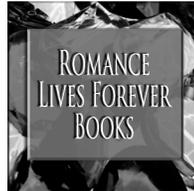


EXCERPT FROM
ALITUS
TALES OF THE CHOSEN

Kayelle Allen



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Vow of the CHOSEN

We are Called to serve
We are Honored to protect
We are Obedient to the vow
We are Safeguards of the truth
We are Enablers of life
We are Neutralizers of threats

The Tales of the Chosen Trilogy

When the fate of hearts rivals the fate of worlds, victory costs everything. The Chosen serve immortals known as Sempervians. Like any group, it has its hidden alignments, mistrust, and mistakes. It also harbors enemies and spies within its ranks -- some known and tolerated, others hidden behind layers so convoluted even the ones who live forever haven't figured them out. This trilogy, a complex tangle of alliances, focuses on relationships among immortals and the mortals Wulf Gabriel, Alitus Vivaldi, and Jawk Brighton.

Chapter One

Tarthian Empire, Tarth

Tarth City, Palace District, Imperial Palace, Division of Imperial Intelligence

Office of Alitus Vivaldi

Sumertsag 34, 4664 Tradestandard date

Spymaster Alitus Vivaldi paused beside his new assistant's desk and tapped a finger on it.

The man jumped to his feet. "Yes, sir?"

"I didn't mean to startle you, Jarod." The man had been with Alitus less than a week, but he'd already proven himself invaluable. "I'll be working on a Class Four project the rest of the day. Keep interruptions to a minimum."

"Yes, sir. I'll ensure you're not disturbed, Minister Vivaldi."

Inside his private office, Alitus set the standard safeguards, and added a few layers of additional protection. The glowing logo for the Conqueror's Division of Imperial Intelligence faded as Alitus pulled up a bank of images from the idBot interface. He slipped a link bracelet onto each wrist, and flicked his fingers to cast the images onto the walls around the room.

"Begin capture. Target: Wulf Gabriel. Parameters: record my questions as well as any and all information available in database for target." Pointing toward the top right of one wall, Alitus moved his finger diagonally to the bottom left to bring up a set of images. "Play series." His current quarry was walking toward the Renyoj Building in the Di Consueto District. "Stop playback."

Alitus tapped a finger on one picture to create a still, and zoomed in for a better view. Mid-stride, Wulf had reached the entrance. He wore a charcoal gray suit, dark hair tousled from the breeze. A former supermodel, Wulf's chiseled features and strong jaw set him apart in any crowd.

How could anyone fail to recognize him? He's beautiful. All he has to do is walk into the room and everything stops.

The lover of wealthy tycoon Luc Saint-Cyr, few things Wulf did were off the public record. The man still had fans from his modeling career five years ago, but these days, fans followed him because he managed famous rock bands for Lucsondis Entertainment, Saint-Cyr's business. That wasn't what had warranted the attention of the spymaster. Wulf was no traitor to the crown, and he'd committed no crimes.

Wulf was suspected of having an affair. Luc Saint-Cyr wanted to be sure, and since he was the Conqueror's friend, the Conqueror had tasked Alitus with finding out who to blame. Saint-Cyr might have no qualms about engaging in an affair himself, and was well-known for his licentious behavior, but his partner had no such freedom. Saint-Cyr and Destoia were allies in every sense of the word. Were even lovers when it suited them.

Alitus would refuse no request the Conqueror made. Nor could he refuse Saint-Cyr. One drew his ire at one's peril.

The man owned a large percentage of legitimate businesses on Tarth, Kelthia, and a smattering on other planets. He had once headed the Kelthian Thieves' Guild. No one had yet proven he led the largest crime syndicate in the empire, but the assumption was

there, despite official denials. There was no public discussion of Saint-Cyr anywhere except entertainment news, where it seemed to be encouraged. On Kelthia, they said his name only if they couldn't avoid it. Otherwise he was the Harbinger, or the Man, or simply Him. One could hear the capital letters.

Proving Wulf was having an affair would be dangerous. It could cost Wulf everything, up to and including his life. Especially if anyone found out with whom he was having the affair. The trick was to get idBot to prove he wasn't.

Alitus swallowed. *Focus. You must do this right. Wulf's life could be at stake.*

"IdBot. Show interior. Face outward. Play." The image shifted to the other side of the door as Wulf entered. "Pause." Alitus drew an oval around Wulf's image. "Follow target. Play."

