

## Soviet Angels

### PROLOGUE

I hurt myself today  
To see if I still feel  
I focus on the pain  
The only thing that's real ...

I stood alone in the dark room, listening to the melancholy voice of Johnny Cash crooning about the pain that had haunted him throughout his entire life, a pain that I was all too familiar with. It was during his twilight years that he recorded this particular song, a song originally written by Trent Reznor and performed by his group, a rock band that went by the name Nine Inch Nails. 'Hurt' was released the same year that the great Johnny Cash passed away. It was almost as if he took everything that he had left and everything that he had been through and he channeled all of it into this one final masterpiece. Every time I hear his old, tired, yet at the same time uniquely sentimental voice, I could almost feel the deep sadness that permeated his soul; it resonated profoundly with the sadness within my own soul. It was almost as if he was reaching out through the mist of time to connect with me.

...The needle tears a hole  
The old familiar sting  
Try to kill it all away  
But I remember everything...

I picked up the small silver case on the table and opened it to reveal the contents inside: a syringe and four small vials filled with a slightly viscous, clear liquid. In this day and age, it was rare to find

such implements. Things like syringes were mostly found in museums, displayed as antiques that showcased how "barbaric" and "uncivilized" medicine used to be a few decades ago. Nowadays, most drugs work simply by applying them to the skin, but unfortunately for me, topical medication just didn't have enough strength to work on me. I was born with a very rare congenital disease called Schwartz-Ritchie disease. Due to a random mutation to my brain-derived neurotrophic factor(BDNF) gene, my frontal lobe is more active than a normal human's. This may sound harmless, maybe even beneficial, but it is not. People that are afflicted with this disease cannot get rest from their own thoughts. Their minds are always working furiously even when they are sleeping. Most people that have Schwartz-Ritchie disease are either driven into insanity by their own thoughts or commit suicide before they reach the age of twenty. I am now pushing thirty and I'm still alive and kicking. As for my sanity... the jury was still out on that one.

After confirming that everything in the case was in order, I tied a rubber band securely around my arm and, with practiced ease, I inserted the syringe into one of the veins that were clearly visible through my pale, almost translucent skin. The automatic depressor made a familiar hissing noise as it injected the syringe's payload into me. I felt a strange numbing sensation spread from my arms to the rest of my body until it finally reached my brain, but then nothing happened. To be honest, I had been expecting this. I had slowly built up resistance to various drugs over the years. As a result, I had to slowly increase the strength of the depressants I was taking in a bid to medicate myself. Unfortunately, I had reached a point where even the strongest depressant available, the poetically named "Lethe's tears", no longer had any effects on me.

....What have I become  
My sweetest friend  
Everyone I know goes away  
In the end....

Was it a coincidence? Was it just happenstance that the day I finished working on the Chronos project was the same day that I became almost completely immune to the effects of the last drug on earth that could help me? Without the drugs to help me, I would be at the mercy of my disease, doomed to a slow, inexorable descent into madness. To make matters worse, because I had been using illegal narcotics to 'medicate' myself, my physical condition has been deteriorating at an alarming rate.

Purpose. Meaning. Fate. Destiny.

Words that have so much importance attached to them. People spend their entire lives trying to figure out these elusive concepts in an attempt to explain the reason for their very existence, but I find myself constantly trying to run away from these words, constantly trying to escape from these inescapable specters that had always haunted me. Starting from the day that I lost my entire family in the great solar storm that destroyed most of North America, I have tried to hide from these words. I have always shied away from asking any existential questions, but now that end was nigh, I couldn't stop myself from venturing into the darkest depths of my mind, the black blight that had infected my soul when I was just six years old and I saw my parents and

my sister get incinerated right before my eyes.

Why? Why did something so terrible happen? Why did my family have to die in such a senseless way? Why was the world falling apart? Why did tens of thousands of innocent people die every day in the so called "aberrant natural disasters"?

Of course, once I started going down that slippery slope, my over-active mind kicked in and I couldn't stop myself from slipping further into even more murky waters.

