

# DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

A MERCENARY LIBRARIANS NOVEL

KIT ROCHA



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

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## **CLASSIFIED BEHAVIOR EVALUATION**

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### ***Franklin Center for Genetic Research***

Subject HS-Gen16-A is the first candidate to achieve perfect marks on the eight-year physical benchmark tests. HS-Gen16-B and HS-Gen16-C show equal promise in intellect and empathy, respectively. I recommend we accelerate their training, with a specific focus on exploring the limits of their endurance.

*Dr. Baudin, February 2060*

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# ONE

Nina had broken the cardinal rule, and now she had to kill someone.

Four someones, actually. She counted the shuffling footsteps behind her as she eyed the stack of crates and scrap blocking the alley's exit. Razor wire glinted in the low light, heading off any thought of climbing over the mess. The only route of escape was back the way she'd come.

A brutally effective trap. Under other circumstances, she might have admired its elegance. Right now, it just pissed her off.

*Never go out alone after dark.* Dani's admonition—or did it qualify as an order?—echoed in Nina's head as she turned to face the men who'd blocked her in. The obvious leader stepped forward, brandishing a cheap pistol, as the three others fell into loose formation around him. The tall man on the left stood with his hand hovering near his hip, like he was getting ready to reach for a weapon tucked into the back of his waistband. The two on the right carried knives.

Surprisingly expert grips on all the weapons. The tall one was favoring his left knee. And one of the men wielding a knife was *built*, with the kind of bulk that made close contact a bad idea. Four men, two guns, at least three knives.

She did not have *time* for this.

"The bag," the leader grunted. "Now."

Nina's hand tightened around the black strap slung over her shoulder. She didn't like fighting if she could avoid it—too many variables—but she couldn't afford to comply. She might have, if the satchel had held her usual haul of scavenged books or random data. But this was a commission, specially sourced information collected for a specific purpose—and a specific client.

Losing it would cost her more than money.

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“Walk away,” she advised flatly.

One of them snickered.

Oh well, she had to try. Not that the world would suffer by losing these assholes, but because her conscience demanded it. Of course, they’d laid a trap in a dirty alley, and they didn’t seem too broken up about going four-on-one to rob her.

Maybe she was actively doing the world a favor.

The leader stepped forward, his index finger trembling as he pulled the trigger. Nina ducked, and the bullet went high, shattering a window that was probably already cracked or broken to begin with.

Everything in Five Points was.

When she came back up, she was inches from the man’s face, close enough to see flecks of spittle fly as he opened his mouth to yell at the others. She smashed the heel of her hand under his chin, snapping his teeth shut on his tongue.

He screamed, and she ducked again, this time to put herself on the other side of his outstretched arm. A hard blow to his shoulder spun him around, away from her, and she pressed close to his back, turning him into a shield.

Then she locked one hand around his, turning him into a weapon, too. She squeezed off two more shots, each finding its target in the dead center of an attacker’s chest, before the gun jammed.

*Shit.*

The third man returned fire. The bullets slammed into his friend—so much for honor among thieves—and sent Nina stumbling back. She recovered just in time to dodge another shot, but she heard the razor-sharp whistle of its path as it cut through the air near her head.

*Too goddamn close.*

She launched herself at her last attacker. She kicked out, feinting as if to disarm him, only to target his weak leg at the last second. Her boot crashed into his knee, and she felt the joint give as he crumpled. The gun fell and skittered across the grimy asphalt, lodging itself under a mangled crate butted up against a length of chain-link fencing.

Just as well. They’d undoubtedly drawn enough attention already. She reached into her jacket, drew her pistol, and slid her thumb over the biometric scanner embedded in its grip. The weapon activated, chambering a round with a soft click.

The two shots she fired exited the elongated barrel just as quietly, silencing the man's shrieking and groaning.

Nina stood over him for a moment, watching the dark blood as it began to pool beneath his head. "You did pretty well," she muttered. "You never really stood a chance, that's all."

A chill swept over her despite the relatively warm spring night, raising the fine hairs on the back of her neck. For a moment, it felt like someone was watching her. Not just observing, but staring at her hard enough to bore holes through flesh.

Right into her soul.

She shook it off and holstered her pistol. There probably *were* eyes on her—the pickers waiting to crawl the place when she was gone. They would wait for her to take first pass at the bodies, out of grudging respect as well as self-preservation. As victor, she had the greatest right to claim the spoils.

She knelt beside one of the bodies, and spent shell casings bit into her skin through her pants. They weren't even from this firefight, just scattered detritus. Another testament to this area's legacy of violence.

Once upon a time, this had been a nice neighborhood. The building on Nina's left used to house city offices, and the one across the street—now a highly trafficked brothel—was an old warehouse that had been converted into chichi lofts catering to the young and wealthy. A faded sign still hung on the side of the building—*Now leasing for Spring 2043*.

