



*A thrilling espionage adventure starring Jonathan Smythe.*

*Once in a Blue Moon* is a spy novel in the vein of Ian Fleming's James Bond series, delivering edge-of-your-seat suspense and intrigue of the highest order. After escaping a doomed ocean-liner off the coast of France, Agent Smythe of the Echo Echelon must follow his only lead: Petrov, a Russian general turned arms-dealer, and his deal with the devil. With high-speed chases on both land and water, the silent infiltration of a heavily guarded embassy, and insidious, deadly enemies, *Once in a Blue Moon* is a spy-thriller that will engage readers of all kinds.



### ***PROLOGUE: Moonlight on Aquarius***

“Who do you work for?!”

The man trembled in the shadowy figure’s grip as he struggled to form words from his mouth. Sweat trickled down his face and hit the floor, as if signaling his impending death.

“Last chance. Tell me who you work for, and I’ll *try* not to pull the trigger.” The cold metal of a handgun silencer dug deeper into his forehead, prying for the answers that the figure in front of him demanded.

“I, uh... I don’t know *anything*,” the ship’s captain managed to spit out at the last possible moment, struggling to breathe and looking frantically for a way out.

“You mean you know nothing of the twenty tons of high-caliber C4 loaded onto this ship last night?” the dark figure said as he tightened his grip on the terrified captain’s collar and lifted his head to look him directly in the eyes. “What is all that shit doing downstairs? They’re not for you to play with.” He smirked, as he threw the trembling man against the main control console, knocking him to the floor. His gun was still trained directly on the shivering captain’s forehead.

“Please... I tell you everything,” the man begged, slowly rising to his feet, his back to the bow of the ship. The view behind him showcased a vast ocean, lit only by the moon and the lights coming from the harbour to the left. The captain stood now, slowly gathering confidence, facing the shadow of a man in the main control room on the bridge of the ocean-liner *Aquarius*. He spoke slowly, suspiciously, “It... the cargo... it was a, how you call it, a pay-off.”

The man's grip on the gun loosened, his sight trailing from the captain in front of him to the ground, his arm falling to his side. He took a deep breath.

"A payoff...? For what?! From who?!" he shouted in frustration. His left hand clenched into a fist, the gun in his right hand still trained on the floor. His fatal mistake. The captain's left hand ran along the bottom of the console behind him, pressing a small red button. An alarm sounded almost immediately, echoing loudly through the corridors of the ship. Lights on the control console flashed repeatedly.

His eyes lit up. A chill ran down his spine and his blood ran cold. For a moment his life, recently devoted to serving Queen and Country, flashed before his cold grey eyes. He looked back over his shoulder towards the door, moonlight splashing over his face. His heart raced. A drop of sweat ran down his forehead, dripping onto his solid black wet suit. Jonathan Smythe, secret agent for the Echo Echelon, a signature counter-terrorist organization under the British government, turned his startled gaze back to his prey.

"That was bloody stupid of you!" he yelled as the captain came at him head-on, striking him in the chest before he could react and swatting at his gun. Swiftly, as if the result from years of training and experience, he grabbed a hold of one of the man's arms, twisted it back, forcing the man to turn his back to him, and then pistol-whipped the back of his head in one quick motion. The man fell to the floor, unconscious.

Smythe stared straight ahead at the harbour in the distance, then pushed the accelerator handle on the control panel to its limit. After feeling the sudden change in velocity, he rang a shot into the console, sending sparks flying and temporarily lighting the room. Smythe then dashed for the door, took one last look at the sparkling harbour, and flew into the main corridor.

He crept along the dimly lit hallway, the alarm still ringing in his ears. His right hand firmly gripped his Beretta while his left hand supported it by the wrist. Walking over to the corner of the hall, he kept his back to the wall, and then peered around the corner. The door to the outside upper-deck of the ship was within reach.

Suddenly, as he leapt from the corner to make his escape, a rope flung around his head, tightened around his neck, and stopped him in his tracks. The guard behind him pulled the rope towards him sharply, dragging Smythe back. He struck his right wrist, causing him to drop his weapon and groan in pain. Just as the rope drove into his neck,

stealing his last ounce of breath, Smythe shifted his balance forward, grabbed the man's arms, and bent forward as he flipped him over his back and onto the floor in front of him. Smythe quickly kicked the guard unconscious with his boot and instinctively reached down for his gun.

Before he could grab it, gunfire lit up the dark corridor in front of him, bullets ricocheting off the walls. 'Damn,' he cursed silently, edging away from the gun. Foreign guards yelled orders at each other and spotted him in their sights as they rounded the corner. Immediately Smythe turned back to the door at the opposite end of the hallway, but froze when he saw three more guards bursting in. Just before the three guards opened-fire on him, he slipped into the hallway he came in through and ran back towards the bridge of the ship.

The alarm grew even louder as he raced into the control room, eyeing the still body of the captain on the floor in front of him. As he looked ahead of him the docks came into view—the ocean-liner was heading straight for land at full-speed.

"Sorry, Captain," Smythe uttered to the unconscious body in front of him, "but every trip must come to an end. The Captain does go down with the ship, doesn't he?" Smythe gave the body one final salute as he leaped through the glass, shattering it, and tumbled onto the deck below. The head officer's eyes filled with horror as he ran into the control room. He threw down his assault rifle and dashed to the main controls, struggling frantically to stop the ship. As his men rolled in behind him he turned and barked at them to get down to the lower decks and kill the fallen spy. He gazed back at the scene in front of him: the harbour docks, five-hundred feet away, and closing in fast.

A handful of guards bumped onto the lowest deck, spread out and searched with the sights of their guns for the hidden secret agent. One of the guards near the entrance of the cargo bay at the center of the ship screamed to the others as he fired his rifle into the darkness.

Suddenly, a crane swung out from the dark, knocking him twenty feet backwards onto the front deck. Smythe dashed out of the cargo bay, dragging a mini jet-ski at his side. The guards fired frantically but could only watch in shock as he leaped from the speeding ocean-liner, climbed onto the roaring jet-ski in mid-air, and hit the water at full-speed, splashing waves in every direction. Smythe sped away and weaved through the

docks as three guards quickly grabbed their own jet-skis and jumped off the ship in pursuit.