Why were we even created in the first place? What is the purpose of the human race? Before the advent of scientific nihilism, people used to think that they were created by an all-knowing, all-powerful deity or deities, but why would such a benevolent being create such an imperfect universe? Whether it is Allah, Jehovah, Ra, Zeus or any of the many other deities that people worship, if everything was created by a god, doesn't that mean that this god was responsible for all the good and all the evil in the world? Were we created, as most religious fanatics claimed, to struggle against evil in some twisted version of a trial to test whether we pass and are deemed worthy of entering paradise or we fail and our souls are forever consigned to the depths of hell? Why would an all-knowing god even need to test the flawed things he created in the first place?

Then there is the opposite side of the spectrum; the school of thought that has risen in recent years. Since catastrophes have started ravaging our planet, most people have discarded the idea that a benevolent god is watching over us. Most people now believe that we are simply spawned from the infinite chaos. They are of the opinion that what we see as the patterns, logics, and laws that govern this universe are but a small part of a large infinite tapestry that is comprised of everything; every idea, every type of matter, every kind of energy and things we wouldn't even be able to understand.

It is difficult to visualize but imagine a canvas that stretches out forever and this canvas has been painted in every color imaginable without any rhyme or reason. On this infinite canvas, we would find the Mona Lisa, the Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, pictures of Marilyn Monroe, and every other image we can think of. Now apply the same principle to reality. If there was an infinite chaotic region, there would definitely be an area of this chaos that is identical to our universe.

People who believe in this philosophy don't care much about things like fate; their purpose in life is to just live their mortal lives until they die. They don't believe in an afterlife or a greater meaning to life.

And where do I stand in all this? My parents used to believe in God. Even when I was just a young child, my earliest memories included going to church every Sunday morning to hear stories of miracles and angels, but that was before everything started to fall apart. That was before I had to watch powerlessly as my entire family was taken away from me. I prayed so hard for a miracle, for angels to swoop down and rescue my family from the merciless flames of the solar storm. The angels never came. That day was the day that I realized that the angels

would never come. That was the day that I realized that if there was a god, he didn't give a damn. The man in the sky didn't care, but I did. Every day I saw people die and it always reminded me of my family. How many people were suffering the same torment that I was suffering? And now the worst cataclysm that the world has ever seen was going to happen unless I did something about it.

I sighed and looked out the window. I used to think that killing myself and completely erasing my very existence from the face of reality would be the hardest part of my self-appointed mission to save the world, but now that the time had come, I found myself hesitating for a completely different set of reasons.

The time for action was fast approaching .My own little one-man crusade was about to come to an end. All my plans and preparations had led to this one singular moment and all that was left was to follow through with the madness that was the final phase of my project. The time had come to take the final step, to do the unimaginable in the hope that it may lead to something that was currently missing in this world, something that was nearly impossible to find in this ravaged and dying planet; hope, hope for the future of the human race.

In a few minutes, I would activate the Chronos program and that would become my doom, but my demise might just possibly become mankind's final chance for salvation. I thought that I would feel fear at the prospect of complete annihilation, but all I felt as I stood there staring up at the breathtakingly eerie fluorescent lights that covered the velvety black sky like a magnificent blue and green silken scarf, all I felt at that moment was regret and loneliness. Staring out into the night, I felt like I was drowning in a sea of melancholic thoughts.

But that was neither here nor there. I needed to focus for what came next. There was no margin of error or second chances for what I was about to attempt, so I did everything to clear my head and to unravel the complex knot of emotions in my heart. I even meditated in the hope that it might free my soul from the jumbled web of emotions that it was trapped in. For a second, I thought that I had succeeded, but that was when the one who had weaved the web around my soul suddenly appeared from the doorway behind me ,and all of my efforts to calm myself became null and void.

"Honey? What are you doing out of bed at this ungodly hour? Come back to bed, the sheets get really cold without you."

I didn't turn around to face her. My resolution had already started to crumble the moment I heard her wonderfully warm voice; I did not think it would survive if I actually turned around, so I stubbornly stared forward, afraid to look back. Instead of facing what could quite possibly be the scariest opponent I would ever have to overcome, I desperately scrambled for a random topic to talk about in an attempt to distract her and prolong the inevitable.

"Look at this so called window Natalia. Isn't it interesting? It is not actually a real window but a computer screen programmed to display the images of the outside in real-time. Right now, I am just looking at

an image from a camera, but it feels like I'm looking at the outside world. I know that I am not actually looking at a real window, but on some level, I let myself be fooled into feeling like I am looking out a window. Does that make me a moron?"

