beneath the Tree
BOOK THREE
STRANGEWOVEN

The Promise Remembered

STORY 3 · A STRANGEWOVEN TALE

The woman returned when the hazel buds began to open.

The spider on the fern was not the one she remembered.

This guardian was smaller, with a pale branching mark upon her back. She had inherited her mother's place beside the skull, along with instructions about rain, squirrels, and leaving an opening beneath the hazel.

She recognized the woman by her ring.

“There you are,” the woman said.

The guardian remained still.

Behind the visitor came a gray-haired man carrying a narrow wooden box. A girl followed him, holding a folded cloth against her chest.

Three people were considerably more than the hollow usually received.

The guardian touched a warning thread.

Within the tree, her family woke.

* * *

The woman set her cushion on the familiar stone. Beside it, the pale pebble from her garden had gathered a little moss.

“I brought someone who might know him,” she said.

The gray-haired man stood beyond the roots.

For a long time, he looked at the bones.

Then he opened his box.

Inside lay a notebook with a split leather cover and a small painted portrait of a man with untidy hair, a short beard, and a smile that seemed to have begun before the painter was ready.

“My great-grandfather,” he said. “Elias Wren.”

The guardian had never heard the name.

She moved along the root until she could see the little face.

The girl crouched beside the box.

“Gran used to say he went out to mend a gate and never came home.”

Her father opened the notebook to a page marked with blue thread.

There was a drawing of the stream. Above it, a great tree spread its branches beside three pointed stones.

The guardian could see those stones from where she stood. Moss had softened their edges, but they still leaned together above the water.

“He drew everything,” the man said. “Gates he meant to fix. Birds he couldn't name. The insides of clocks he should have left alone.”

He smiled faintly.

“When the story reached us about a man in a tree, my daughter remembered this page.”

The girl looked from the drawing to the hollow.

“We thought we ought to come.”

* * *

The guardian inspected the portrait again.

All her life, the man had been bone and bark and the familiar weight beneath her feet.

Now she could see that his eyes had once been brown.



“Is that really him?” whispered a spider behind her.

“It might be.”

“He had so much on his face.”

The guardian had no instruction for that.

The gray-haired man closed the notebook carefully.

“We hoped to take him home,” he said.

Every leg upon the root grew still.

“There is room beside his wife. She waited for him all her life.”

The guardian struck the warning thread.

Twice. A pause. Twice again.

Spiders emerged above the skull and beneath the ribs. They gathered along the roots, standing over the small bones of the resting hand.

The girl drew back.

Her father did not step closer.

“We won't hurt him,” he said.

The guardian stood higher.

Taking was taking. She knew what to do about that.

“Look,” the woman said gently.

She pointed to the wood curving around the shoulders, to the roots that had thickened beneath his legs.

The gray-haired man followed their course with his eyes.

“I see.”

His hand rested on the closed notebook.

“We hadn't understood.”

* * *

They sat beside the stream to talk.

The spiders remained at their posts.

The guardian could hear the man's voice, then the woman's, then the girl asking something too softly to catch.

After a while, all three returned.

“We aren't moving him,” the man said.

The guardian waited.

“He's been here longer than our house has stood. I can't pull him out of the tree just because I've finally found him.”

He knelt beyond the roots.

“But I would like to know for certain.”

His gaze settled on the ring.

“There should be words inside. A tiny wren, too. My great-grandmother described it in a letter.”

The woman leaned forward slightly.

“Could you read it where it is?”

He shook his head.

“I'd need to lift it from his finger.”

The guardian hurried onto the hand.

No.

She laid her feet across the gold.

* * *

The man reached into his box.

He took out a small magnifying glass, then opened a square of soft cloth on the ground.

The guardian watched each movement.

“I'll put it back,” he said.

She knew how easily people could say things. The first traveler had spoken gently enough before he fetched his twig. Her mother had made certain that story was remembered.

The girl lowered herself beside the cloth.

“We can wait, Dad.”

They did.

