

 **FICTION**
The Big Geek

Christopher Kremmer

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning when the voice of the pilot spilled forth from the overhead speaker.

Live or pre-recorded, I wondered? Hard to tell.

"We have begun our descent towards Keflavik International Airport. Current indications are that we'll have you in the terminal by eleven-thirty. We hope you've enjoyed your journey, and thank you for flying Icelandair."

My head ached accusingly. I'm one of those passengers who likes keeping the drinks trolley moving, and the flight from New York had been no exception. Lifting the shade, I squinted out at an amorphous sub-polar atmosphere, the colour of oysters. Somewhere below lay a land of sheet ice and active volcanoes, venting and fuming, and occasionally exploding to besmirch the virgin snow with ashes: a land whose principal industries were fish and financial services. A winter wonderland all year-round, and I'd forgotten to pack socks.

I sighed heavily, picked up the folder containing my brief and read it again. Name: Assauge, Julius. DOB: 3.7.1971. Nationality: Australian. Profession: Computer programmer. Codename: Silver-Wig.

I'd once made a study of military and intelligence operation codenames and concluded that the people who coined them were complete jugheads; "Enduring Freedom", "Infinite Resolve", "Relentless Strike" – give me a break. At least "Silver-Wig", with its nod towards my favourite author, the crime writer Raymond Thornton, displayed some class. The attached photograph showed a somewhat androgynous, thirty-something man with shoulder length platinum hair swept back and over an unlined forehead, and a plump jaw dotted with silvery stubble. A baby face full of contradictions, with sly, knowing eyes, and a lithe frame draped in a black shirt, black suit, and red tie, like an effeminate pimp in a Soho bar.

Didn't look like someone born in the jungles of far north Queensland, the only son of a French father and Australian mother, both of them drifters, who'd moved house thirty-seven times before the age of fourteen and was mostly home-schooled, ending up with a deep mistrust of authority and a preternatural gift for computer code. This latter talent he'd used to hack into a number of top-secret government departments, including Defence and Los Alamos National Laboratories, where he'd left puerile messages of the "Have a nice day Boogie Men" variety. The judge didn't think that was so funny, almost landed him in prison while still in his teens. Maybe it was the shock of it that turned his once dark brown hair a ghostly white. But he had the virus bad, and pretty soon he sets up a website where malcontents can anonymously release classified information they've stolen in the course of their work for certain freedom-loving governments.

The Aussie hacker was playin' fast and wide with some of Uncle Sam's most sensitive secrets. He was what they liked to call a 'threat', a trafficker in dangerous information. He was said to be an idealist, the sort of person of whom Henry Miller once that he "either has no problems of his own or refuses to face them." Still, it was hard to fault the ideals Assauge was fighting for – freedom of speech, freedom of the press, probably free love, for all I knew. It's just hard to respect a man who, by the time he's pushing 40, hasn't found a way of making money out of his passions. He just kept pushing his barrow, a one man insurgency who'd robbed the intelligence bank and distributed the proceeds to the information poor on a website that provided anonymity to leakers, an online version of what people in my business called the "dead drop". It had caught all right. Every mangy geek with a grudge against Miss Liberty was at it. And because Assauge happened to be an Australian, the President called the Prime Minister, who called the national security adviser, who called me, all with the same double-barrelled question – "Who is this guy and how do we shut him down?"

Now I, for one, have nothing against members of our computer programming and digital telecommunications communities. Some of my best friends are phone hackers and my own skills in this department have given me the edge in several high profile fraud cases. But until I took the brief on Assauge, my only interest in the world-wide-web had been online card games, which I'd played to the point of bankruptcy. Not much help having a poker face in the new media. Nor did I have much time for spooks and diplomats. Most of them were living a dream, a bad dream that desensitised and decentred them,

leaving a void where their lives should be. Of course, I speak from experience; had a promising career in the services once, before they got me for insubordination, then expenses fraud. One good thing about the military, though – like doctors, they bury mistakes – and there was no legal impediment to me starting afresh as a private investigator and consultant specialising in national security matters. And when the guy with the crew cut walked into my office and told me about Operation Silver-Wig, I was already calculating the per diems.

