



The Price of a Crown

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Sage sat in the corner of a dimly lit tavern, turning a heavy golden medallion in her scarred hands. A mysterious client had just offered an astronomical sum for the head of Princess Aurelia, the realm's youngest royal. No reason was given, but the sheer weight of the gold was enough to make the seasoned hunter pack her silver blades and ride out into the rainy night.



Her journey led her through the Whispering Woods, a dense forest choked with ancient fog and lethal, lurking beasts. Sage tracked the princess's trail with practiced ease, noticing the erratic, panicked footprints left behind in the mud. Aurelia wasn't traveling with a royal escort; she was running for her life from something else entirely.



Sage found her target huddled beneath the roots of a massive, glowing willow tree, shivering in a torn velvet cloak. Princess Aurelia looked up with wide, tear-streaked eyes, holding nothing but a shattered family heirloom for defense. Instead of a pampered royal, Sage saw only a terrified girl caught in a game she didn't understand.



Before Sage could draw her blade, a monstrous pack of shadow-hounds burst from the thicket, their red eyes locked on the princess. Instantly shifting from hunter to protector, Sage drew her twin swords and stood between the beasts and the royal heir. The forest erupted into flashes of steel and dark magic as Sage fought off the supernatural predators.



As the last monster dissolved into smoke, Sage demanded answers from the trembling princess. Aurelia confessed that she had discovered a forbidden chamber beneath the castle, uncovering a dark ritual her own father was planning. She didn't know why a bounty was on her head, only that her escape threatened a massive royal conspiracy.



Looking at the innocent princess, Sage realized the gold she had been promised was drenched in corrupt blood. She threw her employer's medallion into the dirt, deciding that some lines were never meant to be crossed. She offered her hand to Aurelia, promising to escort her safely across the border rather than collect the deadly prize.



Their trek across the rugged Cragged Mountains was grueling, forcing the pampered princess to learn the harsh realities of survival. Sage taught Aurelia how to build silent fires and navigate by the stars, watching the girl's fear gradually transform into quiet resilience. An unlikely bond forged between the hardened mercenary and the exiled royalty.



Near the border, they were ambushed at a ruined stone bridge by a group of ruthless rival bounty hunters sent to finish the job. Sage fought valiantly but found herself outnumbered, pinned down by the mercenaries' relentless assault. Seeing her protector in danger, Aurelia used the magic she had secretly inherited, shattering the stone bridge to cut off the attackers.



With the threat neutralized, they finally reached the mist-shrouded sanctuary of the elven borderlands, safe from the king's reach. Aurelia looked out over the new dawn, no longer a helpless fugitive, but a young woman ready to reclaim her destiny. She thanked the hunter who had been sent to kill her, but ended up saving her soul.



Sage turned her horse back toward the kingdom, her pockets light but her conscience clear for the first time in years. The world was still a dark and dangerous place, but she rode forward knowing that some bounties are worth breaking. A new chapter had begun, and the hunter had finally found a cause worth fighting for.