They never finished the construction, and no one but squatters ever got the chance to move in. Not after the devastation of 2042.

Not after the Flares.

It started with a solar storm. For two days, a huge blast of magnetic energy surged toward earth, headed straight for southern Europe, exciting scientists and doomsday preppers alike. In the end, huge areas of France, Spain, and Italy were impacted, though the long-term damage to their power grids was minimal.

No, the worst thing about that storm was how it interfered with satellites, scrambling their signals so that no one noticed the much larger coronal mass ejection in its wake.

The second solar flare hit North America head on. By that time, the United States' utility infrastructure had been crumbling for decades, ignored or worse by politicians with other priorities—tax cuts for corporations

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and new fighter jets and the same old fossil fuels that had driven them into the Energy Wars to begin with. The flare struck a killing blow, pushing the weakened government to its knees as it plunged the country into darkness and chaos.

This used to be a nice neighborhood, not that Nina knew any of that firsthand. But there were plenty of old-timers down at the local bar who'd tell you all about the world that once was—the shining city of Atlanta, back before the desolation of the Flares—for the cost of a few highballs.

Nina's stomach twisted. She could still feel the hungry weight of those stares on her as she rose and backed away from the corpse at her feet.

Tonight, the vultures could have it. All she wanted was to get home.

The scavengers were already converging.

Perched on the rooftop where he'd been doing recon, Knox watched the gang of kids creep out of the darkness. They moved like shadows themselves, wraith-thin and nearly silent. The shitty streetlights dimmed and surged as the kids spread out in the bloodstained alley, swarming the dead bodies with tragic efficiency.

They worked fast, gathering up everything Nina had left behind. Bloodied clothes, worn boots, even the shitty gun wedged under a broken crate. A girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen popped the magazine to check it before tucking the handgun through her belt. Before long, the group had stripped the men down to their underwear and melted back into the gloom.

The whole thing had taken only minutes. The men who'd tried to jump Nina lay sprawled and exposed on the cracked asphalt, their pale skin washed out by the flickering metal-halide lights. They looked even sadder like this. Naked, abandoned.

And dead. Very, very dead.

Knox eased back from the edge of the roof and rolled to his feet, ignoring the warning ache in his muscles. He got a running start and made the leap between buildings. The impact of the landing stabbed through his knees, and he rolled to disperse the shock of the force—something he wouldn't have had to do a week ago.

Time contracted around Knox. He could *feel* each second that slipped

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away. He swung out onto the rickety fire ladder and slid toward the ground, ruthlessly forcing his mind back to the job.

But he kept seeing those dead bodies. Nina had killed four armed men in the time it had taken Knox to draw a deep breath, then walked away from the encounter without a scratch.

Of course this job couldn't be easy.

His safe house was a mile-and-a-half hike through the shittier parts of Atlanta. This far south of the TechCorps HQ, security was lax, and Protectorate forces wouldn't venture out without a direct order. There were no checkpoints like the ones lining the streets that wound their way up the Hill, where the TechCorps sprawled like a brooding dragon sitting on its hoard. There, disciplined squads made regular sweeps amongst the posh high-rises that housed elite scientists and distinguished executives. Farther down the Hill, haphazard patrols guarded the more modest homes and businesses that catered to the fortunate families who'd found a way to make themselves useful to the TechCorps.

None of that existed here. The southern half of the city could be on fire, and the Protectorate wouldn't stir itself to piss in this general direction in a feeble attempt to put it out. Sure, they swept in every few months to remind people that the TechCorps still had one boot pressed to their necks, ready to come down. But the rest of the time, they didn't give a shit if the people in the poorer neighborhoods tore each other apart, as long as the TechCorps had enough warm bodies to fill their support staff jobs and their experiment rooms.

People so desperate for money they'd do damn near anything for it? That was the only resource no one was running out of any time soon.

Knox knew that better than most.

Still, he hadn't realized just how bad it had gotten until the Protectorate had pulled them in to deal with the growing labor uprisings. For years, Knox and his team had been deployed outside of TechCorps' territory, entrusted with delicate missions that required a certain amount of discretion and finesse. Knox had advanced corporate interests and forged connections in dozens of regions—from the fiercely competitive shipping clans in Florida and the Gulf Coast to the warring crime syndicates that had taken over Washington, D.C.

Not that the word *crime* had much meaning anymore. The only rules left were the ones you were powerful enough to enforce.

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Knox had seen lawless places that had descended into swirling chaos, as well as cities with rigid laws that made military discipline seem lax. He'd even seen towns where people had come together, pooling their resources to restore comfort to everyone. The mountain communities dotting the Appalachians, the close-knit neighborhoods ringing New York City's boroughs, the cozy communes in New England—all were places almost idyllic in their relative peace.

