

'Ormsby has delivered a triumph of narrative journalism, meticulously researched and gripping, a skilful mergence of tech jargon with human drama.'

THE SATURDAY PAPER

THE DARKEST WEB

DRUGS, DEATH AND DESTROYED LIVES...
THE INSIDE STORY OF THE INTERNET'S
EVIL TWIN

EILEEN ORMSBY

Praise for *Silk Road*

‘Ormsby’s investigative journalism shines as she provides a very thorough account of Ulbricht’s rise and fall.’ *Penthouse Magazine*

‘Through her clear rendering of the facts, Ormsby makes the intricacies of the technology involved accessible to even the most technophobic of readers. The tone is conversational and friendly while the content is intriguing and increasingly dark. In her quest to uncover the mystery behind the enigmatic DPR she uncovers a story of subterfuge, replete with conspiracy theories and hidden identities, that is rich with anecdotes.’ *Newtown Review of Books*

‘The book is a fascinating expose of this particular aspect of the “dark web” of internet dealings and its subsequent unravelling.’ *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Ormsby is a great writer, giving us gripping accounts from the people who actually used “Silk Road” to paint an accurate picture of how the website was created, run, and ultimately fell...*Silk Road* is easily one of the best books I’ve read this year.’ *The Library NZ*

‘*Silk Road* is one of the more readable and gripping true crime books of recent times. It is not just Ormsby’s knowledge of the brief but spectacular rise and fall of Silk Road that makes for compelling reading, but also the ordering of the material so that the reader has the sense of being educated in the technical and legal background to an astonishing criminal enterprise.’ *The Australian*

‘For the most complete account of the original Silk Road, which was closed down by the FBI in late 2013, Eileen Ormsby’s book *Silk Road* is the best place to start. It’s full of original research, interviews and insight. This is best read along with her excellent blog, AllThingsVice, which covers several aspects of the dark net, but especially the dark net markets.’ Jamie Bartlett, author of *Darknet and Radicals*

‘A great strength of the meticulously researched *Silk Road* is the manner in which Ormsby gently takes the reader by the hand, unpacking the technology

underpinning this 'dark net' market.' *Australian Police Journal*

Eileen Ormsby is a lawyer, author and freelance journalist based in Melbourne. Her first book, *Silk Road* was the world's first in-depth expose of the black markets that operate on the dark web. Her gonzo-style investigations have led her deep into the secretive corners of the dark web where drugs and weapons dealers, hackers, hitmen and worse ply their trade. Many of these dark web interactions turned into real-world relationships, entanglements, hack attempts on her computer and even death threats from the dark web's most successful hitman network as she researched *Darkest Web*. She now lives a quiet life off-grid as much as possible.

THE DARKEST WEB

EILEEN ORMSBY


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For Mum and Dad, who gave me my love of reading and who secretly wish I wrote nice literary fiction, but are nevertheless unrelentingly proud and supportive of everything I do.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book deals with violent and distressing subject matter, particularly [Part III](#) Darkest, which describes incidents of child sexual abuse and torture. Reader discretion is advised.

PROLOGUE

Chris Monteiro stares at his computer screen, heart in his mouth. When the two-minute show finishes, the cybersecurity expert restarts it, looking for signs that it has been faked.

The video is substandard both in terms of plot and production values, but the content is chilling. A white sedan is engulfed in flames and the arsonist stands in front of it, his gloved hand holding a sign up to an unseen light so that the words are clearly displayed to the viewer as the car burns in the background: ‘Besa Mafia dedication to Pirate London. 10 April 2016.’

Besa Mafia is a site on the dark web offering murder-for-hire services. And Pirate.London is Monteiro’s personal website. The video is real and it is a warning.

On the other side of the world, I click on to the fifteenth email in as many hours from the administrator of the Besa Mafia website. He calls himself Yura, so that is almost certainly not his name. Earlier emails had been all business, offering bribes if only I would stop reporting on the site’s nefarious activities. As the day wears on and Yura’s offers are met with silence or a refusal, the emails take on an increasingly hysterical and menacing tone.

Yura promises me that his army of hackers will ruin my life. Child porn will be placed on my computer. Incriminating evidence will be planted across the internet, with all digital footprints leading back to me. This latest email has yet another new silencing tactic.

You don’t know my name, you don’t know who I am, but I know your name and I know where you live. I will get my gang members, and I will send them to rape beat and destroy you. And believe me, it will be successful.

Remove your articles now. All of them.

Monteiro and I have let ourselves into the back door of the Besa Mafia website, thanks to the assistance of a friendly hacker. We have been watching every interaction between the most successful dark web murder-for-hire site in history and its customers. We know all their dirty secrets. We have traced the Bitcoin that has been sent from around the world accompanying orders for the murder, beating or rape of spouses, business partners or scorned lovers.

In the few short months the site has been operational, the website has taken in hundreds of thousands of dollars. Now the hitman-for-hire knows that we know. And he's not happy at all.

A hooded figure sits, defeated, in a concrete cell. Beside him are two dog bowls, one filled with water, the other empty. Propped against his feet, a piece of paper bears a handwritten message:

29 Aug#ISISGAMES

A web address (URL) is also scrawled on the sign, but instead of .com it ends in .onion, signifying that only somebody who has downloaded the Tor software can get access.

ISIS Red Room. Free, BRUTAL, live! A countdown clock ticks towards the deadline. The words that greet those who dare to enter the URL tell viewers what they can expect on 29 August:

We will with official media pictures and ISIS propaganda material prove to you that we have 7 very real ISIS jihadists in our capture. Everything is live and interactive. Their fate will be in your hands.

'Red rooms' promise pay-per-view torture, culminating in murder, of an unfortunate captive. Those who want to watch pay the website owner in Bitcoins. Rates vary from site to site, but payment is always a prerequisite. A certain amount to watch passively; more if you want to interact in the chat room with other viewers as the torture is being carried out.

Then there is the director. The director is the voyeur willing to pay the most. In return they get to direct the action, choosing what happens next to the victim. Red rooms are a staple of the dark web, a natural progression from tales of the snuff movie that have been part of popular culture for decades.

But this red room is different.

For one, it is free. For another, these are no innocent victims to be tortured, sexually assaulted, mutilated and murdered. Vigilantes have captured ISIS terrorists, whom they promise to slowly torture to death, one by one.

As the timer counts down, word is spreading across forums and chans, not only on the dark web, but on clear web (regular web) sites like reddit and Twitter. A few hours before deadline, thousands of people from around the world are in the dark web chat room, waiting for the show.

At 00:01 UTC on 29 August 2015, the site updates: *Let the Games Begin*

The quiver in the senior constable's finger is almost imperceptible as it hovers above the mouse. On the screen, the cursor points to a link: *Daisy's Destruction Pt 1*. A screenshot acts as a preview, promising that the most sought-after video of the dark web may be just a click away.

Daisy's Destruction has become a dark web urban legend. It is discussed furtively in chat rooms and forums, on chans and in IRC. A few claim to have seen the video themselves, but most have only second-hand information from a 'friend of a friend'. The details of what is in the video change depending on who is doing the telling. A twelve-year-old girl is killed in it, say some. No, it is a toddler being tortured, say others. There's a man and a woman. Several men. Only children. It is the first, truly verified, snuff film ever known.

The one thing they all agree on is that it can only be found on the dark web, and only within the murkiest bowels of that. To find it, you have to venture into places few even know exist; into an empire run by a man known only as 'Lux'.

Lux's empire comprises a number of sites. A chan promises censorship-free images. Another provides live streaming video. There is a wiki and a community support forum.

But it is Hurt2theCore that has the police officer's attention. Hurt2theCore is the worst of the sites, not just within the empire, but in all of the dark web. It is the site Lux considers his greatest achievement.

Lux is reviled by most, idolised by a select few. In a place inhabited by thieves, deviants, junkies and pedophiles, he is proud of his reputation as the epitome of evil. He claims to be an American pediatrician, but she suspects he is Australian. She is closing in. That's why she has to click. It may bring her one step closer to finding him and closing down his evil empire.

The video flickers to life. A bedroom, nondescript. A masked woman. Hanging above the bed, tied with rough rope by her ankles, a child, or toddler rather, no more than two years old, screams in fear and agony. At the urging of

infant, no more than two years old, screams in fear and agony. At the urging of an unseen male voice, the woman steps towards the baby, a sharp object in her hand, before the video abruptly turns to black.

‘This is just a teaser. Let me know if you want to see the rest of it.’ The invitation is signed ‘Lux’.

The senior constable doesn’t want to see the rest of it, but she knows it is inevitable as she closes in on her prey. Lux’s acolytes will clamber to pay him for the privilege of viewing the life of a little girl literally being destroyed and she will have to see it, too.

In the meantime, the seasoned police officer opens the little filing cabinet in her brain that secures away the vile sounds and images that have become part of her daily life. She pops *Daisy’s Destruction* into it and locks it securely.

As always, she prays that there never comes a day when that filing cabinet bursts open.

‘The last thing you fucking want is my undivided attention.’ The warning plays through my head as I wait on an uncomfortable wooden stool. There’s a telephone on the bench in front of me and I pick up the receiver as he takes his seat on the other side of the thick Perspex wall, which has been reinforced with steel bars.

‘I want to call you “Mongoose”,’ I blurt out before he can say anything. Before he wound up here, in this bleak and notoriously violent prison, we had conversed online, in private messages on a drugs appreciation forum where he often held court with his outrageous antics and tall tales. He had used the name Mongoose then and, reportedly, when armed police officers stormed his home to arrest him on a slew of charges, he had calmly commanded them to ‘Call me “Mongoose”’.

The author of an article recounting some of Mongoose’s older crimes had elected not to interview him, because when people dealt with Mongoose bad things happened: ‘business transactions fell apart, people retired nicknames and dropped from view...[Mongoose] deposited things on people’s PCs via e-mail that gave him access to their personal desktops and files. Frankly, [Mongoose] scared me, and I didn’t consider him a reliable source of information anyway. So why feed his fire?’

‘Please do,’ Mongoose responds politely to my outburst. He looks surprisingly well for a man who has spent nearly two years on remand in Bangkok’s infamous Klong Prem Central Prison. He is fighting extradition to the United States, where he faces charges of being the second mastermind behind the

world's most notorious online drugs market, Silk Road. The other mastermind, his alleged protégé, has already been sentenced to two consecutive life sentences without possibility of parole.

Mongoose used to sign his posts with an explicit threat: *The last thing you fucking want is my undivided attention*. Right now, the man whom *High Times* magazine dubbed the Megabyte Megalomaniac, aka Mongoose, is indeed giving me his undivided attention.

I hope I don't come to regret it.

There's the world wide web—the internet we all know that connects us via news, email, forums, shopping and social media. Then there's the dark web—the parallel internet accessed by only a select few. Usually those it connects wish to remain anonymous and for good reason.

The email is designed to never reveal its users; the news and forums are dedicated to topics of true crime, but with inside information and gruesome detail rarely found on the clear web. Shopping is paid for with cryptocurrency like Bitcoin, on markets that advertise drugs, weapons, hacking tools and far more nefarious goods and services.

I have spent the past five years exploring every corner of the dark web, one of the few who is open about who I am and what I do there. I have shopped on darknet markets, contributed to forums, waited in red rooms and hacked hitmen-for-hire sites.

Sometimes my dark web activities have poured out into the real world and I have attended trials, met with criminals and the law enforcement officers who tracked them down, interviewed dark web identities and visited them in prison.

This book will take you with me into the murkiest depths of the web's dark underbelly—the darkest web.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine being able to browse an online shop that looks just like Amazon, complete with a little shopping trolley for your purchases, except you fill it up with cocaine, ecstasy or heroin. Or what about browsing for the services of a hitman in your local city, arranging for a SWAT team to raid the house of someone you have a beef with or hiring a hacker to check whether your spouse is cheating.

The dark web is a parallel internet that exists deep beneath the one we know. Google won't find its sites, nor YouTube play its videos. You won't somehow stumble across it, because it cannot be accessed without first downloading special software. Host to all the sites that feature in contemporary horror movies or cautionary tales of TV crime dramas, the dark web is like the internet's evil twin, and few people are willing to venture inside. Yet it holds a fascination for us and we have been provided a peek into what it holds, thanks to news stories and documentaries, as well as fictional depictions in everything from the *Law & Order* franchise to the more technically accurate *Mr. Robot*.

In many ways, the reality of the dark web is somewhat more pedestrian than TV shows and movies depict. It is slower, less high-tech and graphically challenged compared to the regular internet. On the other hand, there are some aspects of the dark web too heinous to be used as entertainment. Within the web of private networks, which offer a layer of anonymity impossible to achieve on the regular internet, drugs and guns are traded, hitmen advertise their services, hackers can be hired to attack an enemy's computer and those with the most depraved tastes can download pornographic images to satisfy their lust.

The technical name for the dark web is 'hidden services'—web servers that run locally and are not visible or accessible to the outside internet, and can only be accessed from within the network of the software provider. Hidden services are a way of creating a meeting place where the visitor can't discover where the

are a way of creating a meeting place where the visitor can't discover where the host is and the host can't discover where the visitor is coming from. Nobody—including the organisations that provide access to the sites—can determine who runs them or where they are located. Nor can they close the sites down.

The most popular provider of hidden services is Tor. Tor was developed by the US military with a primary purpose of protecting government communications. Tor has three main functions—allowing users to publish and read information with complete anonymity, circumventing censorship and getting around internet filters, and providing access to hidden services, the dark web. There are positive and important uses for the first two functions. Tor has become increasingly popular in a post-privacy world for anybody needing or wanting secrecy or anonymity. It is particularly useful for whistleblowers and human rights workers in hostile regimes, but also for ordinary people who want to surf the web without their information being harvested for marketers.

While technically-minded folk have long used darknets to communicate privately, Tor brought it to the masses. Once downloaded, the software opens a browser that looks identical to that used for surfing the internet normally. The average user can't see that their IP address is being routed through a worldwide volunteer network of servers, encrypted and re-encrypted several times over until it reaches its destination.

Although a user's internet provider may be able to determine that they have connected to Tor, they cannot tell what sites the user has visited. The user's location and usage is hidden from anyone conducting network surveillance or traffic analysis. When the user's destination is a site on the clear web (the regular web), that site knows it has had a visitor but has no way of knowing who that visitor is or where in the world they are located.

These privacy aspects are useful and seem benign, although there is the potential for people to use the anonymity provided to troll or harass others, safe in the knowledge that their identity is hidden. But when we talk about the dark web, we really mean the websites you can visit via Tor that you can't visit on the clear web.

The URL of these sites is usually made up of a string of sixteen apparently random letters and numbers that end in '.onion' instead of any of the usual domain identifiers such as .com or .org. Because the sites are not designed to be found by search engines, users must either know the exact URL they want or use one of the available gateway sites. Any site that has an .onion domain name is contained within the Tor network and is not part of the internet. The hidden network of sites is colloquially referred to as 'Onionland'.

