

# 1

## THE RACE

I won't let her win. Not again. My sister and I have run this path along the river hundreds of times, and every time she's beaten me to the bridge.

"Come on, Uie," Issie shouts between huffs, her arms pumping at her sides.

"Stop calling me that."

She shoves her shoulder into mine, laughing. "Oh, you love it!"

Actually, ever since my best friend, Jasper, started using it, I don't mind it so much. But I'd never tell her that.

Sunshine peeks through the trees as we race along the river. I'm surprised Mum let us off from our chores so early in the day, but then again it was Isoldesse who asked. When has she ever said *no* to her prize child?

We round the bend and shoot out from within the forest. The narrow clearing snakes beside the river, leading us to the finish line: the stone bridge. The rapids off to my right are mild today, and I pretend the cascading water splashing along the rocks is a group of spectators cheering me on, pushing me to run faster—to win. Inside my chest, my lungs burn with each gasp of air, but I don't stop. Never has one of our races been this close before.

Issie's breathing is in sync with mine. Usually, during our races, she wears a taunting smile—always knowing she's going to win—but not today. I sneak a glance at my sister, whose cheeks are flushed behind the strands of black hair that have slipped free from her braid. Issie shoots me a wild look, and she shrills with frustration as I push ahead. That's when I know I've got her. I'm going to win.

She catches up, but barely. We're so close my hand smacks her hand, and she cries out, "Stop hitting me, Ulissa!"

"Well, don't run so close!"

One foot in front of the other, I push ahead again. I'm pounding wet grass beneath the new boots Daramum gave me. I'm convinced they are enchanted with good luck. They have to be. I've never been able to keep up with my little sister before, yet here I am, an arm's length ahead of her—the fastest youthen in our village.

I huff out a winded laugh. My feet are moving faster than ever before. It has to be the boots. Daramum's gifts are always special, not to mention I love the stories that accompany them. She's traveled every part of the eight regions from quaint villages to congested grandburgs.

The stone bridge is still a ways away, and amid our race, I imagine the story behind my boots. I picture Daramum buying them from somewhere in the Black Mountain region, the second most mystical place on Anuminis. She's told us many tales of her visits to the Black Mountain quarries where powerful stones like the arcstone and transessent stones are mined. I imagine the origin of my lucky boots begins somewhere deep within the caves, beneath the mountain where sunlight never touches, a miner plucks a powerful stone free from the roots of the mountain. He then grinds the stone into a fine shimmering powder before taking it to the nearest grandburg, where he barter it away to a local boot maker. The boot maker casts a bonding amula, fusing the enchanted powder to the leather used to make my beautiful boots, thus empowering them with good luck.

I'm probably wrong, and my boots are just boots. But if I finally beat Issie at a race, then maybe, just maybe, they do possess a hint of enchantment.

Lost in my thoughts, I misstep in the wet grass trailing the embankment. My right foot slips from the edge and I stumble toward the river. There's nothing graceful about my descent. Arms flailing and feet dancing about, I try to find traction along the slope of the sandy embankment.

Maybe my boots are not so lucky after all.

I continue, stumbling forward, and for a split second I think I've got my footing under control, but because I'm my dah's daughter, and my brain and body don't always work at the same time, my upper body teeters out over the water. Instinctively, my right foot stretches out and plunges into the shallows of the river while my left drags along the sand. Panic quickly fills me as icy cold water gushes against my leg, spilling over the top of the leather boot. I shriek and the sound echoes up and over the river and into the Red Umber Forest, disturbing a flock of sparrens nesting in the treetops. They take flight, creating a shadow as big as a storm cloud, momentarily shading me from the midday sun.

The panic swelling inside me isn't because I'm sad or even mad that I've ruined one of my brand-new boots. No. The fear that consumes me comes from how Mum will react when she sees what I've done. I should be used to the disappointed looks she's constantly giving me, yet each scowl—each shake of her head—crushes me more inside every day.

Even before we get to the stone bridge, the race is over, and I've lost once again.