Next thing you know, I'm on this bird to Reykjavik, travelling as Jake Marlo, ministerial advisor in the US Attorney General's office and would-be leaker. Some low level official meetings had been set up by Icelandic intelligence contacts, and a report had been planted in the English language *Reykjavik Grapevine* newspaper quoting officials saying I was in town to lobby for the extradition of a long-serving African dictator. I was putting up at the Hotel Borg, a nice old pile with free wi-fi, a well-stocked bar fridge and nice views over Austurvöllur Square to the red roofed houses and snow clad peaks beyond. It was also close to the Astro Bar, said to be the after-hours haunt of Assuage and his acolytes, who had descended on Iceland the way a bird descends on its prey, claws exposed, ready to feast. On the menu were the country's freedom of information laws, which Silver-Wig's group, Disseminate, was apparently rewriting to make the place a hacker's paradise.

That first night, after an in-room massage to ease the travel aches, I dined alone in the hotel's restaurant. This was the business end of the trip, where one has to be clear about the client's needs. For once, these were simple enough. They wanted to know what his vices were, and where he would be this time next month. I'd been pondering my plan of attack, picking at my reindeer steak with root vegetables and orange cauliflower foam, when I got the call from the spotter my Icелander friends had placed outside the Astro Bar to alert me to Assuage's arrival.

The caller directed me to a nightclub on Austurstraeti. There was an unexpected crush at the door – never get between a Icелander and a trendy bar, they'll just hip-shove you out of their way – and this place was ultra cool, like walking into a kaleidoscope with wall lights pulsating in three hundred different colours of varying intensity. The bodies – some of them divinely beautiful – were crammed in like kippers in the nets of a North Sea fishing trawler, swaying to hypno-techno pop. Outside it was cold, but inside positively geothermal. Nothing else for a Reykjavik geezer to do, I guess, but gaze with intent amid the mood music, and choose an artificially uninhibited teenage girl to take to the sauna. Not my age range, unfortunately. Anyway, I was working

So, this was where the hackers went to decompress their hard drives at the end of long day. Unable to spot Assuage at first, I settled in with a bourbon on one corner of a passionfruit-coloured modular settee with good view of the room, expecting a long stakeout. But before I finished my drink I spotted old platinum locks himself, willowy frame clad in an army surplus anorak, surrounded by a clutch of acolytes over whom he towered. He was wearing the notorious "fag pack" in which he carried the sum total of his private possessions everywhere he went, part fly by nighter/part snail. The groupies looked like college students, the type that hangs around too long. If you wanted a label, "geek chic" would suffice for this band of hollow-eyed webrats reeking with the grandiose narcissism of a fast fading youth.

Moving closer, I joined the queue to the bar at a point where it bordered the Silver-Wig convention in order to get a closer look at their guru. As they vied for his attention and approval in the ever-changing colours of the light, a smile played on his lips, but rarely parted them. He seemed to sift their words, always with that faint air of disdain or detachment. His pale, translucent skin and silver hair took on each change in the projected spectrum of light, like a porcelain chameleon. I found myself wondering how he would look with neatly cut hair, damped down and parted: a school boy.

When he deigned to speak, the groupies hung on his every utterance, all the while managing to look simultaneously 'hot' and 'cool'. As the bar queued inched forward glacially, I heard two of them, potential lesbians I'd say, shouting to be heard over the music, discussing the unusual dormitory arrangements at the group house where Disseminate volunteers were working on their latest project.

"There are beds everywhere, even in the kitchen!" one of the girls hyperventilated.

"I slept with him last night," said the other, then as if competing, her friend responded "Shelly and I both went to bed with him the night before she left."

Girls, girls!

But then came an unexpected kicker. "When I say 'slept with' I don't mean we had sex or anything. Julius spent the whole night glued to a computer screen. And when he did go to bed, it was in the next room, the one the black girl was renting. From then until morning nobody got any sleep. The noises coming from in there sounded like a colony of seals mating."

File that under 'V' for vices. Thank you, madam, thank you ball girls.

Time to push my luck a little further. Having got my next drink – an alco-pop I thought might impress the younger patrons, I dived deeper into the maw. Around me, all manner of arcane conversations whirled. One young hacker was spouting his crazy ideas about internet freedom. It should never be governed by any law, local or international. It was sacrosanct, untouchable, inviolable. Then, a coup. The crowd shifted and I found myself within arms reach of Silver Wig himself. And in the zone of reverence, where not a voice was raised to challenge him, he could be heard quite clearly, as if even the nightclub D.J had turned it down to listen.

"We must think beyond those who have gone before us," he was saying, "discover technological changes that embolden us with ways to act in which our forebears could not."

