

## Mine to Keep Chapter One

Lillian Kwolek failed to notice the protestors until she set her shuttle down in the landing bay. Then they came from seemingly everywhere and swarmed around her vessel.

“Great. Just fucking great.” CyberServe’s security had majorly screwed up. Demonstrators shouldn’t have been able to access the shuttle bay. The company’s lobby had been designated the official area for dissenters to gather, with visitors being routed through other entrances. The arrangement kept the Interplanetary Trade and Commerce System, commonly referred to as the ITCS, content. It kept Lillian Kwolek, president of CyberServe, very happy.

She spotted familiar features within the swarm of sign-waving protestors and groaned. Gunnar Jax was the leader of the Freedom League, an Earth-based movement. His scraggly beard, along with wild, unkempt hair and crooked-tooth smile, somehow failed to detract from fine-boned good looks. Not that Lillian would ever consider him attractive. Gunnar looked as he usually did; as if he’d just rolled out of a garbage reclamation unit wearing a bigger man’s clothes.

For all his disreputable appearance, he was no one to screw with. Bad things had a tendency to happen when he and his people showed up. If Gunnar was there...

Of course. Artemis Neera was present as well. Her bushy brown hair was as wild as Gunnar’s. Thick brows grew low over her burning eyes. Gunnar’s girlfriend was a supposed founder of the Freedom League. She eschewed the spotlight, but she was always in the thick of the action. She was rumored to be among the most violent of the faction. Like Gunnar, the police had yet to make any charges of illegal activities stick to her.

Lillian reached for her phone to call security. No need. They burst into the bay, a dozen men and women shouting at the demonstrators as they waved shock batons.

Gunnar yelled in return. Inside her soundproof Strobe XL-Six, Lillian couldn’t hear his or any other shouts. Most of the crowd turned and rushed the guards.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Lillian groaned as she watched through the shuttle’s front monitor. If any of CyberServe’s employees lost his or her temper, if someone got hurt...

She put her hands to her face. Her fingers spread to allow her to peer between them as the two groups shoved each other. The situation looked as if it would go to hell in a hurry.

Should she go out there? As president of the company, she had to do something. Several demonstrators, including Neera, had remained behind to watch her craft. They obviously waited for her to put in an appearance. While Lillian had no trouble putting her fist in someone’s mug, Freedom League members were renowned for fighting dirty.

Hell, Freedom League members had killed those they’d disagreed with.

The pushing and shouting grew more violent. The shock batons pointed. That only appeared to enrage the demonstrators, and they shoved harder than ever. The shit was about to hit the fan.

The double doors security had entered through opened. At least two dozen Walls and Wardens came out, and the angry tide swirled back as expressions went from rage-filled to terrified.

“Yeah, that’s going to get them on our side,” Lillian muttered, but she was glad to see the cyborgs marching in three columns.

The Walls...more accurately, the TWMs and TWFs...looked like their nicknames. Male and female cyborgs that bulged muscle, their brutish visages cold with intent, they’d been the big

guns of the corporate wars on Earth. They'd terrorized rival corporations' cyborgs and the humans caught in the middle.

The PSMs were smaller and outfitted with less coarse features. One could call the all-male Warden models handsome with their refined physical characteristics. Nonetheless, anyone who'd spent prison time under their merciless care wouldn't acknowledge them as humane creatures. The Wardens had taken torture to horrific levels.

Many, if not all, of the Freedom League had been on Earth during the wars. They'd watched the cyborgs tear the world apart. They'd witnessed them visit atrocities on loved ones. They'd seen the cyborgs kill. Some had been personally hurt by the manufactured soldiers. A few may have been part of the desperate alliance that had finally overcome the corporations and their cyborgs. By then, Earth had damned few resources remaining, thanks to the corporate executives' greed that had turned into a free-for-all grab for riches and power.

Cyborg armies had been the terrors of Earth's corporate wars. Rather than disassemble them, cash-desperate Earth had sold the defunct salvaged remainder afterward to CyberServe. The company Lillian presided over refurbished, reprogrammed, and sold the cyborgs as devoted servants to the humans who lived off-world.

Hence the Freedom League's displeasure with Lillian's company. They'd left Earth to make their ire known in person by showing up in large crowds at CyberServe.