## 2

### THE SHOW-OFF

**M**y sister continues running our race, never stopping or noticing my absence.

"Issie, help me!" I yell. My toes are squished against a drenched sole. When I try tugging my leg free, nothing happens. The boot is firmly planted deep in the riverbed's mud.

When Isoldesse finally slows her pace, she's breathing hard. Then, with one hand shielding her eyes from the sun, she turns to look for me and missteps along the grassy ledge. I can't help but yelp as her feet stumble over the cliff-like ledge—a much steeper ledge than the one I stumbled down. My adrenaline is bursting beneath my skin as I watch, helpless and stuck. Though, I don't know why I exhaust my nerves when it comes to Issie. It's a pointless endeavor. I should know better. Mum's always saying how I spend too much time worrying and thinking when I should just react and do what needs to be done—like Issie.

Mid-fall, without hesitation, Issie raises her hands in front of her and shouts, "*Teacht gohaf luhte balla.*"

Ignoring my drenched foot, I mutter the ancient words that command the Eilimintachs as if I were interpreting an amula for my teacher at school. "Come air... Make... Uh, make a wall. Some kind of wall. Oh, mudals! I can't even remember what *luhte* is for?"

The air in front of Isoldesse spins fiercely into a large disc before solidifying into a soft barrier. Her body lands against the invisible surface, which catches her seconds before she plunges face-first into the river.

"Did you see me?" Issie yells while bouncing and laughing on the invisible barrier of air.

*Yeah, yeah. I saw you.*

With a large push, she rolls onto her side. "We should jump off the ledge more often!"

“Uh, I don’t think Mum would want us doing that on purpose. Even though it was pretty amazing!” I’ve become a bit of an expert in showering one with praise, especially if I know I’m going to need someone’s help, and I’m definitely going to need Issie’s help. She can be a bit carefree, but it’s not completely her fault. Mum lets her get away with everything, and the stuff she gets in trouble for... Well, let’s just say Mum finds some way to blame me. It’s this ridiculous routine our family has fallen into.

But since Mum’s not here, I can speak freely. “Let’s not push our luck, okay. Besides, I need your help over here.”

“I know. I’m just having a bit of fun!” Issie continues to flop around like a fish out of water. She’s having fun, while I can barely feel my toes.

“Hey! Are you going to help me or not?”

“All right!” She presses her hands flat to the barrier. Normally, when casting an amula it doesn’t matter how soft or loud you speak the ancient words. But because my sister is Little Miss Know-It-All and likes to rub it in my face, she recites her amula loud enough for me to hear. “*Ompar mise nos.*”

Slowly, the barrier rises, lifting Issie until she’s level with the grassy ledge.

*Show-off.* Holding my tongue, I silently tell myself to be nice. If anyone can get me out of this mess, it’s my sister.

Now safely on the ledge, Issie lifts her hands and shouts, “*Déanta!*” The air within the barrier wavers and slowly dissipates until there’s nothing left but the memory of its existence. She jogs over, a smug grin forming between two rosy cheeks. “Mum’s going to be livid when she sees you’ve ruined your new boots.” Her snickering doesn’t help my mood.

“I know,” I grumble. “Can you come down here? My foot is stuck.” I yank my leg to show her. The motion only causes my boot to sink farther into the river’s muddy bed.

Issie hops off the bank and shuffles sideways along the wet sand. When she reaches the bottom, she struggles to stop and slams into me.

“Whoa!” I yell. My body tilts out toward the river. I prepare myself for a swim, but Issie grabs my arm and pulls me up, away from the water’s surface.

“Whoops, sorry.”

“Yeah, well, help me up.” With her arms looping beneath mine, we shift our weight away from the river, heaving until my leg and boot are free. We climb our way to the grassy path, putting distance between us and the embankment.

I lean against a tree on the edge of the forest. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. You’re still in a heap of trouble. Mum will not be happy when she sees this.” Isoldesse grabs the boot and pours out the remaining river water.