There are sites that claim to sell human organs (heart \$65,000, lung \$30,000,

liver \$45,000) that the purchaser can collect from a third-world country. Others offer access to real-life Gladiator fights to the death, contract killing services or live streaming of pay-per-view torture. There are those who swear you can access details of live human experiments or obtain made-to-order snuff films. Yet another site promises to procure exotic animals. Identity items are a high-demand black market product and range from five-dollar licence copies, good for nightclub entry and not much else, to passports that are ‘genuinely generated from within the IPS [intrusion prevention system] of the UK government and guaranteed good for travel’ for \$4000. There is theft-to-order, university papers researched and written and even a service that allows people to buy in to fixed sporting events. There are sites that are completely incomprehensible to most mere mortals—the hangouts of the hackers and phreakers doing whatever it is that hackers and phreakers do in their own impenetrable language.

The sites that can be found on the dark web include black markets (arms, drugs, forgeries, banking details, stolen goods and credit cards, new identities, services), illegal porn forums and filesharing sites, political dissent and hate sites, and hacking communities. Many sites require an invitation to view them and so their contents remain a mystery.

Anonymous markets need an anonymous payment system. That’s why cash is king when it comes to buying and selling illegal goods. Unless it has been treated with a chemical designed to hold fingerprints, nobody can tell if you have handled a specific note or coin. It has long been a downfall of the internet that money exchanges (through bank transfers, credit cards or even Western Union transfers) are traceable to at least one of the parties.

Cryptocurrencies fixed all that. Bitcoin in particular offered a robust, mathematically backed currency that had all the validity and anonymity of cash but in the virtual world. When it was unleashed in 2009, Bitcoin—which was ‘mined’ by computers running complex algorithms to solve mathematical equations—had no value. Only computer nerds and people with well-developed scientific minds had any interest in acquiring Bitcoin, and they did so, more as a novelty than anything else.

A year later, Bitcoin still had almost no value and cost more in electricity usage to mine it than it could be sold for. However, some people began to recognise that its nature of being universal in application, and essentially as anonymous as cash, meant it could have a use in being applied to black markets and the exchange of illegal goods. Bitcoin has risen so far in value that it has a market cap of billions of dollars in 2018.

Many people refer to the dark web as the wild west of the internet, where anything goes. In many ways, they are right. There are some depraved minds out

there and they have total freedom to buy, sell, share or create anything they want, confident that they cannot be found.

Some people want to buy murderous substances and implements. Some want to sell people and poisons. Others want to share livestreams of torture or create pictures and films of such depravity, seasoned cops who view them need counselling. Most frightening is that the technology—simple to use for those with basic computer skills—has meant that those depraved minds have been able to find each other.

PART I

Dark

Silk Road

Like the High Street stores that have had to close their doors, the street corner drug dealer is becoming an endangered species. Local drug dealers are losing business, unable to compete with the convenience and cheaper prices of online shopping.

Most people would never have heard of the dark web had it not been for the rise of the first point-and-click illicit drugs market. Silk Road was the original and most notorious dark web drugs bazaar to be promoted to the public. It was a brazen market that brought together buyers and sellers of every drug imaginable. Its design was reminiscent of eBay or Amazon and it was almost as easy to use, with marijuana, cocaine or Xanax bars ready to be popped into the shopping basket, all set to be shipped anywhere in the world. Colourful advertisements offered everything from a single ecstasy pill to bulk orders destined for on-sale in nightclubs, or through friend-of-friend networks. Sellers were rated for their quality and customer service.

‘It’s a certifiable one-stop shop for illegal drugs that represents the most brazen attempt to peddle drugs online that we have ever seen. It’s more brazen than anything else by light years,’ said US Senator Chuck Schumer when Silk Road first garnered press attention a few months after its February 2011 birth. He called for it to be shut down immediately, which would seem to be a reasonable demand. But the technology was like nothing politicians had ever dealt with before.

Tor, Bitcoin and drugs created the perfect storm for the first online mass black market. Tor allowed the hosting of websites where the owner could not be traced, which meant that a shopfront could be created without the inconvenience of it being closed down by law enforcement or a law-abiding ISP. More importantly, it meant that the website did not have to operate clandestinely, or by invitation only. Rather, it could advertise openly to the masses, the people behind it anonymous, their location in the world impossible to determine.

Any commercial enterprise requires payment for goods. Traditional online payment methods such as credit cards, PayPal, Western Union or bank transfers all have the potential to de-anonymise the user. Those who were capable of stealing those means of payment were a select few, and that would be another barrier to mass-market appeal for the shop. Bitcoin was the game changer.

Entire books have been written about the cryptocurrency Bitcoin, and there is not space in this book to do it justice. At its simplest level, it is a borderless digital currency, which allows for almost instantaneous transactions from one

person to another anywhere in the world. It is decentralised, meaning no one entity controls or regulates it. Most importantly for the black market, neither person needs to know the identity of the other. It is the equivalent of cash in an online world.

A potential Silk Road customer might browse a website like localbitcoins.com to find someone selling Bitcoin (which is perfectly legal). Once they agree to a price, the customer makes a cash deposit into the Bitcoin seller's bank account, and as soon as the seller sees the money in their account, the agreed amount of Bitcoin is transferred into the digital address provided. That address could be a private Bitcoin wallet, or the buyer's Silk Road wallet. The seller would have no way of knowing; to them, it would simply be a string of numbers and letters.

Drugs were the ideal product for the experiment. Worldwide recreational drug use continues to grow every year and personal-use quantities are small enough to be hidden in a plain white business envelope, indistinguishable from billions of others circulating the globe for less nefarious reasons.

Postal workers turned into unwitting drug mules as hundreds of thousands of people around the world flocked to this new way of buying drugs. Like eBay, sellers had reputations to preserve, so they provided excellent customer service and high-quality drugs to ensure a five-star rating.

At Silk Road's helm was the site's founder, who initially was known simply as 'Admin'. He started the site with a view to achieving an open market free from regulation or interference by governments. 'Silk Road was founded on libertarian principles,' he said. 'It is a great idea and a great practical system...It is not a utopia. It is regulated by market forces, not a central power.'

As his site grew from a few to hundreds, to thousands of sales every day, the mysterious founder and sole administrator became the object of hero-worship among drug sellers and users alike. He was known for his libertarian philosophies and preaching for a world where people could indulge in the substances of their choice, free from interference or violence. Unlike other black markets that operated both in the physical world and the dark web, Silk Road would not permit the sale of anything with the purpose of harming or defrauding others.

The founder seemed to truly care for his customers. 'I know this whole market is based on the trust you put in me and I don't take that lightly. It's an honor to serve you,' he wrote on the site's forums. 'I hope that as time goes on I will have more opportunities to demonstrate that my intentions are genuine and no amount of money could buy my integrity.'

In any other hands, Silk Road may well have failed. Most people would have set it up purely as a money-making exercise. But although the site operated as an

e-commerce platform, its owner was determined to build a community, one which he would lead with love and kindness, and be closely involved in. He even kept a private journal on his computer, chronicling the early days of his online initiative. 'I imagine that some day I may have a story written about my life, and it would be good to have a detailed account of it,' he mused.

He also contributed prolifically on Silk Road's forums, addressing his flock. 'You all are like family to me. Sure we have some crazy cousins floating around, but they just add character, right? Doesn't matter though, I love you all,' he wrote. He never took the site's members for granted. 'Of all the people in the world, you are the ones who are here, in the early stages of this revolution. You are the ones getting this thing off the ground and driving it forward. It is a privilege to have you by my side. Thank you for your trust, faith, camaraderie and love.'

For whatever reason—quality drugs at a reasonable price, ease of use of the site itself, or the opportunity to be part of a revolution—people from all over the world flocked to sign up to buy or sell drugs and join in the banter of the community.

It was not long before the job was too much for one man. Silk Road needed a crew and there was never a shortage of applicants for the job.

Variety Jones

Some time in 2011, when Silk Road was still a one-man show, ‘Variety Jones showed up’, the owner wrote in his journal. ‘This was the biggest and strongest willed character I had met through the site thus far. He quickly proved to me that he had value by pointing out a major security hole in the site I was unaware of.’

Variety Jones, who had been part of online communities for cannabis growers for over a decade, became the founder’s closest confidant. Unable to speak to anybody in the real world, Silk Road’s owner welcomed the counsel of the seasoned veteran. He grew to trust the man, and let his guard down, chatting to him as if he were a close friend rather than an anonymous person on the other end of a keyboard. They discussed every aspect of the site, as well as ideas and plans for the future. Silk Road’s Admin was the visionary and Variety Jones the practical adviser who would let him know if and how something was possible.

‘He convinced me of a server configuration paradigm that gave me the confidence to be the sole server administrator and not work with someone else at all,’ wrote Silk Road’s founder in his journal. ‘He has advised me on many technical aspects of what we are doing, helped me speed up the site and squeeze more out of my current servers. He also has helped me better interact with the community around Silk Road, delivering proclamations, handling troublesome characters, running a sale, changing my name, devising rules, and on and on. He also helped me get my head straight regarding legal protection, cover stories, devising a will, finding a successor, and so on. He’s been a real mentor.’

In those early days VJ became the young entrepreneur’s sounding board. He was the only person the Silk Road owner trusted enough to share details about the business.

‘OK,’ said VJ before signing off a chat in December 2011, ‘can’t go without asking—what’s the weekly gross sales?’

‘Wanna take a guess?’ Admin teased, enjoying some light-hearted banter with his mentor before revealing sales to be around \$125,000 per week.

VJ was suitably impressed. ‘Not bad for a guy that started selling shrooms, eh?’ he said, referencing the origins of the site, when the founder listed his home-grown magic mushrooms for sale.

That night, Admin wrote in his journal: ‘Chatted with VJ again today. Him coming onto the scene has reinspired me and given me direction on the SR project. He has helped me see a larger vision. A brand that people can come to trust and rally behind. Silk Road chat, Silk Road exchange, Silk Road credit union, Silk Road market, Silk Road everything! And it’s been amazing just

talking to a guy who is so intelligent and in the same boat as me, to a certain degree at least.’ Three months later, he reported sales of \$600,000 per week.

As sales increased and the site grew in popularity, so too did the risks to those who ran it, especially the very visible founder. By February 2012, news stories about Silk Road were common enough that growing numbers of the general public were aware of it, which meant there was political pressure to do something about it. The older and more experienced Variety Jones quizzed Admin about whether anyone in his real life knew of his involvement in the site. Silk Road’s owner admitted that two people—a former girlfriend and a friend—were aware he had started the site. He wasn’t overly concerned: ‘One I’ll probably never speak to again, and the other I’ll drift away from.’

Variety Jones didn’t agree. He believed that anybody who knew the true identity of the owner of the most notorious website in the world was dangerous. His devious mind had come up with a plan. ‘Have you even seen *The Princess Bride*?’ he asked. Admin confirmed he had.

‘So you know the history of Dread Pirate Roberts? It’s a thought I’m working on, so humour me.’

Admin was a little hazy on the details and VJ prompted him about the legend. In the story of *The Princess Bride*, the hero, Westley, was captured by Dread Pirate Roberts, a pirate with a reputation of ruthlessness who would kill all on board a ship if they refused to hand over their gold. Westley went on to become the first mate and eventually the pirate let him in on a little secret: Dread Pirate Roberts was not so much one person’s name as a job title, secretly passed on from man to man as each incumbent decided to retire. The fictional Roberts’ infamous reputation meant ships would immediately surrender their wealth rather than allow their crew to be captured and killed. When the captain wanted to retire, he would offload all his crew other than his first mate at a port. Engaging a new team, the captain would refer to the first mate as ‘Dread Pirate Roberts’ and once the new crew were convinced, he would leave the ship and retire on his riches.

‘You need to change your name from Admin, to Dread Pirate Roberts,’ said VJ. ‘I’m not kidding—start the legend now.’

‘I like the idea,’ his protégé responded.

With that, Dread Pirate Roberts, or DPR for short, was born. Variety Jones affectionately called him ‘Dipper’.

As time went on, DPR became increasingly reliant on the counsel and friendship of Variety Jones. The two of them would chat late into the night about things that affected the business of the site. During one chat about how to tackle vendors trying to do out-of-escrow sales (and avoiding the commission), DPR

admitted that not only could he look through the private messages (PMs) of the site's members, he often did so.

The site's privacy-conscious members would have been disturbed to discover this. Silk Road was built on a platform of trust and 'us against the man'. Although the website enabled encryption using Pretty Good Privacy (PGP), which would thwart any attempts by DPR to snoop, many on the site chose not to use it in their communications.

'Sometime, we have to have a discussion about what to do in the event of arrest or incarceration,' said VJ, one day in March 2012. 'Thought about that a fair bit during the last two weeks.'

'For instance, if you were arrested, a decision would have to be made at what point of time do I come get you out. And I would come and get you out. Jail doesn't scare me a whit anymore. I treat it like being in a 3rd world country with poor communications infrastructure.'

'I've been thinking a bit about that as well,' said DPR. 'Like I could put instructions for transferring control in an encrypted file and give it to a family member. Then I can give them the password if I get put in jail.'

'And remember that one day when you're in the exercise yard, I'll be the dude in the helicopter coming in low and fast, I promise,' said VJ. 'Seriously, with the amount of \$ we're generating, I could hire a small country to come get you. One of the things I'd like us to look at investing in is a helicopter tour company. Cause you never know when one of us is gonna need a helicopter!'

'Yep, all that money won't be worth much if we're behind bars,' agreed DPR.

The Great 420 Sale and Giveaway

Grab your sleeping bag, stock up on supplies and get ready to camp out on your computer for 49 hours, because on April 20, 2012 at 4:20 PM, the greatest sale in the history of the Silk Road kicks into gear, and you're not going to want to miss a minute of it.

This 4/20, every 420 seconds, some lucky buyer will win one of our 420 great prizes! From \$50 gift certificates to a brand new iPhone 4s, some lucky person will be chosen every 420 seconds to win a prize.

– forum post by DPR, April 2012

The Great Silk Road 420 Sale and Giveaway was a brainchild of Dread Pirate Roberts and Variety Jones; a way of engaging the community and getting a buzz

happening around the website. Not only would there be regular giveaways throughout, but the party would culminate in a grand prize of an all-expenses paid holiday with spending money. Dread Pirate Roberts was particularly excited and suggested to his mentor that Silk Road forego taking commissions for any sales throughout the event. VJ wasn't convinced. 'I'd like to think that we can bring more to the party than just dropped commissions. We're filling the prize barrel already,' he said.

'It's just three days!' DPR could barely contain his excitement for the party his site was about to throw. His love of his business extended far beyond how much money it made him.

