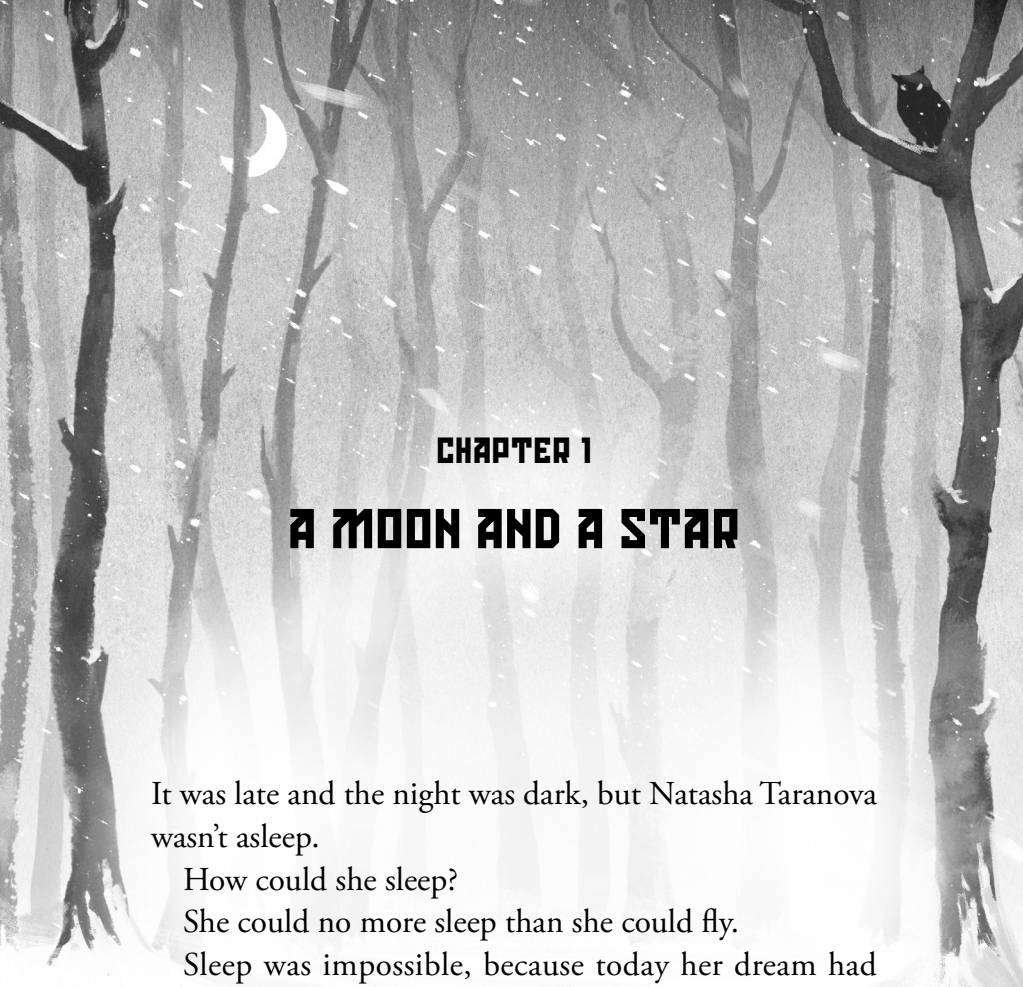


## CHAPTER 1

# A MOON AND A STAR

It was late and the night was dark, but Natasha Taranova wasn't asleep.

How could she sleep?

She could no more sleep than she could fly.

Sleep was impossible, because today her dream had come true. That very morning, the morning of her seventh birthday, her mama had tied a scarf around her eyes and led her by the hand into the living room of their small flat. And though Natasha had hoped and longed, she still had not quite believed.

Then she heard the frantic snuffling and she *knew*.