The ocean-liner *Aquarius* roared as it careened into the wooden docks, demolishing them. The remaining men screamed as they hurled themselves off the ship in panic. Smythe glanced over his shoulder and his heart-stopped: the hull of the ship blew into the harbour at full-speed and exploded almost instantly, lighting up the sky with orange flames and debris. Clouds of smoke erupted into the sky as the wreckage continued to burst into flames, engulfing one of the jet-skiing guards before he could clear the wreckage. Smythe released his breath as he sped along the edge of the harbour, confident he had escaped.

Suddenly, he spied one of the jet-skiing guards out of the corner of his eye just soon enough to swerve out of the way of a bullet from his pistol. Smythe accelerated as the guard's second shot rang off the back of his jet-ski. He turned sharply to the left, just avoiding a wooden pillar, as he skimmed along the water under the docks, with the guard following closely on his left. They both weaved through the pillars as the guard struggled for a clear shot. Finally he rode in line with Smythe's jet-ski, slowly aiming at him, relishing the moment of the kill. The guard saw Smythe smiling back at him through his sight just as his jet-ski smashed into the pillar in front of him.

"He had it coming to him," Smythe uttered as he veered left into the canal that ran through the city. The wind blew through his jet-black hair as he sped through the city, gazing at the night sky.

"Blast!" he yelled as the third guard slammed his jet-ski into Smythe's from behind. Smythe leaned his jet-ski to the left as the guard sped up beside him, glaring at Smythe with his deep, sinister eyes. The pursuer kept pace with Smythe, swatting at him with his left hand, maintaining control of his jet-ski with his right. Smythe struck the guard with fierce blow to the stomach. The guard reacted with a quick reflex and grabbed Smythe by the shoulder, pulling both jet-skis against each other. Both jet-skis skimmed side-by-side along the still water of the narrow canal, rushing under a bridge at incredible speed.

Smythe's heart raced as he glanced forward, eyeing the approaching dam at the end of the canal. People watching from the streets screamed in terror as they watched

both men race towards their inevitable doom. The streetlights of the small urban city illuminated the final stretch of the canal, showcasing their speedy path to destruction.

The guard grunted as he attempted to pull Smythe off, but stopped to correct his steering after momentarily losing control. Then he screamed in shock as Smythe abandoned his own jet-ski and jumped to the other, landing behind the guard and swiftly holding him in a firm neck-hold. The sound of the roaring dam echoed up ahead, as they raced towards it at break-neck speed.

“Arrgh..!” the guard groaned as he struggled to steer and fight back simultaneously. Smythe jerked the guard’s neck back and spoke directly into his ear.

“Hope this isn’t a bad time for me to ask,” he said sarcastically, “who do you work for?!” The guard leaned forward but Smythe pulled him back firmly, pausing only to glare at the dam that closed in about ninety feet away. “The explosives, they were a pay-off for what?” Smythe screamed into the man’s ear in frustration, “Who set this up?” The guard’s eyes raced, struggling to find a way out, and fast. Smythe increased his hold on the man’s neck, showing no mercy. Mist blew into their faces, drenching them in ice-cold water. Smythe heard the roar of the dam closing in on them, like a lion closing in on its prey.

“Give me a name!” Smythe screamed in panic.

“It was...” the guard struggled to whisper the name with his last ounce of breath, “Petrov.”

At that moment Smythe released the guard and dove backwards into the water, surfacing only to hear the guard’s scream and watch as his jet-ski exploded into the face of the dam. Breathing hard, he swam to the edge of the canal and climbed over the fence and onto the usually dark street now lit up by the explosion.

He stood up, and took a deep breath as he stared back down the street along the canal and back into the ocean. The sky was filled with stars and illuminated the magnificent night. The crash of the ocean waves could still be heard from where he was standing.

“Petrov,” he repeated to himself, then stared up at the serene night sky.

A blue moon.



## ***CHAPTER 1: Early Reconnaissance***

“What do you know about Vladimir Petrov?”

The name stung in Smythe’s head as he stared out the window, watching the clouds rush by in a quick blur of sunset orange and purple. The question still hung in the stale air of the helicopter cabin, with only the beating of the rotor blades breaking the tense silence. Smythe turned back from the window to face his superior sitting across from him, impatiently waiting for a response. Michael Truman was a man raised with a ‘by the book’ state-of-mind. He wanted things done in an orderly, efficient, manner, and despised even the passing thought of improvisation. In his mind, a secret service agent should be obedient and trustworthy, one that doesn’t question orders or break the mission protocol. Everything he believed a first-tier Echo Echelon agent stood for disappeared as soon as he laid his eyes on Jonathan Smythe.

“Vladimir Petrov,” Smythe finally repeated as he turned back to face Truman. “Ex-Russian general, exiled because of his militaristic ideals. He was bent on world domination and driven by power. In a word: ruthless.”

“That was over twenty years ago,” Truman shot back, as a three-dimensional holographic image of Petrov appeared in-between them. Smythe studied the image in front of him as it began rotating to reveal all the features of Petrov’s profile. Although he looked like he was approaching his late forties, his hair and mustache were peppered with grey. His face was wrinkled and war-torn, with a distinct scar running down his left cheek. The look of his face tilted on the fine line between diplomatic gentleman and insane psychopath. Smythe squinted across the helicopter cabin through the transparent image of the ex-general and noticed that his superior’s expression had not changed at all.

Truman pressed a switch on the panel beside his chair and the holographic image disappeared before Smythe's eyes.

"Of course," Smythe added, "after his embarrassment during the Cold War, he vowed to clean up his act, so to speak. He is now working for the Russian government as an international ambassador for the world disarmament movement. It's almost ironic."

"But," Truman interrupted, "if the information you received during that fiasco with the Soviet ocean-liner off the Atlantic last week is correct, he's involved himself in some sort of weapons-smuggling deal."

"Or worse," Smythe added, as he spoke under his breath, "I have a feeling it's much more than that."

"Which is why it is critical that we find out exactly what he has obtained and what he's planning to do with it."

