

# AEQUUS

A ROYAL PROTECTOR ACADEMY NOVEL



FROM BEST SELLING AUTHOR

RANDI COOLEY WILSON

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A ROYAL PROTECTOR ACADEMY NOVEL

BOOK TWO

**RANDI COOLEY WILSON**

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ALSO BY RANDI COOLEY WILSON

THE ROYAL PROTECTOR ACADEMY NOVELS

VERNAL

AEQUUS

NOX

THE REVELATION SERIES

REVELATION

RESTRAINT

REDEMPTION

REVOLUTION

RESTORATION

THE DARK SOUL SERIES

STOLAS

VASSAGO

LEVIATHAN



## CHAPTER 1

❧ SERENA ❧

The dark tempest lurks on the horizon, casting an ominous shadow over the cloud-filled sky. Heavy gusts slice through the graying atmosphere in quick, angry bursts.

With each surge of air, the ache in my chest recedes, allowing me to breathe. To feel. To exist.

For me, the wind is the epitome of strength and power, and in an odd way, I've always envied the currents because they move freely and can't be captured—or tamed.

As I'm an elemental gargoyle, air nourishes my spirit and strengthens my supernatural gifts; the currents are essential to my well-being, allowing the gargoyle vitality to flow freely within my royal protector blood. It is a strong reminder that there is more to our worlds than what we see.

The dry riverbank beneath my feet is a stark contrast to the lush forest that surrounds me. My gaze roams over the Killarney National Park and slides up Torc Mountain, focusing on the peak of the waterfall. A shudder runs through me at the thought of the entrance to the woodland realm hidden behind the cascading liquid.

Where *he* is.

Mere steps from me, but worlds away.

With a quiet growl, I shove thoughts of *him* away to focus on my surroundings and the task at hand.

I ease back into a comfortable position and calm my breathing while manipulating the wind's speed. I strain to move the currents until I'm exhausted.

I'm hoping the directional changes will bring the Irish mist and end the drought.

The way the air floats between the clouds and trees determines if a storm will appear. And right now, more than anything, I need the rainfall.

The howling wind calms into a soft sigh as I drop my hands from exhaustion and everything around me stills.

My eyes float across the unmoving land. It still amazes me that with a simple flick of my wrist, I hold the power to create calm and peace or chaos and destruction.

I miss the days when the skies naturally became dark and the raindrops fell lazily from the sky in their gentle dance. Three months. My heart stutters at the thought.

It hasn't rained in three months—not since Tristan left.  
Tristan Gallagher.

My gargoyle protector.

And prince of the woodland realm.

When Tristan returned to his court, not only did he take my heart, but he also took the rainfall. And in its place, the angry winds arose both in nature and in my core.

As time stands still, the ache in my chest spreads. I savor the shadow of darkness that has fallen across the land.

A dark reminder of the sadness and emptiness I feel.

It was only a few months ago that, like the wind, Tristan blew into my life, bringing the storm with him and taking it when he went away, leaving me with the quiet of the curling air, devoid of the tiny drops of water.

I hate the calm. I used to love it, but now, it's too still.  
The lack of chaos provides time to think.

To remember.

To allow the hurt to seep in.

Once it had been second nature to savor moments of peace like this. Once I dreamed of being someone else—until I knew Tristan existed. Then all I dreamed of was a day when it was just me and him.

I release a throaty laugh, because that's not likely to happen anytime soon—or ever—considering he is betrothed to another: Freya, the princess of the water realm.

Even though Tristan is half-gargoyle, he was raised by his mother, Queen Ophelia, in her kingdom, the woodland realm. Months ago, Tristan killed a royal protector, an enemy who had infiltrated the woodland army and planned to murder the queen.

Though he acted in the name of protection, he spilt gargoyle blood and almost started a war between our worlds. The violation could not go unpunished by my clan, the London clan of gargoyles. The royal family.

As a favor to his old friend—and Tristan's estranged father—Gage Gallagher, my uncle Asher, king of our race, assigned Tristan to protect me, which he begrudgingly agreed to, avoiding his sentence of stone petrification.

