

down in 1947. So, when it came to Calvin and Phillips, to say that their deaths – and their death investigations – were off the books would, frankly, be putting it mildly.

Zita had been working in the intelligence community long enough that black budget government operations no longer phased her. Intelligence community budgets have always existed in a kind of alternate reality. But some of what Calvin and Phillips had been into was above even Zita's paygrade.

855 was a professional killer. The kind of man that you'd call if you wanted to put a hit out on men like Calvin and Phillips. And while Zita was rightfully afraid of the practiced hitman, stalking a killer also provided something of a thrill. Frankly, it gave her flashbacks to her days as a field operative. She'd spent so many years behind a desk at this point, it felt good to get her hands dirty again. That said, Zita was sure that her desk job had made her soft. But how soft? Only today would tell.

Zita slid into the kitchen of the abandoned house, quiet and careful to keep to the negative spaces. There, with his back to her, the assassin sat at what was left of the dining room table. Three steps closer and she'd have him.

Three steps closer and she saw that it wasn't a man sitting at the table at all; it was the effigy of one. A trench coat thrown over the back of the chair and a couch cushion with a hat perched on top of it.

The blade was at her throat and his voice in her ear before she could react. She froze, then brought her hands up in a slow, cautious motion, her finger off the trigger of her 9mm pistol. She did not want to give him a reason to slit her carotid artery. Her heart started pounding. She felt weak. This had never happened to her before.

"Calm, Miss Basir. Calm. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead. Your skills are not as sharp as they once were. You have let yourself go."

He reached around and took her weapon. She didn't resist. She knew better than that.

"You have followed me for two days now," 855 said as she started to turn. "I admire your determination, but you're on the wrong path."

"Three days. And why do you say that?"

"You work for **Central Omnilytics**, and you are currently investigating the deaths of Ezekiel Calvin and Jay Phillips. I am not your killer."