Smythe ran his hand through his carefully-parted hair, jet-black with just a hint of grey. He looked his age, a man in his late thirties, in the prime of his life, forced to carry out the orders given to him. His heart was cold and pined for romance, but his soul reluctantly served his country and strived to prevent war and terrorism across the globe. He glanced over his shoulder through the window again and watched dusk set in over the city of Paris. The streaks of October sunset slowly faded into dark blue as the night crept closer. Smythe's vision refocused on his superior, who was typing furiously into the console beside him. His dark blonde hair was slicked back in a no-nonsense style, clashing with his navy blue business suit.

"...And the mission parameters?" Smythe asked slyly, "Capture the villain... rescue the girl... save the world?"

"*Hardly* that easy," Truman said in annoyance. Once again, a hologram image appeared in front of Smythe, this time what looked like the schematics of a three-storey building. The image rotated and highlighted all possible points of entry: one on the roof, another near the back, and the last one through the main door.

"This is the Russian embassy here in Paris," Truman spoke in a monotone voice that signaled the beginning of Smythe's main briefing. "Our contact, Agent Trove, has informed us that Petrov flew in last night and is staying at the embassy. Your mission is



to infiltrate the building and find out what Petrov has got and what he's going to do with it. The word is reconnaissance, Agent Smythe. Interrogate him if necessary."

"The front and back entrances will be heavily guarded," Smythe said as he studied the image in front of him, "and under high surveillance."

"Right, that's why you'll have to go in from the roof." Truman pointed to a section near the top of the schematic, "There is a ventilation shaft that leads from the roof to the lower-levels of the building. Keep in mind that the shafts may be rigged with security lasers, so use discretion, Agent Smythe."

"Discretion?"

"Yes, and be discreet. Any sound louder than absolute silence and your cover will be blown. Remember, aside from oral communication, there's nothing else we can do to assist you. You're on your own, Agent Smythe."

"How comforting," Smythe gave him a forced smile as he pulled out his standard issue Beretta from the holster under his arm. He pulled a briefcase out from under his seat and opened it, revealing a cornucopia of weapons and gadgets.

"All the usual toys, I see," Smythe muttered as he began to screw a silencer onto his handgun. He replaced the gun back into his holster and began sifting through the briefcase for supplies. Smythe wore the standard Echelon spy suit, a skin-tight black outfit designed for optimum maneuverability, while remaining completely silent. Although it seemed to fit him nicely, Smythe despised anything 'standard' about the Echelon. 'I'd just as soon wear my black leather jacket then this uncomfortable garbage,' he thought to himself.

He wondered why he was spending the prime of his life listening to orders and putting his life on the line for the very people that could care less about his death. Then he thought about all of the innocent lives that he had saved. And the people he failed to protect. He wasn't sure whether it was all worth it, a life full of violence and espionage. But for now, he had to focus on the mission at hand. He had a job to do, and he had to do it well.

Smythe began searching through the gadgets in the briefcase. He cracked a smile when he noticed some of his favourites. 'Flash grenades, smoke bombs, infra-red goggles... it's just like Christmas,' Smythe thought to himself.

“Take only what’s necessary, Smythe,” Truman whined, “and as soon as you learn what he’s planning, you’ll have to get out of there as quickly as possible. You’re no good to us dead.” He cracked a wicked smile at the thought. Truman seemed to enjoy testing Smythe’s resilience with every mission, and he would keep pushing Smythe to the limit until the Echo Echelon Agent finally met his death.

“What about the escape route? Once I’ve succeeded...” Smythe inquired.

“If you succeed, you’ll rendezvous with Agent Trove, who’ll be waiting in a silver sports car parked around the corner from the embassy.”

“I work better alone.”

“I didn’t ask for your preference, Agent Smythe. Agent Trove is there under my orders, to keep you in line and make sure you don’t break protocol.”

“He’ll have to be a damn good babysitter to catch up with me,” Smythe shot back.

“She will make sure you follow your orders to a tee,” Truman grinned.

“She?”

“Agent Valeri Trove,” Truman leaned back in his seat and enjoyed the moment, “she insisted that she have the embassy job, but we decided to leave that task to you, Smythe. Better watch yourself, she’s as deadly as she is beautiful.”

“This is getting more interesting by the moment,” Smythe said as he found himself getting more and more excited about the mission ahead. He felt the helicopter slow down and lower towards the far end of the city, which was now covered in the darkness of night, only lit by the streetlights and buildings. The cockpit door slid open as a man with dark sunglasses ducked through.

“We’re getting very close to the drop point,” the man yelled to Truman, “better get your man ready.”

The ice cold wind blew through Smythe’s hair as he clung to the rope ladder being lowered from the side door of the helicopter. He squinted as he recognized the building that they were approaching: the Russian embassy. The helicopter slowed as it flew closer to the back side of the building, barely visible through the thick night fog that blanketed the city. Smythe’s pulse pounded and blood rushed to his head—he craved thrilling moments such as this.

“We only have one shot at this!” the man in the sunglasses yelled from the side door, barely audible over the beating rotor blades, “we’re gonna swing in towards the rooftop, fly as low as possible...you’ll have to jump and roll, there’s no time to stop!”

Smythe nodded up towards the man and took one final breath as he hung from the rope ladder. The wind was picking up and began to blow the ladder violently as Smythe held his grip. The helicopter swooped in faster than he had anticipated, and before he knew it, the embassy roof raced into clear view.

“Damn!” Smythe shouted as his eyes caught sight of two security guards patrolling the embassy rooftop, both immediately alerted to his presence. Before either of them could react to the incoming helicopter, instinct struck through him like lightning. In one swift and precise move he whipped out his silenced handgun and took out the guard to his left, and then the guard to his right a heartbeat later. As the embassy rooftop raced below his feet he knew he only had a split-second to land. At the last possible moment Smythe released his grip from the rope, tumbled towards the roof and rolled as soon as he hit the concrete to reduce the pain.

He quickly got to his feet and checked the bodies of the doomed security guards. Both were dead, one with a chest wound and the other the victim of a deadly headshot. Searching both bodies, Smythe found nothing of importance, not even a keycard.

