

Chp.1

Feb 4th, 13:00hrs local. Apartment block 5, City of Pripyat, near Chernobyl, northern Ukraine.

Ilyana Cherenkov stood on the steps to her building, stretching in preparation to her afternoon run. There were no tour groups during the winter, most of the 4,000 workers were either busy over at the nuclear plant or snug in the workers village miles away, so she was only dressed in running shoes, 'yoga' pants and a sports bra top.

Putting in the earbuds to her radiation-hardened Mp3 player she set off at a slow jog to warm up. A brief flurry of snow drifted down as her footsteps echoed through the empty streets, melting against her lead-grey skin as she dodged around the scrubby trees forcing their way up through the cracked concrete road, running to the beat of 'Building Steam'...

*I, I've suffered long enough in this ghost town
I saw the walls, called their bluff and took them down*

*When I think of all the time I've wasted
All the bitter pills I've tasted
I have to hang my head and frown
I, I've suffered long enough in this ghost town*

43 minutes later, Back In Black playing as she rounded the empty-eyed husk of the city sports centre, Ilyana glanced at her wrist watch, noting her vitals... Pulse 97bpm, temp 65 C, radiation output 150 sievert per hour. Out of a corner her eye she noticed movement and slowed to a walk... she'd surprised a wolf pack only last month. They'd stalked towards her hackles raised and growling until they got within a few dozen feet, then the lead wolf had sniffed, whined and slunk away quickly followed by the rest of them... Ilyana had made a note in her journal for that day to ask if anyone had done some research into adaptations and whether the surviving wolves that called the Chernobyl exclusion zone home were evolving to sense radiation.

Looking around Ilyana stopped and saw what had caught her eye, reflected in a broken window across the street she could see a quadcopter drone buzzing along behind her at rooftop height, catching up.

Oh marvelous, one of Gregori's toys following me. What does he think he's doing, hoping to catch something for U-Vid again? She thought.

Ilyana waited for the drone to catch up, doing knee bends and stretches, and trying not to think how she looked ankle deep in snow, in -40 degree weather.

Unexpectedly, the little red and white drone came to a hover a few feet from her, and flashing it's LED lights lowered down to her eye line. Head of security, Gregori Ivanov's dry precise voice was recognisable despite the tiny speaker.

<<Comrade Doctor Cherenkov, you are wanted at the main building!>>

Ilyana sighed inwardly, Gregori sounded like a Bond villain and he hammed it up to the tourists during the summer season, playing the 'good' Soviet Comrade.

<<Gregori, there are no tourists around for you to intimidate, and the soviet union is no more... call me that again and I'll come over to your office and give you a big hug.>>

The drone wobbled and backed away a few inches, probably as a result of his fingers twitching on the controls, causing her to regret the threat immediately.

<<I'm sorry Gregori, it's been a bad day for me online.>>

Geogori's 'Tsk' was audible despite the drone's speaker... <<Another internet troll Ilyana? When will you learn to stop reading the comments on your blog? Should I have someone sort it out for you?>>

The fond exasperation in his voice was unmistakable, no wonder the workers who's safety he oversaw chuckled and called him bol'shoy brat, or Big Brother in English... and didn't just mean his habit of having eyes everywhere.

Ilyana dredged up a weak smile.. <<No Gregori, no sending one of your cossacks around to break someone's knee caps just for calling me bad names. Not today anyway. What do my fellow comrade scientists what with me? Am I to go crawling around in the Sarcophagus again, doing science for the glory of Mother Russia?>>

Gregori laughed, briefly...as he been told more than a few times that his laugh was spine chillingly menacing to those that didn't know him. But when he spoke again his voice was flatly sober even for him.

<<No Comrade Doctor, not today. We have an Americanski visitor who wishes to see you urgently. There's been an... event... and they need you.>>

Ilyana suddenly felt chilled to her core despite the nuclear furnace inside her. As a member of the Atomic Disaster Response team, a visitor like this could only mean that somewhere in the world, something had gone horribly, catastrophically wrong, people had died, and the atomic demon was loose.

Without further word, Ilyana turned on her heel and began to sprint flat out, her nearly 200Kg of mass producing a thundering beat, each thudding footstep ringing through the abandoned city. Snow whipped around her, melting and steaming off her body as it responded to the exercise by increasing the chain reaction taking place in her very bones and organs, turning radiation into metabolic fuel for her muscles. Within minutes an eerie blue glow fought against the weak sunlight as Cherenkov radiation streamed out of her, evidence of the nuclear reactor that lived within her.