I'd barely been able to memorise that mouthful of gobbledegook when he floored me with another, more familiar

spray, a sentence one should never utter in the presence of somebody working for an American or allied government. "Transparency", he declared, would bring about the "total annihilation of the current U.S. regime."

Regime? Pity for hacker boy he couldn't encrypt his mouth. The people I worked for weren't going to like that turn of phrase. Can't unsay it, either. The memory on this private dick is bigger and more reliable than Google. No tape recorders. No notes. But when he mentioned having a thermonuclear device packed away somewhere, my hard drive almost crashed. Turned out he was only talking about some mega dirt file he'd compiled and marked for release should he ever be deprived of his liberty.

"That'll show 'em," I blurted, when I realised what he meant, momentarily losing the distance between observer and subject that is an essential part of a good investigation. But instead of being cheered by my emotional outburst, Silver Wig's eyes narrowed with an instinctive suspicion, and his followers turned as one to glare at me the same way.

No point standing there like a shag on a icefloe. I moved away, leaving Silver Wig to his dream of upending the world order, and followed an outlier devotee who had separated himself from the main pod and was headed towards the mens' room.

It's a surprising feature of my career that some of my best work has been done in public urinals. Entering this one I saw my quarry, standing before the wall-hung, porcelain piss catcher amid the acrid odour of dichlorobenzene, with his baseball cap on back to front and a skateboard under his arms. Sidling up, I unzipped, and began to relieve myself, convinced that the bait in my pocket would prove all but irresistible. It was a flash drive containing a couple of hundred emails written in Mandarin containing transcripts of bugged conversations between CIA operatives naming senior politicians in Belize, Congo and Australia as agents of influence. Cooked up by counter-intelligence, the confected correspondence was my passport into Silver-Wig's confidence, but to get to him I must pique the interest of this acne-covered drip wearing Wayfarer spectacles and the hacker's standard issue baggy anorak.

He finished first. I followed him to the washbasins, where we stood beside one another again, washing our hands, when the message tone on his iPhone went off, causing him to wipe his hands on his anorak, and take the phone from his pocket. I watched in the mirror as his thumbs worked restlessly to text a reply.

"You're with the Assauge crowd, right?" I said.

His texting thumbs paused over the screen of his phone.

"What if I am?" he replied, enjoying his brief moment of celebrity, and kept texting.

"I have something your boss might find interesting," I said, pausing for effect, and to use the hand drier, then producing from my pocket the flash drive. His widening eyes suggested this move had the desired effect. He was staring at the storage device like it was a live hand grenade, then his expression turned pathetic.

"We're not supposed to accept submissions in person," he whined.

Time to reel him in. "Listen, pal, I've risked my life to get this material to you," I implored, acting desperate. "And there's plenty more where this comes from. But when the shit hits the fan I need to know I won't be hung out to dry, and the only person who can assure me of that is your boss. Are yer with me?"

He nodded. I handed over the flash drive, along my card—"Jake Marlo – Desk officer, Human Rights Branch, Department of the Attorney-General, Canberra."

"I'm staying at the Hotel Borg till Sunday. You can reach me on the mobile number. It's got global roaming, and I can meet the leader at short notice."

"Yeah, well, I'll see what I can do," he said, clearly out of his depth.

"I'd appreciate it," I said. "We have to expose what's going on. Lives depend on it."

And with that, he shuffled back into the bar.

On the short walk back to the hotel, I contemplated the strange Icelandic night. Imagine being born here. You didn't meet many Icelanders in the big wide world. Not many of them I suppose. Either that or they felt there was no place like their Arctic home, with its geysers and four hours of daylight in winter, and trendy bars. And my very presence in such a place struck me as a bizarre illustration of how the world had changed. It felt kind of retro, a reprise of the Cold War, or a novel by John LeCarre or remake of Casablanca on ice. Here I was, in distant Iceland, pressing a flash drive into the soft hand of skateboarding geek, all because the government's own geeks were too coddled and incompetent to keep their secrets safe from amateurs.

It was a kind of thought that often occurred in my line of work, one that must quickly be drowned in several stiff drinks and access to the hotel's porn channel, lest it undermine the investigation. Unfortunately, Scandinavian porn leaves me cold – it lacks both plausible storylines and room to imagine. I chose ice hockey instead, but the game was one-sided, and the dark thoughts returned.