'And a mil in sales,' VJ reminded him, thinking of the extra commissions this could be bringing in a very short timeframe.

DPR thought of it more as a kind of door-buster, loss-leading event, with losses being more than recuperated in the following months. 'We'll be doing a mil in sales every week at full commission before long,' DPR said. 'It's leading by example for the vendors. They will be more generous if we are.' Commissions were dropped.

The announcement of the sale and prize giveaway was met with initial disbelief, but was then well received by customers, and it generated the sort of buzz that was a marketing dream for the site. The community pitched in with their own suggestions and drug vendors offered further discounts and specials on their wares for the duration of the occasion.

In their nightly roundup of the day's events, DPR and VJ cracked jokes about how the sale might be perceived by the public. 'We're selling drugs here, first one's free little Johnny!' joked DPR. 'Damn that sounds awful.'

'Ha!!!' said VJ. 'Let's give away a couple of playground sets, with swings and slides, just to complete the picture.'

The event went down well with the site's clientele, with drug buyers around the world glued to their screens, placing strategic orders in the hope of grabbing one of the prizes. The odds were good, and many customers received bonuses over and above the cut-price wares. Camaraderie among the site's members was strengthened thanks to them taking part in a history-making event that surely would have been considered absurd had anyone suggested it a year earlier.

The winner of the grand prize was a member by the name of 'kiwibacon', who expressed his excitement and gratitude on the forum:

omg thanks alot sr!!!

cant beleive [sic] i actually won something!!!!!!

WTF!!!!!!! when i saw msg i was like must be a scam ill never

.....

win anything!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
thanks guys!!!!!!!!!! Zomg

A month later, Variety Jones broached the subject of kiwibacon with his protégé. VJ had organised the luxury trip for the winner, provided the itineraries and the extras at a total cost of around \$30,000 to Silk Road. ‘Dude, I’m worried about our winner,’ he said.

‘Whasamatta?’

‘He’s trying to dry out. Heroin. It’s not working, and I think his recent influx of cash didn’t help,’ VJ said, referring to the \$4000 spending money that came with the holiday.

This disturbed DPR, who had joked self-consciously at the time about approaching drug dealing in such a cavalier manner. ‘Oh geez. Fuck, what are we doing?’

VJ twisted the knife. ‘Yeah, he told me some time ago he was trying to quit, but SR made it kinda tough. So I’ve been doing sessions with him, giving him someone to talk to.’

‘Do you think he can’t make the trip?’

‘I dunno. I’m sure he’s gonna run out of spending money early, that’s for sure,’ said VJ. ‘Now, his friend coming from Aus doesn’t imbibe, so I’m hoping he’ll be a good influence. I’m just worried that it’s not the kinda place you wanna get caught trying to score H, or possessing it.’ Although they had kept the details of the luxury trip a secret, they had decided it would be to a place both DPR and VJ had a great affection for—Thailand.

‘What does he want to do?’ DPR asked.

‘Oh, he’s all gung ho to go, it’s me that’s worried ;)’

‘Shoulda thought more carefully about dropping \$4k on an addict,’ said DPR ruefully. ‘Maybe our next prize will be three months in rehab.’

A growing enterprise

‘What are weeklys now?’ VJ, the only person who was allowed to be privy to sales revenue information, asked the site’s owner in the third quarter of 2012.

‘Up to \$1.3M,’ Dread Pirate Roberts responded.

Variety Jones became an integral part of Silk Road, but he was never hired to do a specific role. The site continued to grow at such a rapid pace that DPR soon had to take on staff members—administrators and forum moderators. Such was his reputation and the love of members for the site, many people offered their services for free. Forum moderators, in particular, started out as volunteer positions.

DPR gradually built up a small team of trusted workers to whom he paid between US\$500 and \$1500 per week. The website’s members were soon introduced to Inigo, Libertas, Chronicpain and Samesamebutdifferent (SSBD), who took on public-facing administration roles. Inigo and Chronicpain hailed from the US, Libertas represented Europe and SSBD worked the Australian time zone.

Although DPR was paranoid about his own anonymity, he was not prepared to trust his staff. ‘I’ll need your ID with current address,’ DPR told people when he was offering them a position that provided access to information other members were not privy to. ‘It will be stored encrypted and I will probably never need to decrypt.’ Once staff members supplied the identification, DPR would send them a letter that contained a code they would have to repeat to him, so that he could verify that the identification truly belonged to the staff members. He would send it at a random time so that they could not provide a fake address.

A couple of people were uneasy with this requirement and elected not to join the site’s administrative team. For others, however, the lure of taking on an official role, as well as the money being offered, was too tempting. ‘I guess I’ll just have to trust you on that,’ said Flush, who took on the public moniker Chronicpain. ‘That’s a big trust.’

‘Yea, that’s true,’ DPR responded.

Inigo (‘handsome devil’, DPR commented upon receiving a copy of his driver’s licence) was widely considered to be the site’s second-in-charge. He was named for Inigo Montoya, Dread Pirate Roberts’ sidekick in *The Princess Bride*. Variety Jones, who really held that position, was practically unknown to members, except as a cannabis seed grower who made occasional forum posts. His role as adviser and mentor was not made public. Nobody was aware of the access he had to the inner mechanics of Silk Road, nor of his influence over the

Dread Pirate Roberts.

It wasn't just the members at large who were kept in the dark. The public-facing staff members appeared to be Silk Road insiders, but not one of them was aware of the existence of Variety Jones, the puppet-master behind the scenes who had his finger in every one of DPR's pies. DPR shared everything with VJ, sought his counsel and let him in on every aspect of Silk Road. As for his paid staff: 'DPR didn't tell us shit,' SSBD said later. They were provided with limited access, restricted to what was required for them to carry out their jobs.

The administrators were responsible for a variety of tasks, including vendor quality control, resolutions, answering messages—trivial but time-consuming jobs DPR was no longer interested in doing. The toughest stuff, they were told, was keeping up with the vendors and knowing when to demote them. Demotions would apply for nondelivery of drugs to customers, faking feedback, circumventing escrow, loan scamming, exchange scamming or providing fake product. Some bans were temporary, others more permanent.

The administrators and moderators were required to provide regular updates to DPR and he expected total loyalty. The staff, with their common goal of distributing as many drugs to as many people as possible, generally worked as a functional and cohesive team.

That was, until DPR logged on in January 2013 to frantic messages from his deputy. 'I hope you get online soon,' Inigo wrote to his boss. 'We are under attack.'

A thief in the midst

Inigo had noticed some odd transactions running through the Silk Road accounts in the preceding hours. Around \$100,000 had gone missing from the petty cash account, but far worse was the discovery that somebody had been changing vendors' passwords, resetting their PINs and wiping out their balances. It could only be a staff member with administration privileges. Inigo worked frantically all night trying to stem the thefts, unable to get hold of DPR.

'I think I figured out how to contain it,' he wrote finally. 'As far as I can tell it was Flush, and he managed to steal a little over \$350k.'

DPR came to the same conclusion as to the source of the thefts after doing some digging of his own. 'This makes me sick to my stomach. I decrypted his ID and did some digging. He was arrested for cocaine possession last week,' he told Inigo. 'This will be the first time I have had to call on my muscle. Fucking sucks.'

DPR's 'muscle' was a high-volume cocaine and heroin dealer by the name of Nob. DPR gave Nob the details Flush had provided him when he signed on as forum moderator Chronicpain: Curtis Green, of Utah. DPR asked Nob if he could arrange someone to force Green to return the stolen funds. Nob replied by asking whether DPR wanted him 'beat up, shot, just paid a visit'. DPR instructed him to arrange to have Green beaten up and given a sternly worded note with a Bitcoin address to which to restore the funds.

Nob's ears had pricked up at the mention of Flush's arrest for possession. 'That wasn't the kilo that I sent was it? Because I'm going to be pissed,' he said.

'Did you send it to Utah?' asked DPR. Nob confirmed that he had. The two determined that Flush must have tricked Nob into sending it to him as a middleman in a transaction, then used his position as an administrator to raid vendors' accounts. The money that a kilo of cocaine would bring, along with the Bitcoin held by other drug dealers, would be enough to set someone up for life. Flush had, it seemed, gone rogue in a manner that was unprecedented, not to mention unwise given that the owner of the business from which he had stolen had his name and address.

Once he realised what was happening, Inigo had been able to reset the password to Flush's account, but he was beating himself up about not stopping the Bitcoin thefts sooner. 'If you want me to get on a plane and go find him, just say the word,' he told his boss.

'I have someone on it, thank you though,' DPR replied. 'I have a friend that smuggles heroin for cartels. I'm chatting with him now. He has muscle

everywhere and will get to him quickly.'

Dread Pirate Roberts was shaken by the sheer audacity of the theft and sought reassurance from his deputy. 'You're with me right Inigo?'

'Yes sir.'

'I mean...long term.'

'Oh yeah absolutely. i swore my loyalty to you and i will stick by that. i take pride in my loyalty above all my other characteristics,' Silk Road's first mate assured him. 'Where i lack in other fields, you'll at least get your value out of me by having somebody loyal for life :)'

'Thank you.'

'You've given me a chance at a financially secure future that i didn't have before,' Inigo continued. 'While Flush may have been a greedy scumbag, I'm here for the long run, if anything just to show my graditude.'

'Maybe guys like us are just rarer than I'd hoped,' DPR said.

Later, DPR shared his frustration with his closest confidant, Variety Jones. VJ was all sympathetic ears. '\$350K, eh? Fucker.' DPR poured out the entire tale, including Nob's role. VJ was suitably angry on his protégé's behalf. 'At what point in time do we decide we've had enough of someone's shit, and terminate them?' he demanded after hearing the story. 'Like, does impersonating a vendor to rip off a mid-level drug lord, using our rep and system; follows up by stealing from our vendors and clients and breeding fear and mistrust, does that come close in yer opinion?'

'Terminate?' DPR asked. 'Execute?'

'I know a guy, and he knows a guy who knows a guy, that gets things done,' Variety Jones told him.

Dread Pirate Roberts had a philosophy of no violence. He had provided a note for Nob to give to Flush that he hoped would make him return the funds and learn his lesson. But as he spoke to his two main men—Variety Jones and Inigo—over the next few hours, he became more paranoid that Flush was working with law enforcement and may have kept logs of the hundreds of chats they had engaged in.

'So, you've had your time to think. You're sitting in the big chair, and you need to make a decision,' Variety Jones insisted.

'I would have no problem wasting this guy,' DPR responded.

'Well ok then, I'll take care of it,' said VJ.

'I don't condone murder but that's almost worthy of assassinating him over,' Inigo said to DPR in a separate chat, unaware that DPR was also mulling the situation over with Variety Jones (unaware, in fact, that Variety Jones existed). 'There are certain rules to the underworld, and problems can sometimes only be handled one way.'

handed one way.

The parallel conversations lasted well into the wee hours of the morning, touching on trust, justice and Flush's predilection for trying to recruit people to multi-level marketing schemes. Inigo revealed he had never really trusted Flush and DPR admitted that Flush had been trying to turn DPR against Inigo. The conversation took an existential turn.

'You wanna know one of my deepest fears in all of this?' DPR asked. 'Being wildly successful and becoming extremely powerful and being corrupted by that power.'

'That's a very real possibility,' Inigo told him. 'Power has corrupted even some of the best of men.'

'I need something from you,' DPR said.

'Anything.'

'You need to call me out if ever I am over confident in my ideas, or abusive of my power.'

'I wouldn't hesitate to, don't worry,' said Inigo.

'Thank you,' responded DPR.

Variety Jones was a little less reflective. 'You would have surprised me if you had balked at taking the step, of bluntly, killing Curtis for fucking up just a wee bit too badly,' he said. 'Also, if you had balked, I would have seriously reconsidered our relationship. We're playing for keeps, this just drives it home. I'm perfectly comfortable with the decision, and I'll sleep like a lamb tonight, and every night hereafter.'

Although Variety Jones seemed ready and willing to take care of Flush's murder himself, DPR decided Nob was the man for the job. The next time he spoke with him, Nob said, 'As we discussed, I reached out and I have two very professional individuals that are going to visit Green.'

'Will they execute him if I want?' DPR asked.

'They are very good; yes, but I directed them only to beat him up; that was your wishes yesterday, correct?' Nob said. 'They have your note and are going to, how do I say it, torture him.'

Nob told him that beating up Flush would not cost anything, but that DPR would have to pay for a murder for hire.

'Ok, so can you change the order to execute rather than torture?' DPR asked. 'Never killed a man or had one killed before, but it is the right move in this case.'

Nob quoted a price of \$80,000 for the hit, to which DPR agreed.

'Yes, let's do it,' he said.

The murder of Curtis Green

The day of Curtis Green's murder, he and his wife went shopping for Campbell's Chicken and Stars soup. No other soup would do for the task at hand. Green was still reeling, trying to figure out just how everything had gone so badly wrong.

Curtis Green, aka Flush, aka Chronicpain, had been arrested on narcotics charges on 17 January 2013. He had been on the phone to his wife, who was out of town, when a parcel was dropped at his door. Unfortunately for Green, the kilo of cocaine he had been expecting was delivered by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) instead of the mailman. Green was immediately cooperative with law enforcement agents upon being told he was facing 40 years' prison. He even provided the Baltimore Silk Road Task Force with access to his administrator account.

The Baltimore Silk Road Task Force included DEA Special Agent Carl Mark Force IV and Secret Service agent Shaun Bridges.

Bridges, the Baltimore task force's computer forensics expert, found a treasure trove of opportunity when he logged in to Green's account as Flush, and promptly started helping himself to Bitcoin from the petty cash fund, and then from the accounts of Silk Road's vendors. Bridges did this completely of his own accord, without alerting his bosses or colleagues to the activity.

Special Agent Force, meanwhile, was the lead undercover of the Baltimore task force, in touch with DPR. When DPR provided Nob with orders to kill Flush, fortunately for Green, he had been providing those orders to Carl Force. He had taken on the persona of a large-scale cocaine and heroin dealer, using the name Nob, and had been insinuating himself into the site owner's inner sanctum for months.

While Nob was Force's official undercover identity, he had taken it upon himself to set up some other, more lucrative, identities on the Silk Road without the knowledge of his superiors or colleagues. As 'French Maid' he took payment from DPR for information about the investigation and as 'Death from Above' he extorted money out of DPR under threat of revealing certain information he knew from within the investigation. DPR made payments to both personas, unaware that they were also his friend Nob, and certainly not suspecting that they were a law enforcement officer on the task force assigned to take Silk Road down.