Ch.2

Feb 4th 14:45hrs, Decontam unit, Admin building, Chernobyl Nuclear Power plant

Ilyana was still in the decontamination room towelling her carbon-black hair dry when she heard voices on the other side of the frosted glass partition. Swiping her face she peered at the dimly seen shapes, the blur of brown and olive green was probably Gregori, who seemed to be giving the third degree to whomever was wearing the mostly blue uniform. Ilyana stifled her curiosity, there was a button to turn the glass perfectly clear on **this** side of the floor-to-ceiling partition, but her containment suit was still on it's rack across the room, and she wasn't about to greet a visitor wearing nothing but lingerie, if one could call 'granny pants' and a white sports bra that.

Ilyana moved closer to the glass, mindful of it's not-quite opaqueness [thanks to an embarrassing incident when she'd leaned against it while showering, with a room full of technicians on the other side.] but the heavy, inches-thick, lead glass effectively muffled what they were saying. Apart from it being in English, maybe, all she could tell was that Gregori was using his ever-so polite, cold, and unfortunately quiet, voice which usually meant he was angry about something or someone was being stupid... or far too often, both.

Ilyana sighed, it wasn't boding well, and thankful for her quick-drying short hair, threw the towel into the waste chute. As quickly as she could she yanked the silver dexflan and who-knows-what suit over her still damp arms and legs, wriggling her fingers into the integral gloves. With a motion worn smooth by practice she pinched the edges of the vrip front seam closed, starting at a point just above her mons pubis and sliding her hand up, over her body, to just under her chin, closing and activating the suit. A slight cool flush and tightening of the super-gizmotronic fabric told her the interior coolant system had come online, and the universally recognised yellow & black trefoil warning sign for radiation glowed into life on her chest and back indicating the containment field was on and the seals good.

Stomping her silver-clad feet into a pair of Soviet-Russian military issue boots, she snagged her leather and webbing 'utility' or tool belt that her mother had sent her the Christmas before last, [having noticed that the containment suit didn't have pockets, and listened to Ilyana rant via Skype about how uncomfortable trousers worn over the suit were], and hit the control that cycled the decontamination room's triple airlock doors.

On the wall immediately facing the airlock door was a full length mirror, meant for 'dignity checks', and leaning next to that was a young woman. *More like a teenager*, Ilyana thought, *she's what.. 18, 19 maybe?*

She was smoothly curved, svelte, long limbed with a waterfall of bright electric-blue hair with acid green highlights spilling down past a heart-shaped face, to her waist. She was clad neck to toes in a slick shiny-surfaced dexflan suit that was mostly dark blue with a white chevron belt at the waist and what looked like black thigh-high boots.

It's like she's never even heard of fetish wear, Ilyana thought, *did they paint that suit on, or does it stretch to fit?* She herself knew there were websites out there dedicated to fetish versions of popular soups outfits, and worse, but this outfit looked like the girl had bought it from one of those... and she couldn't be wearing anything else under the dexflan.

Still, Ilyana couldn't help be struck by the difference between her angular silver clad reflection and the confident and at-ease young woman who seemed to be made of all smooth curves... and then

realised that whomever she was, she'd taken a couple of steps forward and was holding out her hand.

Ilyana glanced down at the girl's out-stretched hand, then back up to meet her light green eyes. Ilyana raised an eyebrow and tapped the radiation sign on her chest, shaking her head slightly. She didn't do handshakes any more, or touching people if it could be avoided.

<<Privet tovarishch , menya zovut Siniy Blaze. Mne nravitsya byt' vashim pomoshchnikom.>> The girl said in badly accented Russian, turning the aborted hand-shake into a wave.

“English if you please.. Blue Blaze? I take it that's your nickname, and you say you're to be my... aide?” Ilyana asked, her eyes flicking sideways at where Gregori stood, at attention as usual.

Blaze also glanced at Gregori, and Ilyana was struck how the security chief had to look to the American soup. He seemed to have been chiselled out of granite instead of born, hard-muscled and tall with greying hair close-cropped against a blocky skull. Face all angular planes except for the livid scar running from the corner of his mouth to the corner of his eye, twisting his mouth into a permanent sneer.