While it may seem cruel, Tristan's severe punishment was merited in our world. Instead, he was ordered to protect me against a possible attack by the Diablo Fairies—a legion of ancient warriors who practice black magic.

They're a new breed of supernatural creatures, created to end my existence by the king of the Nine Hells. After the death of his mate, Lady Finella, the demon Asmodeus declared revenge on my family and the entire protector

race, making it clear that I'm a primary target. As such, my family felt it vital to add another level of protection to my royal guard.

Enter Tristan Gallagher.

If Asmodeus and the Diablo Fairies succeed it leaves the protector race open to attack, ending our existence—and the future of the human realm.

The Diablo Fairy army has backed off—for now.

Our victory was short-lived because Tristan is also half-satyr and next in line to the throne of the woodland realm.

For centuries, the woodland and water realms have been teetering on the brink of war. It's a power struggle between the two supernatural worlds—one that has escalated over the years.

To solidify their alliance, Tristan was promised in marriage to Freya, daughter of Oren, emperor of the water realm. He doesn't love her, but such is the cruelty of the supernatural world.

Soon after beating Kupuva and her Diablo Fairy army, Tristan left his post as my protector and returned to his realm to fulfill his oath and secure peace for his kingdom and kin.

I look up at the clouds and, with a quick, angry flick of my wrist, attempt to coerce water to fall from the sky.

Manipulating the wind releases the storm that stirs within me, but the rain . . . the rain stabilizes me.

Calms me.

Since Tristan left, it hasn't rained. Not one day.

"If you keep forcing the elements to bend at your will, out of anger, you'll create a nightmare of a shitstorm."

I inhale, not recalling the last time I heard that voice.



“Besides, you will fail. The water realm is the reason for the lack of rain,” he adds. “It’s Oren’s way of throwing his power around the supernatural worlds.”

As my anxiety picks up, so does the wind. It hisses through the trees as Zander approaches me from behind.

Zander, Tristan’s half-brother and best friend.

I peer at him over my shoulder with a vacant glare.

His strides are measured as he approaches and steps next to me. Nervously, he brushes raven strands of hair away from his sympathetic eyes. When I meet his gaze, it causes me to release my hold on the elements, and the chaos I’ve created around us falls silent and the forest stills.

“Serena,” he tips his chin out of respect.

My lips twitch. “Zander.”

The nymph lowers his voice. “The strong winds you keep conjuring have spilt over into the woodland realm. The trees are bending painfully and the leaves are trembling in fear as if something dark is on the horizon.”

My response is a one-shouldered shrug. “Maybe it is.”

Zander watches me with his stormy jade eyes and inky rock-star hair. He looks nothing like his brother.

Tristan’s hair is a warm caramel color and it’s longer on the top and messily styled. The flecks of gold in his serious, cognac gaze are deep, allowing you to become lost in them.

Tristan looks like the calm before the storm, whereas Zander looks like the darkness that will overtake you.

Appearances can be deceiving though, when personalities come into play. Zander is lively, warm, and inviting. Like a blanket. Tristan is full of darkness, a haunted coolness, and an impassive indifference.

Except with me.

“This upheaval wouldn’t have anything to do with my brother’s upcoming nuptials to a certain nymph princess?”

At his words, rage consumes me, and the winds lift again, whipping around us.

The reality of my situation hit me full force ten seconds after Tristan walked out of my life. Since then, the gloomy days match my dark mood.

Male protectors should come with a warning label.

They aren’t good for the heart.

Period.

The End.

“I guess that would be definite yes,” Zander teases.

My attention snaps to his face as thunder rolls in and lightning strikes over the lake multiple times.

Zander’s attention shifts to the sky. “You need to get past this, champ. He needs to focus on his duties and oaths.”

I scowl.

“You should know, whenever the clouds roll into the realm, he frowns, knowing it’s you hurting,” he continues.

When he came into my life, I was given a taste of freedom. Something I’d never had before. Yet, that free will wasn’t unrestricted; it came at a price—the loss of my heart.

In order for Tristan to safeguard me, his protector mark was infused with my blood. It’s the only way a gargoyle can truly protect a charge. Once it’s broken or begins to weaken, the blood-bonded gargoyles become short-tempered and sullen.

