

## Excerpts—THE SOUL SNATCHERS

*from* Chapter 1

“You want to see?”

“After you package it,” she said, too cool, back turned. She clicked off the news and went to the diagonal corner of the room, to the armchair with the end table. She rooted in her backpack and he saw her phablet come out.

He started the S wave analytics and tried to concentrate on running the job, the downside of auto jobs being that they were auto and there was no point in concentrating on them.

He glanced back to the corner, trying to gauge her annoyance. She had put on her glasses, the better to see her screen, and was tapping intently. Her glasses always did it to him—the affiliation of studious girl with hiker girl. He was fairly confident she wasn’t doing it to be irresistible. But he didn’t like the way her face changed when she focused on the screen, as though she had gone into, and away.

“Is that Ping?” he said. Two seconds. No response. Three. “Is that Ping?”

“Wundrus,” she said without looking up.

He knew she was thinking he was a relic because he wasn’t into Ping, Wundrus, Uptake, or any site, mashup, or other entity that smacked of social networking.

“Luddite,” she said out of nowhere. At least she was finally looking at him.

“I’m selectively Luddite.”

She grinned. Relief had been hard won but he’d take it. He could go back to wave analytics in peace, and she could return to Wundrus.

He didn’t understand how he could simultaneously feel old in present company and like a teenager mooning over a ghost of the past a coast away. That problem he could identify. But he had no way to understand, or anticipate, that in the space of twenty-four hours, Therica would be someone he did not know.

*from Chapter 2*

“Can we talk?” he blurted six feet behind her. “Can we—!”

She angled away, braked.

He braked.

“You know,” he gulped, “I have nothing. Against. Your friend. Enthusiast—crusader for the rights of all. Okay? The house makes sense. She’s already coming to the house.” He felt sweat popping from all glands and pores.

Therica surveyed him from her position of strength, imperious. Her jaw was set, but he detected a hint of softening around the eyes.

“Can we go back now?” he said. What was she waiting for, *please*? There was a sparkle of sweat on her upper lip, and he picked up a musky warm drift of her skin cream.

“I know why you’re saying all this,” she said.

It was the first time she had hit him, and it was perfect. They had just made the bedroom. The striped tank top had been praying on his mind, and on any normal day, their tops would have come off first. But on this special day, supercharged, it was her shorts and his jeans. He had felt the whack as he dropped his briefs. She was working out their spat in the most creative way. The sting worked on all levels, and he was happy to return the favor.

She popped the top over her hair and let it drop to the floor. Tzaro admired Therica’s southern hemisphere, its balance and proportion, but under interrogation he would have to admit it was her top that inspired and awed him like beacons of a new world, but taut and heavy in his hands when he weighed them from behind.

In the bedroom of thick, grainy evening light and shadows, they hit the sheet in a sweaty tangle. He got in a salty lick, like a lingering taste of summer.

*from Chapter 4*

The login dialog opened—not even an iris scan, pupil alignment only.

He entered the syzygy-inspired characters one by one.

“Thank you, thank you.” He appreciated her steady-headed normalcy, using the same password against all advice.

That was all he needed. He left the sophomoric splash screen of Wundrus open with its floating heads, grabbed his smart badge, and was through the door and into the old silver Tesla he had spent a fortune on maintaining but couldn’t forsake. The back of his shirt was soaked with sweat. He leaned forward to air it out and gunned it.

In the lab he rummaged furiously through the hardware on the shelves. He knew a Turbo Core reader was there somewhere, and he was right. The packet compressor enabled Spokestream to Captor. He connected her phablet to a spoke and the Captor screen opened on Wundrus.

He raised the frame rate to thirty-two per second and tapped Start. He let Captor grab screens for a full minute before he stopped the sequence. Then he punched up the first dozen of two thousand images on the MagRes monitor and started to page through. What he wanted began on page three, frame image twenty-seven. It was front and center in image twenty-eight. By twenty-nine, it was gone.

As he stared into the image, inspecting every detail, he eventually realized he had stopped breathing. His heart was doing a hard flutter.

Duration, a sixteenth of a second. He forwarded another full second, thirty-two frames. The image again, two frames. That was enough. He pulled a bubble memory pastille from a drawer and backed up the two-thousand-image output.

Shut down, disconnect. Turbo Core back to the shelf. He wanted to leave it all as it had been. Nothing else was.