“Gregori if you please, us girls need some privacy.” Ilyana said, her eyes pleading with him not to tease the girl too much.

Gregori smiled tight lipped, his steel tooth winking through the slight gap caused by the scar; <<Da tovarishch Doktor!>>

Somehow managing to draw himself up even straighter, he inclined a slight bow in their direction and clicked his heels before matching off hands clasped behind his back, looking every inch the Russian military aristocrat he wasn't really.

Blue Blaze didn't quite manage to suppress a slight shudder before turning back to Ilyana, who was doing her best not to grin. Gregori damned well knew she'd recognise the 'General Ivan' act from the Japanese animé he loved and she pirated for him.

“So.. what is this all about then Ms Blaze.” Ilyana asked.

The young soup visibly collected herself: “Ah, yes.. we need your help. There's been three unusual nuclear incidents and SPOON wants you to use your expertise. “

Ilyana raised an eyebrow. “SPOON does know I'm not their dog to come when they whistle?”

Blaze nodded, “It's ok, since it's nuclear related, Granny Whammy cleared it though the Atomic Disaster Response directorate and the U.N. Besides, we really do need your help, no-one knows what's causing this! There's a ziplin waiting to transport you to the US. I can brief you on the way.”

Ilyana's eyebrows both climbed towards her forehead, ziplins were the modern descendent of zeplins, via some technology that better belonged in an American NASCAR, instead of a flying machine that was basically fabric wrapped around flimsy struts and enough hydrogen gas to make it a potent bomb. They were rare, probably dangerous, but the fastest way of moving moderately heavy cargo long distances... and not used unless necessary.

“We do have a shielded Antonov cargo plane you know.” Ilyana pointed out...

“That old thing?” Blaze waved dismissively, “The ziplin's way faster and there's a shielded compartment for you and a cabin for me. Although why we couldn't use a teleporter...”

Repressively Ilyana interrupted. “Because teleportation of nuclear material is illegal, and I am that. They do not make exceptions to this rule just for me.”

Blaze shrugged and turning on her heel started to stride, almost bouncing, towards the door... only to stop and look enquiringly at Ilyana when she realised that the older woman wasn't following her.

“I have not said I will come. Nor have I agreed to you being my aide, whatever you think that means. And I do not take orders from Americanski devushka who is almost young enough to be my daughter.”

“But Granny Wham...” she started to say.

“I **do not** work for your Babushka Sglaz, or SPOON. So, you want my help? Then I am in charge. You take my orders young lady and we do things **MY** way. Is clear, Da?!” Ilyana did not shout, but she had no doubt that Gregori could probably hear from outside, despite the thick doors.

Blaze's eyes were wide, as Ilyana by now was standing toe-to-toe with her, leaning in and down so their noses nearly touched. To her credit, Blaze stood stock still, back straight, arms by her side and her eyes fixed on some point a thousand yards behind Ilyana as she crispy said “Sir, yes Sir! Like crystal Sir!”

Ilyana stepped back, and studied the young American soup, who was standing at attention in a textbook perfect parade-ground position. Inwardly she sighed.

“So.. you are too young to have served I think, military family yes?” she asked.

“Sir, yes Sir! My father served in the Marine corps sir!” Blaze replied, eyes still fixed, barely moving a muscle.

Ilyana pinched the bridge of her nose. “Oh stop this.. neither of us are in military. At ease or whatever it is.. and what is your **real** name, not stupid 'superhero' name?”

“Si...um, I mean, my legal name's Chelsea and sorry. Dad was pretty authoritarian when we were growing up. You sounded military. It's kind of a reflex.” Chelsea looked at Ilyana hesitantly. “I like being called Blue Blaze though... I'm a speedster. So when I run it kinda looks like a blue streak going past, only I couldn't call myself The Streak!”

Ilyana groaned silently, *Bozhe moy! They've sent a child to watch over me!*

Chelsea/Blaze said in small voice. “I am 21. Legally adult, not a child. Even if this is my first official mission for SPOON.”

Ilyana looked up startled, and then realised she'd spoken out-loud. With a sigh she said; “Forgive me... Blaze. I spend too much time alone and forget my manners. Of course you are not a child. I was younger than you when I started. Perhaps we can, do-over, as you say? Tell me what has happened as we walk to this ziplin yes?”