“Useless,” he whispered under his breath. He crept over to a large ventilation shaft protruding from the rooftop, kneeled down, and leaned his back against it. “Echo One,” Smythe spoke as he tapped a device in his inner ear. “This is Agent Smythe. Embassy drop complete. I’ve made first contact. Proceeding to enter the ventilation system, over.” As he spoke, his breath froze into an icy mist before his eyes. Smythe turned towards the shaft and pulled out one of the gadgets he’d chosen earlier on the helicopter: a laser cutter. As he held the button on the handle of the small rectangular device, a bright red laser began to cut through the perimeter of the shaft cover. Soon enough the cover dropped to the ground. But before Smythe could climb down into the ventilation shaft he felt a small vibration in his earpiece which signaled an incoming call from Echo One.

“Good-luck, Agent Smythe.”

The cold air of October night disappeared above Smythe as he climbed down towards the stale air of the cramped ventilation shaft. He used the suction grips that he had strapped to his hands to lower himself deeper into the vertical tunnel. Breathing became a chore as he slipped down through the unbelievably tight space, sweat dripping from his forehead. After what seemed like an eternity he felt the bottom of the metal shaft with his feet. He quickly dropped down to his hands and knees and began crawling along the now horizontal tunnel.

“Shit,” he cursed once again as another surprise reflected against the pupils of his eyes. The burning red light. The hypnotic mechanical humming. ‘Security lasers,’ he thought silently. The five lasers shot horizontally across the shaft, burning anything that touched them. Smythe spied the carcass of a dead rat that obviously felt compelled to investigate the bright red glow. He reached down into his left boot and produced another one of the Echelon’s ‘tools’. He carefully extended the laser reflector to the height of the shaft. He then placed the reflecting rod to one side of the tunnel and slowly pushed it into the path of the lasers. Once set up correctly, the device split into two, extending its other half to the opposite end of the shaft and reflecting the lasers completely into themselves, which created a safe path to crawl through.

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After what seemed like hours of crawling through endless ducts leading to empty rooms, Smythe finally heard faint voices with distinct Russian accents as he crawled down the shaft overlooking the first floor. He moved with extra caution as he headed towards the vent where the voices were coming from. His face was now drenched in perspiration, with each moment spent in the ventilation shaft making it harder to breathe.

As Smythe crawled towards the vent the voices grew louder and he knew that he was in the right room. He squinted at first at the streaks of light that shot through the vent from the room below. As he reached the vent, the voices became all but clear, and he quickly scanned the room to find the sources. The room was well-lit by a central chandelier, bookshelves lined the windowless walls, and a huge desk sat in the center of the room. It looked to him like a study. One man stood by the desk directly in the light, and Smythe recognized him instantly. ‘Vladimir Petrov,’ he thought to himself, ‘Russian

bastard.’ Petrov wore the standard Russian military uniform, complete with medals. ‘Seems he can’t let go of his past,’ Smythe cringed at the thought of such a mad man.

The other man stood across the room in the shadows, Smythe was unable to make out his face. Two guards stood at the far end behind Petrov, with the silhouettes of another two men at the opposite end. Smythe’s heart beat slower than usual as he tried to keep his breathing to a minimum while he scanned the room, trying to make out as many words as he could.

“The money. Do you have it with you?” Petrov spoke with an obvious Russian accent and unbridled enthusiasm. He sounded much older than he looked, and his mustache seemed greyer than the one Smythe saw in Petrov’s holographic profile.

“In due time, my friend,” the man in the shadows spoke with a sinister, yet calming voice. “Do you have what I requested?”

Petrov opened his military jacket and produced a single computer disk. He held the disk up to his eyes and waved it in front of the man in the shadows.

“Do you have any idea what it took to obtain information like this?” Petrov’s voice grew louder with every word, “Hundreds died for the information on this simple disk I hold in my hands.” He struggled to hold back an evil smile. “Think of it. The launch codes and co-ordinates for every major city and military base in the western world. The power to launch your stealth ‘*Cancer*’ warhead without a trace of its origin. All in the palm of my hand,” Petrov’s smile disappeared from his face, “soon to be yours.”

‘Cancer?!’ Smythe’s mind searched deep into his past, where he vaguely recalled mention of a covert warhead in development during the Cold War called Cancer. With the correct launch codes and co-ordinates programmed into the main database, the stealth warhead could be launched to any location in its database files, completely invisible to radar and air defense. The Cancer warhead was thought to have been abandoned years ago, but obviously someone else had gotten a hold of it. This was turning out to be much more serious than Smythe could have ever imagined.

“So, tell me comrade, do you have what *I* want.” Petrov placed the disk back in his jacket and folded his arms across his chest. The man in the shadows across from him snapped his fingers. At that moment one of the men behind him stepped out of the darkness and placed a very large briefcase onto the desk in front of Petrov. The guard

stepped back into the darkness as Petrov excitedly opened the briefcase and began thumbing through the millions of dollars in front of him.

“You are very efficient for an American,” Petrov looked up at the man from the open briefcase, “I admire that.”

At that second the other guard stepped out from the shadows and lined his gun up directly with Petrov’s head. Before any of Petrov’s men could react, a gunshot rang through the embassy as blood dripped from the ex-general’s temple. Petrov stood for a split second with a look of shock frozen on his face, and then dropped to the ground, dead. Smythe bit his lip as the guard proceeded to take out Petrov’s two men before they could pull out their own weapons. All three bodies lay in pools of blood on the floor across from the man in the shadows.

The shadowy figure looked back at his other guard and ordered, “You, get the briefcase,” and then looked at the guard in front of him, “you, get the disk.” The henchman who murdered Vladimir Petrov swaggered over the ex-general’s corpse, reached into his jacket, and pocketed the disk. As he stood up from the body Smythe gasped when he saw that the man had red eyes, no pupils whatsoever. His dark hair was slicked back and made Smythe shudder just at the look of him.

“Quickly, there’s not much time,” the man still shrouded in darkness said calmly as he headed for the door behind him, followed by both the guard holding the briefcase and the guard with red eyes. The guard with the red eyes took one final look into the room the slammed the door behind him.

