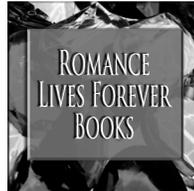


EXCERPT FROM
WULF
TALES OF THE CHOSEN

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, Kelthian District

Batchelors

Sumertsag 18, 4659 Tradestandard date

Six android cooks looked up as Wulf Gabriel entered the restaurant's back door. He waved in greeting and angled through the black-tiled kitchen, around the cluster of steel stoves and counters.

The human Chef Yvan was finishing one of the cheesecake masterpieces Batchelors had made famous. As he topped it with the last curl of dark Tyran bittersweet, Wulf snatched the sweet, barely escaping a slap when the man swatted at his hand. Wulf blew the tall blond Yvan a sassy kiss, and danced out of the way as the inner doors swung open.

Two uniformed human waiters slammed through it. One grabbed a tray, slid orders onto it, and swept back out. The other grabbed an ice bucket with wine and followed him.

Yvan added another curl of chocolate and stepped back from the dessert. "What do you think?" He made a sweeping gesture. "Isn't that beautiful?"

Wulf sucked a chocolate smear off his fingertip. "Perfect."

Yvan bowed. "Got a hot date tonight?" He motioned to one of the droid cooks to remove the cheesecake.

Sighing, Wulf folded his arms. "Too tired. Photo shoot started before dawn and here it is long past dinner."

"Sounds like my life." Yvan washed his hands. "You hungry?"

"I'm good. Ate one of those energy bars on the walk over here."

"How you gonna get energy from somethin' made of sugar?" Yvan opened one of the commercial refrigerators and pulled out a covered plate. He set it in front of Wulf, handed him a fork and a napkin and, with a flourish, removed the cover. "Eat."

Slices of lean roast beef, a small bowl of salad and a handful of asparagus spears had been artfully arranged on the silver plate. "Looks good." Wulf cut the beef with the edge of his fork. "Somebody didn't pay for their food?"

"Saved it for you." Yvan folded his arms and leaned against the counter near him. As tall as Wulf and built the same way, Yvan resembled a ruckball linebacker more than a pastry chef. The concern in his blue eyes warmed Wulf's soul as much as a good hug. "You never eat enough."

Wulf held out a hand and slapped it against Yvan's. "Thanks man." The first forkful of meat almost melted in his mouth, it was so tender. While Wulf ate, Yvan chatted about his day, the celebrity clientele they'd served, how many orders for specialty cheesecakes they'd filled.

Finishing the last bite, Wulf patted the napkin across his mouth. "I've never eaten anything you made that wasn't tip top." He leaned out to admire Yvan's backside when the man turned to put dishes in one of the sinks. "You and Trink must make a mint with this place. Every time I come in here, it's all I can do to keep from getting run over by waiters dashing in and out with orders."

"Yeah, well if you'd come in through the front door like a normal person"-- the chef paused and shot him a stern glance --"that wouldn't happen. Then again, if you did I wouldn't get to see that cute little model butt of yours nearly as often as I'd like." He winked.

Wulf stuck out his tongue.

Yvan leered. "You don't want that tongue in yo' mouth, honey, I'll let you put it in mine."

"You are such a perv. I love that about you. Where's Trink tonight?"

A swinging door opened, admitting Trink. "Wulf!" The man halted in his tracks, hands spread. Far shorter and several years older than Yvan, he always looked more like a kid playing dress up than a true maitre d'. With his baby face, few believed Trink's real age when they learned it. "If it isn't his Royal Hotness. You lookin' fine, m'boy. All the honeys be watchin' you tonight!"

Wulf swept a deep bow. "Wuss down, bro?" He brought up a palm and Trink brushed his fingertips across it in greeting.

Yvan nudged Trink's shoulder. "You spy he pushin' de dog?"

"Hell no!" Wulf knew enough Kelthian street slang to get that. "Ain't no boy toy selling cock. Dis boy straight up real."

Trink rubbed the edge of Wulf's Draap denim jacket between thumb and fingers. He lifted his dark brown gaze and raised both brows. "Your boss know you stole these naughty lookin' taggers?"