Somehow, Atlanta had become a combination of all three. Though the TechCorps held the city in its brutal grip, their control didn't extend to support, so the outlying neighborhoods had fallen into neglect. But within those neighborhoods, you could find sparks of light. Communities coming together. Workers fighting for better pay, for better lives.

Hope. That was why the Protectorate had recalled the Silver Devils. Hope had been bubbling up through the cracks in the TechCorps' power, and they'd wanted Knox to snuff it out.

In those orders, Knox had finally found a line he couldn't cross.

He broke free of the final line of buildings and left the streetlights behind. Darkness wrapped around him, another layer of safety, and he relaxed slightly. No one was likely to be wandering out this way after dark. The Devils had set up shop in West End, in an abandoned warehouse overlooking the reservoir. The crumbling remains of the old interstate rose beside it, dwarfing the squat concrete building. A huge chunk of the overpass had caved in over a decade ago, wiping out the community below and discouraging resettlement.

After the Flares, weak infrastructure had been their downfall. The federal government had been held together by tissue paper by that point, unable to function effectively, and state governments had filled the void with varying levels of success. Atlanta had been doing better than most of the rest of Georgia, with strong citywide leadership that might have rallied, given time.

Except that the infrastructure was already so fragile. And the TechCorps were right there, a monolith of recently merged medical and tech companies with the latest and greatest of *everything*. How generous they must have seemed in those first dark days, reaching out with their seemingly unlimited supplies of solar power, water, food, and medicine.

TechCorps offers were always too good to be true, and the hooks they

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sank into you went bone deep. Atlanta's swiftly displaced city government had no doubt learned that lesson as harshly as Knox had.

Knox approached the abandoned warehouse they'd taken over. It was truly off the grid, not even hooked up with power or water. They had to procure or process both for themselves. Not the most comfortable place to crash, but it didn't matter. They wouldn't be here long.

Besides, the Silver Devils had stayed in worse.

Knox approached from the north and stopped precisely five feet from the back door. His embedded communicator beeped, and he activated it with a low command. "Knox here."

"Gotcha, Captain. Disabling security."

Conall's reply echoed inside Knox's head. They'd had the subcutaneous comms for almost a year, and Knox still wished they'd carved them out along with their trackers three days earlier. Conall swore he'd modified the frequencies to be unique and untraceable, but the things still creeped Knox the fuck out.

Implants to make him stronger and faster? Fine. To moderate his biochemistry to make him the perfect soldier? Okay.

Conall's voice serving as his inner monologue?

Too far.

It took nearly a minute before Conall sounded the all clear. Knox crossed to the door, which popped open just as he reached it. Conall greeted him with a grin and an outstretched hand. "Glasses."

Knox slipped off his glasses and relinquished them. "Pull the last thirty minutes of footage first and get it up on the wall. Everyone needs to see it."

"So you caught up with the mark?"

"Yeah." Knox eased past Conall and let the tech worry about resetting the security measures. The cavernous main room of the warehouse was well lit, with bright solar-powered LEDs hanging from the bare beams. Rafe and Gray sat at one end of the trestle table, the remains of a meal as well as one of Gray's ever-present disassembled guns spread out between them.

Knox stopped at the other end and stripped off his tactical vest. "We have a problem."

"How bad?" Rafe asked, his rice-laden spoon hovering in the air. "She got a security team or something?"

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“She *is* a security team.” Knox shrugged out of his shoulder rig and dropped it on the table. His backup pistol followed, as well as the knife sheath strapped to his leg. “Watch the footage.”

Rafe obediently picked up his chair and turned it to face the white-washed section of wall at the back of the building. Gray looked up without moving—or taking his full attention from the rifle components in front of him.

After another few seconds of fiddling and some muttered curses, Conall flipped his handheld projector upright, and the surveillance footage from Knox’s glasses appeared on the wall. The video from the night-vision camera was tinged with green, though Conall color-corrected it with a few keystrokes.

On-screen, Nina arrived in the alley. The video washed out the gold undertones of her skin, and the angle of the shot left her face in shadow. She surveyed the trap she’d walked into with no apparent alarm as the four men drifted into the frame.

Knox had almost intervened then. The instructions he’d received had been *very* specific—if he wanted his biochem hacker back, he was to deliver Nina to the designated coordinates, alive and unharmed.

He’d seen so much death in those four shadowy outlines—first Nina’s, when they overpowered her. Then Luna’s, when Knox failed to provide her ransom. Then each of his men, one by one, as their degrading enhancements slowly poisoned their bodies. Without a biochem hacker to regulate their implants, the Silver Devils might as well put bullets in their heads right now. Or go crawling back to the Protectorate.

Knox would prefer the bullet.

