The Coup of Aleston

                   *Elizabeth Hammilton*

Chapter 1

Prince Zephyr, a tall young man with sharp features and some twenty odd years to his credit, tugged his belt on and sheathed his sword. Sighing, he looked at himself in the mirror, his armor glinting from the bright morning sun. Nagging little voices tore at him like arrows, ripping at his heart until he felt he couldn't bear it any longer.

*Weak. Useless. Insignificant. That's what you are, you foolish boy!*

A knock on the door made him jump, and he shook his head as if to somehow shake the voices out.

“Enter!” he called.

A guard clad in armor much like his own opened the door and bowed. “The King is ready for you, my Prince.”

“Ah, but am I ready for him?” Zephyr chuckled. The guard didn't smile. Zephyr cleared his throat and nodded. “Erm, very well. Lead the way then.”

The guard turned on his heel, and Zephyr followed. His face the perfect mask of a composed and confident prince, no one could have guessed that his heart was beating wildly in his chest. For more than anything else in the world, Zephyr feared his father.

As he stood in front of two closed doors to the throne room, he clasped his hands behind his back and plastered on a polite smile. The doors opened, and he walked in. His iron boots clanged on the marble floor as he approached.

His father sat atop a shimmering throne and glowered down at him with an unmasked scowl. Zephyr bowed low at the waist.

“You wished to see me, father?” he said without rising.

“Yes. I've *finally* heard of this attempted assassination on your life.”

*Yes, someone obviously doesn't like the way you handle your kingdom,* Zephyr thought with amusement.

He rose and straightened. “A minor incident, Father. It's been taken care of.”

“Why didn't you tell me, boy?”

“You are often busy, ” the prince said nervously. ”I thought it best not to disturb you.”

“You thought wrong,” the King growled, and Zephyr couldn't hold back a wince. “I've called for General Ocran to gather our most masterful soldiers. One of them will be chosen as your bodyguard and will remain at your side at *all* times.” His tone was dangerous. Zephyr knew now was not the time to defend what little freedom he had left.

He dipped his head. “As you wish, Father.”

“You're dismissed.”

Zephyr began to turn then stopped, his heart pounding. “If I may, I have a request.”

The king’s eyes narrowed. ”Oh? And what is that?”

Zephyr forced himself to look into his father’s eyes boldly. “That I am allowed to choose my own bodyguard. Without interference.”

“Ha! You think yourself a man, do you? Want to make your own decisions? Fine then. What's it to me? I'll *indulge* you this once.”

His words cut deep into Zephyr’s heart, and with fear the young man realized tears were welling in his eyes. He quickly bowed to hide them. “Thank you, Highness. I'll take my leave.”

“Indeed,” the King muttered as Zephyr left.

The wounded prince quickly exited and attempted to keep his pace normal as he retreated to his room. Upon his arrival, he asked the guards that he not be disturbed and shut the doors swiftly behind him.

Leaning heavily against his door he let the tears flow. Despite all he had been taught of how disgraceful it was to cry, he allowed the salty drops to slide down his face unhindered. He saw no harm in it since after this, his last day of freedom, he would never be alone again.

After some minutes he regained his composure and forced himself off the door and onto his own feet again. Uncomfortable in his armor, he adjusted it to try and alleviate the stiff pain.

“Chin up, Zephyr,” he whispered to himself. “Maybe one day things will be different.”

He straightened his armor and took comfort in the fact that he could at least choose whom was to be stuck with. A knock sounded on his door. Zephyr quickly straightened and called for the person on the other side to enter.

The door opened, revealing General Ocran who bowed shortly at the waist. “The prospects are prepared and ready for you, Highness.”

“Very well, General. Proceed. Do you find yourself satisfied with the prospects?”

“Very much so,” the General said as he led Zephyr to the outer courtyard. “Especially one of them. I believe he would make the most excellent bodyguard out of any of them by far.”

“Hmmm,” Zephyr said, finding it odd that the man was so enthusiastic about something that clearly shouldn't excite him, especially seeing as how he and the General had certainly had their differences in the past. “Well, we'll see.”

As they walked to the training yard Zephyr began to become irritable as his thoughts shifted glumly to how miserable he'd be with a bodyguard at his arm every moment of every day, not to mention how uncomfortable it would be to have someone serve him in such an extravagant manner when he obviously could protect himself.

But as they entered the courtyard, Zephyr put on a pleasant smile. If not for the act then for the poor soldiers who had worked hard to earn such a high position. For some of them, it was everything they had dreamed of. It helped that bodyguards gained a position almost equal to that of one of the Royal Family and were held in high respect.

Prince Zephyr clasped his hands behind his back and surveyed the group of soldiers that had been trained for him. His father’s general followed close behind and watched his face intently as he surveyed the row of men and women.

“Well, General Ocran? Who is this unmatched soldier who's caught your eye?”

The general gestured with his hand. “Macor, step forward.”