The hapless Green had no idea he was being screwed over by both Silk Road and the officers who had arrested him. The administrators of Silk Road hired one

of the task force's members to kill him for a theft he didn't know about that was being carried out by another member of the task force. At the same time, Force had no idea that Bridges was behind the theft and Bridges didn't know that Force was relieving Silk Road of Bitcoin in other ways. Bridges was careful to first move the Bitcoin from various vendor accounts into Flush's account to ensure blame would be laid on Green. 'I mean, anybody looking into it would—it would be a no-brainer, saying, "Oh, obviously he did it",' Green told the court later. Bridges then transferred the proceeds out of Flush's account to Mt. Gox, a Bitcoin exchange operating out of Japan.

Force advised Green that DPR had ordered his torture, which made Green's decision to turn snitch on DPR a little more palatable. Force explained they would have to stage the torture and make it look as realistic as possible so that Force, as Nob, could provide DPR with evidence that the job had been done.

The torture was carried out in a Salt Lake City hotel and involved what Green felt was a rather too enthusiastic mock drowning in the bathtub. He did not have to act for the photographs the police snapped, because his panic was genuine. After what felt like hours, the police were satisfied with their evidence and let Green return home.

Before Force could provide the photos to DPR, however, the order had been upgraded to execute. Green was in tears as he updated his wife about the situation, still at a loss to explain the theft that had turned his boss against him. What's more, the task force agents had returned to Baltimore with only torture photos, not murder photos. Green and his wife would have to stage the murder and take photos convincing enough to satisfy DPR.

Campbell's Chicken and Stars Soup was exactly the right consistency and colour to pass for the vomit of a man who had been tortured to death. Green's wife staged the scene with an artistic flair motivated by the knowledge that the slightest error could mean a real death sentence. 'Lay perfectly still,' she told her husband, and then started snapping with her iPhone.

'Green is dead, they killed him this weekend, don't have the details yet, and I'm waiting for a photo,' Nob wrote to DPR. DPR insisted on seeing the proof himself. A while later he received the evidence he needed of both the torture and the gruesome aftermath. Nob told DPR that Green had died of asphyxiation or heart rupture while being tortured. Green had vomited all over himself.

'I'm pissed I had to kill him,' DPR said to Nob, 'but what's done is done.' He justified it as being Chronicpain's own fault: 'I just can't believe he was so stupid...I just wish more people had some integrity.'

Upon receipt of the photograph of Green's dead body, DPR admitted to being 'a little disturbed, but I'm ok...I'm new to this kind of thing is all.' He wired the balance of what he owed to Nob, as agreed. 'I don't think I've done the wrong

balance of what he owed to NOB, as agreed. 'I don't think I've done the wrong thing,' he said. 'I'm sure I will call on you again at some point, though I hope I won't have to.'

After the murder

No doubt Dread Pirate Roberts believed, or at least hoped, that one murder for hire would be all that was required and he could go back to running his empire and bantering with Variety Jones about things that did not involve killing people.

No such luck. Things fell apart again for the website in late March 2013. A user going by the name FriendlyChemist contacted DPR to tell him he was in deep shit with the Hells Angels. FriendlyChemist claimed he had been fronted \$700,000 worth of LSD from the motorcycle club. He gave it to popular vendor Lucydrop to sell on Silk Road. Lucydrop took off with the proceeds and failed to supply the product, never to be seen on Silk Road again. Now the Hells Angels wanted their profits and they were coming for FriendlyChemist.

FriendlyChemist had a long list of real names and addresses of Silk Road vendors and customers that he would publish unless DPR gave him \$500,000 to pay off his suppliers. He provided a sample to DPR as proof.

DPR was worried. 'I said, have the hells angels contact me so I can work something out,' he told Variety Jones. His journal entry on 28 March 2013 read: 'being blackmailed with user info. talking with large distributor (hell's angels).' A short time later, a user previously unknown to DPR and calling himself 'redandwhite' introduced himself as one of the people FriendlyChemist owed money to.

DPR started up a dialogue with redandwhite, proposing he become a vendor on Silk Road. He offered the supposed Angel FriendlyChemist's real name: 34-year-old Blake Krokoff. He also provided an address in British Columbia, and the titbit that Krokoff was married with three children. 'FriendlyChemist is a liability and I wouldn't mind if he was executed,' he told redandwhite.

Meanwhile, FriendlyChemist was becoming edgy, not having heard from DPR for nine days and presumably not having been let off the hook by his suppliers. FriendlyChemist delivered an ultimatum: DPR had 72 hours to pay up before 5000 users' details and about two dozen vendors' identities would be released.

DPR decided that these threats were unforgivable and so, several hours later on 29 March 2013, DPR sent a message to redandwhite. 'I would like to put a bounty on his head if it's not too much trouble for you. What would be an adequate amount to motivate you to find him? Necessities like this do happen from time to time for a person in my position.' He went on to say that it didn't

need to be 'clean'. Redandwhite responded quoting \$300k+ for clean, or 150–200k for non-clean.

The price was a bit high for DPR. 'Are the prices you quoted the best you can do? I would like this done asap as he is talking about releasing the info on Monday.'

They eventually agreed on a price of 1670 Bitcoins—approximately \$150,000 at the time—for the job. DPR made the transfer, immortalised on the blockchain for that date. A day later, redandwhite provided an update on the whole messy situation, stating: 'Your problem has been taken care of...Rest easy though, because he won't be blackmailing anyone again. Ever.'

'Got word that blackmailer was executed,' DPR updated his journal. A few days later: 'received visual confirmation of blackmailer's execution.' Ever the sceptic, DPR had demanded a picture of the dead victim with a string of numbers supplied by DPR written on a piece of paper next to him, which redandwhite dutifully supplied.

'I've received the picture and deleted it. Thank you again for your swift action,' DPR wrote, presumably mentally filing the picture along with that of Curtis Green laying in his can of chunky chicken soup. No doubt, he hoped that this was truly the end of killing to save the empire, until the name of an old nemesis came up.

Redandwhite must have decided this murder-for-hire business for the online drugs czar had the potential to be lucrative because, a couple of days later, he told DPR that his goons had extracted some interesting information from FriendlyChemist with some not-so-friendly questioning before his demise. FriendlyChemist had identified another Canadian who had been working with him on the blackmail scheme as well as running a number of scams for a couple of years.

That individual was Tony76, the vendor responsible for the greatest heist in Silk Road's history. And redandwhite had his real name.

Tony76 had been a vendor of cocaine, ecstasy and heroin, and one of the most beloved and trusted sellers on Silk Road. He engaged with his customer base with a friendly, open demeanour and his ratings were consistently high for both product quality and customer service.

During the Great 420 Sale, Tony76 had been one of the most enthusiastic participants. He offered his usual array of drugs at such heavily discounted prices that he had to ask customers to front him payment without going through Silk Road's escrow system, which provided protection for customers against paying for a product they never received. Having the cash on hand meant he would be able to stock up for the huge upswing in orders. Being such a trusted

and respected Silk Road identity, customers were happy to oblige.

A couple of days after the sale had come to an end, Tony76 posted to the forums:

In 12 hours i will be taking my listings down for 24–48 hours to catch up with the sale orders. If you have an order you want to get in you have 12 hours. I will leave sale prices up for the 12 hours. When i put my listings back up in 24–48 hours prices will be back to normal with NEW PRODUCTS AS WELL.

Please keep messages to a minimum as i have been having a hard time keeping up with all the pointless messages.

That was the last anyone would ever hear from Tony76.

A week after the sale, a rumble began on Silk Road. Nobody expected international orders placed during the sale to have arrived yet, but people had started to report and rate their domestic deliveries. Shoppers began to ask Tony76 when their domestic deliveries would arrive. His service was usually so good—his customers hoped his standards weren't slipping.

Two weeks later the rumbles became a roar as buyers demanded to know where their goods were. They compared notes and realised Tony wasn't responding to messages, even as he logged on. It slowly became clear that the most trusted vendor on Silk Road had absconded with what buyers estimated was over \$100,000 for a single weekend's work; one moderator of the forums placed it at a cool quarter of a million dollars.

Some of the faithful remained hopeful for weeks, even months. Others offered explanations aside from his actions being a massive scam. Some believed Tony76 had been killed by Mexican drug lords. Others assumed he had been busted. Many refused to believe that someone in their community would do such a thing. Then came the conspiracy theories: he was already selling under another name; Silk Road's owners were in on it; it was all part of a worldwide sting and nobody was safe; Tony76 was actually a Canadian bikie gang.

A lot of customers demanded Silk Road do something to recover their Bitcoin. But Silk Road's administration was unsympathetic. Dread Pirate Roberts had developed a system to protect buyer and seller—that system depended on the escrow service being used. Buyers had been warned that if they traded outside of escrow, they were unprotected. Still, Silk Road's reputation had taken a blow and Tony76's name continued to be brought up as part of its history. DPR never forgot what he did.

'Man, I still can't believe tony fell into yer lap,' Variety Jones marvelled when DPR told him a heavily edited version of the story a few days later.

when DPR told him a heavily edited version of the story a few days later.

Indeed, DPR didn't do much questioning himself on that part of the story as he relayed what FriendlyChemist had told redandwhite. 'Says he was in cahoots with lucy all along and ripping the angels off and black mailing me was part of the plan. He also said a 3rd party, our man tony76, orchestrated the whole thing. Gave up his ID.' Redandwhite had told DPR that Tony76's real name was Andrew Lawsry of Surrey, Canada. '[FriendlyChemist] said that [Lawsry] started selling on silkroad a couple of years ago and since then he has made a career of making new seller profiles to sell and then rip people off. He told them how to start on here and how to rip people off and asked for a percentage in return. He said that he showed them everything about how to sell and how to pull it off and all that stuff.'

Again, not stopping to wonder where redandwhite had come from or whether he was really who he said he was, bloodlust whetted, DPR ordered another hit. 'I would like to go after [Tony76],' he wrote, 'though it is important to me to make sure he is who Blake said he is. I would rather miss the chance to take him out, than hit an innocent person. If he is our man, then he likely has substantial assets to be recovered. Perhaps we can hold him and question him?'

There was a problem, though. Tony76 lived with three other drug dealers, and at least two were always home. 'Ok, let's just hit [Tony76] and leave it at that. Try to recover the funds, but if not, then not,' said DPR.

Redandwhite was a little more bloodthirsty—either that or he needed the money. He offered to hit Tony76 alone for \$150K, but said that he would have a better chance of recovering any money if he did all four occupants of the house. 'Anything recovered would be split 50/50 with you,' he said. Redandwhite quoted the bargain price of \$500K to do all four, practically a 'buy three, get one free' deal.

Whether he was nervous or he liked the idea of 50 per cent of recovered earnings, DPR responded later that day: 'hmm...ok, I'll defer to your better judgment and hope we can recover some assets from them.'

'Gave angels go ahead to find tony76,' he wrote in his journal, along with some housekeeping issues about cleaning up unused libraries on the server.

DPR transferred another 3000 Bitcoin to redandwhite ('sent payment to angels for hit on tony76 and his 3 associates,' said the journal), an amount which again appears in the blockchain for that day. A week later, he received confirmation that he had been successful in ordering the murders of four people, three of whom he did not know and had no beef with. 'That problem was dealt with. I'll try to catch you online to give you details,' wrote redandwhite. 'Just wanted to let you know right away so you have one less thing to worry about.'

'Thanks ' said DPR 'see you on chat '

Thanks, said DTR, see you on chat.

Mr Wonderful

In mid-2013, several staff members received an email from someone who called himself Mr Wonderful. Mr Wonderful said he was an undercover law enforcement agent, and he was offering incentives to the staff to feed information about Silk Road and its owner to him.

One of the staff contacted was Scout, the only female on DPR's team. The deal offered by the undercover was for Scout to assist with setting up high-profile vendors in exchange for a percentage of each bust (plus a get-out-of-jail-free card). She immediately alerted DPR, who promptly demanded Scout hand over her login credentials for the TorMail address she was using and then locked her out of her own personal email account. DPR took over discussions with Mr Wonderful.

DPR later suspended Scout from her duties as moderator, claiming that engaging with the undercover and then discussing her situation with other employees Inigo, Libertas and SSBD was an unacceptable security threat.

Once what became known as 'emailgate' settled down, the remaining staff suggested DPR rehire Scout. He eventually relented and did so, but insisted she have an entirely new (male) identity.

He sent his staff a message on 12 July 2013: 'Hey gang, we have a new moderator going by the name cirrus. We used to know him as scout. Cirrus has always been dedicated to our common goals and the community at large and we have put what happened surrounding Mr Wonderful behind us so he can come back on the team. The scout persona is still off limits and still should not be discussed.'

'Thank you for the introduction!' responded Cirrus. 'I'm really excited to be back and working with you guys. Missed you all!!!'

The greatest scam ever?

Perhaps the reason DPR was so ready to place a hit on Tony76 was that Tony76 personified the greatest frustrations of running the most successful online black market in history. The truth was the market did not run as smoothly as its owner tried to portray.

There was never a shortage of people for whom the fast and relatively easy money of drug dealing was not enough. Criminals saw another criminal making untold riches and they wanted a share of it. DPR spent a great deal of money paying off extortionists, hackers and scammers behind the scenes, while the Silk Road community remained in blissful ignorance. DPR paid up to protect not

Road community remained in blissful ignorance. DPR paid up to protect not only his empire, but the people he considered he had a responsibility towards.

If a rogue vendor threatened to release information about their customer base, Dread Pirate Roberts paid the ransom to keep them quiet. When a staff member apparently stole the Bitcoin in members' accounts, DPR returned the money without telling them it had been stolen. He paid off those who would perform DDoS attacks to take the website offline. When a scammer spoofed private messages to look like they were coming from Inigo and convinced vendors to part with Bitcoin to buy 'shares' in Silk Road, again DPR returned the money from his own pocket.

He kept records of all the payments as expenses in his spreadsheet. All in all, the costs of paying off criminals could pile up, but DPR tried to protect his people as much as possible.

But when he discovered that the original great scammer, Tony76, had apparently been so happy with proceeds from his heist that he carried out a similar scam months later with Lucydrop, it was too much. He had already crossed a certain line when he had ordered the murder of Curtis Green.

Only it seems that Tony76 was a scammer on a far more epic scale than DPR ever imagined. The FBI and Canadian authorities compared notes and could find no homicides matching the names or any other details of the alleged victims. The most probable explanation was that redandwhite and FriendlyChemist were the same person—maybe even Tony76—carrying out an elaborate scam. FriendlyChemist had started blackmailing Silk Road around the same time as Lucydrop—who was very likely Tony76—had absconded with thousands of dollars worth of members' Bitcoin.

DPR had apparently paid Bitcoin worth around \$650,000 to a slick-talking shyster and opened himself up to charges of conspiracy to commit five new murders that had never taken place.