"Put out your hands," her papa said. And then Natasha's arms were full of warm, squirming softness, and the

softness barked. Mama pulled off the scarf and Natasha felt the greatest happiness ever experienced by any child since the world began.

The puppy's coat was pure white, white as the first fall of winter snow. It had a foxy face, its muzzle long and thin, tipped with a moist, black nose. And there was something strange and magical about its eyes. One was blue, an icy blue, to complement its snowy fur. The other was a soft brown, like the earth under the snow.

"What's he called?" Natasha cried.

Papa was about to speak, but Mama put her finger over his mouth.

"That's up to you, darling. And the puppy's not a he but a she."

Natasha pondered for a moment or two. Then the name appeared in her mind and made its way to her lips.

"Zoya! Her name is Zoya!"



"A good name," said Mama, and Papa nodded.

Later that day, he brought back a collar, with a little brass name tag on it.

"Here," he'd said. "Z-O-Y-A. And look, there's a crescent moon and a star. The moon is for love and the star is for luck. This will be a lucky dog and a loved one."



Now, long into the night, Natasha could still barely believe that she had a beautiful puppy. Ripples of delight travelled up and down her body, from her toes to her scalp.

She was also a little angry and upset. Somehow the anger did not drive out the excitement, but lived together with it, like two old women who hated each other but lived in the same house in the woods.

The trouble had started when Papa told her that the puppy was not allowed to sleep in her room.

"It's bad enough she gets to come inside the flat," he said, yanking at his black moustache the way he did when he was annoyed. "When I was a boy, dogs lived in the yard. A dog had one job: to bark when the wolves came."

"Did wolves come often?" said Natasha, her voice touched with both doubt and fear.

"If the winter was bad, they came out of the forest. And the winter was always bad in the olden days.

The snow they have now! Pah! A decent fart would blow it away."

Mama slapped the top of his arm but couldn't hold back a smile. "Such language in front of a little girl!"

"Seven is not little," said Natasha. "I'm a big girl!"

Papa smiled too, and said, "Ha, so it is, and so you are."

But Natasha was still thinking of the wolves. "And did the dogs fight the wolves?" she asked.

"Fight? A dog doesn't fight a wolf. A dog is dinner for a wolf. Or worse."

Natasha's eyes opened wide. "What is worse than to be dinner?"

"There are worse things, my *big* girl."

"But Zoya isn't a dog for barking at wolves. She's my puppy!"

"I have spoken," said Papa.

Natasha bit her lip. She knew that her papa was a kind man, and a humorous one, but it was unwise to push him too far.

So that was why little Zoya was sleeping in a basket in the kitchen, and not where she belonged, on Natasha's bed.

Natasha tried to think about all the fun they would have tomorrow. She would begin training the puppy. That would show Papa. Even he would be impressed when Zoya learned to sit, to lie down, to come when she was called. Once Papa saw what a good dog she was,

then he would let them sleep together, keeping each other warm through the cold nights, when the wolves prowled outside.

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, Natasha heard the doorbell, followed by roars and shouts. It was Papa's friends from his army days. Every few months they would come round, and it would mean drinking and stories late into the night. She heard Papa's voice summoning her to come and say hello, and not to be rude. The boys had come specially to wish her a happy birthday.

She ran first to the kitchen and Zoya jumped into her arms, licking her face and making a funny squeaking noise that was as close as she could get to a bark. Then Natasha walked proudly into the living room, bearing both her puppy and a smile as wide as her face.

The room was full of men, some broad and big, like her father; some thin and haggard. One man always frightened her because there was only a pink stump where his right hand should be. Natasha didn't like to look at him, didn't want to think about the terrible thing that must have happened to him in the war.

Mama brought black tea and little cakes, and with her the rough men were gentle and courteous, as they were with Natasha. The man with one hand gave Natasha a little bag of Clumsy Bear chocolates. Each wrapper had a beautiful painting of a mother bear and three cubs playing in the forest. Natasha felt ashamed of her fear and put extra effort into her "thank you".