Wulf brushed at the denim jacket. "I got off a late photo shoot and the crew didn't feel like putting it all away. Let me wear it home."

The Draap jeans and jacket cost hundreds of *draks* apiece. Their logo made the simple black T-shirt worth over a hundred. Even with the fees he pulled down as the "Face of Draap," Wulf couldn't afford the prototype footwear. Low gravity athletic shoes? No sports association in the empire would ever permit such an advantage. Still, walking in them sure felt good.

Rubbing his chin, Trink ambled all the way around him. He gave a low whistle. "You sure be fine tonight."

Wulf held up both hands and spun in a tight circle, stopping in a chin-lifted pose straight off the runway.

Yvan whistled. Trink grinned. "You might score with a lady, you keep that up, Wulf."

He made a rude noise. "Not even for free, bro."

Trink laughed aloud. "Catch me up. You hawkin' or tawkin'?" *Hunting action or hanging with the guys?*

Wulf gestured right. "Hawkin' this side. Tawkin' that." He motioned left.

Trink held up a hand and Wulf connected with it, hooked fingers with him, and then released.

Trink dragged over a barstool and perched on it, one elbow on the counter. "You sure you're not slakin' this territory?"

Yvan rested a hip against the counter and winked.

Wulf caught they were teasing. Both had been public pleasure slaves back on Kelthia, "slakes" in local talk--but had bought their freedom and opened Batchelors together. He loved them for their big hearts; guys dabbling in prostitution always worried them.

"Hey, you know I'm real. Not sellin', bro. Not sayin' no offers to buy, now." He blew on his nails. "Good money too."

Trink leaned over and popped him on the arm. "You is doggin' me tonight, bro. What's down?"

"Got troubles. Need friends."

"Sure come to the right place." Yvan untied his apron and threw it into a bin. "Come on, bro. Grab us all a beer, Trink."

His partner opened a refrigerator and tossed each of them a bottle of the good stuff: gold label. Wulf followed them into an adjoining office, where Yvan dropped into the chair behind the desk. Trink propped himself in the corner and waved Wulf into the only other chair, a wooden swivel-type.

Wulf broke the seal on a beer as he sprawled, legs out in front of him. He took a long sip of the cool golden brew and tilted back his head. A moth fluttered around inside the ceiling light. A seeker doomed to death for finding what he thought he wanted. Way too much like him.

"Anybody ever threaten you?" Wulf rolled his head to one side so they could see his face.

Yvan sat up straight. "You got some ass leanin' on you, bro? Give me his name. I'll break his neck in six damn places."

"Thanks, man, but this is different. Answer my question first. You ever been threatened?"

The guys shot each other a glance. Yvan nodded. "Yeah, 'bout two weeks before we opened."

Trink wiped beer from his mouth. "Inspector guy. Wanted money up front for good numbers. When we wouldn't pay, he gave us a failing report on cleanliness. Yvan about shit. You know how he is about this place."

"Hell yeah!" Yvan leaned both arms on the desk. "Worked our asses off for this place." He cracked a smile. "And I do mean *asses*."

Trink almost spewed his beer. He choked on a laugh and wiped a hand across his mouth. "You straight up right on that, hon."

Wulf rocked forward. "What'd you do?"

Yvan flashed Trink a glance that said, "You tell it," and leaned back in the chair.

"You know the story of how we bought this place. But you don't know how we really got our money."

All slaves had a Freedom Savings Account, provided by law. When they had earned enough to buy out their contracts, they could free themselves.

"It wasn't your freedom money?"

Trink shook his head. "We tell folks that's how, but we had help."

Wulf frowned. "You mean an investor?"

The guys flicked glances at one another. Yvan lowered his lashes. Trink shifted positions, crossing one ankle over another.

Wulf took a long chug of beer as he sat back. This had a juicy feel to it, like one of those hot novels you'd read on Imperinet.

Trink chewed his lip. "I tell you this snippet, man, you gotta swear you didn't hear it here."

Wulf drew a cross over his heart.

Yvan sat still, head down, as if he wanted no part.

"Geez, guys." Wulf gestured with the beer. "If you did somethin' illegal, you don't have to tell me."

