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### Don't Challenge Aurella

Aurella was solemnly packing her clothes when Mavic appeared in her window, startling her. She screamed and dropped a boot and Mavic chuckled.

"You idiot," Aurella said when she opened the window. "You nearly gave me a heart-attack."

"Sorry," he grinned.

"What do you want? I'm packing."

"Just seeing what kinda stuff you're packing." Mavic peered in at her clothes laying out on her bed. Aurella tried to surreptitiously cover her underwear with the boot she had dropped. "I'm having the strange problem of not having enough room for everything."

"What have you already packed?"

"Not a lot . . . I'll show you." He started walking away and Aurella rolled her eyes and left the house to follow him. When she arrived in his room she raised her eyebrows. Mavic had taken out almost all of his belongings and put them on his bed.

"What are you trying to do? Pack everything you own?" Aurella snorted.

"Isn't that what packing is?" Mavic asked. His expression was so innocent, Aurella refrained from laughing aloud. It was obvious what the problem was. Mavic wasn't used to having so much. When he'd left the orphanage three years ago, he took all that he had, which easily fit into a single backpack. Then when they left Rashtica last year, he didn't even get to pack, because they had to leave immediately without warning. And here he was with the average teenager's amount of clothes and junk strewn across his room and there was no way he could pack it all up like he had in the past.

Aurella sat on his bed and picked up his pack. "Packing is only taking the bare minimum of what you need. You don't take *all* of your clothes, and you don't take *all* of your stuff. And I'm sorry, but you can't take all eighteen of your birthday presents."

Last month, Mavic had had his first real birthday with his family, and they'd gotten him eighteen presents, one for every birthday they'd missed. Technically they could have gotten away with just seventeen presents, since Mavic did spend his first birthday with his mom and dad, but they must have thought, "Well, what's one more present?" They could afford it. With Ric being the only magical healer in the country, Mavic's family was doing very well financially.

Aurella spent the afternoon helping Mavic pack before returning to her own house and doing the same, only to find that her mom had already done it for her. No doubt Joelle wanted to mother Aurella as much as she could before she left home again.

They left the following morning.



Aurella felt a large blanket flop over her head and nearly knock her off her seat. She smiled and shook her head as she pulled the blanket around her. It was just like Mavic to do something sweet in the most annoying way possible.

“Thanks,” she said.

Mavic shrugged. “You have like no fat on you to keep you warm, so I thought I’d give you some help.”

The blanket had a very strong sea-salt smell, just like everything else aboard the *Invisible Serpent*. They had been sailing for five days and were expected to reach their destination tomorrow. Aurella smiled as the sun kissed the horizon, marking the end of another day. The smooth waves that rippled across the ocean sparkled with the fading, orange light, reflecting the pink and purple clouds in the sky. Sailing was not Aurella’s favorite thing, but she had to admit that sunsets over the ocean were the most beautiful she had ever seen.

Most of the journey had been rather tedious. The last time she’d been aboard a ship, she’d been unconscious for most of the time, so she had little experience sailing for this long. There was little that she could do to help out either. The men insisted on doing all of the hard labor, leaving Aurella with nothing to do but fix the food, which Aurella found annoying and sexist, but also necessary as everyone but Roderic had proven themselves completely useless in the kitchen.

Roderic came up and stood behind Aurella. “A blanket? Don’t tell me you’re getting sleepy. I was looking forward to another sparring session with the famous sorceress.”

Aurella grinned. Quick as lightning she reached behind herself, caught hold of Roderic’s sword in its holster and spun around, standing on her bench with the sword pointed at his chest. Roderic, however, had anticipated her move and parried just in time to cross her blade. Aurella hopped off her bench and attacked with all her might. It wasn’t long before Aurella was panting and sweating from a very long swordfight with a trained knight who was obviously more practiced and skilled than she was. She loved it. Everyone else treated Aurella in one of two ways: either she was a delicate little girl who needed protecting, or a terrifying sorceress. This meant they were either too afraid *for* her, or too afraid *of* her, to pose any kind of challenge. Ric treated her like an equal. He may have been many years her senior, but they shared a bond of knighthood that few could understand. He also wasn’t afraid to push her.

Soon the sun had set and Aurella found herself bested once more as Roderic’s sword point hovered before her neck. Aurella held up her hands in surrender.

“Very good, Aurella,” nodded Roderic. “You held out much longer than yesterday.”

“I still haven’t beat you,” she smiled wryly.

“Well . . . I am rather good,” Roderic admitted with a small smile.

Aurella placed her sword back in its scabbard. It had been her own sword she'd stolen off Roderic. They had been practicing that move, so Roderic had put her sword in his holster so she could practice with it once she snatched it off him.

Roderic turned around. "Mavic, are you ready for your turn?"

Mavic raised an eyebrow. "After that show?"

"Get your sword. Let's see what you can do."