*from Chapter 6*

“You were being followed,” Wilson said, deep eyes fixed on Morgan. “A guy was getting close to you when Tzaro found you. I think he had a Trakker.”

Tzaro envisioned the stalker focused on his phone with a morph-recog app, locked on to Morgan’s face and form.

She hung her head, looked back up, face glistening with sweat. From a hardness in her look, Tzaro guessed it wasn’t the first time.

“We have to catch up,” she said. “She’s probably heading for the house.”

“Not so sure.” Her apartment, the lab, anywhere, Tzaro was thinking, the image of her wild-eyed still white-hot.

“Let’s start there; we’re losing time.” Morgan was standing, ready and more.

The sirens were louder. Police were close, in the park.

He got her, completely. But he had more information. He couldn’t tell how or why, but he knew he had the key to what possessed Therica. And he was becoming chillingly aware her sudden mania was not unique. He felt his pants pocket to confirm the disc of bubble memory the thickness of an old nickel. He knew the source already, but now it meant more. It had a sudden velocity, and weight, and a range he couldn’t gauge. He knew what he knew, but it made it no easier. His assistant of the last ten months was in his heart, much more than a lab partner. A chopper whacked by overhead, deafening above the trees, and it felt to him like the thrashing in his insides.

“I need to get to the city,” he said to Wilson. “The ferry will be jammed.”

“What are you ...” Morgan started, clearly appalled.

“Listen, we can help her, but not here. There’s a reason she’s like this. And not just Therica, there are others. Trust me.”

“Where do you need to go?” Wilson asked.

“The U, there’s a professor—”

“We can use my boat. We should go now.” Wilson rose to his full height.

Tzaro had been unsure, but that Wilson had a boat struck him as a sign, if he could believe in signs.

“You’re going to freaking leave her?” Morgan was cold. “Should I be surprised.” She started back toward the clearing.

“Hey, queen of the revolution, you have no clue.”

She stopped.

“You don’t know what I’m about, or what happened to her, or what’s going on here.” He was fighting for Therica, he knew, but he was feeling nearly as possessed, going on something totally irrational, but true. “All of that I can understand and excuse. But if you think we have another option and I’m not taking it, you’re deluding yourself for your own reasons.”

Morgan was staring at him, breathing hard, fists clenched. Out of a rumble like a storm, the whacking was closing in, thundering down.

“Behind you,” Wilson shouted.

Between Morgan and the clearing, green mist was dropping, fogging the firs and cedars.

And then it was on her.

Tzaro bolted forward, grabbed her hand.

“Come on!” Wilson hopped a log and bounded easily into the deeper forest.

Tzaro’s eyes met Morgan’s. Their hands were tight.

Then they were trying to keep up with Wilson, who was nimbly dodging the broken ivy-wrapped trees and moss-green stumps in the shadows, as though everywhere he ran was Indian land.

### *from Chapter 13*

Tzaro snapped awake. They were on Portland’s Eastside, rolling to a stop at a light. GPS was talking, and then there was no talking.

“Leave me alone!”

Tzaro heard but didn’t process. He was spinning up from a former lifetime, not parsing language.

“Leave me alone!” came again sharply, a voice of desperation.

Across the street on the opposite sidewalk, a wiry male half-crouched beside a bike rack, shouting, spring-loaded, a hatchet in his hand. Svetla dropped the window a few inches.

“Leave me alone!” He shouted again and again, same volume, like a kid in a tantrum. Fifty feet from him on the sidewalk, a stocky matron with copper-tinted hair stood frozen, a toddler in tow.

“Leave me alone!”

The nanny pulled on the little boy’s hand then wrapped his shoulder, dragging him back.

The shouter fell silent, turned to his objective. He bounced the hatchet in his hand, rotated it. His first blow, hatchet head to bike lock, was measured. Having gauged the target, he hit again and then again with both hands, furious strikes, metal sparking, a controlled frenzy of blows. The lock burst into pieces on the sidewalk.

He checked both directions then lifted the bike from its slot. Hatchet in hand, he mounted and rode away in the direction the neo-nanny had come.

Tzaro knew what he had seen.

“He’s another,” he said. The sound of his own voice chilled him.

Morgan seemed to understand then, and so did Wilson. Svetla turned back with her dark eyes, now childlike.

A horn sounded behind them. Green light.

### *from Chapter 23*

A siren blasted suddenly behind them and then it was on them.