They both snickered.

"Naw, man, it's cool." Trink pushed away from the corner. "Yvan and I had the same master. Guy used to sell us on the sly. You know, without paying us. Against the law. Even slakes have rights. He slipped it all in his lover's pocket." He set a hand on one hip. "Thing is, the lover's a parole officer. If we complained, the PO would say we were doing something wrong and haul our asses to jail."

"That low life."

Trink shook a finger at him. "You said a mouthful there."

"Straight up." Yvan raised a hand.

Wulf reached across the desk and slapped it. "What happened?"

"Bout ten years back, Yvan'd been a chef in a brothel on Porosen Ia. He used to cook for parties. Master found out. Sent him over to work the Man's gigs once a week. The Man paid for his time two ways--the fee our master charged and then triple that straight into Yvan's freedom account. Said he deserved to be free."

"Super guy." Yvan gestured with the beer. "Asked if I had a friend who'd slake a party or two. He paid Trink the same way. Whatever he earned for the master and three times into his account. Shit, we got free of that hole within a year. Legal."

Trink rubbed the beer bottle against his cheek. "We both worked for the Man about six months, catering parties and such. He paid us on time and bonused us for good gigs. When we wanted to start a restaurant, he said Yvan's cooking deserved a first class place, and had investors scope one out. That's how we founded Batchelors, man. We'd paid him back by the third year."

"So did he help you with this inspector guy?"

"Oh yeah. We called the Man; he went to see the guy in person."

Yvan chuckled. "Guy proolly wet himself."

"I don't get it." Wulf leaned forward, elbows on his knees, the beer bottle swinging between fingers and thumb. "Was this man someone important?"

The guys shared another one of those glances.

"Not 'a man', bro." Trink leaned forward. "'It was *the* Man'. You know. On Kelthia."

He squinted. He'd been to Kelthia on photo shoots in the last few months. Hell, he'd been born and raised there until his father died when he was ten. That was twenty years ago. "Sorry, guys. No clue."

"You never heard of 'the Man?'" Yvan blinked. "You shittin' me?"

"I have no idea wh..." Wulf almost stopped breathing at the realization of whom they meant. *No, surely not.* He swallowed. "You don't mean ... the Harbinger."

The guys flinched as if saying his name meant he'd appear. No one on Kelthia said his name if they could help it.

The Man. The Harbinger. The crime boss even the crime bosses feared. Luc Saint-Cyr.

"I can't believe you had the balls to go to the Harbinger. That's rich." Wulf took a long pull on his beer and then chuckled.

"We're not shittin' you man. He helped us out."

Still chuckling, Wulf nodded. "I believe you." His shoulders shook with laughter.

"That's what makes it so funny."

Yvan and Trink stared at him like he'd just sprouted antenna. "Uh, you okay, bro?"

Wulf tried to answer but couldn't stop laughing long enough. He set the beer on the floor and took a deep breath to gain control. After a few gulps of air, he wiped his eyes and sat back. He snuffled a laugh.

"You wanna say what's gigglin' ya?"

Wulf sucked in a few more deep gulps of air and blew it out, calming himself to speak. "Sorry, guys. Not you, believe me. It's a long story. Kind of personal." He wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands and brushed the front of his shirt.

"No squeeze, bro." Trink perched on the desk. "We got your back. How you bein' threatened, Wulf?"

Sighing, he scooted back in the chair, bent over and picked up the beer. He drained the little that remained, set the bottle on the desk, and then folded his arms. "Last year, my agent screwed with my contract so I'd have to work for him longer. When I tried to sue, he bought off my lawyer. Bought off the media. Hell." He dragged a hand through his hair. "They wouldn't go near that story for a million *draks*, even now."

"That shit!" Yvan hit the desk. "He still messin' wit you?"

"Yeah. He knows I've always wanted to act. About two months ago, he started feeding me scripts. Good stuff. Not great, but not bad, either." Wulf shrugged. "I'm a newbie. But to get the roles, I'd have to sign with him for another five years."

Trink pulled a face. "Why?"

"Turns out his father owns the studio producing the vids. I don't sign with his son, I don't work. They'll blackball me to the entire entertainment industry." He kissed his fingertips and flipped up his hand. "Goodbye career."