If it was as it appeared, Tony76 first robbed hundreds of Silk Road customers to the tune of six figures in April 2012, scammed them again for a similar amount under the name Lucydrop in 2013, then attempted to blackmail Dread Pirate Roberts with customers' addresses he had gathered while selling as Tony76 and Lucydrop. When that failed, he extracted the money out of Silk Road by pretending to be a hitman, carrying out the murders of himself and his alter egos.

Variety Jones was right to marvel that Tony76 had dropped into DPR's lap.

End of the Road

Silk Road's unlikely business lasted nearly three years, growing exponentially

and going from strength to strength, seemingly out of the reach of law enforcement or politicians. It operated so openly and smoothly that its thousands of members began to imagine that it would keep going forever. Perhaps the billion-dollar business wasn't really that significant in the grand scheme of the global drug trade. Maybe politicians and law enforcement didn't mind it so much because it had none of the violence or immediate danger of the street scene.

Customer service staff, administrators and moderators came and went, always with a core team of around five, to whom the ever-growing membership base could go with questions or issues. Others worked behind the scenes, the ordinary user never aware of their existence.

Nor were any of the casual users of the site aware that some of these staff members were discussing and sanctioning murder of those who threatened the Silk Road empire. Thus when it all came crashing down on 2 October 2013, to the million or so members of the site, the arrest of Dread Pirate Roberts was the arrest of a peace-seeking libertarian who provided recreational drug users with access to affordable, high-quality drugs in a violence-free environment.

Handsome, 29-year-old Texan Ross William Ulbricht was captured in a dramatic arrest in a San Francisco public library. Ulbricht, who had an advanced degree in chemical engineering, and who had developed a cult-like following among the Silk Road users as Dread Pirate Roberts, criminal mastermind, was caught in the sci-fi section logged in to the master control panel of Silk Road, as well as various other incriminating sites and applications.

The arrest was carried out by FBI agents who had been keeping the young Texan under surveillance and suspected that he sometimes logged on to administer Silk Road from a local café or the library. When he entered the library, they had to make sure he was logged in to the backend of Silk Road. What DPR didn't know was that one of his staff members, Cirrus, had been compromised. She had been arrested in July and her account taken over by an undercover agent, Jared Der-Yeghiayan.

The FBI had to make sure Ulbricht was logged in as DPR when they seized his computer, or there was little doubt that the laptop would be encrypted and of no more use to them than a brick. To do so, they had 'Cirrus' strike up a chat with him. If DPR was actively chatting to a staff member, they could grab the laptop while he was logged in and have access to the inside of the Silk Road website.

The plan was executed perfectly. Two officers staged a domestic dispute, and while that distracted Ulbricht, another officer grabbed his open laptop. On that laptop was a goldmine. He not only kept a journal on that same laptop

documenting the establishment and growth of the site, he meticulously kept records of the real-time chats he had with his staff, something that was drummed into his staff they were forbidden to do.

Thousands of pages of logs recorded every conversation DPR had had with his various staff members. They also revealed the existence of the hitherto unknown Variety Jones. Unfortunately for some, the open laptop also held the ID documents of Silk Road staff.

Five days after Ulbricht's arrest, high-ranking members of Silk Road met to discuss a replacement. A month later, on 6 November 2013, Silk Road 2.0 was launched.

More arrests

Nearly three months after Ross Ulbricht's arrest on 19 December 2013, key staff members Inigo, Libertas and Samesamebutdifferent (SSBD) were taken into custody in a coordinated transnational operation.

'I suspect that the police had also done a "sneak and peek" into my premises at some stage,' Peter Nash, Australian moderator SSBD said. 'I remember coming home from work one day and my front door key was extremely stiff whereas it normally opened very easily. At that point in time my immediate reaction was that a locksmith had tampered with it. I was told after my arrest it was most likely that the police had installed listening and possibly video surveillance in my home but I have no actual confirmation of that.'

Peter Nash went to bed on 19 December 2013 a content man. Holidays had started. Tomorrow he would board a plane to the UK for his first family Christmas in seven years. From there he would head to Paris for New Year's Eve, where he would propose to the woman sleeping next to him.

Sitting up in bed at 5:00 am, Pete was dealing with some final matters on the website he helped moderate and at the same time chatting via private message to Cirrus, a fellow moderator whom he had never met but considered a friend. He told Cirrus all about his planned holiday. It was then he heard strange noises coming from within the apartment.

His bedroom door burst open and more people than he ever knew could fit in his apartment swarmed in. 'Australian Federal Police!' they yelled as one of them snatched the laptop from his hands. 'Don't move!' Around fifteen police, accompanied by two FBI special agents, searched every inch of the apartment while Peter was read his rights. He was allowed to comfort his partner as they ransacked his home. Computers were high on the agenda.

There would be no plane trip that day. There would be no romantic proposal at the Eiffel Tower.

In Charles City, Virginia, USA, a similar scene took place on a yacht that Andrew Jones called home. It was a rent-to-own affair on which he could laze away the days, a lifestyle paid for by the modest salary he was pulling from Silk Road. Andrew didn't ask for much out of life. Time spent smoking weed and chilling with his girlfriend were his happy days.

He was smoking weed and chilling with his girlfriend when there was a loud banging on the boat with voices demanding that he come out.

'This is a joke, isn't it?' he said to his girlfriend, Birdie.

It was no joke and Andrew was presented with a warrant that allowed police

to take all of his computer equipment, before they placed him under arrest and took him away. The accompanying indictment identified Jones as Inigo and gave names to the colleagues he knew only as SSBD and Libertas.

When he was in the interview room, police showed him some of the evidence they had against him. Andrew was aghast as he saw things that no law enforcement agency should know: conversations he'd had with buyers and sellers, and even private messages with DPR.

I don't fucking understand... he thought.

In Dublin, Ireland, Gary Davis was presented with an identical indictment, accusing him of narcotics trafficking, computer hacking and money laundering under the name Libertas. Davis was taken in for questioning by the *gardai*, but remained tight-lipped, responding only that he wanted to consult a lawyer. His solicitor wasted no time in arranging bail and Gary Davis was home sleeping in his own bed that night.

Samesamebutdifferent

Peter Nash arrived at Silk Road late in 2012. Calling himself Samesamebutdifferent, better known as SSBD, he quickly became a prolific contributor to the Australian discussion threads and soon after, at his own request, was elevated to moderator. 'I had sent a PM to DPR asking about supporting the community and he just upgraded me the following day,' he explained.

At first a volunteer, he was later paid \$500 per week, then by mid-2013 was earning \$1000 per week in Bitcoin. The Bitcoin never left his account, instead being spent on cocaine, weed and MDMA (ecstasy). 'I was just doing it because I enjoyed the camaraderie and social connections I found on the forums,' Pete said. 'At that time I was going through an incredibly stressful and challenging period in my career and was feeling very isolated in my life. The forums became my second home. I was holding down a full-time job and then putting in almost the equivalent amount of hours each day on the forums.'

Pete was surprised when Dread Pirate Roberts demanded he provide a scan of his driver's licence, which DPR assured him was standard for his staff. Silk Road's owner preached the importance of opsec (operational security) and as anonymity was sacrosanct, Pete's ID would be encrypted, safely tucked away from prying eyes; Pete need only worry if he ever tried to blackmail his boss.

SSBD soon became one of the most popular and hardworking moderators on Silk Road. In his role, Pete had no control over anything that happened on the markets. He had no influence in what the marketplace did. He never sold drugs himself. He had no say in what drugs could be sold, to whom or by whom. His job was to delete spam, help newbies with their questions, move posts around if they were put in the wrong forums or delete them if they put someone in danger, such as if a disgruntled member posted identifying details of somebody. Forum moderators also had to immediately remove particularly objectionable posts, like anything linking to offensive pornography or sites selling other objectionable services.

Pete got along with all the staff, but was closest to fellow moderator Scout, who was later reinvented as Cirrus. 'We used to exchange messages often and I frequently found myself offering [her] support.' Scout/Cirrus often inadvertently pissed off DPR, and Pete would find himself comforting her when things turned pear-shaped.

As for his boss, Pete said of DPR, 'it would not be unusual for him to totally ignore messages from me or others. Occasionally we would have more in-depth

exchanges but he never really gave much away and our exchanges were usually rather one-sided.'

Pete had been going through a tough period in his life. The Silk Road forums offered him purpose, friendship and camaraderie. His position of moderator accorded him status. He had all the drugs he needed for weekends to be one long party. Life was good.

When Ross Ulbricht was arrested on 2 October 2013, accused of being Silk Road mastermind Dread Pirate Roberts, and the marketplace was seized by a host of American three-letter agencies, Peter Nash panicked. He posted some farewell messages on the forums (which, being on a separate server, had not been shut down), cleared his house of drugs, wiped his computers clean and went to ground.

But a few weeks later, with no knock on the door, the fear began to subside. A race had begun to replace the site with a new marketplace, and previous staff were invited to join forces with programmers and developers to re-create Silk Road. When the new site opened with much fanfare just a month after Ulbricht's arrest, Pete couldn't resist; he revived SSBD and logged on to the dark web once more.

Silk Road 2.0 felt like home. The old faces were there. Money launderer StExo had bestowed upon himself the moniker of DPR, carrying on the legend of the character of *The Princess Bride* handing over the mantle. Former administrators Libertas and Inigo resumed their roles. Most importantly, Pete's closest ally, Cirrus, was on board as chief moderator of the forums. It was Cirrus to whom Nash was chatting on that fateful day six weeks later.

After the unexpected 5:00 am visit from representatives of both Australian and US federal law enforcement, Nash was taken to the Roma Street police station, where he discovered they knew more than he ever could have imagined. Pete was not the only one arrested that day. Simultaneously, Andrew Jones, Silk Road's second-in-command Inigo, was arrested in Virginia, USA. Gary Davis, accused of being administrator Libertas, was picked up in Ireland.

A police officer processing Pete's paperwork warned him not to talk to anyone no matter what they said to him. 'If you talk to these people you will fuck yourself,' the officer said. Pete was introduced to an FBI special agent who was there to oversee his arrest. It was suggested several times that there were things he could do right there and then to 'help himself'. Pete exercised his right to remain silent.

From there Peter Nash was incarcerated and his nightmare began. The United States government demanded he be extradited to face charges there. Under the Australian legal system, this meant there was virtually no chance of being

released on bail while the courts determined whether or not to grant the USA's request.

Pete was remanded in a Brisbane correctional facility. For a while, things were okay; or at least as okay as they could be spending Christmas in prison. But then he woke up one morning to a fellow inmate waving the front page of a local newspaper at him. It said that Pete had run Silk Road while working in a prison. The same prison he was incarcerated in.

'I initially found it hilarious reading all the inaccuracies and sensationalist hyperbole,' he said. But then he was threatened by a group of inmates and his time in the general population was over. He was moved into protective custody.

Pete—a nurse and psychologist—had worked for a service for adults with intellectual disabilities and complex behavioural support needs, including those who were in prison. The same news report stated he was 'under investigation by the Crime and Misconduct Commission for allegedly smuggling a dangerous sex offender out of jail for a meal at Hungry Jack's'. Pete denies this.

'The "incident" in question related to my having escorted a client to see their doctor and whilst out we got lunch,' he said. 'It was that simple, nothing untoward whatsoever and perfectly normal in the context of community rehabilitation as per that client's support plan.' But Pete soon discovered it wasn't just his fellow prisoners he had to worry about. A while later it was reported he received a vicious bashing at the hands of prison officers.

'The bashing occurred after the prison was locked down following a roof top protest that was going on somewhere in the prison,' Pete said. 'We had been locked down since early afternoon and I was alone in my cell watching TV. I became aware of a commotion somewhere in my unit, lots of screaming and shouting basically then soon after a corrections officer acting in their capacity as the specialist response team (SRT) came onto my tier and announced a verbal warning of physical violence against anyone who called out.

'Just as he said that, someone made a comment and because I was looking out my cell window at the time the officer looked in my direction. I was ordered to get on the ground and put my hands behind my head. My protests that I hadn't said anything fell on deaf ears, I am told even the corrections officer who was working our unit that day tried to intervene and was disregarded. Soon after my cell door was opened and approximately five officers smashed me to the ground punching and kicking me in the head and ribs yelling at me to "stop resisting!" and to "shut the fuck up!"

'I was then handcuffed and dragged from my cell. Before exiting the unit I was pushed up against the wall then my hands which were cuffed behind my back were sharply pulled back so I fell forward in a free fall so my head

connected sharply with the metal shelf that ran around the outside of the fish bowl (staff observation area). I was then dragged up to a holding area near the stores and thrown onto the ground and after being uncuffed told to “clean that shit up” which was referring to the blood that was all over the walls and floor, some of it mine and some of it other inmates who had received the same treatment. I was left in the holding area for a couple of hours then taken back to my unit.

‘At that time I thought my ribs had been broken. I was having trouble breathing and started to hyperventilate which was probably the shock coming out. Another inmate alerted the medical team that I was in distress because they could hear my distress. Soon after I had a large number of corrections officers outside my cell demanding to know what was wrong with me. At that time I was only concerned with avoiding another bashing so I told them I was ok and just needed some pain relief.’

With life having become a nightmare in the Australian prison and his lawyer advising him that, no matter how long it was drawn out, extradition was all but inevitable, Pete gave up the will to fight. He waived his rights to contest his extradition and agreed to go and face the music in the United States. He was transferred to the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York in June 2014.

Another, far more famous, prisoner was also housed at the MCC. Ross Ulbricht was in another division, awaiting trial for being the Dread Pirate Roberts, Pete’s boss. And a complete stranger.

Libertas

‘Promoted gramgreen to mod, now named libertas,’ DPR wrote in his journal during Silk Road’s growth spurt in May 2013. The renamed marijuana vendor’s role became monitoring user activity on Silk Road for problems, responding to customer service enquiries, and resolving disputes between buyers and vendors. Libertas had a quirky, somewhat militant manner, and a tendency towards grandiose statements, which led to him being gently ribbed by other members of the site.

Nowhere was this manner more evident than upon the arrest of Ross Ulbricht and the shuttering of Silk Road. Libertas made an impassioned speech on the Silk Road forums the next day:

Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters in arms,

It is with a heavy heart that I come before you today. A heart filled with sadness for the infringements of our freedoms by government oppressors, and a heart filled with sadness for the pain that all of you who have lost everything are feeling.

Silk Road has fallen.

Whilst this is devastating to me personally on so many levels, and I will not be commenting on the arrest of any person portrayed by the media as ‘Dread Pirate Roberts’, it serves to strengthen my resolve to keep fighting the hands of Law Enforcement that are committed to strangling personal freedom from our bodies, demonstrating a lack of conscience and justice on their part in the process. They will stop at nothing to enforce the unjust laws created and maintained by the societal and governmental framework within which they operate, and the actions of one persona, the Dread Pirate Roberts, has managed to stymie their efforts for two and a half years...