Using the tree for balance, I snatch the boot from her, the leather squishing between my fingers. “You’re telling me stuff I already know. How about you help me dry it?”

Ignoring my request, she leans back on her heels and points to her worn boots. “If I’d fallen in with these old things, Mum wouldn’t have cared. But if I’d worn the boots Daramum had just given me... Well—”

“Issie, I know!” I don’t mean for my tone to sound harsh, but my patience is wearing thin. I turn the boot over. The leather folds lining the top part of the boot are discolored from its original sandy brown.

Ruined. Completely ruined. Daramum will be so disappointed in me.

Issie stands nearby, brushing back the damp black strands of hair framing her face. She tucks them behind her ears and says, “You know Mum’s not going to let you out of the house tonight, right?”

Oh, I’d almost forgotten about the show later this evening! Tonight the Prinor family is visiting our village, and they’re bringing Fawness with them. Her name is Basira, and she’s the current Fawness. The most powerful

Anumens on Anuminis. She's a direct descendant of Fawn, the first woman blessed by the Eilimintachs with the power to cast amulas. I was taught in school that the Fawness' bloodline is the only bloodline with a direct connection to the Eilimintachs.

I've only glimpsed our Fawness once. A long time ago. But now she's coming here—tonight—to take the stage at our village's amphitheater and tell us one of her infamous stories. It's all the entire village has talked about for weeks.

Scratching at a loose piece of red bark from the tree I'm leaning on, I tell Issie, "I don't want to miss out on seeing Fawness. It's not fair that you got to see her last year." I glance up through the leaves, squinting at the sun, waiting for her to respond. When she doesn't, I say, "The Prinor family never comes to our village on their way south before the icy months. It makes me mad that Mum knew they would be staying up in Umberwood last year and took you."

"Yeah, well, Umberwood isn't anything special."

"I wouldn't know. You've seen more grandburgs than I'll ever see."

Mum started taking Issie on more of her trips once she became a youthen. Not quite an adult, but more responsible than a youthling.

"Trust me, Uie, you're not missing anything."

"Says the one who has seen one of Fawness's shows." I'd continue speaking my mind, which I rarely get to do, but Issie is distracted with fixing her hair. She's retied the end of her braid, which makes me think of what my braid must look like.

I do plan to see Fawness's show tonight. Ever since Gunrthii, our village Adamant, informed our village of tonight's special occasion, I've taken extra precautions to stay on Mum's good side. Helping her on the farm with more than just my usual chores, staying out of sight whenever she's in a foul mood, answering every question with an answer that will please her, even if it means lying. I don't want to give her any reason to keep me from attending tonight's show.

"Can you do something?" I hate asking Issie for help, but sometimes dire circumstances require unfavorable actions. "Don't you know an amula that will dry it? Please. You know Mum will force me to stay home tonight if she sees this!"

"Yes, she definitely will," she says, again not holding back her amusement.

"It's not funny, Issie! You and Mum travel to the capital and meet with the Prinor family all the time. You get to see the world and—Fawness! While Dah and I—"

Issie's expression hardens. "You think I like when Mum drags me off to the capital? To act as if I support her trying to convince the Prinors to bring back the Old World ways?" Her seriousness makes her look older, and her dark eyes tense like Mum's do right before she gives me one of her *do you realize what you've done* lectures. She jabs a finger into my shoulder. "You think I enjoy her constant watch over everything I do?" Issie's shoulders relax and her head sinks. "It's exhausting, Uie."

I didn't mean to upset her. I honestly thought she enjoyed going with Mum. I let the soaked boot fall from my fingers. It lands in a pile of fallen umber tree leaves. Before she walks away, I pull Issie in for a hug. "I didn't know."

"How could you? And why would I burden you with my stress when you've got plenty of your own?" Issie pulls away from my embrace. "I can't even imagine how you go on, day after day, with her constantly scrutinizing and bullying you."

I smirk, but only because I've grown used to hiding my true emotions on the subject. "She's our mum, and this is our life."

"Will we ever be free?"