Natalia's warm voice sounded confused as she replied, "What are you babbling about? You know that real windows haven't been used since the ozone layer broke up into small pieces way back in '28. What is this really about?"

And just like that, my attempt to make inane conversation and stave off what was coming fell flat. A smile involuntarily crept upon my face, but it wasn't a joyful or happy expression. No, it was a ghastly expression filled with pain and self-ridicule.

"You don't have to pretend anymore. You don't need to act like you care for me or love me. You have already donned this mask for far too long Natalia; it is about time you took it off."

"What are you saying Joseph?"

The warmth in her voice had vanished. She was still struggling to stay in character, but the alarm in her voice had already given her away.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and I turned around to face her. Immediately, I knew that I had made a mistake. I had assumed that because I was confronting her about her betrayal, my anger would have dulled my feelings for her, but I was monumentally mistaken. The moment she entered my sight, I felt like I always did when I looked at her, the same way I felt starting from the very first time I had met her; I felt like I was suddenly punched in the gut before being repeatedly struck by lightning.

My wife was the most beautiful person, thing, or phenomenon that I have ever been lucky enough to gaze upon. Next to her, the Aurora Afrikanis that I was looking at earlier was nothing but celestial fart that was not even worth a second glance. Every time I saw her, she quite literally stole my breath away, and even though it has already been three years since I had first met her, my reaction didn't seem to have abated in any way. If anything, it had only grown worse.

In my defense, Natalia was one of the very few people in the world to have ever received embryonic genetic restructuring; she was carefully designed to look the way she does and all I can say is that whoever was responsible for her looks deserved a raise or at least some sort of an award because he was a freaking genius.

They say that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder but I couldn't see how anyone could see Natalia and not think she was beautiful. She had amazing, shoulder length, golden hair that was almost luminescent; I could have sworn that it was lightly glowing in the dark room that was dimly lit by the artificial window. Her skin was almost pure white, but it wasn't pale or waxy. Instead, it had a pearlescent quality that made her look holy and wholesome. Her eyes were not colorful like the exotic eyes of most of the people that received genetic restructuring; instead,

they were a pair of deep brown orbs that were nearly black which sounds completely unremarkable, but her eyes were like two bottomless pits that could draw anyone into their depth and I would often find myself lost in the profound world that resided in them. If anybody manages to extricate themselves from these two portals into infinity, then they would find that the features surrounding these two magical gems were perfectly symmetrical and perfectly proportional, the perfect setting to set off two such miraculous jewels. I doubt there was an artist that could have done a better job even if he was drawing a goddess. Her face was absolutely mesmerizing and it was perched upon her gracefully arching neck that could only be described as swan like. Beneath that was a body that was muscular but not buff, compact but not slim, sexy but not obscene, and all of these attributes were on clear display since all she was wearing was one of my shirts.

It took me a while but I eventually recovered the use of my body and that ugly self-mocking smile was back on my face, "It's okay, I have always known that you were an agent for the Human Race Preservation Agency. I have always known that I was nothing but a mission to you, but I still married you and let myself fall in love with you. Like this window, you are just pretending to be something you are not, but I allowed myself to be fooled, to enjoy a fantasy. Does that make me a moron?"

"You have to listen to me Joseph. It is not what you think. I am an agent for the HRP, but I really do love you," Her beautiful face was scrunched up in alarm and her voice was actually panicky when she was talking. I could almost believe that she was telling the truth. Hell, I almost wanted to hug her and tell her everything was okay, but I couldn't do that because of what was in her hands.

"I want to believe you Natalia, but it is really hard for me to do so when you have a gun pointed at my nose."

Natalia waved the gun dismissively as if it didn't matter. "What, you mean this? This is nothing, just a little precaution in case you come to a wrong conclusion and overreact. Instead of worrying about this, you should consider these," she held up two strips of golden paper so I could clearly see the big red 'ARK' written on top, "You see these? Two first class tickets aboard the Ark. We could leave this damned planet behind, just you and me. I'll quit the HRP and we can live the rest of our lives in peace, maybe have some children. This is our happily ever after. Just say yes, Joseph. All you have to do is agree. "

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to abandon my plan and follow her into the dream she was describing, but my conscience wouldn't allow it.

