Jonah Spector 123 456 words

COBALT SABER

by Jonah Spector

Adult/Young Adult

Science Fiction

# CHAPTER ONE

FIRST LINE. Small apartment buildings fill the area between interspersed commercial centers; it is generally considered the suburbs of the city, but it is significantly more dense than American suburbia. Most of the buildings are simple, painted white, although they become colorful at dusk, covered with varied shades of neon and synth-bioluminescence. In the desert sun, the genetically engineered paint absorbs enough energy to brighten the city, though dim, in a beautifully unique spectacle, even without the traditional, supplemental electric lamps. Wisps of the glyph-philic, luminescent graffiti rise into the air as the sun sets; the sky blackens and the air becomes crisp and clear. Kernel City awakens into the night.

Fayçal’s skimpy streetcar dinged and he hopped off leaving it empty. A rare, isolated, fluorescent, motion-activated street lamp flipped on, blinding his organic, albinic piercing blue eyes momentarily—blackened eyelids mechanically lowered then raised. His pale body clenched and his hands quickly found their place in his obnoxious, myriad pink fur coat, part of a wardrobe built for the cold nights since the Sinai sun would surely kill him. As he walked to The Ardara, the crowd grew thick. Neon green and pink graffiti encased his warehouse destination. One depicted a half-skeleton pointing a finger gun to the knife in his head, with something written in non-legible Arabic. Fayçal admired it, before continuing his casual walk to the nightclub, a little around the bend.

All together, the man’s appearance is absurd, even by local standards, but no one batted an eye during his walk. His somewhat spiky, fluffy white hair and dark makeup doesn’t stand out, but his overtly masculine face in contrast does. With white stubble and thick, dyed eyebrows, he appears older than he is. Although rather tall and a tad thin, his face is still wide.

However he never carries himself absurdly. He’s far too serious, but not necessarily industrious; his appearance would suggest an eccentric or flamboyant person, but his face is truly revealing of him. He has worked as a psychiatrist for almost a decade, only now moving to *contracting* (as he describes it). In the age of cybernetic mental augmentation, his skills become less valuable as technology gains the ability to diagnose and solve mental problems, although there is still one use for his skills now, at least the best he can think of: communication. Dealing with parties not inclined to share their thoughts via cybernetics is a key job.

He sees these dealings as “puzzles,” even within the natural chaos of the human mind; something he solves the same way as any other. His process is as follows: first, identify the goal and the starting conditions of one or more minds. Everything they are prior to contact, where mental matters persist. A puzzle is, of course, impossible without the use of tools (even as simple as using your hand to move a piece), which Fayçal finds in these mental matters. Then, find the subset of tools and their positions in the mind which allows access to the goal by another tool or a direct, universally applicable pathway.

Despite the small market for non-Interfaced cybernetics, he has never installed anything, not even the most basic transcriber. He endlessly types instead, no cybernetics to aid him. The hours of research on targets that could have been done in overclocked minutes emphasizes to him how short his life really is; maybe 50 more years until he will die of natural causes, something he could easily extend to 500 years with an Interface. Only those in their 20s and below are ubiquitously Interfaced, but he is old enough to have been born at a time of the earliest Interface development, before wide-spread adoption.

Now, as he traveled to the nightclub, he reviewed the tools he acquired from background research alone on one Lewis Rodney. His investigation was primarily on the old internet, where he sifted through public posts mirrored from the matrix and made lines of anonymous communication to the man himself. One must be careful not to alter the mind, as even the slightest unintentional text from such a master psychologist as him is enough to provoke a murder-suicide in the happyest person. Fayçal was careful, though, posing as an organized digital fling with Fulco, using image and audio filters to maintain anonymity.

The film-maker’s mind was revealed to be entirely logical on the surface; a wall of ruthless no-nonsense built up over decades. But Fayçal saw the trick, a little sliver, a crack in the wall. Something so unique and so hidden as to be almost impossible to uncover. Finding this single uniquity revealed the tools, all that was left was the order and positioning of them, the part he has solved as far as he knows; but until execution, the faults in his plan can not be revealed beyond what he can predict.

\*\*\*

Fayçal arrived at The Ardara and checked his phone: 4:55 a.m. The queue curled around the block, down the side alleyway, and to a steep staircase drilled in the side of the unmarked building Fayçal stands beside. The skull graffiti sits on the far side of the alleyway and the stairs seemingly enter the back of the building in an alley, although the streets are more than convoluted. Multiple overlapping shades randomly ascended the alleyway in a planar mesh. The sheets each have their own luminescent designs etched in. Minute condensation built on them, dripping down to the concrete below. At the base of the dugout stairs is a thick steel door for entry to the nightclub, where an atmosphere of fog and red neon emanated, struggling around the seemingly airtight seal. It will not open to the public until 5:00 a.m on Fridays.