“Holy shit!” Conall’s shocked exclamation drew Knox’s attention back to the surveillance footage. Four bodies were already on the ground. It had happened that quickly—so quickly Knox hadn’t even had time to vault off the roof to help.

Rafe shoved his spoon into his bowl of rice and braced his elbows on the table. “Go back and play it slow.”

Conall obeyed. Even at half speed, Nina was *fast*. She dodged a fucking bullet before commandeering the man who’d tried to shoot her as a human shield. Then she used his gun to fire on two of his friends while the weapon was still in his hand.

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Knox was good, the best the Protectorate had ever turned out. And even he wasn't sure he could have pulled that off.

Gray sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin, his brows drawn together in a contemplative frown. "Who is she?"

"Fuck that," Conall retorted. "*What* is she?"

"Trouble," Rafe rumbled. "Hot, sexy trouble. Does this mean we go with plan B?"

Rafe always wanted to go with plan B, where he deployed his charming smile and his big, beautiful brown eyes, and everyone melted for him. Knox had relied on the man's natural charisma on plenty of missions, but the thought of Rafe using sex to lure Nina into a trap . . .

"No," he said, too curtly. "Plan A was to pick her up off the street. That clearly won't work. Plan B would be to sedate her, not seduce her, but we don't know what she is or whether our tranqs will work on her. So we go with plan C. She's an information broker. We're going to make her an offer no broker could refuse."

Gray scrubbed one hand over his face with a rough sigh. "Maybe we should focus on figuring out another way to get Luna back." He gestured toward the makeshift screen. "I already wasn't crazy about kidnapping someone. I'm really not crazy about getting killed during the attempt."

Knox wasn't wild about the kidnapping, either. When he'd first joined the Protectorate, it had been with wide eyes and dreams of heroics. He'd decided that he would accept the biochemical enhancements. He'd train day and night, if that was what it took. And then he'd go back out into the world and do some damn good. Help people like his father, who'd died protecting a neighborhood store from petty thieves. Make things better instead of worse.

His eyes hadn't been wide in a long time. The world wasn't interested in being saved. And the only allegiance Knox owed now was to the men in this room, men who'd followed him into battle and the depths of hell and now into treason, where a ticking clock was counting down to their slow, painful deaths.

"We don't have time," he reminded Gray. "Conall couldn't trace the communication. We don't know who took her, or what they'll do if we show up at those coordinates without the payment they requested. And every day we stall, our side effects are getting worse."

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“It’s Luna,” Rafe declared, as if that answered the moral dilemma. “Helping us is what got her into this mess. And sure, the lady is hot and all, but . . .” He waved a hand at the paused video, showing Nina frozen in the act of delivering her silent coup de grace. “You don’t get that good at killing by being a sweet little pussycat.”

Gray relented, holding up both hands in surrender. “Understood. Still not too keen on dying, though, so this ruse of yours had better work, Knox.”

It would, because Knox had been saving this weapon since the day Conall had offered it to him. His game-winning ace. An information broker’s ultimate fantasy.

“Conall?”

“Hmm?”

“How thorough are those files you have on the Rogue Library of Congress bunker?”

Conall tipped his chair on two legs so he could snag a small data pad off his workstation. “Old Uncle Aiden was a little cracked, but he was fucking meticulous. So I’m guessing pretty thorough.”

“You’re guessing?”

“I never actually decrypted most of them. Seemed a little reckless.”

“How long would it take you to decrypt it and redact any references to location?”

Conall tapped his leg as his eyes darted back and forth and his lips moved in silent calculation. He’d always sparked with barely restrained energy, but now he was restless and fidgety all the time.

“Twelve hours?” Conall said finally. “Maybe twenty-four, if some of the files have multiple encryptions.”

Too long, but it was still the best chance they had. Knox slid an empty tablet down the table. Conall caught it. “Do it. We need schematics, paper trails. Proof. Redact anything that would lead her to the real location. Load it all on there.”

Conall raised one brow. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just throw together some dummy shit? I can make it look good enough to sell the con.”

Knox turned back to the video frozen on the wall. He’d underestimated her physical strength. He wasn’t about to make the same mistake with her mind. “This isn’t the time to take chances. Use the real data.”

“Yes, sir.”

And that was that, as far as Conall was concerned. He settled into his task, trusting that Knox would spend his family secret wisely. That he'd save Luna, save *them*, keep them all out of TechCorps torture cells, and probably score them enough credits to settle down to blissful lives of leisure.

Knox had worked hard to earn that trust. To *deserve* it. Somehow, he had to pull this off and be worthy of it.

**TECHCORPS PROPRIETARY DATA,  
L2 SECURITY CLEARANCE**

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Recruit 66-615 survived the implant procedure and is responding well to biochemical adjustment. He's already broken our standing strength and stamina records. I advise expanding testing of the latest-gen implant with 66-615 as a control subject.

*Recruit Analysis, May 2060*