"It is funny that they are calling it the Ark. Most people probably wouldn't get the biblical reference since religion has been banned for years now. The full name should be Noah's Ark, right? The giant ship that delivered Noah and his family from the great flood; it is fitting that this ship has the same name. Funny thing is, there was no second Noah's Ark back then and there wouldn't be one now, right? I know the HRP is spouting nonsense about saving all of humanity, but anybody who pays attention to these things will know that there aren't enough resources to make another ship. In addition to that, you and I both know

that the launch of such a massive ship will damage our already fragile planet. The earth will not survive once the Ark launches. All that would be left in the Ark's wake will be meteorites, debris, and frozen dead bodies floating out in space."

"How do you...? Never mind. Look, this planet is already doomed. We can't save everyone so we chose to save who we can."

"So you will sacrifice nearly three billion people to save a few hundred."

Natalia was frowning hard as she tried to explain to me why mass genocide was a good thing. "We don't have a choice Joseph. It is either this or everybody dies."

I smiled at Natalia and this time it wasn't the ugly thing from before, but instead, it was a smile filled with pride and accomplishment. "That is not necessarily true. I have a way to solve everything."

That surprised her. Although there was some skepticism evident in her expression, she still asked, "How Joseph? How can you save everyone?"

I made a gesture with my left hand and a podium slowly rose up from the ground. On top of it was a silver metal seat with something that looked like a spaghetti strainer on top. "This is the answer, a time machine."

"A time machine? That is foolishness Joseph. We have already explored this option and it leads nowhere. Anyone that attempts to change the past creates a paradox and is erased by the forces that govern the universe. If you try to do it, you will also share the same fate."

I gestured again and a two arks of electricity appeared like two swimming dragons, trapping Natalia in their midst. I calmly walked to the metal chair and sat down. I carefully put the spaghetti strainer which had wires coming out of it onto my head. "I believe I can avoid that problem. I am not actually trying to send myself back in time per say. Sending oneself back in time is a profoundly stupid thing to do and I am well aware of this fact. Instead of sending myself back, I will be sending back pieces my consciousness in the form of takyons in the hope that they might find appropriate hosts. As for the paradox problem, that wouldn't really matter because these little pieces of my consciousness will be unstable. By the time the feedback from the universe arrives, they would have already disappeared. This means that when the universe tries to restore equilibrium, I'll have already been completely erased from existence, so there will be no paradox. Causality will be preserved."

Natalia was still pointing her gun at me, but I could tell that it was more of a reflex action than anything else. Her face was filled with alarm and shock as she looked on in horror. "Joseph, please listen to me. What you are doing now will jeopardize what little we have left."

What you are doing now could destroy everything! Stop this madness! If you have ever loved me, please don't do this!"

I looked at her, unfazed. Now that the final moment had approached, I felt a strange calm settle upon me. "Are you going to shoot me Natalia?"

Tears ran down Natalia's cheeks as she threw the gun away. "Joseph, why are you doing this? This is suicide! Our future is already secure; it is waiting for us aboard the ark. Why are you doing this? Why are you risking so much for people you have never met? Why are you throwing everything away for strangers who have done nothing for you?"

I started to flick the switches that would start the Chronos program and the seat underneath me started to softly hum. "I know this is suicide Natalia. I know that even if I succeed in changing this timeline, my existence will become too improbable and I will be gone forever. But it will be worth it. As to why I am risking 'what little we have left' as you so aptly put it; you are willing to kill billions of people to save a scant few, why are you surprised that I am willing to risk a scant few to save billions?"

That was when Natalia did something that scared the crap out of me. She ignored the dangerous looking force field around her and took a step forward. One of the two electric dragons collided with her chest, but instead of electrocuting her, it passed right through her and came out of her back, leaving her unharmed. For a second, she just stood there, frozen in shock. "It wasn't real?"

I couldn't help but laugh when I saw the look of wonder and disbelief on her face. "It was just a hologram. Funny thing is, even now, I can't bear to see you get hurt. Well, I guess this is goodbye. You don't have to worry Natalia. I know that you might not exist in the alternate future I will create, but for some inexplicable reason, something tells me you will. I hope you will have a better life in the new future Natalia. I hope you will find someone that you will love as much as I loved you."

Before Natalia could react, I pressed the final button and the Chronos program activated. The last thing I saw before my mind was swallowed by unimaginable pain was Natalia frantically running towards me. She had almost reached me when a wave of blue light suddenly threw her back so violently that she hit the opposite wall and slid down motionlessly onto the floor.