I’ve been told that with time, the hostility will fade.

Just like my memories of Tristan.

I shiver, feeling lonely and rejected.

“The bond we share doesn’t leave me a choice,” I snap.

Zander doesn’t get angry at me for my short temper.

Instead, his demeanor becomes softer, understanding.

"You do have a choice," he pacifies.

Elemental chaos reigns around us with my heightened emotional state. "Wrong," I state sharply. "If I had a choice, I would have chosen Tristan and he would have chosen me."

Zander swears under his breath and pinches the bridge of his nose. My gaze hones in on the dark circles that frame his eyes, and I'm suddenly aware of how drawn he appears.

His lips pull into a tight smile. "You think he likes this, Serena? Do you think Tristan isn't hurting in the same way you are? My brother is miserable. If you thought he was dark and broody before his time with you, he's worse now. Each time the lightning strikes our realm, a sharp pain literally rolls through him," he forces a bark-laugh. "It's true. He rubs at his heart—daily—at an ache that has settled there, a longing," he pauses and calms. "For *you*."

My words catch in my throat and my shoulders fall in defeat. I know Tristan feels this too. How can he not?

Maybe I should move on.

At the thought, the small mark behind my ear comes to life, reminding me it's there. I lift my hand and rub at it, trying to soothe the sudden burn.

Zander's ink-clouded focus narrows in on the motion.

"Have you told him yet?" he asks.

"About what?" I feign ignorance.

Rolling his eyes, Zander folds his arms across his muscular chest. "The mark. Behind your ear, Serena."

I look away. "Why would he care about a freckle?"

"A freckle in the shape of his insignia," he counters.

Tristan wears the Sun of Vergina symbol on a necklace.

It marks him within the supernatural world as nymph royalty. Oddly, the same mark is branded on my skin.

Sighing, I shake my head, suddenly losing the ability to argue anymore. Instead, I swallow the dryness in my throat.

"I have no idea why it's there, Zander. Until I do, Tristan doesn't need to know. Not now anyway—with everything else he's dealing with," I whisper.

Zander shakes his head in disagreement. "There is a deeper meaning behind it. It isn't just a coincidence."

He's right. Before Tristan left, he handed me a note, which read: *The Sun of Vergina is our cessation.*

The words contain a hidden meaning that I can't decipher. I've been going over and over them again in my mind, trying to figure out their importance. Exactly, how, or what, the insignia will stop or end, I have no idea.

"Do not tell him, Zander," I demand. "Until I understand it, Tristan doesn't need to be bothered with it."

"He'll be pissed off that you withheld this from him."

"I'm not afraid of Tristan's wrath," I mumble, kicking and staring at the dry gravel under my feet. "I fear nothing."

He releases a heavy sigh. "You're too stubborn for your own good. Fear is not a sign of weakness, but of strength."

Slowly, I raise my head and lock eyes with Zander.

"Why are you even here?" I snap.

"Freya's father has moved up the date again."

I try unsuccessfully to hide my surprise at this news.

"I wanted to let you know in person before you heard about it another way. I thought—well, you should know."

"Why?"

He smiles sheepishly and waves toward the winds twisting the landscape. "Given how you took the news the last time, I thought perhaps I could convince you to harness your anger and fear into a less *elemental* outlet."

I school my features, pretending not to have heard him.

“Serena?” Zander questions at my quiet state.

“I meant, why has Oren moved the ceremony up, *again?*”

He shrugs. “I assume it has to do with Tristan’s recent visit to the earth realm. Freya has her father’s ear and I’m sure she has mentioned my brother’s newfound fondness for you, which most likely made him afraid that Tristan would change his mind. As you are aware, *Your Highness*, this agreement binds the two most powerful lands across all realms. It doesn’t take a genius to smell Oren’s desperation and desire to solidify that partnership. And quickly.”

I glance from the good-looking nymph to the waterfall cascading gently behind him, and then back to him again.

The tightness in my chest constricts and I’m forced to push out a sharp breath. Something about this seems off.

“I think the real question is why the desperation? Why does Oren seek the backing of the woodland realm with such furiousness that he’s willing to force nuptials for land he will never govern?” I ask. “It’s as if he’s afraid, or knows something is about to happen to threaten the realms.”