Why was I hounding a bunch of kids, idealistic kids, like I once was? How is it that we let life grind us down, scar us with our worst experiences while the positive ones slide off as if made of Teflon? What was Assuage? An anarchist gadfly. Yet my very presence was evidence enough that lots of powerful people were preparing to use the full power of the state to crush

him like a gnat. The pragmatist in me knew all about the dangers of extreme idealism, and the difference between transparency and nakedness in a world where liberal democracies confronted one party superpowers. Yet I felt somehow ashamed, ridiculous. Only when my head settled on the pillow did I remember that half the job was done.

Next morning, I was woken by the synthetic ring tone of my Scandinavian cell phone. "Mr Marlo?" a strangely familiar voice on the line said. It was the skateboard rider. "Sorry to wake you. I'm calling on behalf of Disseminate. I'm afraid we won't be able to arrange the meeting you requested before you depart on Sunday. However, I've been instructed to ask whether you might be available to meet next month?"

They were heading for Stockholm.

It's rare for an investigator like me to get entangled in an actual operation, but the Somali girls, high class escorts, had been flown in from London and no-one else had managed to penetrate Disseminate's inner-circle. It was my job to introduce them to the target. The Somalis had been paid well to say what the client wanted said, after the event. Their affidavits were already written. It all hinged on getting them some quality time alone with Silver Wig.

His group was there at the nightclub as arranged. We'd agreed the meeting was best held in a public space. The skater introduced us in a quiet corner of the bar that was filling rapidly with a young crowd after ten o'clock. The Big Geek was dressed to kill in a blue business suit, and his hair was neatly combed. He bored me for half an hour, talking about our shared commitment to freedom of information, and the internet's unlimited potential as a force for bringing power to account, and how truth, creativity, love, and compassion had to be liberated from patronage networks that corrupted the human spirit. He liked the material I'd provided, but needed to see more. Disseminate's reputation was global now. They needed to be careful, and ensure that everything they published could be corroborated.

As he spoke, his eyes strayed frequently in the direction of my lithesome companions. The Somali girls smiled obligingly like shy star struck admirers, and when the music became danceable, Silver-Wig invited all three of us onto the dance floor. I let them go. The chemistry was working. They never returned to our corner of the bar, and I notice a gleam in Assauge's eye when our gaze met occasionally.

Operation Misleading Menage was moving inexorably towards its just conclusion, or at least I thought it was, when a group of Disseminate late arrivals flooded into the bar, with one young woman of uncommon natural beauty in their midst. She was the sort of girl who made you want to try again, as if she'd been the right one all along, only you'd never met her. Suddenly the Somali aura that had engulfed the quarry evaporated as he saw her. The black girls returned to me, obviously deflated as Silver Wig bought that girl a drink. I tried to reunite our little party – the one my client had paid big bucks to organize – but he wasn't interested. We had lost control. Last time I saw him, he was getting into a taxi with the woman.

We humans inhabit a sordid and entirely tragic comedy that defies our best efforts to force the outcome. I stayed on in Stockholm, taking the air. It's strange how you can visit a place you have never been to before, and find it just as you imagined it would be. The Scandinavian air of Stockholm was clean, the city neat, brimming with Nordic efficacy and the scent of the sea. Part of me wished I'd been born there, grown up there. Stayed there. What would I be doing now if I had? Something more useful I imagine. Over breakfast one morning, I read a profile of Assauge as he fought the extradition proceedings that flowed from the events of that evening. "With his spectral white hair, pallid skin, cool eyes, and expansive forehead, he resembles a rail-thin being that has rocketed to Earth to deliver humanity some hidden truth."

Well, we all have our own truths. The guy's a rock star, and we all know what happens to them. It's a kind of karmic loop – the hunter becoming the hunted becoming the hunter again. Maybe he'll snap and evaporate under the pressure, or the best hackers money can buy will break his codes. Delusions of grandeur being what they are, his quest will end in disappointment.

On my way to the airport, I stopped at a bar and had a couple of double scotches. They didn't do me any good. I still remember the day when my own youthful idealism was folded and put away in the place where dreams go.

It's all downhill from there, and dead cold when you reach your destination.

About the author

Christopher Kremmer is a journalist and writer. He is the author of five books, including fiction and non-fiction, short stories and a substantial body of journalism. His work during a decade spent as a foreign correspondent in Asia – first for the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, and later for *The Sydney Morning Herald* – earned him an international profile as an insightful and sensitive observer of the region.

His latest book *The Chase* was published in August 2011 in Picador

Global Media Journal © 2011