

SNOW AND IRON

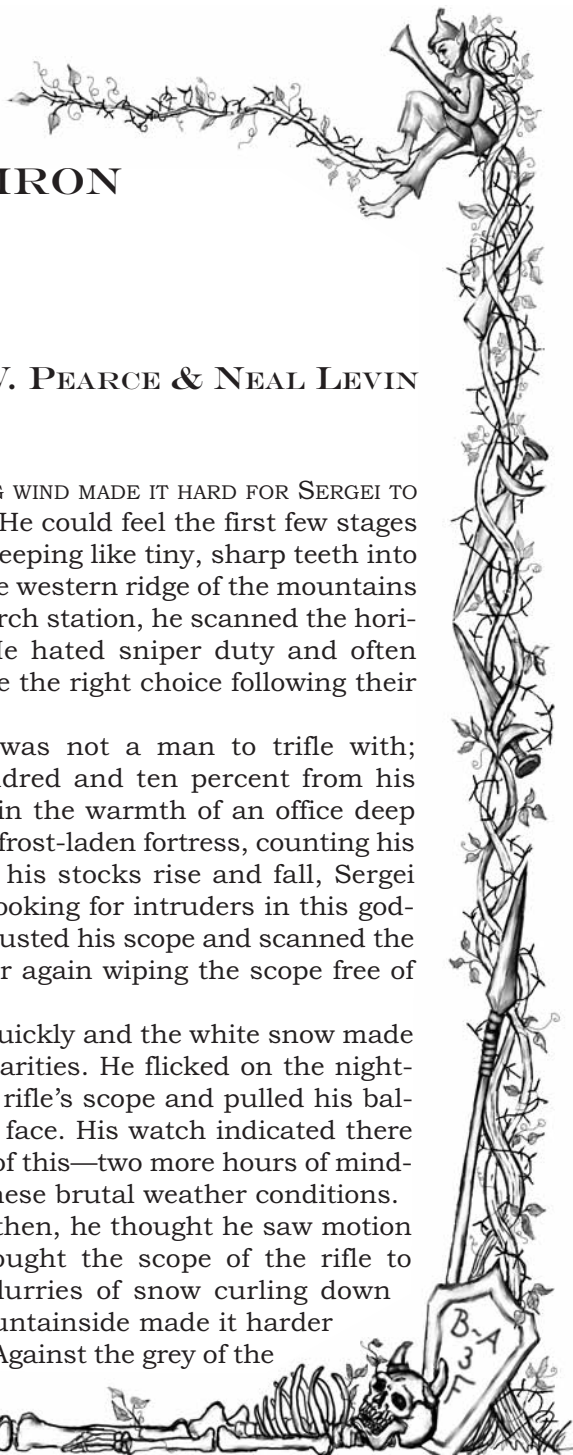
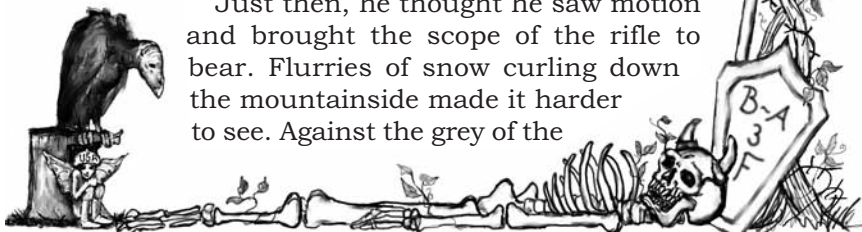
DARREN W. PEARCE & NEAL LEVIN

THE COLD BITING WIND MADE IT HARD FOR SERGEI TO aim his rifle. He could feel the first few stages of frostbite creeping like tiny, sharp teeth into his skin. High atop the western ridge of the mountains in an Old Soviet research station, he scanned the horizon for movement. He hated sniper duty and often wondered if he'd made the right choice following their leader out here.

Victor Kamynin was not a man to trifle with; he expected one hundred and ten percent from his people. While he sat in the warmth of an office deep inside the walls of his frost-laden fortress, counting his money and watching his stocks rise and fall, Sergei was out here, stuck looking for intruders in this god-forsaken place. He adjusted his scope and scanned the southern plateau after again wiping the scope free of tiny frost crystals.

Night had come quickly and the white snow made it easy to spot irregularities. He flicked on the night-vision function of the rifle's scope and pulled his balaclava up around his face. His watch indicated there were two more hours of this—two more hours of mind-numbing tedium in these brutal weather conditions.

Just then, he thought he saw motion and brought the scope of the rifle to bear. Flurries of snow curling down the mountainside made it harder to see. Against the grey of the



scope, he couldn't quite make anything out. Then he saw it again: the flicker of a figure against the horizon, moving with near impossible speed.

Sergei blinked. Standing in the snow, looking right at him, was a dark-haired, willowy woman. She had sharp cheekbones and almost alien features; something was not quite right with her face. It seemed all too symmetrical Before he could pull the trigger to take her down, she was gone again; she just seemed to vanish into the night.



She was aware of being watched by someone on the western ridge. Her eyes ignored the darkness and they saw all the detail as if it were as bright as day. Who needed night-vision technology when you were born to the dark and cold of another place and time? Amaranthine Samara was an unusual woman, gifted with an otherworld heritage. The ice and snow was her playground, the darkness a soft and giving friend that held her close and whispered through the shadows.

She was a fae creature, torn from her world and deposited upon the Earth over one hundred years ago. The violence of her upbringing in the Unseelie court meant she had learned quickly.

A casual exploration had pulled her through a rift between both worlds, depositing her in a cold, dark forest where she was surrounded by human soldiers. After killing six of them, Amaranthine vanished and escaped her human captors; she was too fast and deadly for them. Her skills as a warrior and a soldier were unparalleled in the modern world.

She enlisted in the military and rose through the ranks quickly; her natural talent and her bloody-minded nature meant that she did what was needed.

A lack of compassion was perfect for Black Ops work and Sam became a star pupil, trained by the likes of the SAS. And since she didn't have human fingerprints or retinal prints, she was the perfect agent for missions that involved assassination or espionage. She was there when John F. Kennedy was assassinated; she was there when Hitler supposedly died. Now she was here in Russia to take down a dangerous man, the leader of a massive Black Market weapons cartel. They'd put someone of their own in the vacant spot of leadership she'd create.

Victor Kamynin sold weapons to anyone who paid him enough and some of his so-called tests left a lasting mark on the world. Someone had hired the mercenary company she worked to