We must stand on the shoulders of this tragedy that has befallen us and raise high what still remains—our sense of community, freedom and justice. No doubt we will all regroup elsewhere, and I look forward to seeing all of you again, still free and still engaging in free trade without government interference into your personal affairs.

Whilst Silk Road may have fallen, its spirit will spring eternal. The spirit of this

community that has inspired and helped so many will continue to live on regardless of what governments wish to say about it. It has been an absolute pleasure serving and working with all of you, and I sincerely wish you all the best for the future wherever you choose to go.

The Dread Pirate Roberts is a revolutionary, a comrade in arms and a true hero who will live on as such in our hearts and minds without fail for as long as we breathe. His ideals and sacrifices will never be forgotten, and they will spur the next generation of revolutionaries into action against oppression.

To the members of Law Enforcement that are no doubt reading this, many of you may have received pats on the back and 'high-fives' from your peers. You may feel good now, ecstatic even, but I urge you to consider the effects of your actions. You are going to see more bloodshed on our streets (note 'our', not 'your', for those streets belong to the people), and more dealer on buyer violence as free people that wish to engage in activities that harm none are forced to return to their previous methods of securing the goods that they wish to put into their own bodies. That blood is now on your hands, and the hands of the politicians that you live to serve and serve to live. I pity you, for as long as you live to serve you will never know freedom.

To the community at large, you have been nothing short of incredible. Keep fighting the good fight, and never let they who are bound by the chains of law tell you that you are not permitted to be free simply because they are shackled themselves. Governments tell us that we are free but the reality is that the moment we are born we are shackled by the rule of law. Government has no place in a free society, and we need to make sure that they who deem it their right to take away the natural rights of others as free beings are made fully aware of that.

Take the fight wherever it is needed, and support every effort to take your government down. You are justified in those actions as they would not hesitate to take you down for standing up for your freedom.

'Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.'

– Martin Luther King Jr.

It has been an honor and a privilege to be part of something so incredible with all

of you.

Until we meet again, brothers and sisters.

– Libertas.

Libertas was instrumental in developing Silk Road 2.0, which opened a month later. Silk Road 2.0 survived the multiple arrests and continued running for a year before being shut down on 6 November 2014. By the time it closed, it was larger than the original Silk Road ever was. Cirrus, the undercover Homeland Security officer, had been on its staff the entire time.

Libertas had used the Guy Fawkes mask, the symbol of Anonymous, to stamp his posts on Silk Road. With his widow's peak and goatee, the dark-haired Davis cultivated a look that was remarkably similar to the online avatar of Libertas.

The Irish system began as Gary Davis' friend. He was granted bail on a nominal surety and headed straight home on the night of his arrest. The court decided there was no evidence he was a flight risk, would tamper with witnesses or commit further serious crimes, much to the chagrin of the FBI agents who had flown to Ireland to interrogate him.

He had to surrender his passport, and report in to the local police station three times a week, but other than that, Davis was a free man while he prepared for his court hearings.

The United States was keen to extradite Davis to face trial as soon as possible on the conspiracy charges, but Gary's lawyers argued vigorously. Gary was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome—a form of autism—shortly after his arrest. His lawyers argued that his Asperger's coupled with depression meant that extradition would breach the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which prohibits torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and ensures 'respect for one's private and family life, his home and his correspondence'.

A psychologist confirmed that in Davis' case, extradition could precipitate a suicide attempt.

Counsel for the US, Remy Farrell, was sceptical, claiming Davis had 'a mild case of Asperger's brought on by a bad case of extradition'.

Davis appealed all the way to the full bench of the Supreme Court of Ireland and was still awaiting the decision at the time of writing.

Inigo

The man widely assumed to be second-in-charge only to the Pirate himself was Andrew Jones, aka Inigo. One of the earliest customer service staff members, Inigo was appointed as an administrator to resolve disputes between buyers and vendors. He also maintained Silk Road's book club, where users were set reading tasks and those who participated would debate the libertarian and political philosophies from the books allocated.

In his offline life, Andrew Jones was a hardcore libertarian who believed that the role of government ended at the protection of people's rights; government should neither provide for people nor punish them for activities that did not interfere with the rights of others. He and his girlfriend were participants in the Free State Project, an experiment to bring together 20,000 people in New Hampshire with the intention of creating a society in which the maximum role of government was the protection of individuals' rights to life, liberty and property. The project had not commenced at the time of his arrest.

Silk Road's longest-serving administrator was released on \$1 million bail, which was raised by his parents putting up their home and retirement savings as surety. He was placed under 24/7 house arrest at their house. As part of his bail conditions, he was not allowed access to any internet-enabled devices. His long-time girlfriend, Birdie, moved into the family home with him.

Drew and Birdie set up a page to fund his defence, having seen the generosity of the community to Ross Ulbricht's family since his arrest. The fundraiser drew a couple of Bitcoin, but overall they were disappointed in the response. Drew lost the support of most of his family and all of his girlfriend's family, who were quick to believe that Andrew was a cartel drug trafficker who was bent on destroying society.

As the authorities revealed their case against Drew to his lawyers, the magnitude of the evidence against Ulbricht, Drew and his co-defendants became clear. Drew was dismayed to learn that DPR had not only kept his identification but also logs of all of their TorChat conversations—hundreds of pages worth. He was convinced that the amount of evidence the US had against him was overwhelming and could put him in prison for the rest of his life.

After much soul-searching, and weighing up the options—life in prison or not—Drew decided he would turn state evidence against Dread Pirate Roberts.

The trial of Ross Ulbricht

The trial of Ross William Ulbricht, accused of being Dread Pirate Roberts, sole owner and operator of Silk Road, began in New York on 13 January 2015. Ulbricht's defence attorney, Joshua Dratel, opened with the bombshell that Ross Ulbricht created Silk Road as an economic experiment but said he was not Dread Pirate Roberts. He claimed Ross had sold the Silk Road in the very early days of the website's lifetime. The defence claimed that Silk Road's true owner had been alerted to the police investigation closing in and had framed Ulbricht.

It is safe to say, there had never been a trial like this one. The first witness called was Homeland Security Special Investigations Agent Jared Der-Yeghiayan, who had made over 50 purchases from 40 Silk Road dealers in ten countries and eventually took over the account of a Silk Road staff member, Cirrus, formerly known as Scout.

Der-Yeghiayan admitted that he had suspected several people to have been Dread Pirate Roberts, including Mark Karpelès, the owner of Bitcoin exchange Mt. Gox, and also that he thought the writing style of the person operating the Dread Pirate Roberts account had changed in April 2012.

Ulbricht's defence team tried to bring up people and events and evidence relevant to the defence, but much information was excluded due to certain concurrent ongoing investigations. The defence tried to introduce evidence about a Silk Road account called Mr Wonderful, operated by a law enforcement agent, but any evidence about that account was disallowed after objections by the prosecution. The jury also never got to hear about the antics of DEA Special Agent Carl Mark Force IV and Secret Service agent Shaun Bridges, who used their access and technical knowledge to steal Bitcoin from user accounts, sell intelligence to Dread Pirate Roberts, and extort money from him with threats to release sensitive information. The jury heard the entire case, blissfully unaware of the corruption of two law enforcement officers actively involved in investigating Silk Road.

It wasn't until a few days into the trial that the name Variety Jones came up. Until then, at most, those intimately involved in Silk Road knew the name as the moniker of a marijuana seed supplier who made occasional posts on the Silk Road forum. Nobody had any idea he was also Dread Pirate Roberts' most trusted adviser, his oldest ally and the brains behind many of the site's ideas, improvements and innovations.

As the prosecution revealed it had recovered over a thousand pages of chat logs between Dread Pirate Roberts and the Svengali-like Variety Jones,

members of the many darknet market-related forums scrambled to uncover information about the man Ulbricht apparently relied on for everything in the early days, from technical advice to moral support.

There did not seem to be any real-life identity linked to this Variety Jones character. Nothing in the evidence suggested that law enforcement had anyone on their radar. He had not been included on the indictment with Inigo, Libertas and SSBD. His role in Silk Road was not clear, but he was paid significantly more than the administrators and moderators. The Silk Road accounting books indicated that payments amounting to several hundred thousand dollars in Bitcoin had been made to him.

The press picked up on this mysterious new character, his role behind the scenes in Silk Road, and his relationship with Dread Pirate Roberts. They soon referred to him as a puppet-master, the true architect of Silk Road.

As the trial wore on, Ulbricht's lawyers made valiant attempts to deny the accusations that he was the sole owner and operator of Silk Road. But the treasure trove of information on the laptop, the journal, spreadsheets, blockchain transactions, TorChat logs, payroll details, together with the data recovered from the server, built up a picture of guilt that was difficult to defend.

Who is Variety Jones?

As someone who had been following and writing about Silk Road since its very early days, I followed the trial avidly from the other side of the world. Every morning I would download the hundred-plus pages of court transcripts and check my Twitter feed for analysis and news and insights. I would fire up Tor and scour dark web discussion forums for inside information or new revelations. On site after site, the chatter centred on one topic: Who is Variety Jones?

On 22 January 2015, three days in to the second week of Ross Ulbricht's trial, I opened an email from an unfamiliar address.

Excuse my unsolicited email, but this is best done over email, rather than publically via twitter :) I have been following yours (and others) tweets about the trial, loving it, hope to get the book one day!

It was a warm fuzzy opening to what at first glance I thought might be a piece of fan mail—a rare, but not unheard-of occurrence. Then the writer got down to business.

I've been looking into Variety Jones, avoiding the dark net market angle as I expected to draw blanks on that front, however coming at it from the seed

supplier angle threw up something interesting I thought you might be interested in.

In 2006, a Canadian cannabis seed related company called Heaven's Stairway was raided and shut down...the owner was a millionaire businessman of Armenian descent...

The email, around five paragraphs, provided some tantalising hints, a couple of names, and links to source information I might want to pursue. The writer gave off the impression that he had simply been googling and had come up with this stuff.

The decision now is do you or someone else do the homework and find and name VJ via this link, interesting to think about no?

It warrants proper and *careful* consideration, we're not talking about a few starry-eyed teens here, we're talking about older, wiser and possibly better connected career criminals, who worked this industry long before the current zeitgeist for acceptance of marijuana was at the fore, if a person was interested, they would do so with care, these *are* the kind of people that have had people hurt before for getting involved in their business.

Just thought you'd find the links interesting :)

Alan. (My real name, so if you run with this, it's ALL yours, you found it, you ran with it :P)

Any investigative journalist would find the information interesting, but there was something off about the email. There was no way I was going to click those links.

His Gmail address supplied a surname as well, along with the information that he was in the UK and a picture. A couple of hours' searching came up with exactly nobody by that name. He was lying to me.

I responded with a non-committal, 'Wow, that's a lot to take in. Thanks—I will have a look when I have some time. Did you send it to anyone else?' His response was swift.

Nope, just for you and I'll keep it that way if you like.

I didn't want to post it in public as it deserves a writer's touch and someone with

time to put the pieces together properly, that's if there is anything there and I'm not a writer.

I just like digging things up and trying to make connections, and have a bit of an art for searching and making connections. :P

I decided not to act on it that day. There were hundreds of pages of court documents to read through before the trial resumed in the morning.

The next day I received another email. More links and lines being drawn, implicating people in the seed growing business of the UK and Canada.

One thing is abundantly clear, Variety Jones is known by many of them, and not just in an online capacity, they know who he is, period. But there is respect for him that means I find it doubtful that any will disclose those details

I didn't respond and later that day, another email arrived from my eager correspondent.

Ok, this one is a bombshell... There is a very probable *official* paper-trail that leads to the identity of Variety Jones...

The man had done his homework. Pages of accusations, links and practically a roadmap telling me that Variety Jones was also known in the world of online drug dealing as Plural of Mongoose, and was known in the real world as Roger Thomas Clark.

'I haven't really had time to look at anything yet and to be honest doxxing is not generally my thing,' I wrote back, still suspicious of 'Alan's' motives. 'Why the keen interest on your part, may I ask?'

Once again, 'Alan' professed mere curiosity and a desire to help Ross.

I read the chat logs / articles last week and saw two names that really jumped out at me, Variety Jones and *shabang*, at first moreso *shabang* than anyone else, because, shabang, VJ and the aforementioned Plural of Mongoose and Gypsy Nirvana among a few others were all entwined in a series of dramas, arrests, claims of blackmail *etc.* over control of the cannabis supply market, and/or control and ownership of some fairly large pro-cannabis websites that were thought to be worth a lot of money in the early part of the internet, from 1998 to 2008, these people worked for each other, with each other, conspired against each other and even used law enforcement AND EVEN FAKED ASSASSINATION attempts against each other in attempts to take each others

money and/or businesses.

Finally, intrigue got the better of me and I clicked on all his links.

The next day I found that all emails between me and two former Silk Road staffers—Scout/Cirrus and Nomad Bloodbath—had disappeared from my Gmail account. Scout and Nomad Bloodbath had both been compromised before the fall of Silk Road, their accounts taken over by Homeland Security agents. My attempts to retrieve the emails, or find out what happened to them, were fruitless.

I suspected that I had fallen for a phishing attack and that it came from the mysterious ‘Alan’ who had bombarded me with increasingly specific information, none of which I had been able to verify. I forwarded the information to LaMoustache, the most thorough dark web researcher I knew.

More new characters

Variety Jones was not the only surprise new character to emerge from the evidence led at Ulbricht's trial. The message logs revealed a quagmire of people who contacted Dread Pirate Roberts for various reasons. One unidentified user by the name of 'alpacino', who appeared to have ties to a law enforcement agency, was feeding Dread Pirate Roberts intelligence about the investigation. As well as specific information about the authorities' attempts to locate DPR, alpacino had some general advice for him:

I know that Eileen has a publishing deal and is writing a book around SR, and has had extensive dialogue with everyone from buyers to new vendors to old hats. She claims that she has your blessing and at some point will be (or has) interviewing you of sorts... Do not put it past them to wiretap journos. If you (for example), interact with people like Chen [the Gawker reporter who first wrote about Silk Road] or Ornsby [*sic*], assume they can see it. Assume journalists are compromised/breached.

Over the years of writing exclusively about the dark web, I had become accustomed to receiving all manner of communications. More often than not, they were conspiracy-fuelled, inaccurate or fed to me in a deliberate attempt to spread FUD—fear, uncertainty and doubt. There is rarely enough time to check or respond to every claim. The discovery of a rogue agent feeding intelligence to DPR behind the scenes reminded me of an encrypted note I had received in December 2013, a couple of months after Ulbricht's arrest, from an anonymous Silk Road member. 'What if I told you DPR had a federal agent on his payroll... who was feeding him information about vendors who were being surveilled or were about to be busted. He saved quite a few vendors' asses,' the message said. It went on to name some prominent vendors and incidents I could question them about as proof of the writer's claims. 'Ask Modzi how DPR knew stuff that helped him not get busted. He won't know how, but he will know what you are talking about.' The message also suggested I ask StExo about 'The Canadian Professor incident'. Although my curiosity was slightly piqued, the note came at a time when rumours and paranoia ran rampant throughout the dark web forums, and I did not follow up on it.