“I don’t know.” And it’s true, I don’t. I know it’s custom to marry and start a family, but I don’t ever plan on leaving our village, and I highly doubt Mum will either. So, it seems we’ll always be in each other’s lives. Mum may want to bring back the Old World ways, but she’ll never be granted permission to actually seek out and bring back technology. There’s too much risk for a second Era of Chaos.

“*Magic and technology don’t mix well,*” Dah would always remind Issie and me whenever Mum wasn’t around. “*A darkness takes over. A greed for more.*”

Whenever we’d asked what he’d meant by *more*, he’d only say, “*Of everything. Influential Anumens in high positions in society, both men and women, were constantly seeking out more regardless of the consequences. It was a terrible time for our ancestors.*”

We’re taught early in school about the Era of Chaos, a fifty-year-long period where Anumens feuded over how everyone should live. All we know for sure is that in the end, technology was banished. Something that infuriates Mum. She’s a firm believer that we can coexist with both technology and amulas.

“I believe you, dear sister, are destined for great things. You will be free one day,” I tell her.

Issie smiles with a snuffle. I should’ve known better than to assume she agrees with Mum’s ideas. She’s simply better at playing the *stay on Mum’s good side* game.

She drops her hands from my shoulders and wipes her cheeks dry before telling me, “I will only ever be free if I know you’re happy.”

I don’t want to dwell anymore on the parts of our lives we can’t control, so I pick up my boot and inspect it. Issie steps to my side, staring into the forest behind me. After a few seconds, she wanders out between the trees, turning her head left and right as if she’s looking for something. She disappears behind a wide trunk that’s four times her size. When she emerges, she tells me, “You know you can leave, right? Maybe not today or anytime soon, but one day you can get married and raise a family far from here. No one is forcing you to stay in the village. Not even Mum.”

I can’t feel the crescent mark permanently inked between my shoulder blades, but the fact that it’s there means I will have a family of my own one day. Unlike Issie, who bears the full-moon mark.

“I know,” I tell her, shifting my weight against the tree. She brushes fallen leaves with her feet, searching behind the trees. “What are you looking for?”

She ignores my question and asks, “You wouldn’t be wanting to stay for a boy, now, would you?”

My sister loves a good rumor. She and her friends are good at getting into everyone’s business. The last thing I need is for her to whisper details about my life to the village, especially when it involves matters of the heart.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I lie. The topic of me and Jasper, whom I’ve been close friends with since we were youthlings, is not something I intend to discuss... out loud... with Issie. “Can we focus on my boot, please?”

“Only if you admit you like Jasper.”

“Issie, we’re just friends.”

“Uie, I’m not helping you unless you—”

“Fine!” I tilt my head up to the sky and run my fingers along my braid, which is thick enough to prevent the rough edges of the tree trunk from poking my skull. I hate that I’m conceding to Issie’s assumptions and pray to the Eilimintachs that she can hold her tongue around others. I puff out an exasperated breath and nod. “Yes. I have been considering Jasper to be more than a friend, but...” I pause, pushing forward on one foot while the other rests against the tree behind me. “...my feelings on the matter are not public. So, please, Issie, keep this between you and me.”

Issie points a long stick at me and smiles. “I *knew* it!” She tosses it into a nearby bush, then bounces toward me and boops me on the nose. “You two are perfect for each other! Plus, he’s probably the only other Anumen

who understands what life is like in our home. He knows the real you, not the you that puts on a fake smile and hides your pain from everyone else in the village.”

I have no words. My fingers are twiddling, twisting the bottom of my shirt, because she’s right. Jasper understands what life is like under our roof. He always listens when I need to vent, sits close and lends me his shoulder when I need to cry, or offers a forest adventure to help distract me from the troubles I often carry.