Smythe’s mind raced as he kicked the vent cover off of the shaft and dropped into the room. He ran over to the dead body of Vladimir Petrov and searched it for any sign of another disk. Nothing. He stood up from the body and double-tapped his earpiece, still in shock from the event that had just unfolded before his eyes.

“Agent Smythe to Echo One. The warhead Cancer is active. I repeat, the warhead Cancer is active. Petrov is dead.”



## ***CHAPTER 2: The Quick and the Dead***

“What do you mean they’re all dead?”

Smythe raced through the main hall of the Russian embassy, only stopping to glance at the murdered bodies of the embassy guards that lay mangled along the doorways. Each guard had a bullet hole in the center of their temple, hit with extraordinary accuracy. He had never seen so many headshots before, and it scared the hell out of him.

“Every last one of them, they’re dead,” Smythe repeated, talking into the microphone attached to his collar, “He killed them, and they’ve got the disk.”

“Who? Damn it Smythe calm down,” Truman pleaded, “who killed them?”

“I didn’t see his face.”

As Smythe ran full-force towards the front door, images of the man in the shadows and the man with the red eyes flashed in his memory. Just as everything began to make sense, everything seemed to fall apart again. Vladimir Petrov was a traitor to his country, and he paid the price for his treason with his life. It was Petrov who obtained the stolen disk containing the launch data from an insider on the ocean-liner *Aquarius*, in exchange for tons of explosives and C4. But the *Aquarius* was now destroyed, and Petrov murdered. It seemed that everyone who came into contact with that computer disk ended up dead.

Smythe rushed through the main door of the embassy and the cold night air hit him like a punch in the face. Running down the marble steps, he spotted a black luxury car followed by three black vans speeding down the street and away from the embassy.

‘Going so soon?’ he thought to himself, ‘The party’s just started.’

The moon pierced through the dark clouds, like an essence watching everything unfold before it. The city streets of Paris were deserted, except for the usual beggars, who wandered the side-streets searching for food and shelter. A few trees lined the street in front of the embassy, while the rest of this part of the city revealed a more concrete and residential appearance. The night was cold and quiet, the calm before the storm of chaos.

As Smythe ran across the lawn towards the sidewalk, a sleek silver sports car roared from across the street and pulled up beside him, its headlights shining on high-beams and blinding him. Smythe stopped in his tracks, his heart beating wildly, as the window rolled down to reveal the silencer of a handgun aimed directly at him.

“Get in,” a voice echoed from inside the car. Smythe took in a deep breath and surveyed the area around him. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. His vision focused back on the gun, waiting, like a wild animal, to strike. With his hands up, Smythe circled around to the passenger side, opened the door and slid in.

“Agent Trove, I presume?” Smythe said coyly, eyeing the stunning woman behind the wheel. Her dark hair was tied back into a ponytail, which cascaded onto her broad shoulders. She glanced over at Smythe, her expression remaining emotionless. Her deep blue eyes contrasted her relatively pale complexion—she reminded Smythe of a ghost. She wore a skintight red dress, almost looking more like a princess than an Echelon agent. Although her expression didn’t change, her eyes conveyed a sense of innocence, untrusting, and fear towards Smythe. He wondered what it must be like to be sitting in a car with him, a man who has killed so many without thought, served his country without question, and saved so many lives without receiving so much as a ‘thank-you’. Smythe shuddered at the idea of being a new agent assigned on a dangerous mission with him. Although Truman didn’t say it, he could sense that Agent Trove had never been in a real chase, never faced real danger, never put her life on the line for freedom. She was cold, inexperienced, and a perfect way to keep him on his toes. ‘Damn Truman,’ Smythe thought. Almost on cue, Trove turned to look Smythe directly in the eyes and cracked what looked like a smile.

“Please, call me Valeri. Looks like I arrived just in time. Need a ride, Agent Smythe?”



“Call me Jonathan,” Smythe snapped back effortlessly, fighting to hold back a smile. “Now that we’re on a first name basis, we’ve got business to attend to.” Smythe pulled out his gun and then turned to face Agent Trove, moonlight illuminating his face. “Truman was right. You look like a beauty, but can you drive like a beast?” Trove shifted the car into first gear as she slammed on the gas.

“Hold on tight,” she smirked as she glanced at Smythe, “this is gonna be one hell of a ride.” The engine of the sleek silver sports car roared as they sped away from the embassy, in pursuit of Petrov’s murderers. The streetlights flew by them as they sped down the street, Smythe could barely make out the convoy of black vans in the distance.

“We’ll never catch up with them this way,” Smythe yelled over the screaming engine, “You got any ideas?” He looked over at Trove, who was frantically calling up a digital map on the front console. She ran her finger along the lines representing the streets on the map, pausing to look ahead.

“I know a little shortcut,” she said under her breath, “the street cuts to the right three blocks down and heads back along the waterway down to our right. We can head them off.” Almost instantly she swerved to the right and cut through a side street, slamming Smythe against the passenger side door. Garbage and debris flew past the windshield as the car streaked through the narrow road, which ended with a barricade up ahead. Only a few lampposts streaked by, darkening everything around them. The car’s high-beams showcased a ‘DO NOT ENTER’ sign posted on the boarded up passage straight ahead of them. Trove increased their speed as they headed straight towards the dead end.

“What are you doing?” Smythe screamed, “Are you trying to get us killed?” They headed at full-speed for the boarded up alley way at the end of the side-street. Agent Trove glanced over at Smythe, furrowing her brow.

“Trust me,” she yelled as she shifted into high gear, jolting them forward, faster. Before he knew it they blasted through the wooden barricade like a silver bullet, shattered debris covering the front end of the car. Sparks flew as the metal sides of the car brushed against both sides of the brick wall, sandwiching them.

“Are you bloody sure we’re going to make it?!” Smythe yelled as sparks exploded from his side of the car.

“We’ll make it!” Trove shouted back, flooring it and igniting the car’s pre-installed turbo boost. Smythe looked up ahead and saw nothing but a blur of stars and night, everything was moving so quickly that if he blinked, he would miss it.

The car flew out of the alley way and into the air, for a moment it almost seemed to hover for a second or two. Then just as soon as they had gone airborne they swiftly landed on the street below, overlooking the waterway.