"That ain't right." Yvan shook his blond head. "Shit like that gets my blood goin'."

Trink faced him more squarely. "How can we help, bro?"

Wulf leaned elbows on his knees and put his face in his hands. Blowing out a deep breath, he paused before lifting his head. "I wish I knew. I just got the contract to be the Face of Draap--worth more money than anything I've done so far. If I try to leave, I won't work at all. If I stay with him-- You have no idea what an ass this guy is. I can't prove it, but now..." He swept a hand through his hair. "I should be able to coast the rest of my life off money I get modeling."

Trink and Yvan listened.

"My investments have all been in places my agent advised before I knew he was dirty. Now I find out he cranked me for most of it." He held out his hands. "I'm broke. Haven't made a lick on what I invest. It sits there, gathers dust. Not getting interest."

"Not that I like the law, but you sure they can't help?"

"Trink, I wish they could. This guy has connections and family all over the empire. Hell, he gives the Harbinger a run for his money, power-wise."

Trink gave Yvan a glance. Yvan nodded. "I think the Man might help."

"No." Wulf gave a half-hearted chuckle that fizzled at the end and came out a squeak. "No way."

"He's our friend, bro. If we ask him, the Man'd step in. We're tight, you know?" Trink held up two fingers together.

Wulf choked on a laugh. He tilted the chair and leaned his head back. The moth in the light overhead had stopped fluttering. Trapped at the source of everything he

sought. Just like him. One of the top ten models in the empire, and helpless to get himself free.

"Wulf." Trink and Yvan both leaned against the front of the desk to face him. "Let us help you, bro. We can call the Man. I know he's got the power. Hell, he owns everything on Kelthia and half of Tarth. This whole district owes him."

"Thanks, guys, but there's got to be another way." He dusted off his pants. "I should go." When he stood, Trink took hold of his arm.

"What is it, Wulf? What you not tawkin', huh? Me and Yvan." He gestured among them. "You know we got your back. You can tell us anything."

"Thanks, Trink." He situated himself so he wasn't being touched, hopefully smoothly enough not to offend. "Don't want to talk about it."

Yvan started to speak.

"Guys." Wulf held up both hands. "I appreciate the advice and the offer to help, but the last thing I want is to involve Luc Saint-Cyr. The Harbinger, the Man, whatever you want to call him. If I'd known you'd suggest anything that had to do with him, I never would've come here. No offense." He ducked around Yvan.

The taller man leaned a hand against the door to block him, then swung around and leaned against it, arms folded.

Wulf sighed. "Don't do this, Yvan."

"Doin' nothing, bro. Jes standin'. Whyn't you talk to Trink?"

"Yeah, bro." Trink spread both hands. "Let us help."

Pressing his lips together, Wulf concentrated on breathing through his nose, focusing on a dark spot on the wall.

"Listen, Wulf," Trink dropped his street voice. "If you let that asshole fuck you like this you'll kick yourself for it."

He closed his eyes, jaw clenching. "Back off, Trink."

"People always say that to me, Wulf, but truth is I can't. I'm your friend. Friends help friends."

Wulf leveled his gaze on the man's face. "I appreciate your concern, but I'll handle it."

Yvan tilted his head. "We're trying to help you."

"Thank you. Really. Thank you." Wulf tucked his fingertips into the front pockets of his jeans. "Now back off and let me out of here."

Yvan stared into his eyes for a long moment, not blinking any more than Wulf. "After you tell me one thing."

Wulf ground his teeth together. "What?"

"Why you so dead set against the Man's help?"

"His help?" Wulf pressed his lips together, shaking his head. "I would rather die than ask that fucker's help."

You'd have thought he'd blasphemed. Trink crossed himself and Yvan slid aside like he expected a lightning strike.

"You think I'm crazy? How's this? If Luc Saint-Cyr was on fire, I wouldn't cross the street to piss on him."

Their mouths dropped open.

"You want to know why I hate, loathe, and detest Luc Saint-Cyr? When I was ten years old"-- Wulf slammed one fist into the other "--he made me watch my father die."

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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