Not wanting to talk about Jasper anymore, I ask, “What about you? Where do you see yourself when it’s time to leave home?” The moment the question leaves my lips, I feel a twinge of guilt. I mean, Issie may find love one day, but she can never have youthlings of her own. Adoption is always an option, if there are youthlings or youthens who need a family, but our world has never had many orphans. It’s custom for blood to remain with blood. There have been many nights I’ve lain awake wishing Mum would send me to live with Dah’s sister, even if it is in the Black Mountain region. I’d miss Dah, and maybe Issie, and most definitely Jasper, but to wake up each day without the worry of what awaits me outside my bedroom door *is* tempting.

I glance at Issie, who has twisted her lips into a sour pucker. “I-I didn’t mean to bring up—”

“No, it’s okay,” Issie says with a shrug. “I plan to apply for an apprenticeship here in the village, at our school. I’d love to spend my days teaching amulas to youthens, maybe even dabble with helping the Adamant with his responsibilities of overseeing our village.”

“Ah.” I laugh playfully. “An educator I can see, but I never knew you were interested in politics.”

“I can’t help it. I’m our mum’s daughter. I have ideas and I want others to see value in those ideas.”

“Quite the ambition, and yes, I’d say you’re definitely more Mum than Dah. I’m sure Gunthrii will be as pleased to have your advice as he is with Mum’s advice.”

We can’t help but laugh, knowing that it’s a curse more than a blessing to share similarities with Mum. Issie makes her way over to me and takes my boot. She waves for me to follow. “Come on. I found a stump we can use to dry it on. Afterward, we can go home, eat dinner, and then *both* attend tonight’s show.”

## 3

### BYE-BYE BOOT

**I** hop on one foot while using the trees for balance as I follow my sister deeper into the woods. The reddish-brown bark pokes at my palms with each landing and push-off. When I reach the oversized tree, I round it until I spot Issie in a small clearing with a stump in the center. The stump looks freshly cut with splinters spiking the edges.

“Did you think of an amula you could use?”

Issie blinks and nods. “*We* can use an air-current amula,” she says, pointing a finger back and forth between us. She drops the wet boot in the center of the stump. “I’ll start us off and then you can jump in and help.”

“You want *me* to cast with you? But you’re the more powerful Anumen.”

Isoldesse positions her feet shoulder-width apart and raises one hand over her head, the other out toward my boot. “Yes, *we*. Now come on. Get into position.”

I move in closer, clearing some fallen leaves with my bare foot until the forest ground appears. On my toes, I center my body and hold out my hands, waiting for her instructions. “Okay, ready.”

She nods and begins the incantation, “*Teacht teas gohaf ag tiryim.*” The leaves in the trees above rustle and a current of air streams toward us. A faint, semitranslucent shimmer of light glints within the stream of air as it circles her. With one hand still raised high, she uses her other to redirect the air flow toward the boot. It jostles a bit but doesn’t fall from the stump.

“That’s amazing,” I whisper as the air flows around it.

I could never match her strength and expertise. It isn’t in me. Literally. Issie is a Creator, and I am a Bearer. A Creator creates and carries the seeds for life inside their body. Once a season, the local healer will collect seeds from Creators depending on how many are needed. The Healer will then distribute the seeds to Bearers that are ready to have youthlings. Though Issie will never have youthlings of her own, as a Creator the seeds she carries intensify her amula abilities. The seeds are the source of our connection to the mystical Eilimintachs.

I used to hate that she was born a Creator. Night after night, while lying in bed, I used to think how if I’d been born a Creator like Issie, then maybe Mum would see me as an equal. But now, my heart aches knowing that my sister may never be a mum.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Issie asks with a scowl.

She never specifically told me which amula to use.

Okay-okay. I can do this. I’ll never be able to invoke a powerful amula like air manipulation. My air amulas are smaller—way, way smaller—like miniature whirlwinds to cool my stew.

*Mudals!* Uh, let’s see.

Eyes wide, Issie gives me that *hurry up* look. I’m about to give up and just ask her to tell me what to say when I remember something I saw the other day. After class, I spotted some powerful amulas listed in a journal left open on my teacher’s desk. One of them was water manipulation. While my teacher spoke with another student, I browsed the open pages, curious about the phrases and images scrawled inside.

