

Aurella

THE WITCH

How it All Began

“Hey, look—it’s Ella the Ugly,” Gia laughed.
 “Please, just leave me alone,” Aurella cried. She shoved her way through a crowd of eager twelve-year-olds all trying to squeeze through the same door at the same time. Having just been dismissed from class, everyone was impatient for escape but Aurella more so than most. If only she could fly, she might be able to beat the crowd. She imagined being a bird and zipping through the window unnoticed and up through the trees to freedom. She could even find pine cones and acorns to drop on that stupid Gia’s head.

Finally, Aurella slipped out between a couple of older kids from another class and took a deep breath. The smell of lush pine trees and dirt engulfed her as a gust of fresh, forest air whipped her hair around her face. A classmate shoved past Aurella, but she was already in her happy place, and she set off for home smiling.

If Aurella had been paying attention to her surroundings, she’d have realized that she was being followed. But she was too busy imagining what birds talk about when they’re chirping back and forth. Maybe they said things like, “Hey, nice branch. Love what you’ve done with the place.” Or maybe, “Man, let go of my worm.” Or maybe there were some that looked down on her thinking, “Hmm . . . I think my nest could use a few red hairs.”

Having made it only a few steps from the sad, three-room, log-cabin, the sound of giggling and running feet yanked Aurella from her daydreams. Three girls pushed past and Sasha, the nastiest one of all, stuck out her tongue.

“I heard that if you sing in front of a witch, she’ll trip and die.”

“I—I’m not a witch,” Aurella stammered. “Why does everyone keep saying that?”

The three girls all spoke over each other.

“Trip and die? Excellent.”

“Right?”

“Let’s try it.”

“I have the perfect song.”

Aurella tried to push her way past them, but the three girls shoved her back and started chanting:

*Aurella
Does smell-a
She is a witchy fella.*

“Stupid witch, why didn’t you trip and die?” Ivy complained.

“Leave me alone.” Aurella’s eyes darted every which way, hoping Mavic would show up and save her again. But he didn’t. Aurella sighed. “Just go away.”

“Ooh . . . I’m so scared,” Sasha laughed.

“I’m serious.”

“Oh, she’s serious guys; we’d better go,” Lea said. They all burst out laughing.

“If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Sasha challenged. “Call for your guard dog? That crazy orphan?”

“Don’t talk about him like that.”

The three just laughed and continued to shout insults.

“If you don’t stop, I’ll . . . I’ll cast a spell on you.” Aurella held her hands up and started muttering in gibberish.

The three girls ran away screaming. Lea tripped over her own feet and started crying. Sasha grabbed her hand and yanked her along.

Shaking with anger and embarrassment, Aurella sprinted straight to the forest behind the school to the only hiding place she knew. After running through the trees for a while, she found her secret pond and sat down with a sigh. The crystal-clear water sparkled in the sunshine, and little forest creatures chattered from the bushes.

She took off her shoes and dipped her feet in the pond. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, humming her own melody that quietly echoed through the forest. Her hair rippled gently in the breeze. She exhaled. It felt as though she’d been carrying a great, heavy load and just set it down for a moment of relief.

Aurella was a witch.

At least that’s what everyone in town said. It was just empty name-calling. No one really believed in magic anymore, but sometimes Aurella wondered if they were right.

Unexplainable things were always happening around her. Belongings went missing, people saw and heard strange things, and they often found themselves places without remembering how they got there. She also had this odd habit of muttering to herself, which apparently made it look like she was casting a spell.

Sasha especially claimed to have been a victim of her “witchcraft.” One time, she’d been picking on a younger girl, and Aurella told Sasha to hold her tongue. Sasha obeyed—literally. She was unable to unclamp her fingers from her tongue until class was over, which was unfortunate because by the end of class her desk was covered in a puddle of drool that had dripped down her arm. Aurella was sure she had imagined it, but the next day Sasha seemed oddly unwilling to open her mouth.

“It’s not like it was my fault,” Aurella muttered. “She’s such a baby. And so is Gia.”

Aurella tried to mentally decide who was the bigger baby, when an image popped into her head of Sasha and Gia’s heads on baby bodies, crying loudly, and she giggled to herself. Her laughter echoed in interesting waves across the pond, and Aurella tilted her head, listening.

She was in no rush to go back to the village, so she laid back on the long, tangled grass and gazed up into the sky, stroking the locket around her neck. The birds in the trees sang back and forth, as the grass swayed to the rhythm of the breeze. Before she knew it, Aurella had drifted off to sleep and was suddenly seized on by a nightmare.

Swords collided, windows broke, a man let out a guttural groan. A woman screamed, and another woman cackled with glee.

A little boy whispered into Aurella’s ear, “It’s okay. It’s alright. I’ve got you. Shh.”

She was startled by the feeling of being wrapped up in blankets and carried by little hands.

“You’ll be alright. Just please stop crying,” pleaded the boy. His little feet slapped against the ground as he ran through the streets. “Please, baby, they’re going to hear you . . .”

Aurella woke suddenly to something tickling her nose. Staring down at her with a feather in his hand and an amused smile was Mavic. Aurella wondered why people thought they were related because they looked nothing alike. He was tall and muscular with dark brown hair, and she was a tiny ginger girl. And it wasn’t as though they lived together. While her delightfully quirky parents had raised Aurella, Mavic had grown up in an orphanage.

“Get that out of my face,” Aurella grumbled, trying to grab the feather from his hands.