But she was relieved when the birthday wishes were over, and the last of the men had stroked her hair and pressed a few roubles into her hand, and she could go back to bed.

"No, leave that dog!" ordered Papa as she edged towards the door, still clinging tightly to the puppy. "I know your tricks! And these gentlemen would like to look her over, to see if one day she will make a good guard dog, or a hunter, or a wolf killer!"

Natasha wanted to say that her Zoya would be none of these things. But she was too tired to argue and she handed Zoya over. The puppy struggled a little, then went limp in Papa's rough hands, and Natasha dragged herself to bed.

She lay back down in the dark, but she could still hear Papa and the other men, their voices rising and falling like the sound of the sea. The sea-voices had lulled her almost to sleep, when she heard her papa say the name Zoya. Once again, she was wide awake.

"Aye, she's a pretty creature," said one man.

"A Samoyed?" asked another.

"Yes and no," said Papa.

"Ach," laughed the man, "you've never given a straight answer in your life. If I was drowning and asked you for a hand, you'd reply, 'Left or right?', and if I said 'left', you'd say, 'My left or your left?'"

All the men laughed in a good-natured way.

"Fine, fine," said Papa. "But you're a simpleton,

Dimitri, and life is never simple. The dog is Samoyed with something a little more . . . *wild* in there too."

"Wolf?"

"Perhaps, perhaps."

Another man laughed. Natasha thought it might be the man with one hand. "That's no wolf-dog. These dog dealers, they say anything. They have a nice Samoyed, pretty as a princess, and some local street dog gets at her. Rather than drown the litter, the breeder takes you to one side and tells you the pups are part wolf, so you get all excited thinking you've got something special."

"Maybe, maybe," said Papa. "But look at those eyes: one dog, one wolf!"

"Nonsense. I had a dog with one brown and one blue, and it had no more wolf than it had monkey in it."

"Listen," said Papa, "the breeder didn't try to con me. He said she wasn't pure Samoyed and that's why I got a good price. His story was that the wolf, if there was one, was back somewhere in the line. And that's good. A wolf-dog is a monster, not one thing or the other. But here, with this little lady, there's enough wolf to make her . . . *interesting*, but not enough for her to tear your throat out while you sleep, eh!"

Natasha gave a gasp but the sound was lost in the rumble of the men's laughter.

The talk then turned away from dogs, and back to politics and war and money, and soon sleep came. Natasha's dreams were full of wolves: of wolves coming

from the forest to eat her, of her own brave Zoya-wolf who protected her. She dreamed that the wolves were scratching at her door, and then she woke and heard that it was true. For a few seconds she felt panic rising and she clutched the blankets to her face. But as the waking world came back, she knew what the sound was. She crept to the door and opened it and picked up Zoya with a silent shriek of joy.

Closing the door softly, she carried the puppy back to her bed, whispering into her ear. "Now, quiet as a mouse, quiet as two mice. And no howling, my little wolf."

Zoya was enraptured with the new world of the bed, pawing at the white covers and shoving her long nose under the pillows. But soon the excitement of the day gave way to exhaustion and the puppy curled up on Natasha's feet.

"Now, my love, my darling," Natasha said with a yawn, "we must sleep, because tomorrow I have to teach you all the tricks, so that Papa will love you as much as I do."



A little before 1.30 a.m., during the course of routine maintenance and testing, Reactor Number 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear plant exploded. The two high metal towers, and the huge square-shouldered reactor buildings glowed red, and then dimmed as the ash fell, and then glowed again, like the slow breathing of a sleeping dragon.

The explosion was just ten kilometres away from the neat and well-ordered town of Pripyat, with its smart apartment buildings and its fifteen primary schools, one of which Natasha attended and where her father was the caretaker. And just out of town there was the new, still unopened funfair with its merry-go-round and bumper cars, and the tall Ferris wheel, all shining with hope for the future.

Only one member of the family would ever see any of these things again.