The woman poured warm tea into the lid of her flask. A bird searched the leaves behind them. Above the skull, a young spider began repairing a strand that had broken when the family rushed out.

The gray-haired man's hand rested open on his knee.

He had brought a box, but he had not put anything into it.

He had wished to carry the man away, then seen the tree and changed his mind.

The guardian shifted her feet upon the ring.

“We don't let them take it,” whispered her sister.

“I know.”

“Mother said.”

The guardian looked toward the pale pebble beside the woman's stone. A spider had fastened a thread to it that morning.

Their visitor had left it in their care. They had never needed to drive her away to keep it safe.

She stepped off the ring.

Then she began cutting the fine retaining threads.



The man noticed the movement.

He leaned nearer, slowly.

The guardian remained on the wrist while her sister withdrew beneath the thumb.

With two fingers, he lifted the narrow band from the bone. He cupped his other hand beneath it and carried it no farther than the waiting cloth.

The guardian followed along the root.

He bent over the magnifying glass.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

“There,” he whispered.

The girl moved close beside him.

“The bird?”

He nodded.

His mouth trembled.

“And the words.”

The woman waited on her stone.

At last, he read them aloud.

“Elias. Come home to me. Ada.”

The guardian looked toward the bowed skull.

The man with the brown eyes had been expected somewhere.

Someone had watched for him there, too.



The girl began to cry quietly.

Her father put one arm around her. In his other hand, the ring caught a small patch of sun.

The guardian stood at the edge of the cloth.

The girl noticed her.

“You kept it,” she said.

She glanced toward the other spiders, waiting along the root.

“All this time.”

The gray-haired man wiped his face with his sleeve.

Then he brought the ring back.

He lowered it onto the same finger and waited until the guardian approached before withdrawing his hand.

She checked the gold with her feet.

It was warm.

Her sister came beside her. Together, they fastened new silk around it.

* * *

The girl unfolded the cloth she had carried.

It held a little wooden board, a short stake, and a pencil.

“We thought we'd need this for the journey,” she said. “So he wouldn't be without his name again.”

Across the board, in careful letters, she had written:

ELIAS WREN

FOUND, AND LOVED.

Her father looked toward the roots.

“May we leave it here?”

The woman helped them choose a place beyond the webs, where the stake could enter the soft earth without striking a root.

The guardian watched from the hand.

There was no alarm.

Before they left, the gray-haired man opened the notebook once more. He tore nothing from it. Instead, he showed his daughter a page covered in small, hurried writing.

“Your grandmother said he could never go to bed while someone needed help.”

The girl read a line and smiled through the last of her tears.

“He went back to fix the same gate twice.”

“Apparently it was a very determined gate.”

The guardian listened.

For the first time, the hollow held stories about the man beneath the tree.

* * *

They returned the following week.

The girl brought a little pot of earth from beside Ada's resting place. Her father scattered it gently beyond the roots and planted woodland flowers there.

The woman brought her cushion.

They sat until late afternoon, telling the man what had become of his family.

The spiders went about their work around them.

One young spider spent a great deal of time inspecting the wooden name board.

“Can we attach to it?” she asked.

The guardian tested the stake. It held firmly.

“Above the letters.”

By evening, a fine thread joined the board to the tree.

* * *

When the people had gone, the guardian returned to her place beside his cheek.

The ring was secure. The new flowers stood beyond the roots. Beneath the hazel, the passage remained open.

She rested one foot against the old bone.

“Elias,” she said, trying the name.

Behind her, the youngest spiders stirred beneath their shelter.

Tomorrow she would teach them where the tree stayed dry, how to mend a lower thread, and which squirrels could not be trusted.

Then she would bring them here.

This is Elias, she would tell them.

This is the one we watch over.

Below the hollow, footsteps lingered beside the stream. The girl was asking whether they could come again before the flowers opened.

The guardian heard her father answer yes.

She settled closer to the skull.

“They know the way now,” she told him.


ELIAS WREN
FOUND, AND LOVED.