Both incidents came up in DPR's law enforcement intel file and journal: "alpacino" from DEA has been leaking info to me. Helped me help a vendor avoid being busted, he wrote. In a separate note he referred to a Canadian academic: 'StExo has discovered that Dr David Decary-Hetu is planning to do

academic. StExo has discovered that Dr David Décary-Héту is planning to do research on SR for canadian LE [law enforcement].’ DPR made a note to himself of the professor’s LinkedIn profile address.

Later, a character who called himself Oracle and seemed to have some inside knowledge of Silk Road wrote in a post on a dark web forum: ‘This news, when brought to DPR1’s attention, allegedly resulted in the poor professors life being threatened! StExo and DPR1 spoke of possible scenarios, one of which involved putting a contract on the professors head! Very “Breaking Bad”-esque (which incidentally was a show StExo was a fan of). To my knowledge, the Canadian academic was never actually harmed, but was threatened to back off.’

Décary-Héту, however, denied ever having been threatened. ‘It really feels strange to read about how DPR was discussing how to intimidate me. I would love to read those chats to see exactly what was said—if anything was really said. I was never contacted by DPR or any of his associates. No one ever tried to intimidate me or stop me in any way from crawling cryptomarkets. I always thought that it was a pretty harmless thing to do,’ he said. ‘I was never contacted or threatened by anyone—and I checked my SPAM folder to make sure I had not missed something. This is once again offenders bragging about how tough they are when they have done absolutely nothing in fact.’

I had dismissed the note at the time, but with this new evidence that the information had been accurate, I had to wonder who had sent it to me and what they hoped I would do with it. It may have been a Silk Road insider; perhaps the Variety Jones I had not known existed until the previous week, though it did not seem his style. Perhaps it was someone who had access to the discovery documents, which would mean someone within one of the three-letter agencies or someone from Ulbricht’s camp, trying to get that information into the public. As I had ignored it, I might never know.

Silk Road deputies

Peter Nash, Andrew Jones and Gary Davis meanwhile had been all but forgotten as their far more famous boss stood trial. Davis kept his head down and avoided the limelight as the case for his extradition progressed through the Irish courts. Nash had been transferred to the New York Metropolitan Correctional Center, where Ulbricht was, but they were in different sections. Surprisingly, considering the charges were computer-related, Nash had access to the prison's email system and I was able to provide him with daily updates on the trial and what was happening to his co-accused.

Both Nash and Jones entered guilty pleas because there was little point in denying who they were. The prosecution had evidence—lots of it. Bit by bit, information came out from testimony and exhibits produced against Ross Ulbricht in the lead-up to the trial of Dread Pirate Roberts. Ulbricht had kept the IDs of his staff in a file on his computer. A backup server, which was housed in Pennsylvania and subjected to a search warrant, contained every single message ever sent from Silk Road. Law enforcement was able to match up things said in private messages with events in the men's real lives (exactly as they did with Ross Ulbricht).

'Hindsight is always 20/20 and providing my ID to DPR was obviously reckless and stupid,' Pete said. 'You have to remember though that those were different times and no one had been busted back then and I think we were all rather misguided in our perceptions of risk.'

It wasn't until the trial that the former staffers discovered that fellow moderator Cirrus was in fact an undercover Homeland Security agent. Cirrus had been instrumental in bringing down Ross Ulbricht, and had been engaging Peter Nash to ensure that he was logged in to Silk Road so that agents could grab his open, unencrypted computer; Cirrus had done the same with Ulbricht. By the time the revelation became official knowledge, Peter already suspected there was a traitor in their midst and it could only be one person. Cirrus was the only still-active moderator of the original Silk Road to have escaped arrest. But Nash was bewildered to discover that the real Cirrus' account had been taken over as far back as July 2013.

'It seems strange to me now knowing that the Scout/Cirrus account was handed off to a HSI [Homeland Security] undercover, because they continued to mimic the same personality traits of being quite flaky and overly emotional about some of the shenanigans that used to go down on the forums,' Peter said, apparently no longer sure which pronoun to use to describe his former colleague.

Many on the dark web forums and reddit blamed Ross Ulbricht for the arrest of Peter Nash and his co-defendants Jones and Davis. Their photo IDs were held on Ulbricht's laptop, along with logs of chats and messages that any dark web employee should have the right to assume were never kept.

Nash, however, refused to lay the blame at his boss' feet. 'As for Ross leaving my ID in an easy to find folder on his laptop...well I think that just underscores what I just said before about being stupid and reckless,' Peter said. 'I do not blame Ross for my incarceration though. It was my choice to send him my doxx, no one made me do that. Too often people look to blame others for the consequences (unintended or otherwise) of their actions and I am not about that, I take the responsibility for what I did.' That said, he no longer held the unbridled admiration for Dread Pirate Roberts that he once had, saying, 'What has come out subsequent to Ross' arrest and at trial has conflicted me and changed my perceptions of a few things. The OPSEC issues certainly caused me to question a lot.'

What did concern him were reports that the peace-loving libertarian captain of the website he had come to love had ordered six hits, calling for the murders of recalcitrant staff and Tony76, among others. Staff and users of Silk Road alike had been sold the utopian vision of drugs for consenting adults in an environment free from coercion and violence. The bombshell revelations split the darknet market community. Those who loved and admired Silk Road and its owner could not condone cold-blooded murder. It seemed so out of character for the leader they felt they had come to know.

In the myriad conspiracy charges thrown at Ross Ulbricht, conspiracy to commit murder, or attempted murder, was not one of them. Nevertheless, the transcripts discussing the hits were admitted as evidence of Ulbricht's willingness to use violent means to protect his business. Like many, Peter preferred not to believe the government's version of events. 'As for the murder for hire stuff, well as abhorrent as that may be I will reserve judgment until those allegations have been tested and proven beyond a reasonable doubt.'

Despite being in the same facility, Nash crossed paths with Ulbricht just once, when neither was expecting the meeting. Ulbricht was coming out of an elevator. Peter recognised him immediately and held out his hand to the younger man, introducing himself. When recognition failed to register on Ulbricht's face, Peter followed it up with his surname. Ulbricht's eyes went wide as the penny dropped. 'I just told him I was pleading out the next day and that was it, we literally just passed each other so there was no time to speak, just exchanged pleasantries really,' Peter recounted.

Silk Road was a most unusual workplace, in which the entire executive team,

who dealt with each other on a day-to-day basis, had no idea about the person behind each username. When Peter Nash and Andrew Jones attended the same court appearance, neither knew who the other was. Inigo and SSBD had had daily conversations and kept things running when Dread Pirate Roberts was otherwise indisposed. Both had guessed the other was male—a safe bet on Silk Road, Scout being the one exception—but had no knowledge of each other’s details otherwise.

Andrew’s lawyer had told him that Peter would be in attendance and he was able to figure out which one Peter was. He had hoped they would be placed next to one another and have a chance for a chat, but that wasn’t to be. Peter was seated a few seats down in the same row and Drew had to crane forward to see his co-accused. When he caught Peter’s eye, Drew gave him a bright smile.

Peter had no idea who the smiling man was and blanked him, wondering if he was a federal agent. It was only when the proceedings started and they read out the US vs. Jones that he realised Drew was Inigo, the man he had worked side by side with in what they thought was a revolution.

By that time, the socially awkward Andrew was steadfastly avoiding catching Peter’s eye, worried that Peter judged him for the decision he had made to turn state evidence against Dread Pirate Roberts.

Andrew had gone into hiding after he made his deal with the prosecution. He remained under house arrest at the home of his parents, the bracelet affixed to his ankle ensuring he never strayed far from home. He was banned from any online activity at all; he couldn’t even order take-away through the local pizza delivery’s webpage.

As it turned out, the prosecution ultimately failed to call him to testify, though no reason was given. Andrew felt he would not have been able to assist the prosecution’s case; he was as much in the dark as to his boss’ identity as anyone and knew little of what went on in the backend of Silk Road.

The verdict

The trial of Ross Ulbricht wound up on day three of week four, on 4 February 2015. Both sides had a chance to make closing arguments, then the prosecution and the defence rested, sending the jury out to decide the fate of the young Texan.

After a mere three hours of deliberation, the jury found Ross Ulbricht guilty on all seven felony charges he faced, including drug trafficking, continuing a criminal enterprise, hacking, money laundering, and fraud with identification documents.

After the trial, the public was made aware that at least two members of law enforcement who worked on a task force dedicated to Silk Road were corrupt. They had infiltrated the site, posed as vendors and staff, and stolen Bitcoin for their own use. Carl Mark Force IV and Shaun Bridges pleaded guilty to their crimes and were incarcerated for 78 months and 72 months respectively. Carl had used the names ‘Nob’, ‘French Maid’, and ‘Death from Above’ during his extortion activities.

Neither Force, nor Bridges, the investigation concluded, was ‘alpacino’.

Closing in on the puppet-master

Among the identification documents of Silk Road staff found on Ross Ulbricht’s computer was a passport supplied by Variety Jones. Nevertheless, he had somehow avoided arrest during the December 2013 swoop that nabbed Inigo, Libertas and SSBD. Strangely, VJ’s ID had been added only a few weeks before Ulbricht’s arrest, even though he had been mentoring Silk Road’s owner from the beginning. It seemed out of character and particularly incongruous for somebody whose main contribution to Silk Road was identifying security flaws and advising on opsec.

Media speculation about the mysterious Machiavellian puppet-master was keen, but there appeared little action on the part of law enforcement. They had an ID, according to the court transcripts, although the name had not been made public, and a reference from Variety Jones in one of the chat logs that tied him to the moniker Plural of Mongoose. In a 28 June 2012 chat between Ulbricht and VJ, he said, ‘I was, and am, Plural of Mongoose. Folks who know and love me, it’s Mongoose.’

When discussing whether it would be easy for either of the Silk Road masterminds to de-anonymise the other, in the period before VJ had supplied his ID, Variety Jones threw out a broad hint. ‘You know—I post up, and give you shitloads of info that could if you tried just a bit (fuck, Plural of Mongoose alone should do it!) that you could determine exactly who I am,’ he wrote. ‘I did that to make you feel comfortable.’

‘I know,’ responded DPR.

‘If you can’t find me in 10 days, you’ve not read my shit.’

Both pieces fit directly with what the mysterious ‘Alan’ had written to me, and LaMoustache did not disappoint with his usual intensive research efforts. On 26 February, a couple of weeks after the trial concluded, LaMoustache posted a detailed analysis on his website which joined all the pieces and definitively identified Variety Jones as being Roger Thomas Clark, previously known as Plural of Mongoose, no stranger to the UK prison system and currently residing

Plural of Mongoose, no stranger to the UK prison system and currently residing in Koh Chang, Thailand.

Clark had a long history in the online drug trade that significantly predated Silk Road. Although Silk Road was unprecedented in its design and scope, it was far from the first online drugs market. Long before an accessible dark web, people were buying and selling drugs through chat rooms and Usenet forums, using code words and arranging clandestine meetings to exchange goods for cash.

The millennial generation likes to believe they led the way in online black markets, but there were many people involved in online drug sales while they were still in primary school. There were sites on the clear web that skirted legalities by positioning themselves as informational sites, which did not blatantly make drug sales, but brought like-minded folk together. One in particular, overgrow.com, was the mecca of cannabis-growing websites, the brainchild of a group of cannabis activists who had previously interacted on discussion forums. It was home to a massive collection of articles, pictures and information on cannabis cultivation, with in-depth FAQs about nearly every cannabis strain.

‘Overgrow was the meeting place of an outlawed society, bringing the wisdom of expert growers to novices, and the politics of cannabis activists to recreational users, all in an online world of information and photo galleries,’ wrote journalist Chris Bennett in an exposé in *High Times* in 2006.

As commercial interests became involved, the Overgrow community became increasingly dysfunctional and split when there was a disagreement over who in the ‘seed biz’ had the legitimate right to run the site. More dysfunctional than any was a character who went by the name Plural of Mongoose, the man Bennett dubbed ‘the Megabyte Megalomaniac’.

Plural of Mongoose—or PoM, or simply Mongoose—delighted in causing havoc. When two key individuals of the UK seed biz, Richard Baghdadlian and Marc Emery, were busted by Canadian authorities, Mongoose took it upon himself to publish a series of posts detailing the busts from inside the circle of those involved. He hurled wild accusations at a number of vendors, breeders and other members of Overgrow, and accused Baghdadlian of working with authorities.

In April 2007 Mongoose got into a dispute with another supplier and former business partner, Gypsy Nirvana. The convoluted mess of accusations and counter-accusations, shady business dealings and sexual infidelities wound up in court, where Mongoose’s identity was revealed to be Thomas Clark, a Canadian living in Surrey in the UK.

All of this played out on the internet forums that Mongoose and Gypsy frequented. During one tirade, Mongoose mentioned visiting a good friend in England called Variety Jones. He clearly held Variety Jones in high regard, saying: 'I met VJ when I was just a pup, and he had always been my counsel. If I started getting too big for my britches, I could always count on him to take me to task. There is nothing I knew that I didn't share with him, and he was a sounding board and confidante like no other.'

Mongoose spent some time in prison before returning to the seed biz, but lay low until a new forum emerged, where he could once again get in behind the scenes and manipulate those involved. He assumed the name of his former mentor Variety Jones and took to playing a similar role to the young Dread Pirate Roberts.

On 21 April 2015, the US government filed a sealed complaint against Roger Thomas Clark aka 'Variety Jones' aka 'VJ' aka 'Plural of Mongoose', who they said 'served as a trusted advisor of Ulbricht'. The complaint sought to charge Clark with conspiracy to traffic narcotics and conspiracy to commit money laundering in relation to activities on Silk Road. VJ, the complaint alleged, was a senior adviser to Dread Pirate Roberts, the owner and operator of online illicit black market Silk Road. Clark was alleged to have been a close confidant of Ulbricht's who advised him on all aspects of Silk Road's operations and helped him grow the site into an extensive criminal enterprise.

Variety Jones was more of a counsellor or consultant than staff. There were several large payments to him on the Silk Road spreadsheets, but these tended to coincide with payments for specific events.

A couple of weeks later, on 4 May, the US Embassy in Thailand requested the provisional arrest for the purpose of extradition of Roger Thomas Clark from Koh Chang Island, Thailand.

On 29 May 2015, Ross Ulbricht was sentenced to two life terms in prison, without possibility of parole. Variety Jones had promised him, if it ever came to this, he would do whatever was necessary to break him out. People began to muse whether he would really come roaring in with a helicopter to save his young genius boss.