Lillian was delighted they were in full retreat at the moment. With the cyborg arrivals, shuttles in the visitors' slots were lifting off and flying haphazardly in their mad dash to escape. It was a wonder they avoided smashing into employees' vessels, walls, or the ceiling of the cavernous space.

By the time she stepped out of her Strobe and emerged in the midst of the cyborg phalanx, the Freedom League was gone. Torn signs, placards of hate printed in blood red, lay scattered on the bay floor.

"Good job, gang." She looked at her protectors with mingled pride and relief.

"Thank you, Mr. Kwolek," they chorused.

The very human Security Chief Scott Michaels trotted up. "I'm sorry you walked into that, Mr. Kwolek. They arrived barely a minute before you did, and I was calling in the team to turn them out when you landed. No excuse for the delay, I understand, and my resignation will be on your desk within the hour." His voice caught halfway through his speech, but the red-faced man powered through it.

Lillian took in his trim physique in his gray CyberServe security uniform. How much of his tone came from actual workouts and how much from contouring? No matter. Whether his body was real or surgically enhanced, Michaels' other qualifications were topnotch, the best she'd been able to hire when it became apparent CyberServe would have safety concerns against outside agitators.

"You most certainly won't resign, Mr. Michaels. What you'll do is figure out how those people got past the defensive grid to gain access to what should have been a fortified area. You'll fix it immediately." She eyed him severely.

The tension vacated his features, which had been allowed to show some of his middle-aged years. At least Michaels wasn't erasing the lines in his forehead or around his eyes, the way so many did. A grateful smile didn't break through, but it teased the corners of his mouth.

"Absolutely, Mr. Kwolek. Thank you. Until we figure out how those protestors got through, there'll be a full security complement guarding the bay."

“Excellent. I recognized members of the Freedom League, so you’ll want to call in the regular police.”

Michaels paled. “Right away.” He hurried to the detail he’d brought in and barked orders.

A TWF stepped forward. Her heavy brow made her look as if she were scowling to the untrained eye. It was actually her most deadpan expression. “A detail of four was instructed to escort you to your office, Mr. Kwolek.”

“Thank you, TWF.”

The cyborg snapped a nod. She jerked a motion with a beefy arm. Wrapped around a human head, that arm would crush the skull like an eggshell. “Detail, assemble. All others, return to your berths and power down until needed again.”

Three other cyborgs joined her in surrounding Lillian. The rest marched out ahead of them. Their boots echoed in the bay in thunderous booms.

The cyborgs were impressive. Fearsome. But thanks to Lillian, no longer deadly.

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Alek knew the soft tread of Lillian’s step, and he turned to greet her as she entered her office. She left the guard detail outside her door, which closed behind her.

*Assessment: Lillian Kwolek appears tense and ill-humored. Experience dictates this unit display a low-level concern approach.*

After a year of functioning and learning, Alek’s matrix wasn’t required to tell him how to cope with Lillian. Nevertheless, it was good to have a scientific appraisal of her state of mind. “Good morning, Mr. Kwolek. I trust the ambush in the shuttle bay didn’t inconvenience you too greatly?”

“It would have been far worse if you hadn’t sent in the cyborgs. Good call. Thank you, Alek.”

“I’m pleased to have been of service.” He gave a stock answer humans expected to hear. Alek was pleased about nothing. He was also never irritated, peeved, or upset. He simply was.

He watched as Lillian slung her carrycase on the top of her polished desk. Her spiky silver hair, its ends tipped in black and red, was its usual artfully messy state. Her tie matched its coloring in alternating stripes, as did her long fingernails, which tapped nervously on her desk.

Lillian was unlike her contemporaries in many ways. Alek found her defiant non-corporate style interesting, but not enough to ask her about it. Despite the hair, which could change color daily, weekly, or monthly depending on her whims, she tended toward more of a natural look. She might go in for body contouring every month or two, depending on whether she had put on a few extra pounds, but she wasn’t rabid about it. Indeed, she was a far cry from the current trend of looking like a svelte gym maven. Her shape was a top-heavy hourglass. Alek had noted the gazes of most men and quite a few women went to her ample bosom, like moths attracted to a flame. Her breasts were impressive, he supposed.

He should know. He’d seen them close up and naked. He’d mauled and sucked them numerous times. He’d even fucked her cleavage, those impressive mounds pressed together to enfold his erect cock.