I send a quick, silent prayer to the Eilimintachs that my memory won’t fail me.

*I can do this.*

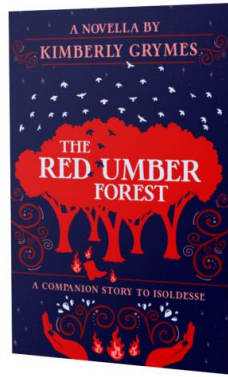
I hold my palm facing out toward the boot, while my other hovers high over it. Then, I pinch my fingers together and raise my hand up, ready to say the words and draw the water out and up into the air. I repeat this motion a few more times before taking a deep breath and saying, “*Tarach amach et tiin.*”

“No!” my sister yells, her eyes opening to their fullest just as a bright orange spark ignites within the current of air flowing past her hands. She immediately rolls her wrists and swings her arms up, redirecting the stream of fire toward the sky. A flock of sparrens take flight, their black wings are frantically flapping as they chaotically flee from the unintended ambush.

Issie and I stare until the last flickering red flame has vanished over our heads.

“Oh, Uie.” Her voice is soft and concerned.

I lower my gaze from the sky to the stump where my boot sits, engulfed in flames.



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**THE RED UMBER FOREST**

Companion Novella 1.5 in the Aevo Compendium series

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\*\*\*  
**ANUMEN**  
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**TERMINOLOGY** \*\*\*

**Adamant** – Official title of the overseer in a village or a grandburg.

**Amula** – (ah-mew-lah) Incantations that involve speaking certain words of the Anumen language that are encoded with instructions to manipulate the energy of the Eilimintachs.

**Anumen** – (ah-new-men) A race of beings that live on a world called Anuminis. The women of this species have a magical connection to the Eilimintachs.

**Anuminis** – (ah-new-min-is) The home world of the Anumens.

**Arcstone** – A powerful stone mined from the Black Mountain region on Anuminis. It has the capability of holding the essence of a single Anumen woman after her physical life ends. The arcstone can also form a permanent bond, a connection, to a living person, who can then see and hear the Anumen occupying the stone as well as utilize the magic of the arcstone.

**Bearer mark** – The outline of a crescent shape permanently inked on Anumen girls when they transition into their youthen years. The crescent shape symbolizes the ability to bear youthlings.

**Creator mark** – The outline of a full circle permanently inked on Anumen girls when they transition into their youthen years. The full circle symbolizes the ability to create and carry the seeds for life inside their body until needed. Once a season, a Healer will collect seeds from Creators, depending on how many Bearers are ready to bear youthlings. The seeds also provide a strong connection to the Eilimintachs, thus making Creators more powerful when casting amulas.

**Daramum** – means *grandmother*



**Darayouthen** – means *grandchildren / grandchild*

**Eilimintachs** – (el-im-in-tocks) Believed by the Anumens to be powerful beings with a connection to the elements who have blessed Anumen women with the ability to cast amulas.

**Grandburg** – Is the name for a large scale community comparable to a city.

**Ittums** – (it-tums) A green flower found on the leaves of an Ittum tree. When picked, the petals of the flower turn a bright yellow color.

**Iya** – means *hello* and *goodbye*

**Prinor Family** – The ruling family of Anuminis. The Adamants oversee the villages and grandburgs within each of the eight regions, and the Prinors oversee everyone, making the large scale decisions.

**Séara** – (say-era) A powerful Anumen who can sense amulas, communicate with Anumens in the Unforeseen World, and sometimes get glimpses or premonitions through visions or dreams.

**Sparren** – A small bird, found in the Red Umber Forest region.

**Transessent stone** – A powerful white stone mined in the Black Mountain region on Anuminis. Anumen women use the stones to amplify their amulas.

**The Unforeseen World** – The place where an Anumen's essence ascends to after their physical life is over, and where they live out their second life before final rest.

**Youthen** – An Anumen term for a young child in their preadolescent years.

**Youthling** – An Anumen term for a young child prior to their youthen years.