

THE SYNERGY EFFECT

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Synergy (sin'er jē):

Refers to the phenomenon in which two or more discrete influences or agents, acting together, create an effect greater than that predicted by knowing only the separate effects of the individual agents.

- *Wikipedia Encyclopedia*

Chapter 1

The shadow of a man moved with lethal intent through the dimly lit facility corridor. Menace hung about him like a dark cloak. He did not hide his presence, but moved with a determination and assurance of one who belonged. He stopped here and there to check a locked door or to sweep his gaze through an equipment filled room, hunting for the two men he had come to kill.

Highly advanced security cameras tracked his movements in both infrared and sonic imaging. Wall and ceiling glow panels produced only a dim luminous glow through the corridors, but the insufficient light had no effect on the camera's abilities to track him.

Yet no alarm sounded.

As far as the security personnel who monitored the cameras were concerned, there had been no breach of the outer defenses. The assassin was dressed in such a close approximation of the regular facility guards that the human eyes who noted the man saw nothing amiss—he appeared to be one of the guards checking for anything out of the ordinary. It mattered not that the man was not recognized; the facility boasted of over four hundred security personnel and over a hundred and thirty five during any given shift. However, what human eyes dismissed, the computers recorded and then flagged the irregularities for the operators—the expected population count had been exceeded by one. The human operators, who took note of it, dismissed it—just another guy working overtime. There had been no breach of security.

So the man continued the search for his victims unimpeded, checking doors and empty rooms with a casual air that belied his deadly intent. He stopped only once, to stare with a look of amazement at the facility logo and name etched into the marble floor. It read: *The Genesis Foundation of Theoretical Sciences*. At length, he came to stand before a door where the control panel indicated that the room beyond was occupied by someone with high security clearance.

He pushed the door activator, but the door remained closed. Undeterred, he knocked loudly. The door slid open to reveal a short, thin man with balding hair and blue-grey eyes that smoldered with impatience. He wore a white frock coat and white pants with black stripes along the outside of both garments.

“Yes? What do you want?” the balding man demanded. He cast a distracted look back over his shoulder at a computer screen filled with equations that meant nothing to the assassin.

The guard, who wasn't a guard, usually allowed nothing to shake him, but the sight of the scientist filled him with a bizarre sense of the unreal. “Dr. Braxton?” he breathed almost in unbelief.

“Yes, yes, I wish not to be distur—”

The assassin killed Dr. Braxton quickly and efficiently. The thin scientist never even brought his arms up to defend himself before his body fell to the floor with a broken neck.

A moment of absolute calm surrounded the assassin and his victim. Then the shrill alarms shattered the quietness and the hallway glow panels changed from a steady white to a pulsing red.

Someone had finally noticed him.

The assassin spun on his heels and took off running. He knew where to go, where the security forces would fail to anticipate his movements—where he could escape. Standard procedures for the security forces within the complex dictated that the exits to the compound be sealed off first, followed by a systematic cordoning off of sections where the intruder was known not to be. It would take just a matter of minutes, and the intruder would be isolated and quickly caught. And for those few crucial minutes, the assassin was not hindered in his flight towards his destination—a destination that he should not have known to exist, a destination that had deliberately been hidden from their own security forces.

Just short of his goal, two security guards succeeded in intercepting him. Neither stood a chance. The first ended up head first into a wall light panel, his unconscious body illuminated by a shower of sparks and hisses. The second one fell with a well placed snap-kick to the solar plexus and then a blow to the back of the head.

Pausing only to get his bearings, the assassin ran on. He found and entered an unremarkable door leading to a much larger room, obviously the central focus of this level of the complex. The room could only be described as one giant computer, but one completely dedicated to a specific and singular function. Huge screens ran from floor to ceiling on every wall, and various workstations dotted the floor space. It all focused on a large computer console that stood in the middle of the room like some centerpiece of a museum display. A transparent room stood behind the central console, within which a giant glass bubble, surrounded by rotating panels, rested impossibly on one narrow end in the very center.

Once in the room, the security forces became blind. Not only did they know nothing of the chamber the assassin had taken refuge in, there were apparently no cameras in there either. Frantic calls went out to the converging forces to hasten, and a special notification protocol went into immediate effect by the computer.

The intruder, free from prying eyes, went quickly to a central computer console, and knowing that his verbal commands would go unheeded, punched in a series of override commands that set a timer on a twenty second countdown. Once set, he ran into the transparent room, closing his eyes as he passed through a decontamination field. The glass capsule had a hatch built into the side of it and the intruder opened it and climbed inside the small space. When closed, the hatch merged seamlessly into the clear material. He positioned himself in the center of the circle and braced himself against the sides with hands and feet.

The countdown reached zero.

All the lights dimmed, and an array of rainbow colors seemed to burst forth into a liquid, almost translucent, bubble of light surrounding the capsule. The space within the bubble appeared to contract and stretch at the same time. Motion both slowed and sped up, and suddenly the man was gone—completely gone as if he had never existed.

Time stood still...

The man abruptly reappeared within the bubble and staggered as he fought to orient himself. He moved groggily, groping around for the hatch release, but couldn't find it until he looked on the opposite side of the capsule. He staggered out of the transparent room and came to an unsteady halt near the computer consol. Still somewhat disorientated, he made no move when four men rushed into the room from different directions. Two were guards with assault rifles at the ready, but one of the others was a short thin man with balding hair. The last one was a heavysset man with a thick mustache.