She eschewed most makeup, because she preferred her rose-beige skin bare. Mascara, lip gloss, and the occasional swipe of blush when she had to make a public appearance were her sole concessions. She was a dichotomy inside and out, the most interesting human in Alek’s existence.

Which wasn't saying much. Fortunately, Alek wasn't programmed to get bored. He simply existed.

Lillian sank into her chair. She drew a deep breath, perhaps to steady the tremor in her voice. "I need to report to Tosha Cameron. More importantly, I need to get her guidance on what steps to take."

"Mr. Michaels' expertise isn't adequate?" Alek's tone was modulated to imply interest.

"It may be, but as Life Tech's CEO, Mr. Cameron has been the target of attacks and assassination attempts. Her cyborg bodyguard knows more about personal security than a hundred Scott Michaels. I want their insight."

Her remark lit a few of Alek's circuits with what humans would have termed fascination. Brick, the TWM owned by Tosha Cameron, was a fully sentient cyborg with emotions. Little impressed Alek, but he found Brick's development from a basic automaton to a fully realized entity absorbing.

"May I observe your conversation?"

Lillian waved him over. "Since company protocols keep me from recording it, you'd better. She always has a laundry list of advice, and I'll never remember it all."

Alek hurried over as she sent the request for a video conference with the owner and CEO of the company that owned CyberServe.

As Lillian waited to be patched through...Tosha Cameron's aide Amadis Dubois had said the CEO wanted to speak to Lillian as soon as she finished with the call she was on...she regarded her own assistant. She needed a distraction, and Alek was a better diversion than anything else in the room.

PSM-426021, better known as Alek for the last year, was a handsome version of his model, the Warden. Lillian had experimented with his looks for six months until arriving at his current appearance. The PSMs were masculine without the heavy brows and jaws that made the TWMs so brutish. They were handsome, with none of the sleek delicacy of the Infiltrator-class cyborgs. Thanks to Lillian's upgrades, Alek approached fashion model perfection.

She'd kept the military cut of his hair because it suited him so well, but she'd changed it from a nondescript brunette to a sandy blond. She'd liked his tawny eyes, so she'd kept those. His features had been altered slightly. Lillian had directed its change from the kindly angelic cast that had been such a lie for the PSMs to reflect a firmer, no-nonsense attitude. Alek still look as if he could be an angel, but more along the lines of the avenging type.

When Lillian had discovered him among the other decommissioned cyborgs stored in a warehouse, his skin had been torn in several places, his metal skeletal limbs bent. His left arm had been completely torn off. Still, he'd been in better shape than most, and it hadn't taken long to repair him and replace the matrix that served as his brain. He wasn't the muscled behemoth that characterized the physiques of the TWMs and TWFs, but he was the sort of buff that would cost a human thousands of dollars to achieve and hundreds a year to maintain in a contouring studio.

It was what was between Alek's legs that gave him what counted in Lillian's view. The PSMs had been originally outfitted to terrorize prisoners, male and female alike, in ways she refused to imagine. Now programmed to offer pleasure instead of torture, Alek could be properly appreciated for his substantial gift.

Lillian hadn't taken him home in a couple of weeks, and she had a new upgrade to test. One of the perks of being a senior engineer for CyberTech had been bringing her 'work' home. As president, Lillian was granted even more leeway.

New upgrade or no, she deserved a satisfying fuck after the bullshit she'd encountered in the shuttle bay. The kind of demanding fuck where she couldn't think of anything except what was going on at the moment.

Her ruminations halted as Tosha Cameron's lovely face filled her viewscreen. "Mr. Kwolek, it's good to see you. What's this report about you being threatened?"

Lillian loved that about her boss: straight to the point. The lady didn't screw around.

She matched Cameron's lack of equivocation with her own. In less than a minute, Lillian laid out the facts of what had occurred in the shuttle bay and ended with a request for advice.

"After all, you know a thing or two about fending off personal attacks." She forced her tone into lightness.

Cameron chuckled. "I do. I'm glad the situation escalated no further than it did and you're safe and sound. Brick, you're the expert on these matters. What's your take?"

The holoscreen monitor widened to show Brick, Cameron's cyborg bodyguard and lover. The TWM's crude features had been softened at his request. He'd been made over into action-star delicious. Lillian got a thrill looking at him, but not just because he was a gorgeous view. Brick had been then cash-strapped CyberServe's first sale. Cameron's purchase of him had led to a partnership between CyberServe and the mega trillion-dollar Life Tech enterprise. Later, Life Tech had bought the company outright and Cameron appointed Lillian its president.