“Still breathing?” Trove remarked to Smythe sarcastically, with a huge smile.

“Not quite,” Smythe replied, still catching his breath. Inexperienced as she was, she damn well seemed to enjoy the thrill of the chase. Something about her enlightened Smythe, and made him feel young again. “Any second now,” Smythe whispered, rolling down his window and readying his gun. Trove continued to stare into her rear-view mirror, awaiting the convoy of black vans.

“Here they come!” she shouted, shifting gears and accelerating as fast as possible. The first black van sped by them, followed by the luxury car and the other two vans.

“Quick, pull in behind the last van!” Smythe yelled at Trove as she struggled to keep pace with them. The concrete cliff-side which they had flown off of seconds ago now towered over them on their right, trapping them between itself and the waterway on their left. The last of the black vans swerved in front of them, blocking them from making any kind of pass.

“Stay on its left,” Smythe shouted as he leaned out the window, aiming his weapon at the speeding van in front of them. Smythe’s hair blew in the wind as they sped down the street after the convoy at an incredible speed. “Keep her straight,” Smythe yelled once more, waiting for a clear shot at the van. Trove cringed as the first two shots rang off the bumper of the van. The third hit the van’s back left tire dead on, blowing it off completely. “Now pull up beside them!” Smythe shouted as the van began swerving uncontrollably from left to right. Trove accelerated as they matched the van’s speed, driving parallel to its left.

The driver of the van peered at Smythe as they drove up beside him, rolling down his window and pointing a gun at them with his right hand. Trove glanced over at him long enough to catch his sadistic smile.

“Shit!” she screamed, immediately slowing down as the driver’s shot rang off the front of the car, nearly missing the veteran agent beside her.

“Quickly now, speed up!” Smythe yelled. Trove once again pulled in beside the van, which suddenly began to swerve away from them and towards the waterway.

“Now!” Trove shouted, as Smythe trained his sight directly on the driver and shot a bullet into his chest. The driver screamed in pain, grabbing his chest and struggling to maintain any sort of control over the van. The van veered past them and towards the railing to their left, swerving left and right uncontrollably. At that moment, Trove sped up and steered the car towards the van, cutting him off and forcing him through the aluminum railing. Smythe looked back only to see the van plummet off the road and into the water.

“He was dying for a swim,” Smythe remarked slyly.

“One down...” Trove uttered under her breath, trailing off as they sped up behind the second van. The street continued straight ahead, running parallel with the waterway.

Suddenly the back doors of the second van flew open, revealing two henchmen and a machine gun turret. One of them manned the turret while the other loaded his shotgun, both intending to blow their car into pieces. Smythe flinched as the man at the turret opened fire on their windshield, but the all of the bullets ricocheted off of the windshield without leaving a scratch.

“Bullet-proof glass?” Smythe cracked a smile.

“It comes standard,” Trove laughed, keeping pace with the van.

“Stay behind them, I’ve got an idea,” Smythe said. He suddenly opened his door completely, creating a bullet-proof shield. He leaned over and out of the car, holding onto the handle of the open door and using it as a shield from the onslaught of ammunition that peppered the door. He waiting what seemed like forever for the turret’s magazine to run out of ammo, until he heard the familiar ‘clicking’ sound from the turret. Suddenly, like lightning, he aimed up through his open window and shot the henchman at the turret twice, killing him. Smythe ducked back behind the open door once more, waiting a few seconds until he heard the blast from the second man’s shotgun ring off the door. Then he aimed through the window again, taking down the second henchman almost as fast as he’d taken out the first.

“Now, drive up beside him!” Smythe shouted as he pulled himself back into his seat, sweat dripping down his face. Trove slowly accelerated, maneuvering the car up to the driver side of the van, matching its speed. The driver reacted quickly, opening his door and drawing his gun. “It was a pleasure working with you,” Smythe yelled to the rookie agent beside him as he slowly leaned out of the car, “but I work better alone. Au revoir!”

Before the driver could react, Smythe leaped from the car to the van, barely grabbing a hold of the van’s open door. There he hung for a moment, struggling to gain any sort of balance and fighting off the driver of the van at the same time.

“Imbicile!” the driver yelled as he continued to steer as well as fight Smythe off.

“Getting off here are you?” Smythe yelled, barely clinging to the van. With a swift kick to the head the driver was out, and the van suddenly began to swing left towards the waterway. Smythe struggled to hang onto the open door as he pulled the unconscious driver out of his seat and onto the road below. Before the van could swerve off the road and into the watery depths, Smythe swung into the driver’s seat and turned sharply to the right, almost cutting Agent Trove completely off.

Smythe, now in control of the van, motioned Agent Trove to follow behind him as he picked up speed, gaining on the black luxury car up ahead, which was still following the last of the black vans. No doubt Petrov’s murderer was in that car, and there was no way either agent was going to let him escape. Smythe glared at a two-lane tunnel up ahead, split down the middle by intermitted pillars. Suddenly, the black van ahead slowed down and dropped back behind the luxury car, a predictable move, in Smythe’s point of view. ‘The chase continues...’

The tunnel lights sped by as Smythe hurtled through the oncoming lane in pursuit of his prey. His heart raced as an oncoming car flew into view, blasting its horn and swerving out of the way of the black van Smythe had commandeered from his enemy. For a split second he could swear that he had seen the panic-stricken, ghost-white face of the innocent motorist as he sliced past him.

But no matter. Bigger things were at stake here. The safety of the world was at stake. That disk of Petrov’s, which he sold at the price of his life, contained information

of unimaginable power—the launch codes and co-ordinates for every major city in the western world. Of course, the disk alone was worthless, but combined with the ‘Cancer’ warhead—warheads?—the ability to launch an undetectable nuclear strike from anywhere in the world, even just the threat of it, was very real. Did this man in the shadows, this murderer, somehow obtain one or more ‘Cancer’ warheads? Impossible!

Smythe glanced in the rearview mirror, and his own cold grey eyes stared right back at him. His hands tensely gripped the steering wheel, shifting nervously.

‘Nothing is impossible. Anything’s possible,’ he thought to himself. This isn’t a silly spy game anymore. This is for real. The world is at stake.