“Fuck!” Svetla lurched toward the curb and they bounced halfway onto the sidewalk. A burst of red light lit up the car, and then the howling was past them. She shot off a volley of Bulgarian curses, took a breath, and then backed onto the asphalt.

“Jesus.” Morgan had retrieved her phone from the floor and was recalibrating.

“Next is Market, am I right?” Wes had kept them in sight on R.B.

“Yeah, right on Market—one block.”

They were hearing more sirens. Svetla turned and they rolled on in silence. At the next intersection a black man in shorts and T-shirt was shining a flashlight, holding the car in the cross-street, waving Svetla through.

“Extraordinary,” the professor remarked. “A citizen.”

A firefighter? Tzaro wondered. Or a citizen extraordinary brought to life in the moment.

Another left, on Seventh.

“There it is.” Morgan identified the distant regular procession of lights as the Nimitz Freeway. Relief was palpable in the car. They were in sight of others who were moving purposefully, and safely.

Tzaro checked the streets they crossed, and as much of Oakland as he could see. A pile of bricks spilled over the sidewalk in the middle of a block. He was mainly looking for fire, seeing no sign. Soon they closed within a few blocks of the freeway.

“There will be a ramp?” Svetla asked Morgan who was peering around her seat back.

“Right, on Broadway—”

“Look out!” Wilson had an open line of sight over an empty lot, and he saw it first as they approached a cross-street.

The semi cab was not stopping. It bore down on the intersection steadily, roof alive with sparks, a rolling hallucination.

“Stop!” It could have been Morgan shouting, but it was all of them.

They were on a dead collision course.

Svetla braked and Tzaro pitched forward into his shoulder belt. The brakes grabbed and the car fish-tailed and died.

### *from Chapter 23*

Impact, sudden and dull. A plug of bark and yellow powder erupted from a pine trunk beside Wilson. Behind them, he realized, down the hill. Only a muted pock, a silencer.

“Get down!” He shoved Morgan and Svetla into the brush and the raccoons scattered. They all crashed in and flattened against the hill in the ferns and undergrowth. In a few moments Morgan lifted her head and pointed, and Tzaro followed the line of her arm. A male figure was crouching below them on the hill, a long pistol barrel visible, the expected silencer. In the pale moonlight, he broke across the drive to their side. Tzaro noticed his gate, a subtle hitch, left foot dragging.

“Cheung,” she all but gasped. “He’s after me.” She started to stand.

“What are you doing? Get down!” He pulled her into a crouch.

“Quill gave me a gun ...”

She slipped a strap off one shoulder and swung her pack around. Adrenaline charged it with too much momentum and it slipped out of her hand. Beyond them, the slope of the hill was quicker and rugged, and Morgan’s backpack glanced off rocks into a narrow ravine and rolled.

As she scrambled to retrieve it, a deafening explosion blew out of the spot on the hillside. Tzaro pulled her down flat.

*from Chapter 25*

A hall lay before them, and beyond, the light Tzaro recognized as the emanation he had seen through the side window. They edged forward into the hallway, old dark photos on the walls of California redwoods and loggers. The corridor smelled musty from closure. As they neared the end, Tzaro motioned them to stay against the right wall, out of the line of sight.

They were close, a few steps from the end of the wall, when the light wavered. A shadow broke it. The six froze as one. The shadow was followed by a hard clack, as of a plate on granite. Then a sucking sound, slight but distinct, of a refrigerator door opening. And then a rustling of plastic, and knife and plate sounds on stone. Finally the refrigerator door was closed. The shadow was moving, breaking the light again, and there was a burst of music, factory techno. Just as suddenly, silence.

Svetla was wide-eyed, reflecting the inevitable: They were not alone, a fact they had fully anticipated but which now seemed incredible. Tzaro tried to estimate at least a minute before they risked going on. Eventually he took the first step....

Morgan touched his arm and he nearly jumped. She pointed to the far end of the kitchen, and a door. He realized it was the one the shadow must have used. As they-cat-stepped toward it, they detected the same music, a hint at first and then clearly.

Svetla confirmed it. "They're in the basement."

Tzaro pulled one drawer and then another. He found two long knives and handed one to Wilson. The others armed themselves with knives that remained. Carmody appropriated a fire extinguisher from a closet.

They gathered again at the door and Tzaro put his ear to the wood. The same techno, rave music, but louder. As he leaned back and grasped the knob, he heard the percussion of his heart. His fingertips had left moist spots on the door. He turned the knob. The door opened on a stair, and the music welled to meet them.