Brick's green eyes usually twinkled with humor, but he looked far from amused as he joined the conversation. "First of all, I'm delighted you're all right, Mr. Kwolek."

"Thank you, Brick."

"I hope you won't mind if Life Tech's security chief and I confer with CyberServe's Mr. Michaels after this episode."

"By all means. You'll find Mr. Michaels is easy to work with. He was recognized in his previous job for welcoming assistance from others."

"Excellent. A non-territorial chief of security is difficult to find. We'll figure out how to keep you and your employees safe. In the meantime, are you still using that PSM as an assistant?"

"Alek is right here." Lillian waved her cyborg in.

"Good morning, Mr. Brick. In what way may I be of service?" Alek stood behind Lillian.

"It would be advisable for you to download the full security program available to the cyborgs. Or, if Mr. Kwolek prefers, another cyborg can serve in the same bodyguard capacity for her as I do for Mr. Cameron."

For some reason, unease stabbed Lillian. "Do you really think that's necessary? I mean, it was chance that my shuttle landed so soon after the protestors' arrival. They probably weren't after me specifically."

"I disagree. The fact they showed up just before you and before CyberServe's security staff could remove them makes me think the confrontation was orchestrated. There may have been someone watching when you departed your home this morning. They would have tipped the others off as to when to be ready for your arrival."

"We're talking about the Freedom League. Such a ruse would fit with their modus operandi," Alek remarked.

“I can’t recommend a bodyguard cyborg highly enough,” Cameron chimed in. “There’s a reason so many company executives are ordering them. Between that and our people getting with your head of security, you’ll be in good shape for the Freedom League’s next move. That bunch is tenacious, so they’ll be back.”

“No doubt.” Lillian almost bit her lip. She sighed instead. With presidential perks came headaches, and she’d realized she’d have to expect some inconveniences when she’d accepted the position.

*Inconveniences? Seriously? I call bullshit on that, Lillian.*

She ignored the disbelieving voice in her head. “All right, Mr. Cameron, I appreciate the suggestions. I’ll tell Mr. Michaels to expect your call, Mr. Brick.”

After the call ended, Lillian regarded Alek. He gazed back. She could probably stare at him until the end of time, and he’d only stand there and wait.

Alek as her bodyguard. It made sense, no matter how part of her rebelled against the idea of letting anyone...even an emotionless cyborg...spend too much time close to her. Yet Brick and Cameron were right. The Freedom League had left Earth to take up the anti-cyborg cause, and as CyberServe’s president, Lillian would be their focus.

She fought off a shudder.

Alek was no Brick as far as strength was concerned, but the Warden was as resilient as any Wall. Putting her unfounded concerns aside, he was the obvious choice to serve as her bodyguard. If she could be said to trust anyone, it was Alek.

“Thoughts?” she prompted him.

“As always, I’m at your service. I am ready to assume the task of your personal security if you desire me to do so.”

“Well, it would keep you close at hand for other tasks. I planned on taking you home tonight for some research. I guess we’ll make it a more regular thing until we figure out how to discourage the Freedom League.” Spoken in her breeziest tone.

Nothing to see here, folks. It was no big deal.

“Download the full security program?” Alek was only interested in the task to be accomplished.

Lillian drew a breath. “Download.”

“Full download will be completed in five minutes.”

“Great. You do that, and I’ll get to work. Freedom League or not, I have a full schedule today.” She tapped on her computer and scowled at nothing in particular. “I should have stayed in R and D.”

Her day wasn’t merely full. It was wall-to-wall, with a schedule that would have been impossible without Alek’s organizational skills. When Lillian had taken the job, she’d known Alek would outperform any human executive assistant. There’d been no point in hiring anyone else.

That was the reason other dissenters without the Freedom League’s agenda of vengeful justice gathered in protest against CyberServe. They were afraid the cyborgs would take their jobs.

A valid concern for the far-off future, because cyborgs were remarkably adaptable to whatever was needed. If CyberServe lacked a career’s program, its cyborgs could still learn tasks at a phenomenal rate.

It wasn't Lillians' job to worry about such things. As the situation currently stood, cyborgs were too expensive for most individuals and companies to afford. Jobs were safe from their taking over in the foreseeable future.