Blaze smiled, her face lighting up enough that Ilyana wondered if her nickname came before her powers.

Ch.3

Feb 4th 16:00 GMT, 0900 EST, 210 miles east of US controlled airspace, on approach to Newark.

Ilyana lounged on the pale grey leather sofa, sipping the excellent white wine she'd found in the minibar. Grudgingly, she had to admit that this ziplin at least, was far better than the greasy, deafeningly noisy, bare metal box that was the Antonov 124 she normally travelled in.

Blue Blaze had chattered about the case on the way to the airfield, where the pilot of the sleek dolphin-like craft had been happy to answer her questions. Apparently this was one of the newer 3rd generation craft. It used a graphite aero-gel matrix to render the hydrogen safe, as the pilot happily demonstrated by playing a blowtorch over a ball of the odd lighter-than-air material. It had glowed, a bit, but by the time Ilyana cupped it in her hand in order to prevent it floating away, it hadn't even been warm.

Ilyana had to admit to herself at least, the pilot had been as much the reason she'd boarded the craft as the science. His voice reminded her of old cowboy movies, she could just see him with a Stetson riding the range on horseback, and his easy confident manner reassured her more than anything else.

With a guilty start, she chided herself for being seduced away from duty by decant capitalist-materialistic comforts, as Gregori would probably say, and picked up the slim folders from the [real walnut-wood!] table.

Ilyana had managed to piece together much of what had happened from what Blaze had said on the way to the airfield, although she was seriously wondering how useful her 'aide' would be as she seemed to be unable to converse coherently with her, she was so overcome with nerves... and had fled to her forward cabin in apparent terror shortly after take-off. Ilyana sighed, she would either get over it or not.

Still, to the matter in hand. She thought. Three incidents, one involving civilian fatalities. All apparently the result of a massive but brief, highly directional, burst of high-energy radiation. The casualties had been vaporised in an instant, mercifully, their outlines burnt into nearby surfaces in a few microseconds, as the top few centimetres of the surface had been heated to hundreds of degrees and then the blast had blown the carbon soot of their bodies onto it, fusing their silhouettes to the rock.

The results were nearly identical to the effect produced by the flash from a nuclear bomb, only without the blast effects. There also seemed to be little radiant heat as well, the only heat coming from the neutron flux itself.

As well as not knowing how this very selective blast was achieved, the current theory being it was a new soup who's power was flickering disastrously out of control, the authorities couldn't easily collect forensic evidence from the sites as the affected surfaces were highly radioactive. In fact, so far they'd been lucky in that all three blasts had impacted rocky mountainsides, limiting the hot zone to the immediate area and only penetrating the rock a few dozen metres. Ilyana shuddered as she imagined the fan shaped blast scything for miles through a town instead...

In the meantime, she studied the photographs taken though a long-range telephoto lens, and the measurements taken using robotic probes.... and tried not to enjoy the comforts of the luxury cabin too much.

In the forward cabin Chelsea McMasters, aka Blue Blaze, was wishing it was possible to die of embarrassment. She'd been so proud and happy to receive her first official SPOON assignment, determined to do her best and prove to everyone that could hack it as a cape. On the flight over she'd read Ms Cherenkov's case file, and then googled for whatever other information she could find.

Nothing had prepared Blaze for the force of her personality that came with the superbly muscled and toned body. Already off-balance thanks to the goose-stepping gulag guard running security, she'd been mentally and emotionally bowled over by the force of nature that had stepped out of the shower room.

Blaze knew she'd babbled like an idiot, making a total hash of everything, panicking when it seemed like Ms Cherenkov would refuse to help because of her... and then she'd stood **so close** to her that she could feel Ilyana's hot breath on her face, smell the odd musky/metallic scent of her, and she'd just gone... old reflexes kicking in as Ms Cherenkov chewed her out, justifiably so!

As Ms Cherenkov had talked, not shouted but forcefully, Blaze had felt her will slipping away, her body sliding into that warm comfortable state of completely malleable passivity she knew so well...

Blaze had known what she was like since she was 14, when one of the few female Rangers had been invited one day to teach Blaze's class self-defence. She'd been mesmerised watching this supremely self-confident woman moving with powerful precision and self-assurance. Hers had been the first hand up to volunteer, as she hadn't guessed what the butterfly stirrings in the pit of her belly had meant. But, when the tall, tautly muscled Ranger had thrown her, pinning her to the mat by her shoulders, Blaze had gazed up lost in the older woman's eyes, as her adolescent body exploded in her first climax...