Mavic chuckled. He had the most inappropriate laugh. A high, ridiculous giggle. You’d never guess that a boy who looked as intimidating as Mavic could produce such a sound.

“Give it to me.” Aurella laughed, climbing onto Mavic’s back, reaching for the feather.

“I don’t have it anymore; I dropped it,” he lied.

“Uh-huh, and I’m the queen of Dovice.”

Aurella slid off his back and stood before him. She raised an eyebrow and folded her arms.

“Honest.” Mavic held out his empty hands with an innocent expression. Then suddenly he was tickling her ear with the feather again.

“Ugh. How do you do that?” Aurella snatched the feather from his hand and threw it into the pond.

“Fall asleep by the pond again, elf?” he teased.

Aurella pouted. “Don’t call me that.”

“Fine, fine . . . but your mom wanted me to tell you it’s time for dinner. Also, you snore when you sleep.”

“I do not snore. Why are you so annoying?”

“That’s my job,” Mavic grinned. “The king of Dovice summoned me to Hemloc and personally asked if I would take on myself the task of annoying Aurella of Lenic all her days. I would have pleaded for a nobler calling, but it’s such an easy job I figured I’d take it.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Aurella rolled her eyes and began marching back toward the village. Mavic caught up to her in three easy strides.

“So how was school?” he asked.

“The same,” she said morosely.

Mavic scowled. “I wish you’d tell me who is calling you names.”

“It’s not one specific person; it’s everyone.”

“I doubt it’s everyone, Ella.”

“They all talk about me behind my back. I’m not making it up. You just don’t get it because *you* don’t go to school anymore.”

Aurella immediately felt bad for saying it. She knew it was a sore subject. “Sorry.”
“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

Though Mavic was one of the most intelligent people Aurella had ever met, he’d only received about five years of schooling before the orphanage made him drop out. Apparently, if a child was still living there by the time they were ten, they had to start working for the orphanage to pay for their services. So Mavic was a teenager with already five years of crummy work experience.

“How was your day?” Aurella asked, trying to change the subject.

“It was fabulous. I really love shoveling cow manure. Really. It teaches me to appreciate the little things, like breathable air.”

Aurella laughed.

“Really. It’s the best—especially the way it makes me smell. Here, want a hug?” Mavic held out his arms, grinning evilly.

“No, gross.” Aurella giggled, running away. “You stink.”

“If by stink you mean that I smell like grass that’s spent some time inside of a large animal’s intestines and came out it’s behind, then yeah, I’d have to agree.”

“You’re so weird.”

“Oh, little elf,” Mavic sighed dramatically. “You’ll understand the glory of poop when you’re older.” He patronizingly patted her head.

“Don’t.” She pushed his hand away. “I’m only three years younger than you, you know. I hate it when you treat me like a little kid.”

Mavic looked down at her and raised an eyebrow. “Well, I hate to break it to you, elf, but you are a kid. And you’re tiny. Therefore, little kid.”

Aurella scowled at him and kept walking. The town became clearer as they made their way to the edge of the forest and the sounds of the village fought through the trees. She heard the *clippity-clop* of hooves before reaching the road. A rickety, horse-drawn coach creaked by, with a trailer spilling with barrels of hay. The trailer of hay bumped the apple stand, sending the apples rolling everywhere, giving a small boy the perfect opportunity to slip one into his pocket. An old man on the corner shouted at the boy before the same clumsy trailer splashed a puddle of water in his face. His eyebrows and beard dripped with muddy water, and the apple thief laughed and pointed at him.

“People of Lenic are a cheery people,” Mavic observed.

“Oh, yeah. Lenicians. People love us,” Aurella laughed.

Aurella had just started to cross the street when an enforcement officer carelessly rounded the corner and almost ran her over with his horse.

“Watch it, Ella!” Mavic said, pulling her out of the way.

“I’ve got it. I’ve got it,” Aurella grumbled, pulling her arm out of his hand.

The enforcement officer lifted his obsidian helmet off his head to better glare at her as he strode by. His rich, black, shiny armor and chain mail jingled and clanked as he urged his proud horse forward. He tucked his precious helmet in the crook of his elbow, while the other hand held the reins.

“Those dumb clankers,” Mavic scowled.

“They’re called enforcement officers, Mavic,” Aurella corrected in a mocking tone.

“Hey, they asked for the nickname. Everyone knows a real man doesn’t need armor—especially not loud armor that announces to the entire world where you are. Can you imagine one of those guys trying to make a sneak attack?”

He pretended to loudly sneak behind a tree while stomping his feet and making clanking metal noises with his mouth.

“I wonder where Mavic could be?” Aurella laughed.

“Well, anyway,” he said, rejoining her on the side of the road, “as much as I’ve loved talking with you about the wonders of cow crap and rescuing you from clankers, I’d better get back. It’s almost dark.”

Despite his age, the orphanage still punished him if he wasn’t back by sundown.

“Yeah, okay,” Aurella sighed.

“You alright?”

“I’m fine.” She smiled half-heartedly.

Mavic studied her expression. He looked about to say something but held his tongue. (Figuratively, not literally.) He glanced at the setting sun, gave her a grim smile, and jogged back to the orphanage.

Aurella watched as he hustled back to make his curfew. Then she realized that she was standing alone in the middle of the street. She may as well have a sign above her head saying, *Attention everyone: Mavic’s gone. Bully me while you still can.*

“Oh, crap,” she squealed and sprinted home as fast as her legs could carry her.