Wulf entered an elevator. On the right of the screen, an inset showed the elevator cabin from the top. Wulf was joined partway up by two women, each of whom flirted with him. When the elevator stopped on the seventieth floor, the idBot security system announced the target passenger had exited. Different cambots took over. Wulf touched a security panel, unlocking the door of an apartment. Once he'd stepped inside, the owner's idBot privacy guards prevented further access.

"Override apartment privacy protocols on my order." Alitus spoke his passphrase.

No place was immune from the spy network Alitus managed for the Conqueror. Anywhere a target went, secret eyes followed, recorded, and reported. Once Alitus named the person, idBot went to work, finding everything there was to know. The system gave him unprecedented access and stripped away privacy on levels the average citizen could not begin to fathom.

How ironic that the name "idBot" was synonymous with "protection."

The visual of Wulf fluttered, and then revealed a grainy image of him inside the foyer.

As Alitus had coached him, Wulf turned out of view, and returned with a glass of water, which he drank, and then returned the glass to what was apparently the kitchen. He made a quick walk-through of the apartment, during which idBot reported his presence via items such as a heat control that registered his body temperature, and an electronic picture frame that activated upon sensing his nearness. Wulf returned to the door, wrote on the apartment's note screen, and exited.

"IdBot, scan note, please." The line had been signed with a smiley face and his name, saying Wulf had performed "the inspection."

Time for Alitus to play his part in the charade. "Inspection? Of what?"

"Cannot process the request." IdBot's female voice sounded pleasant and calm. "Please rephrase."

"Sorry, idBot. Wasn't talking to you."

"Cannot process the request. Please rephrase."

Alitus took a deep, calming breath. *Let's try this from a different viewpoint.* He flicked his fingers at a different part of the screen. "Access apartment information. Provide occupant name, occupation, and occupant's current location. Voice and main screen, please."

"Occupant L Givens, artist. Registered owner of the Dark Neon Art Gallery in Top Tier. Last known location is off planet. Port Tarth, Ezraki." The information flashed into view in the upper right corner.

"Show full name, please."

"L Givens."

"Not the initials, idBot. Full first name, please."

"L."

Alitus frowned. "Spell the owner's first name."

"L."

Alitus paused. "One letter? 'L'?"

"Affirmative."

"How odd."

"Cannot process the--"

"Yes, I know. Set new response parameters under my authority. Are you ready, idBot?"

"IdBot is ready to comply."

"When speaking to me, delete this term: 'Cannot process the request. Please rephrase.' Replace it with the term, 'I don't understand, sir.' End request. Can you comply?"

"IdBot can comply."

"Good. Location of Dark Neon Art Gallery."

"Dark Neon Art Gallery is in TARTH City, Top Tier District, on Gallery Row." The system overlaid a map of the city, with a pin in the designated space.

"Ah, yes. Near Yutai Art."

"Affirmative."

"I wonder if they've met?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"Sorry, idBot. My friend, Anne Cain, is opening another Yutai Art studio on Gallery Row. Any indication L Givens and Anne are acquainted?"

"Affirmative. Are details required?"

"Not at this time." Alitus flipped through his handwritten notes. "Relationship of target to occupant?"

"Wulf Gabriel sub-leases apartment to L Givens."

"Target owns the apartment?"

"Affirmative."

"Number of times per year target accesses the apartment?"

"One."

Alitus clasped his hands behind him. "Is purpose known?"

The idBot system did not respond for a moment. "Conjecture drawn from associated documentation."

He smiled at idBot's way of saying it had an educated guess. "Continue."

"Maintenance and security overview on part of owner. Average stay eight minutes."

He ran through the same exercise at other locations where Wulf spent time. Wulf worked inside the Nizamrak Building at Lucsondis Entertainment, and spent huge portions of time in various on-site businesses owned by Saint-Cyr. His and Saint-Cyr's living quarters were at the top of the building, and some days, Wulf seemed to do little more than change floors at random intervals.

When Wulf left the building, he spent large chunks of time at any of the four Batchelors restaurant locations, with the longest time spent at the oldest site. The

upstairs had an apartment belonging to the business owners, Terellee "Trink" Vandermeer, and Yvan "Dazzle" Ellory, with whom Wulf had a long friendship. Saint-Cyr was an investor in their business, and also had a long term relationship with the pair. Their apartment's security safeguards were not maintained by idBot, and Alitus could not access them. When Wulf went there, to idBot, he was as good as invisible.