The latter ran up to the assassin and seized him by the arms. "Did you succeed Major Grey?"

Major Grey shook his head and looked with menace at the hands on his arms. The other man released him and stepped back quickly. "Only in part," the assassin replied after a moment of disquieting silence. "They were not together as we hoped. I could only find one of them. But I got a good look at their technology, and I don't think it's as advanced as ours."

"Are you sure?"

The assassin frowned and ignored the question. "We ought to focus on destroying it. We can learn nothing from them."

The stout man nodded nervously. "But we still need to eliminate all threats. Which one did you kill? I need to know which one!"

The assassin looked over at the short thin man, the mirror image of the man he had just murdered. "It was Dr. Braxton."

The smaller man seemed to shrink even smaller. "Me? You killed me?" he asked in a tiny voice.

Major Grey nodded his head, still trying to shake the last remnants of his disorientation away. "Yep, I sure did, Doc."

Allen walked up his front porch, suppressing a yawn at about the second step and ran a strong hand, unscarred, through his close cropped brown hair. He felt worn out. His stained jeans and worn t-shirt bearing the logo of a local landscaping company testified to a hard day's work. No one noticed anyway. His average height and features rarely made him noticeable. Despite his tiredness, his light grey-blue eyes peered alertly around him. And that is why he knew something was wrong.

A cloudy sky provided a brief, but welcome, respite from the Arizona summer heat, but more importantly, cut down on the glare as he scanned the street. Two of vehicles parked on the side of the Mesa suburb street did not belong. Strategically placed to provide support and overlapping fields of fire directed at Allen's apartment, the van-like vehicles had the air and feel of a tactical assault team.

And his door had been tampered with.

The door lock included a standard thumb print and voice activation system. It looked clean. *Too clean.* It meant someone awaited him inside. A violent rage began to build up from within him. He was *retired!* His whole life had practically been redacted by the government. They had promised to leave him alone and he had done nothing to call attention to himself. Nothing!

His face hardened as he stuck his right thumb on the scanner and spoke a few words, so that his voice could be scanned and matched for verification. "Open says me!" he ordered, his voice conveying his irritation. The scanner screen turned green and the door slid obediently open.

Darkness greeted him. He could see no one.

Warily, he moved into the house and immediately the barrel of an automatic assault rifle pressed against his side. It always requires a split second to pull a trigger after you have made up your mind to do so, and his assailant's amateurish actions suggested a junior member of the assault team. His mistake. The landscaper's arm snapped around, followed by a full spin that knocked the gun barrel out of line of his body. His right fist connected satisfactorily with the gunman's nose. There was an audible snap as something broke, and the man reeled backwards, blood already flowing onto his body armor. The landscaper spun on his left foot and brought the heel of his right foot around to kick the man into the wall where he bounced off heavily. The rifle came loose from limp fingers and skidded across the hallway floor.

The bedroom door slid open and another gunman emerged from the dim light. "Halt!" he yelled, but the command came too late. The landscaper, with anticipation born of long experience, had already moved within the arc of the second gunman's weapon.

Allen slammed the second gunman into the bedroom door, which, programmed to open if an undue amount of pressure was applied to it, slid open, and the gunman, already off balance, fell backwards into the bedroom before he could recover—leaving his rifle in Allen's hands.

"Who are you?" the landscaper demanded, drawing a bead on the gunman's face. Both of intruders wore riot gear, but Allen had not been able to make out any military insignias in the darkness of the apartment. He placed a booted foot on the attacker's knee and began to apply pressure. "I asked a question, buddy."

"Police!" the gunman bit out through clenched teeth.

The landscaper grunted in surprise and withdrew a step. *Not military?* "Buddy, don't you have to have a warrant to be in here?"

The front door slid open, and bright light spilled into the darkened hallway and into his open bedroom doorway. The landscaper looked up and then stepped back, letting the barrel of his assault rifle turn slight to the three newcomers entering in a crouch. Three red laser dots danced over Allen's chest.

"Police!" shouted one of the riflemen. Indeed, in the light, Allen could clearly see the word 'police' emblazoned across his riot gear. "Drop the weapon and put your hands on your head," ordered the speaker.

"Sure thing, buddy," the landscaper complied. "Just take it easy with that thing. What's this all about?"

"Are you Allen Grey? Captain Allen Grey?"

"Retired," Allen corrected. "But that's me. I ask again, what's this all about?"

"You're under arrest."

The men advanced on him, their eyes hard and weary. One took out a pair of handcuffs and deftly and quickly restrained Allen's hands behind his back while the other two covered him. They took no chances. He was then pressed into a kneeling position as one of the men touched his watch face to activate his ear bud. "Suspect in custody. Request medical attention. Officer with injury."

Allen didn't hear the reply. "Hey," Grey said again, "would someone tell me what's going on?"

"Mr. Grey, you are being arrested for the murder of Dr. Braxton." The officer produced a small screen and hit a button. An image of Allen Grey, wearing a strange uniform, knocking on a door in an unfamiliar building came into focus. Allen blinked. Then his eyes widened in shock as

he watched himself violently kill the man who answered the door. “You have the right to remain silent...”

Allen felt too stunned to even offer any resistance as the police methodically and efficiently completed their duties. This must be some insane joke! He hadn't murdered anyone!

Who the blazes was Dr. Braxton?