This was new. The nightly sparring sessions had actually been on Aurella's insistence. She had little else to occupy her time, and she genuinely liked it. Each night Mavic had simply watched admiringly as she and Roderic practiced until Aurella eventually lost. Aurella knew Mavic wasn't keen on swordplay, preferring his own fists as a weapon. Yet, he had definitely improved over the months, especially since inheriting a sword of his own.

Mavic shrugged. He walked back to his cabin and came back out onto the deck, his impressive broadsword gripped at the hilt by both hands. "We're gonna pretend I'm amazing at this," he said, slowly approaching the master.

"You're not bad. Don't sell yourself short, king-killer."

Mavic rolled his eyes. "That was with fire, not a sword."

"You wouldn't have gotten close enough without having first fought your way through." Roderic advanced and made the first offensive move, which Mavic blocked just in time. Roderic came around for another jab, which Mavic parried a little faster. After about four hits to his sword, Mavic made his first offensive move. Roderic blocked it easily. They practiced until the moon was high in the sky, but Mavic continued to be beaten rather quickly, even though Aurella could tell that Roderic was going easy on him.

Oner eventually emerged from his cabin to watch. He was a quiet man who often kept to himself, and since there was no need to guard Aurella aboard the ship, he often remained in his own cabin. During one of Mavic's breaks, Oner beckoned Mavic to him and whispered something in his ear. Mavic grinned and returned to Roderic.

When they resumed their practice, Roderic stuck out and Mavic parried. Their blades were crossed and Mavic shoved as much weight into his blade as he could, so that their swords were pushed upward and Mavic and Roderic drew nearer. Then, suddenly, Mavic's arms seemed to give out. His sword gave way, and he leaned to the right, causing Roderic to stumble at the sudden release of weight. But before Mavic's sword hit the ground, he swung his body around, drawing the sword in an arc around his body until it was posed before Roderic's neck, dangerously close to removing his head. Roderic blinked in surprised and Mavic shouted and cheered like a little boy.

"YES! I *beat* you! I'm the best! Not even Aurella's done that! WOO HOO!" He did a ridiculous little jig in celebration.

Roderic raised an eyebrow. "I believe the credit goes to Oner on that one."

"No way! I'm the one that did it!" grinned Mavic.

Aurella frowned. "But . . . I'm better than you."

"Not anymore!" Mavic grinned evilly and held up his sword. "Or do you want to challenge me?"

Aurella scowled and snatched up her sword. She marched toward Mavic and was on him in a matter of seconds, spinning and slashing and blocking. Her hair flew out behind her as she danced around his blade. Mavic, overwhelmed by her sudden attack, could barely lift his sword in time to defend himself. Then suddenly his sword was on the ground and Aurella had her sword pointed at Mavic's neck, just shy of his Adam's apple, which bobbed up and down as he swallowed nervously. He held his hands up. "Okay, alright, Ella! You're the best. Please don't kill me."

Aurella grinned. "That's what I thought."

## The Proposal

Aurella and Mavic were laying on the couch when Mavic said, "Should we get married?"

Aurella shrugged. "Probably."

"Cool." Mavic stood up and tossed a ring at her. "I gotta pee."

Aurella smiled as she put the ring on her finger.

Mavic smiled as he peed.

## Telling the Parents

"This is so good," Mavic said, stuffing his face with Joelle's chicken and dumplings. Joelle smiled proudly. "We should definitely have this stuff at our wedding."

"Yeah, probably," Aurella said, wiping her mouth.

Joelle's eyes bugged out and she froze. Then she exploded. "*Wedding?* Did you say the word '*wedding?*'"

"Oh yeah," Mavic said. "Ella and I are getting married."

"What! When was this decided?"

Aurella and Mavic spoke at the same time.

"A few weeks ago."

"A few years ago."

They looked at each other and smiled.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Joelle sputtered. "This isn't how these things go. You're supposed to ask the father for her hand. Did you ask him?" She turned to Tarrin. "She he ask you?"

Tarrin smiled and shook his head.

“Oh yeah,” Mavic said. “Is it cool that I marry her?” He gestured toward Aurella with his fork on its way to his mouth.

Tarrin grinned. “Fine with me.”

“Have you told your parents yet?” Joelle asked Mavic.

Mavic shrugged. “Not exactly.”

Joelle put her face in her hands.

“Mom, what’s the big deal?” Aurella asked.

“This is big news!”

Mavic frowned at her reaction. “I didn’t really think there was much to tell. I mean, I thought it was obvious.”

“It was pretty obvious,” Tarrin said.

Aurella smiled at her mother’s flustered reaction. Then leaned in toward Mavic and said, “Don’t tell her how you proposed.”

He chuckled, put his arm around her, and kissed her cheek.

Aurella smiled and grimaced as she wiped soup from her face. “Gross.”