Likewise, he disappeared when using any of the various hoversines and other private vehicles belonging to Saint-Cyr. IdBot itself was owned by Saint-Cyr, who obviously made good use of its privacy resources.

"Thank you, idBot. That will be all. Close presentation." The image wall went blank, and a ghost image of the black-and-green idBot logo appeared, an eye with a square iris. "Incorporate all data, including my questions, into a report bundle, please."

"IdBot has completed the request."

Alitus sat at his desk. "IdBot, open private mail system. Prepare message to Her Majesty. Classification: Your Eyes Only. Subject: Wulf Gabriel's business and personal whereabouts. Message: I have verified and logged target information as requested. Attached presentation provides four weeks of activity. No indication target is acting outside usual parameters. End message. Seal with tag, 'Vouchsafed by Division of Imperial Intelligence' and prepare for encryption on my mark." He pressed his thumb to the encrypt pad on his desk and sent the note.

"Hmm. What time is it, idBot?" When the system answered, he summoned his assistant.

Jarod entered at once. "Yes, sir?"

"I had appointments all afternoon. What happened to them?"

"I rescheduled all but one person."

Alitus flattened his hands on the desk. "Without asking me?"

"Your schedule had ten minute appointments based thirty minutes apart. A Class Four is detailed work. I didn't see the point of you being disturbed when you would need to focus. I reset them to fit in your morning schedule, fifteen minutes apart. Would you prefer I handle things differently in the future?"

He considered before answering. "No. I like your initiative, Jarod. However, I schedule my appointments spaced farther apart to allow time to write reports afterward."

"Would it be permitted for me to take notes during some of the meetings and write first drafts of those reports for you, sir?"

Alitus sat back. "For some, yes. I appreciate the suggestion. I'll let you know which ones in the morning when we go over my calendar. I have one person to see?"

"Yes, sir. Minister Roth Kloven. I would have rescheduled him but since he had the same rank as you, I thought it wise not to."

"I see. Good thinking, Jarod. However, if the situation comes up again, feel free to put Kloven at the bottom of any list."

Jarod grinned. "I will, sir. Thank you. He's in my office now, waiting to see you."

"Show him in." He motioned to the door. "Then, since you've handled my other appointments, I won't need you to stay. Secure your office, alert the Praetorian on duty that I'm not to be disturbed, and you may go. Enjoy the day."

"Yes, Minister Vivaldi." Jarod bowed. "Thank you, sir." He swept out of the room.

The meeting with Kloven went more smoothly than Alitus expected, and the man was in and out in short order. Once he'd gone, Alitus activated another set of locks from

a remote on his desk, darkened the windows, and sealed the room from prying eyes. He turned off idBot's voice and record commands.

"IdBot, do you copy?"

No answer.

Satisfied with the room's security even against idBot, Alitus activated a manual slideshow program. This bank of private images displayed Wulf Gabriel in his days as a supermodel, many of them behind-the-scenes of him changing outfits. Most of these were nude shots that he'd omitted from sending Destoiya.

Alitus tapped play, and leaned back in his chair.

Images of Wulf's flawless body, sculpted physique, and captivating smile filled the wall-sized screen. There were hours of images to peruse. Wulf had modeled for years, and idBot had access to virtually every camera in the empire. Even the shots in storage were available via the system. These were images no one other than the photographers and their assistants had seen.

Alitus propped both feet, clasped his hands behind his head, and let out a long, satisfied sigh. "I *love* my job."

About the Author

I am a best-selling American author who's been published since 2004. In 2006, as a response to questions from friends for marketing help, I founded Marketing for Romance Writers, a peer-mentoring group open to the entire literary community. MFRW is now a large online author peer-mentoring group, and provides no-cost training in book marketing skills as well as free promotional services its members. In 2009, I opened the Romance Lives Forever blog for authors. The site now has a reach of over three million. I teach workshops online, and I'm an invited speaker at numerous online conferences. I've been a featured speaker at Outlantacon since its founding and hold an honorary lifetime membership there. I was a board member for Gaylaxicon, and have been a panelist at DragonCon and a featured guest at NerdaCon. My books have won multiple awards, including the EPIC eBook Award for Science Fiction Erotic Romance, and one was a finalist in Fantasy. My motto is "romance lives forever" and my books include unstoppable heroes, uncompromising love, and unforgettable passion. I'm married to my personal hero and we live in the metro Atlanta area, near our three grown children and five grandchildren. My husband and I are both US Navy Veterans. We met while on active duty in Memphis, TN.

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