She scowled at her workload and mentally vowed she wouldn't stay late in the office. Lillian wanted to play with her latest sex program. Cyborgs for sex were all the rage among the ultrarich at the moment. Fortunately, the 'we're not getting laid because of cyborgs' protest contingent hadn't yet formed to harass Lillian.

As she went over the latest sales charts, she considered what her night with Alek held in store. Lillian was an unapologetic mechosexual, a human who accepted only cyborgs as sexual partners. Alex had been her first, and thus far, was still the best she'd taken home. Though such dalliances were as impersonal as a hired dick, at least Lillian no longer had to pay to score her jollies.

*Otherwise, it would be a menage of me, myself, and I.*

No human men. No romantic entanglements. She'd learned her lesson where that was concerned. Life was on the lonely side, especially with her at the helm of CyberServe. Being its president took up far more of her time than her job as an engineer had, but at least she didn't have to worry about being hurt.

"Security program has completed downloading," Alek said.

She glanced at him. "How do you feel?"

"The matrix says I'm operating within system parameters."

Good old Alek. Unlike the human race, he gave her nothing to worry about.

Everywhere he looked, Alek saw threats.

The door to the office locked automatically, but it wasn't reinforced. He could have punched through it easily, which meant any cyborg in the wrong hands could also be ordered to do so. Though the new protocols should inhibit any cyborg ordered to commit harm to a human, there were always methods the programmers might have missed.

Certain weapons could break through too. Those sorts of weapons would be in the hands of the military only, but again, exceptions could never be discounted.

There were no other accesses to Lillian's office. That should have soothed the watchfulness the security program had given Alek, but instead, it worried him more. She'd be cornered if someone with harmful intent broke in. And what of a fire? How would she escape dangers beyond those of murderous demonstrators?

*This new program has presented me with uncomfortable insights, he told his matrix.*

*Lillian Kwolek is no less safe than she was before this unit added the security protocol to the system. There is still the automatic security field and two guarded checkpoints between all headquarters accesses and her office.*

*Yes, but I wasn't so aware of the issues before now.*

He considered his options. The first was obvious. "Mr. Kwolek, will you grant me full access to CyberServe's security system?"

She was frowning at her computer and didn't bother to look in his direction. "Yeah, sure. Connect with Mr. Michaels and start the ball rolling on whatever you need for your assignment. Let me know what you require me to approve."

Alek obeyed. He simultaneously conversed with his matrix as he alerted Michaels to the incoming request and the reason for it. He also sent Lillian a batch of forms and reviewed the next few days' schedules with her protection in mind.

*My data on Brick explains that his initial moves into sentience and emotion came about with the addition of his interpersonal relations program to the security program he began with.*

*His matrix: Accurate.*

*Other life assistants have also reportedly achieved these advancements. I have an interpersonal program already active, to which Lillian has added the advanced security module. Should I anticipate emotional awareness?*

*The answer arrived without a second's pause. This matrix is unfamiliar with the details of unit Brick's evolution to emotional maturity. I cannot answer this unit's question with reliable accuracy.*

*Can the matrix extrapolate a theory?*

*Certain fully upgraded programs, including the interpersonal software, can spur true emotions.*

*My interpersonal software is basic, not advanced. Am I safe from emotional distress?*

*This unit has achieved self-awareness and learned much over the past year of its operation. Over time, emotions may naturally occur. Should this unit wish to accelerate the process, the matrix advises it to request an upgrade to its interpersonal programming, as it is that software which seems to offer best emotional growth.*

Alek weighed the suggestion for barely an instant before dismissing it. He had no interest in gaining emotions. From what he'd seen of the cyborgs that had developed such curious tics, they appeared less focused on their appropriate functions. Even Brick was occasionally unprofessional in Mr. Cameron's presence. The TWM cracked jokes and discussed dinner plans when the *mood* hit him. Like Alek, he could pay close attention to several matters at once, but the mere appearance of distraction was enough to make Alek wish to put off any disruptions that might leave Lillian unguarded.

Speaking of which, he had information to gather.

For the next hour, he researched Gunnar Jax, the face and leader of the Freedom League. What he found gave him pause.

"From now on, you don't go anywhere without me," Alek informed Lillian.

Her gaze shifted from her computer to him. "Is that the program talking or you? Because I'm less than crazy about that tone."