Smythe shifted gears and pressed down harder on the gas pedal as the black luxury car and its final escort drew slowly into view. As he glanced to his right, he spied Valeri Trove in the through lane keeping pace with him. For a moment, they locked eyes, and their focus temporarily shifted from the thrill of the chase to each other. Although they had only met just minutes ago, Smythe felt an instant connection to her. This was no rookie. She took risks and cut corners like the best of them... like him. But she also had a hardened look in her eyes—they looked cold... like his. What could have happened, he could only guess. But there was something definitely different about this one. She was unlike any woman he had ever met. She was strong.

‘That’s what it is,’ he thought. She was strong. She could hold her own. ‘I work alone,’ he thought to himself, silently.

‘Maybe...?’

He snapped back to reality as he noticed that Trove was signaling something to him. ‘Get a hold of yourself, damn you,’ he thought as he cracked a smile. She was signaling towards the black van, which was now less than twenty feet ahead of her. As the tunnel pillars flew by in-between them, Smythe realized her plan and quickly sped up to keep pace with her.

The driver of the black van began to panic as he watched the silver sports car steadily gain on him in the rearview mirror. His already sweaty face was nothing compared to his palms, which were drenched in perspiration. Suddenly, he made a decision—he took his attention off of the road, grabbed the handgun that was on the

passenger seat beside him, and began shooting wildly behind him through the driver side window. Trove did not flinch as a few of the bullets ricocheted off of the bulletproof windshield.

‘BAM!’

The driver of the black van lurched forward as he was rammed from behind by the silver sports car chasing him. The smoking handgun lay again on the seat beside him—out of ammo—out of hope. He swerved to the left just in time to avoid a second rear-end attempt by the silver car. At this speed, a collision would tear the van, and himself, into pieces.

“Shit,” he muttered as he eyed his mirror—the car was going for the final blow. Suddenly he veered sharply to the left, avoiding the hit and flying into the oncoming lane. He never made it. At the last second, his attempt to swerve into the wrong lane was blocked by another black van on his left. Trapped on both sides by his pursuers, the driver’s eyes grew wide with fear as he opened his mouth to scream. But no sound came out—it didn’t have a chance to. His van blew into the center median pillar and exploded on impact.

Smythe’s heart pounded as they flew out of the tunnel and the black luxury car raced into view ahead of him. His blood shot through his veins as he sped ahead of Trove and gained on the luxury car.

“This is what I live for,” he told himself.

The waterway continued to run parallel to the road, but the road itself now towered over it, with only a thin guardrail protecting motorists from a watery death. To the right, a high wall ran parallel to the road.

‘No where to run, no where to hide.’

Smythe suddenly felt very satisfied with himself, and his focus wavered. The disk would be recovered, siphoned to the techies back at the Echelon base in London, deciphered, decoded, and extracted, and then, perhaps, obliterated. Assuming that this was the only copy of the disk, the warhead would then be made useless to whomever was pulling the strings on this operation. Finding that out would not take long either, of

course. First, he would disable all of the men in the luxury car, shooting the guns out of their hands and then placing bullets in each of their legs.

‘They will be writhing on the ground like worms,’ Smythe thought to himself, amused. He would gain particular satisfaction watching and listening as the man with the red eyes—a cold-blooded killer—begged for mercy and refuge. The Echelon clean-up crew would be called in, and the injured men would be taken away, in disgrace, to the local interrogation complex, where they would be tortured and the information extracted from them. This was no time for politics, diplomacy, or rights—these men were nuclear terrorists and they would pay for their sins, and deservedly so. And it would be he, Jonathan Smythe, who had taken them down. Yes, he was satisfied.

His awareness suddenly snapped back as his mind was awakened by a horn blasting at him from behind. As he checked his rearview mirror, he saw that Trove was flashing her lights at him, while swerving back and forth wildly. As his focus returned, he turned his attention back to the luxury car in front of him.

He froze. Suddenly, Smythe felt extremely nervous, and his stomach lurched. He couldn’t breathe. The trunk lid of the black luxury car was propped open, and pointing towards him was an artillery launcher loaded with a series of mini-rockets. Just as the realization of the situation dawned on him, a loud whine blasted from the trunk and three of the rockets launched backwards from the car. He swerved to the left, and sparks flew as his driver side mirror snapped off as he screeched against the guard-rail. He held his breath as the rockets flew by him, missing by inches.

For a moment, relief swept over him, but only for a moment. His relief soon turned to dread as he saw a flash of light in his rearview mirror. His heart stopped as Trove’s silver sports car flew into the air, twisted, and then crashed to the ground, upside-down, skidding along the road and then bursting through the guard-rail.

“No!” Smythe screamed, tears now streaming down his face, as he continued to keep pace with the luxury car in front of him. A feeling of conflict suddenly shot through him like an electric shock. His mind and his senses were screaming at him to keep going, to continue the chase, to capture the villains. Bigger things were at stake here. The world was at stake. But his heart and his soul, two things which he believed he had given up many years ago when he had killed his first victim in cold blood—shot in the heart, no

less—were reminding him about Valeri. Valeri Trove. She was strong. She was still alive. But she wouldn't be for long—not without him. There was something about this woman. 'I work alone,' his own words flashed in his head.

'Maybe...'

The decision was made. Like lightning, he reached into his utility belt and pulled out what looked like a mini-grappling gun. With his left hand, he reached out through the driver side window and fired a short blast right at the rear end of the luxury car. Then he pulled up on the hand brake, and slammed on the van's brakes, causing it to spin in a circle. At the first opportunity, he jumped out of the van, rolled, and then got up and ran as many steps as he could away from the van before diving to the ground and covering his head with his hands. It took only a brief second for him to hear the familiar whine, and only a split second later for the van to explode into a ball of flame, lighting up the street, the wall, and the waterway below.

Silence. It was the dead of night in Paris, in the seedy part of the city, and Agent Smythe could hear his own heart beating. He could probably scream at the top of his lungs, and nobody would hear him. There was no one here to help him—help them. Valeri. Agent Valeri Trove. They had just met, just a few minutes ago. Minutes! He may have possibly thrown this whole mission away, risked it all, and lost everything, for a woman—a mere rookie—whom he had just met, minutes ago. A wave of confusion rushed through his mind. This is not the Jonathan Smythe that he had grown accustomed to, the cold-hearted bastard that he had molded himself into, the self-righteous killer without a conscience. This was the kind of thing that was done by someone who has a heart. Someone who cares.