His face pinches. “Perhaps he plans to rule both.”

“That’s impossible. The only way Oren could rule both realms is if Queen Ophelia and Tristan—” My brows rise. “You don’t think he’s planning to kill them?”

Zander shakes his head. “Oren is too dumb for that. Even so, he won’t be able to control my brother once Tristan reigns. No one can,” he adds with pride. He pauses, looking around uncomfortably before dropping his voice. “Perhaps Oren is hoping Freya and Tristan will produce an heir right away, one that he eventually *can* control?”

I swallow the bile in my throat at Zander’s words.

"Then he'd be out of luck. Tristan would never—I mean . . . he wouldn't let a—*his* child, be controlled by Oren. Or anyone else," I bark out. "As his best friend, you know this."

"Maybe it's truly as simple as Oren fearing Tristan will change his mind, given his feelings for you," he reasons.

"Ophelia and Oren signed the decrees when Tristan and Freya were a day old. Royalty cannot break marriage decrees; their agreement is binding. Not to mention Oren pushed the first date up *before* Tristan was assigned to me."

"True."

"And even if they were to be married tomorrow, the queen has a long reign in front of her. Other than solidifying their alliance, rushing their marriage makes no sense."

"Unless," Zander whispers.

"Unless, what?"

"What if Ophelia and Oren are truly working together, as a united front? Think about it, the two most powerful supernatural realms in existence coming together, seeming to be enemies, yet they're working behind the scenes to secure even more influence? Total realm domination."

I stare at Zander because his theory is plausible.

"It would also explain why the queen is holding Tristan to his promise, knowing he has feelings for you," he adds.

His words seep in, before I speak in a hushed tone.

"Zander, what you are describing is marital coercion, with the attempt to undermine the line of succession."

"Yes. I am speaking of high treason," he confirms.

"Holy shit," I blow out on a sharp exhale.

"Deceitfulness in any form within our world is a clear show of disloyalty—even if committed by the sitting queen and emperor."

I scoff. “If your theory is true, as the future heir to the *protector* throne, I can’t intercede in matters of supernatural sovereignty unless directly attacked. Regardless of my feelings for Tristan. If I step in, my own actions could be looked upon as threatening the security of the two largest and most powerful immortal realms. These accusations could very well trigger a war—and get me killed.”

His gaze narrows. “As the gargoyle princess, you can arbitrate without your uncle Asher’s approval if human souls are in danger, or a protector’s existence is threatened.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, if they are plotting realm dominance that will include the earth dimension, which places humans in danger. It is your duty to protect them. Not to mention, Tristan is half gargoyle and therefore your subject. It is within your rights to also safeguard him,” he points out.

“Notwithstanding, we have no evidence or facts to support the conclusion that the queen and emperor are conducting high treason,” I retort. “It’s a theory we *just* came up with ten seconds ago.”

Zander’s expression turns sheepish as he watches me.

My eyes narrow. “Wait, did you really come here just to share news of the change in date, or was it to convince me he’s in danger, hoping that I’d charge in and protect him?”

I stiffen as the satyr prowls toward me, ignoring my accusations. “We’ll find the evidence, together.”

I stare into his unyielding gaze, trying to decide if his conspiracy theory has merit. Zander has no reason to lie.

“Are you trying to start a war? She’s your stepmother.”

“And he’s my brother. You love him. And he loves you. So stop letting fate and titles decide both of your futures.”

Without a word, I continue to hold his fierce stare.

“Isn’t he worth starting a war for, Serena?” he asks.

My anger vanishes, as does the storm around us.

Silence settles between us, and over the land.

It’s as if the universe is waiting for my answer.

Do I want to start a war to protect Tristan?

I look over Zander’s face for a few moments before coming to the realization that if this conclusion is true, Tristan is in danger. I have no choice but to protect him.

“I need a favor,” I demand with a firm resolve.

“Do you now, champ?” he counters with amusement.

“Your Highness.” I bow as confusion falls across his features. I look around, uncomfortable but committed. “I understand you’re in need of an escort to a celebration?”

My eyes plead with him, hoping he plays along.