Fayçal popped two pills: Kernelaid and a sensory booster of some kind. Kernelaid, taken by the majority of Kernel citizens, is generally enough to stave off the effects of nocturnalism, but it requires almost constant low-dose administration. It gives the adequate nutrients missing from moonlight and enslaves the circadian rhythm, although Interfaced people generally only use it for the nutrients since the Interface handles the rest neuro-digitally. Temperatures during the day are near inhospitable, but people really only nocturnalize themselves to match their jobs as it’s certainly possible to be diurnal. The booster, his specific substance not being a common sight, is a stimulant which increases blood flow to the eyes and most brain tissue, among other things. Taking too much reddens the sclera—even the smallest amount has a visual effect to a trained eye—but Fayçal limits himself. Its effects take a few minutes to kick in, so he feels unaffected. The Kernelaid has no noticeable effect on serial users like him, so he feels nothing from both pills.

Suddenly, the door opened. A short, bulky bouncer stepped out. What can only be described as hardcore Noise followed him for a second before he closed the door. The bouncer barely managed to squeeze into his spot, pushing the crowd on the stairs back with loud verbal commands but no force. He was armed with a 9mm pistol and a simple armored vest like the other patrolling security guards. They each have noticeable luminescent patches with The Ardara’s logo, and a few occasionally walk up and down the line, but never enough to weird people out. The bouncer continued, settling into position, surely checking his eye widgets for the time, or maybe synth-intuition. He looks to the right at nothing so the latter is most likely. It is unusual, but many people still prefer the tactile feeling. Fayçal watched the kerfuffle before moving to the end of the queue.

He walked, hands in the pockets of his pink fur coat, observing the variety of people waiting to attend The Ardara. Scantily clad partygoers shivered in the freezing desert, most glowing with not-necessarily-safe paint-on luminescent strips. The most popular colors seem to be the shades between blue and green. The glowing paint covered faces and exposed skin in unique, twisting patterns, blending into the patterns already painted onto clothing. Kernel City depends heavily on the substance for cheap lighting at night, so body paint has always been incredibly popular due to its convenience. One person wore sunglasses with six inch long spikes, forming from the frames and jutting out, which Fayçal wished he had. Puddles formed from the condensation of mass human breath in the dry air.

Finally, he arrived at the end of the queue. She had long blonde hair and golden loops on both forearms. Fayçal watched her from behind before quickly distracting himself with his phone. The line moved quickly, the bouncer profiling people digitally using government registered genetags, often embedded in wrist-jacks or put on cards, and a wireless genetag reader. Of course, no one argues that the policy is authoritarian; they are obviously not compulsory, just very difficult to live without. All people have the human right to absolute sovereignty over their own genomes, at least under U.N. declaration, but Fayçal always decides to fake his genetag with a patch of vat grown skin on his forearm, so he could care less about human rights. In front of him was a woman in a modest red dress.

“Hey mistah, you mind?” Fayçal looked up and was met with a pair of pale blue eyes. Pretty girl, Fayçal thought to himself. She looked young, but she was just as tall as Fayçal, the same size too.

“Strong for 16

“Why’s your head so big…” he said, biting his lip

“Your lips look big, you Kim K.?”

What are you, George Washington?

The bouncer checked the digital profiles of visitors for cybernetic weaponry and age, including Fayçal via his wrist-jack. The bouncer has the standard combat enhancements, but does seem disciplined in their usage. His unimportance is striking to Fayçal—it blends with the traffic of the early nightclub goers. There is a calm normality to it that Fayçal enjoys. Deals are best done in this company.

Aside from the druggies and partygoers, a man and a robot sit at a circular booth talking quietly. The robot smokes a cigar, seemingly just because it can. The robot relaxes its frame into the cushion and crosses its synth-skinned arms as Fayçal approaches. Fayçal walks without hesitation to the booth, going in for an immediate handshake.

“Fulco, yes? Shall we?” Fayçal said as they shook hands. The man shifts himself to the middle of the booth as Fayçal sits flattening his pink coat to the seat. “Who’s the other?”

The man puts his elbows on the table and a palm to his chin in an L-shape smiling but not showing his teeth. He has a thinner frame than Fayçal, but he is the same average height.

“Fucking superfluous stairs,” Fayçal thinks to himself.

“It’s almost like your creator didn’t know that Fayçal was a girl’s name,” he said.

“Shut up,” Fayçal responded.

The Expulsion: aṭ-Ṭardu