'What am I doing?'

Breathing became harder as he ran towards the ruptured guard-rail ahead of him—every step was agony. He could still smell the smoke from the wreckage of the burning black van that he had deserted behind him, giving up on the chase and allowing the shadowy figure and the man with the red eyes to get away with their prize unharmed. He had made the previously unthinkable decision to run back and to try to help Agent Trove... if there was anything left of her.



As he approached the guard-rail, he smelled the familiar scent of smoke and burning wreckage. He held his breath as he drew closer to the edge, ready for the worst. Would she be dead, thrown from the destroyed vehicle and torn to shreds on the concrete outcroppings below? Or would she end up in the water, her corpse carried away by the current to an unknown destination? Smythe shook his head as he tried to rid himself of these morbid scenarios, and peered over the edge.

A chill ran down his spine. The smoldering wreckage of the silver sports car lay upside down on the concrete that lined the side of the waterway. It was covered in small flames and smoke billowed up from it. This was one of Smythe's worst fears: failing the people who were near him and who depended on him. A wave of regret and despair flew through him—they had only met, just minutes ago.

Suddenly, there was hope. There was movement, and movement was definitely hope. Hope was definitely a step up from regret and despair. For a split-second, Smythe thought that he had seen an arm grasping outside from the driver side window, disappearing just a moment afterwards. But it had only been a split-second.

It was enough. Smythe quickly grabbed the grappling hook and the thin nylon rappelling gear that was standard on all Echelon utility belts, and, with a newfound energy, he began to prepare for a quick descent. He was no longer thinking or feeling, but was operating on pure instinct, as if his actions were programmed into him like a machine. Just a few seconds later, he was over the edge, and he began rappelling downwards as fast as he could. The chilling air of this October night sent shivers through his whole body, but he didn't let that slight discomfort delay him from reaching her as fast as humanly possible. To reach her and be seconds too late would be a pain too great to bear. The rope began to burn through his hands as he kicked harder and harder on the wall. As he drew closer to the bottom he could hear coughing coming from within the sports car. She was alive. Just barely, as it sounded, but alive. There was definitely something about this woman. She was definitely strong.

He landed with a thud on the concrete passage next to the waterway, the overturned car just a few feet away. Fumbling with the rope that was hooked onto his belt, Smythe cursed loudly. Finally freeing himself from it, he tossed the rope aside and

ran to the driver side of the car. Down on his hands and knees, he peered through the broken glass of the window.

“Valeri?” he shouted.

“Jonathan!”

Looking back at him with terrified eyes was Ms. Trove. Her hair was now thrown about her face and her dress was torn. She struggled, upside-down, still strapped to the driver’s seat. Her seat belt had become mangled and was preventing her from escaping the wreckage, but no doubt it had saved her life.

“Jonathan! Help me, please!” she screamed in terror as her eyes grew wide with panic. The flames that were engulfing the car had grown, and the whole vehicle was now on the verge of exploding.

“Jonathan! Quick! It’s going to explode.”

“Stay still!” he screamed. “I’m going to cut you loose—don’t worry I’ve got you. Everything will be okay...”

Quickly grabbing the knife from his boot, he slashed the seat belt from her body, then reached in through the window and pulled the door open. She tumbled onto the ground and rolled right-side up as Smythe pulled her out of the car and onto the cement. She was breathing hard, and her cheeks were covered in ash.

“C’mon, we’ve got to get out of here, now!” Smythe shouted. They began to shuffle along the waterway away from the burning car, with Smythe supporting her by the shoulders, when they heard a large clank. Smythe turned to see that the car had fallen onto its side and was now covered in flames.

“It’s gonna blow any second now!” Trove screamed, “What are we going to do?! It’s hopeless.”

“Shut up!” he shouted. “You musn’t talk like that. We’re gonna get through this—somehow.”

Then it hit him. The waterway.

“Valeri... into the river—quick!”

Before she could argue, she was in the water. Seconds later, he dove in after her. As they both began to gasp for air, a loud groan echoed through the waterway.

“Down, now!”

Taking one last breath, they submerged into the water just as the car exploded into pieces. A minute passed before they emerged from the water. Together they swam back to the edge. Smythe first helped her up and then pulled himself up after her. Together they lay side-by-side on the concrete, panting, soaking wet, trying to catch their breath.

“Why did you come back?” she asked between breaths. “What about the bad guys?”

“I came back for you,” he replied.

“Why? Why did you come back for me, Jonathan! There are bigger things at stake here!”

He was silent.

“What happened to the car?” she asked. “Did you get the disk?”

“No. They got away,” he muttered, disgusted with himself.

“Damn you, Smythe. What were you thinking?”

“I came back for you,” he said again, panting.

“Why...?” she asked, her eyes meeting his. They were no longer cold like they had been outside of the embassy. They were warm and soft. Smythe, embarrassed of the truth, looked away and back down the waterway.

“I don’t know,” he lied, “I was foolish. I made a misjudgment. I’m sorry.”

She smiled and grabbed his face, pulling his gaze towards her. “You saved my life, Jonathan. Thank you.” She smiled.

Smythe chuckled, “Water... why does it always have to be water?”

They both got up and began to walk hand-in-hand along the waterway.

“So... they got away?” she asked, sounding disappointed. “We failed our mission?” Smythe couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Not quite.” He pulled the small device that he had used earlier, just moments before he had jumped out of the black van. “This is a tracking gun. The bug that I shot with this onto that black luxury car will track them to wherever they end up. Our guys back in the lab would have been on it as soon as I activated it. This isn’t over yet...”

“No, it isn’t...” she smiled. “But what will we do now?” Both up and down the waterway, there was no end to the concrete path in sight.

“How about a walk?” he asked, smiling warmly.

“A walk is good.”

Together they walked along the path to no where in particular. It was the dead of night in Paris, in the seedy part of the city, and all they could hear was the sound of silence.