To this day, Blaze blushed at that memory, nobody had ever said anything, the other girls probably thought she'd been winded, but she **knew** that the female Ranger had known, she'd seen the surprise, disgust and embarrassment flicker across her face, and not meeting her eyes afterwards Blaze had begged off the rest of the lesson, slinking to the school-nurses office with a fake shoulder injury.

Now here she was, years later after she'd come out and accepted her submissive side... and she'd been involuntarily slipping away into 'sub-space' as Ms Cherenkov had torn a strip off her with good reason. Making the same mistake again... rolling over for someone who'd never understand the nature of power-play and would just treat her as a doormat.

Then Ms Cherenkov had shockingly stepped back, apologised and softly asked in her lyrically accented English if they could 'do-over'...

And that was it for Blaze... she'd retained just enough self-awareness to realise she was crushing on Ilyana **hard**. But the entire way to the airfield she'd been floating along in a blissful bubble of hopelessly, wildly inappropriate fantasy.

Which had popped once the reality of heading back had set in, and she'd fled to her cabin. Because she knew, without a shadow of doubt, that Ms Cherenkov could ask her to do anything, and she'd willingly comply no matter what it was... and it was supposed to be her job to 'ride herd' as Granny Whammy had put it, on the Russian soup instead!

Now Blaze was terrified she'd say or do something so very, very wrong, completely stuffing up her mission... and at top of that long, long list was giving even the slightest hint to anyone of just how hard she was falling for the woman she'd have to be shepherding around for the next few days!

Blaze went into the toilet and running a sink full of cold water dunked herself face first into it. Once she couldn't hold her breath any longer she raised her head and looked her reflection straight in the eyes.

*Blaze, she thought, you are **not** some hormonal teenager any more. For Kthulu's sake, get a hold of yourself woman! Your job is to assist and support one of the most powerful well-known Russian soups. You are **NOT** going to seduce her, even if she **does** mash down hard on all your buttons!*

*I wonder if she's deliberately going for that hard-body Butch look? **NO**, stop that. Bad Blaze! She admonished herself, No speculation as to her orientation, no, nothing personal. You will be professional about this. You are a representative of SPOON whom Granny Whammy has entrusted with a mission, well two missions really, to help out someone whose expertise we need, and to set a good example for all those many, many Russian crickets watching one of the most 'out' soups they have, hopefully enticing a few more to sign up to SPOON.*

*Besides... you don't even know if she **can** get close to anyone, much less which way she swings!* Blaze regarded her still slightly dripping face and smiled wryly at herself.
It's always the ones you can't have that get to you the hardest isn't it?! Ever since Alicea.

With a sigh Blaze remembered her first real crush, Alicea, she'd met at college. In retrospect she'd been one of those privileged mean girls that used people at best, and treated them as enemies at worst. Blaze had fallen for her, and for 4 months had done her every bidding, and the older girl had accepted her fawning as her due. Then came the accident that gave Blaze super speed, and turned her hair from fiery red to blue & green... and Alicea had revealed herself as a complete fork bigot, calling her every name she could think of and outing her to everyone, including Blaze's father.

To this day, Blaze wasn't certain what her father hated most about her, the fact she was gay, a soup, or the fact that she'd refused to join the Specials Force and serve alongside the other super-powered soldiers.

Blaze scrubbed her face with the fluffy towel and sighed. No, no way could any kind of 'liaison' with this Russian woman end well. The Russian Federation had a reputation for only tolerating soups if they were useful. Ok, Ms Cherenkov got away with being openly a soup and a blueplate at that, not that she had a choice, because she was frellin hero a couple of times over and had the medals to prove it.

A thought struck her then, just how much digging would the Russian forks do into **her** background? The fact that she was gay was well known, and not a problem in America at least... but not even SPOON knew that she got some of her income after her father had thrown her out, by running a moderately successful fetish-wear business online. *And*, she thought ruefully, *wouldn't Alicea just **burn** if she knew that sitting in her fashion-design classes taking notes for her made that possible!*

Blaze shrugged... Junket had shown her how to route her income through several proxies, and while what she did wasn't illegal, she made sure to cover her tracks and paid her taxes promptly and in full. It seemed unlikely to her that there would be any repercussions.