“What?” he asks confused.

I press my lips together; he clearly doesn’t understand what I’m doing. “My presence in the woodland and water realms has been forbidden. It was declared by a royal order.”

Zander frowns. “By whom?”

I bristle. “The future king.”

“Tristan banished you?” He sounds surprised.

“He signed the order himself,” I say in a soft tone.

“That would explain why you haven’t come to him.”

“Yes, well—” My arms fold across my chest. “Anyway, you’re his brother. I know he wouldn’t deny you anything. As second in command of the Woodland Nymph Royal Guard, and a prince of the realm, you are permitted to bring anyone you’d like to the future king’s marital ceremony.”

“You want to be my date to your true love’s wedding?”

I growl. “I’m a princess. You’re a prince. I would be permitted back into the realm for political reasons—as your date. Then perhaps *we* could find the evidence you seek.”



Zander falls silent as he studies my features. "You do realize we would be insinuating that we are . . . *together*?"

I breathe in through my nose and nod my response.

He falls silent again and looks around at the trees that line the expansive lake as he works through the idea. After a moment, he speaks again. "Your uncle would have to approve my courtship, even if pretend, and send word to Queen Ophelia of our blossoming . . . *relationship*."

"You mean we can't just change our Facebook statuses?"

He tries not to smirk at my joke. "I think this would fall into the *it's complicated* category."

"My uncle Asher will approve of it. Of us."

"And Tristan?"

I avert my gaze. "Once he knows why, he will be fine."

A disbelieving laugh escapes from Zander's throat. "No, champ. He fucking won't. Trust me. He'll kill me. Most likely in my sleep. Shit! And what about Magali?"

"She'll understand too," I lie, hoping my best friend and roommate, who has fallen hard for Zander, will.

Since one of Magali's supernatural powers is the detection of deceit, I know she'll pick up on this fib quickly.

After a moment, he sighs. "Once in, what's the plan?"

I smile brightly. "We find evidence that the queen and emperor are consorting to commit high treason, stop a wedding, start a supernatural war, and dodge death."

"Sounds easy enough," he scoffs.

"You asked," I point out.

"My mistake," he grumbles.

I lift my chin. "Tristan *is* worth fighting for."

His gaze narrows as he takes a step toward me. "So you're saying you feel the crazy, obsessive, *I will die for you* kind of love for him?" he asks, pinning me with a look.

Zander once asked me if I felt that way toward Tristan, and I lied and said no. But I do. Deep in my bones, I know.

"I am crazily, obsessively, and totally in love with him."

Zander falls silent and blows out an exaggerated breath.

"What?" I inquire, unsure of his response.

"You just used like twelve adverbs in a row."

I frown. "It was only three."

He runs his hand through his hair. "I love my brother like that too. So, in the name of protection, we'll do this *pretend* courting thing. But Magali needs to know from the start. After what happened with Ryker and Ireland, I won't lie to her, or lead her to believe anything is going on between us. She doesn't need to go through the heartache again of her friends coupling behind her back."

Relief floods me as I nod my agreement.

Without Zander, I don't have access to the woodland realm. If I am going to protect Tristan, I need his help.

"I have another condition," he says in a serious tone as he takes my hands in his. "I mean, if this is to work," he adds.

I tilt my head back, curious. "What's that?"

"You can't cry. Not even a little. I mean it. My heart—well, I won't be able to handle it," he explains.

A small smile cross my lips. I found out the hard way that tears make him beyond uncomfortable.

"I won't shed a tear," I vow.

"You lie; one look at my brother and you're a goner."

"Care to wager?" I challenge. "The winner gets to pick the reward. Anything of their choosing."

"Anything?" he repeats as his eyes narrow on me.

I try not to bristle at the way the word rolled off his tongue, with an underlying roguish sound.

I dip my chin in confirmation. "Anything."

"I accept," he smirks. "This is going to be fun."

We shake on it. "This is business, Zander. Not fun."

"Lighten up, life is supposed to be fun. On that note," he takes a knee. "Serena St. Michael, would you kindly escort me to this small family function I have coming up soon?"

"I would be honored."

He kisses my hand. "Then let the *fun* begin."