Mongoose on a virtual rampage

He may have taken a back seat on Silk Road, content to let Dread Pirate Roberts and the customer service representatives be the public face of the website, but it was not in Mongoose's nature to shrink into the background.

On 11 September 2015, Motherboard—a VICE Media subsidiary dedicated to tech news—published an article entitled, 'These are the two forgotten architects of Silk Road: Digging through the email account of Variety Jones', which took LaMoustache's research, independently verified it via the controversial path of acquiring access to Clark's private emails with the assistance of a hacker, and published the findings. The second 'architect' identified by Motherboard was Mike Wattier, who was Silk Road's prime coder, 'Smed'.

Once his name hit the mainstream media, and he realised that the American authorities were serious about bringing him in on myriad drug running, money laundering and hacking charges, Mongoose decided to go public. Roger Thomas Clark was indeed living in Thailand, enjoying the good life. He was invited to most of the parties of the ex-pats because he always had the very best weed. He was socially awkward and somewhat annoying, according to one local source, and it was only the steady supply of quality drugs that kept getting him invited back.

'So I've got this trip planned, to the Big Apple,' he wrote on 20 September 2015 on seed-growing forum MyPlanetGanja (MPG), reviving an account that had not posted in six years. 'There's a lot of misinformation floating around out there,' he wrote. 'My first instinct is to try and correct all of it, which is why my second instinct is pretty much always to beat my first instinct into fucking submission, and warn it if it ever raises its mangy fucking head again, it had better be prepared to be thoroughly chastised, perhaps even taunted.'

As Mongoose would tell it, when he heard about the warrant for his arrest, he took himself down to a bar near the local police station, a place 'where the locals go to interact with the local police'. He asked an officer whether they were looking for him. 'No, we're not, but immigration is,' the officer responded. The two proceeded to have a drink. 'He made a phone call,' Mongoose claimed, 'and about 15 minutes later a pickup truck with a couple of immigration police showed up, they sat down and we ordered a bottle of Sangsom Thai whiskey, and a bucket of ice. This was a serious conversation we were having, and called for serious drink.'

The immigration officer confirmed that there was a warrant for Mongoose's arrest, with a corresponding reward of 20,000 Thai baht, approximately \$700.

'I left a bundle of 50,000 THB on the table to cover the tab, said good-bye to the smiling officials divvying up the loot, and headed home,' Mongoose said.

He had a way with words and a way of drawing out a tale, feeding off the responses and encouragement of others. 'I didn't architect anything, I was too busy being in Wandsworth fucking prison,' he said in response to the media reports that called Variety Jones the hidden architect of Silk Road. He claimed he could not possibly be Variety Jones, because he was incarcerated during much of the requisite time. 'Folks...get a skewed view of an alternate reality. The altered reality said nope, Mongoose was never in prison, it was all a ruse while he was in reality Architecting away at you know which project.'

It wasn't long until Mongoose's story took an even more unbelievable twist. He said that somebody contacted him; somebody who mattered a lot in the Silk Road investigation. That somebody had been feeding information to the owner of Silk Road in the time leading up to Ulbricht's arrest. 'It started out with things like Atlantis. He had, for a princely sum, kept the management of Atlantis updated with documents that eventually led to them shutting the site down, fearing the feds nipping at their heels,' Mongoose said.

Atlantis was a rival to Silk Road that had tried its best to gain market share but had never been successful in luring away customers from the incumbent giant. They had accusations of being a honeypot (i.e. a law enforcement sting), scammers and scum thrown at them as they tried to build their business. In the end, they shut down, still scorned. What came out at Ulbricht's trial, however, was that they had tried to warn Dread Pirate Roberts of an FBI investigation. He, apparently, had ignored them.

In Mongoose's story, this crooked FBI agent had come into possession of a Bitcoin wallet, with 300,000 Bitcoin in it (worth at the time of the tale some \$75 million), which he had liberated from Silk Road, and which nobody else knew existed. Unfortunately, he did not have the passphrase to unlock the Bitcoin within. He did, however, have a plan.

'He was going to patiently wait for Ross to be convicted, and after he was convicted, he would eventually be transferred to a permanent home in a federal prison,' Mongoose wrote. 'Now, this is where I come in. He figured, for whatever far-flung reason, that I could convince Ross to cough up the passphrase he needed. He also had a second theory, and that was that Ross only had half the passphrase, and I had the other half. Either way, I am critical to his plan.'

Mongoose's tale rambled on for thousands of words, claiming that the mysterious contact provided him with the news of corrupt agents Force and Bridges long before it hit the media. The corrupt officer, he claimed, fed him many such pieces of information. 'And one day, he did something weird. I mean weird, even for him. He signed off one of his reports with: ...out.'

went, even for him. He signed off one of his texts with. --CWT.

This seemed to be a less-than-subtle attempt by Mongoose to imply that the corrupt cop was Christopher W Tarbell, the FBI special agent who headed the task force that brought down Silk Road and Ross Ulbricht. Mongoose claimed that, when pressed, the agent said cwt stood for 'carat' because one of his code names was Diamond. It was Diamond, Mongoose said, who alerted him to the sealed indictment and had arranged for his arrest by the Thai authorities. When Mongoose slipped out of the arrest, the story took a sinister, even hysterical turn.

'Well, you'd think I kicked his puppy! He went fucking mental, and started going on about his backup plan. He would kidnap Ross Ulbricht's sister, or mother, or ideally both. Get a video capable phone in front of Ross Ulbricht, and he'd give up that fucking passphrase, and Diamond would have them tortured until he did. I had his bonafides by now, and knew him well enough to know he was serious about this. Come Christmas, if I wasn't well in position exactly where he wanted me to be, I'd be responsible for the results.

'In this case, biting the bullet was turning myself in, because writing an anonymous postcard wasn't going to cut it. If I was to keep him from kidnapping those two women, which he'd do if I didn't turn myself over to him, I was going to have to turn myself over to the DOJ folks, so they could take the appropriate action to protect those people, and maybe even figure out just who this sick fuck was, and stop him.

'Easiest thing in the world, turning yourself in, you'd think.

'You'd also be wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.'

In his attempt to turn himself in, Mongoose claimed he had written to Assistant US Attorney Serrin Turner on 9 May 2015, having become aware of the sealed indictment against him. 'The contents of the email informed Mr. Turner that secret grand jury information, and the existence of a sealed indictment had been passed on to me by Diamond. I also touched on the fact that I was aware the authorities in SE Asia had been requested to detain me for extradition.'

He told Mr Turner he would cooperate and turn himself in. Mr Turner never responded. So Mongoose doubled down on his efforts to figure out who Diamond might be. He was getting worried now. 'It wasn't until he started obsessing on the kidnappings, that I realized I had a fucking lunatic on my hands. A lunatic highly placed in the FBI, with a massive off the books private budget, who thought that kidnapping and torture were the solution to his problems,' he said. 'I gave myself four months to see if I could uncover him. If not, I'd have to come up with something else. I spend the next four months, sixteen hours a day, trying to track that fucker down.'

Mongoose wrote a follow-up email to Serrin Turner, again telling his tale of

Mongoose wrote a follow-up email to Sethi Pinner, again telling his tale of the mysterious and dangerous Diamond. ‘I intend to uncover the identity of Diamond,’ he concluded in the letter. ‘I have a pretty good idea how to go about that, and if you and/or your office are unable or unwilling to assist, perhaps you could pass my information on to someone who can.’

As Mongoose brought his astonishing tale to an end, he finished by addressing the question everyone wanted answered. His ID was in the same folder as that of Inigo, Libertas and SSBD. Thus the FBI presumably had his information at the same time. So why wasn’t he arrested back then?

‘The answer is simple: the folks who should have been trying to put me in jail, didn’t want me in jail.’

What to believe?

It didn’t take long before people started poking holes in Mongoose’s story. Small details didn’t match up to other reports. Many people on the forum had been around during the first great dramas created by Mongoose all those years ago, which had spilled over into real-life violence and arrests. The claims that a highly placed government agent had threatened to kidnap and torture family members of Dread Pirate Roberts bordered on the absurd.

Mongoose claimed that by his calculations, there were over 400,000 Bitcoins from Silk Road unaccounted for, which was a claim backed up by some who put the research into Silk Road. However, Mongoose was possibly simply seizing on reports that the FBI was unsuccessfully struggling to seize a further 600,000 Bitcoins belonging to DPR.

There was no denying that Mongoose was publicly outing himself as the person the authorities had indicted as being Variety Jones. He continued to post on the MPG forum, taunting the authorities and practically begging them to arrest him. He stuck to his story that there was a third, unidentified, rogue agent called Diamond who had stolen Bitcoin and provided intelligence to a number of darknet markets (not just Silk Road). He was sure the authorities were deliberately ignoring the matter, hoping it would go away.

‘Only 2 agents *ever* succumbed to temptation, therefore “Diamond” cannot possibly exist. (Insert “LA-LA-LA-LA I can’t hear you,” here),’ he wrote, imitating law enforcement’s response—or lack thereof—to his wild accusations. ‘So, if all the TLAs [three-letter agencies] pretend Diamond doesn’t exist, the problem will just go away, right? And they’re doing a damned fine job of pretending that either A) Diamond didn’t *really* break any laws, or B) Diamond isn’t a federal agent, and none of our concern. Also, that Clark guy bothering us

to turn himself in, he'll likely just give up and stop bugging us any day now. Let's just wait him out, shall we.'

Indeed, it seemed as if they were waiting it out. Mongoose continued posting, not hiding where he was writing from, and musing as to why he was not being arrested. Separating fact from fiction in his stories was always difficult and he knew this and was happy to lead people on a merry chase. His taunting of the authorities became increasingly blatant:

'My name is Roger Thomas Clark, I can be reached by email at zybose@safe-mail.net, and I wish to make arrangements to safely travel to the United States and turn myself in to be served with any indictments that may be pending. If I have been misinformed, and there aren't any sealed indictments waiting for me, well great! Drop me an email and let me know, either way.

'I really cannot be much clearer and [more] direct than that.'

He liked to play with journalists, too. He contacted Joseph Cox, the author of the Motherboard article, and told him to fly to Thailand, where he would gain an exclusive interview with the man alleged to be Variety Jones. Cox would have to give up his communication devices and allow minders to whisk him between Southeast Asian countries until finally, 'A helicopter will take you to the airport at your final destination. A limo will take you from there to my hotel, and we'll play the rest of it by ear.'

'It was elaborate, it was hard to believe, but as a journalist there was the possibility there was some truth to it,' Cox said of the plan that took shape over two months of private messages. But it seemed life on the run was taking its toll on Mongoose. 'Towards the end when we moved to encrypted chat, he sounded exhausted, less of the jokes, less whimsical.'

It did seem all part of an elaborate hoax; as Cox was packing his bags for the trip, he received a message: 'DO NOT GET ON THE PLANE.' Mongoose told him that one of the minders had been arrested. 'Not driving down the road and pulled over arrested, but two truckloads of army pulled up to his house type arrested.'

I also contacted Mongoose via private message and he was happy to chat, though he never invited me on his helicopter. He claimed not to have yet read my book on Silk Road, but knew who I was. 'Everyone seems to think yer pretty swell, and actual author and not a click-bait factory drone,' he told me. 'High words of praise, indeed, from some of the people who have dealt with you.'

'Are you still in Thailand?' I asked one day. 'If, just say, I was going to Thailand to get some nice cushion covers made up by the super-tailors, would you meet me for a beverage and a chat?'

Mongoose never responded to that message. On 3 December 2015, two years

after the arrests of the three Silk Road administrators, Roger Thomas Clark, a 54-year-old Canadian, was arrested through a joint operation of the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, the Drug Enforcement Administration and local Thai police.

Darknet markets after Silk Road

After the fall of Silk Road, the two smaller markets in its shadow—Black Market Reloaded and Sheep—received such a massive influx of Silk Road refugees that the former closed down gracefully, saying they didn't need the scrutiny all the new members would bring, and the latter closed suddenly, taking everyone's Bitcoin with them. Silk Road 2.0 opened just a month after Ulbricht's arrest, run by former Silk Road employees, three of whom were arrested a couple of months later and one of whom was in fact undercover agent Cirrus. Silk Road 2.0 stayed open for a year before it, too, was shut down by the authorities.

After that, several markets rose and fell—a few by law enforcement infiltration, but most just shut up shop, usually taking the Bitcoin of their customers with them. The appetite for online drugs markets was voracious; drug users worldwide had discovered a newer, simpler way to acquire better quality drugs at reasonable prices, and the closures, busts and scams were little more than a nuisance, the cost of illicit activities. It was not long before new markets dwarfed the size of Silk Road.

The classic exit scam, many say, is the perfect crime. Build up a network of trust among customers, then abscond with all their money. Those who have been ripped off have little recourse; there's no ombudsman to complain to when your illegal goods don't turn up or aren't what was promised. No door to knock on and demand your money back.

Individual drug dealers have done it throughout the dark markets' history to various degrees, with Tony76 setting the bar. But on a much larger scale, sometimes the owners of a market, entrusted with all the users' Bitcoin in their accounts and held in escrow, decide to simply close the market and move the Bitcoin into their personal wallets. Such was the case with Atlantis in November 2013 (although in retrospect, it is likely Atlantis was simply spooked as they had apparently been fed information about the ongoing FBI investigation) and Sheep Marketplace in December the same year. And so it was in late March 2015 with the largest black market the dark web has ever known. The owners of Evolution Marketplace—known as Verto and Kimble—brazenly told staff that they were closing the site and taking the coin. The estimated value of everything within their control ranged from \$12 million to \$34 million worth of Bitcoin at prevailing market rates.

This should not have come as a surprise to its customers. As well as getting larger, these new markets had wildly different philosophies of doing business

than the trailblazer. Gone were the days when the leading darknet market, Silk Road, refused to sell or list anything ‘the purpose of which is to harm or defraud another person’. The markets that emerged to fill the gap left by Silk Road listed stolen credit cards and personal information, hacking services and malware alongside drugs for personal use. Evolution was founded by a character well known to the dark web. Verto had been administrator of Tor Carding Forum, a massive community of those who trade stolen credit or debit card account information for profit. They sold personal information, credit card dumps, ATM skimmers, cloning machines, fake IDs. And the owners pulled Ponzi schemes on their own members.

In retrospect, it should have been obvious that someone who had made a career of ripping people off would stage a heist where risk was minimal and reward was great. Evolution’s administrators had probably planned the long con, giving themselves a year or so to establish trust and amass Bitcoin. Evolution had always had a cleaner interface and, importantly, lower commissions than any other major online black market. The profits, while still healthy, were unlikely to be adequate for those risking their lives and freedom.

Two former moderators of the Evolution forums confirmed separately that a ‘staff meeting’ was called the morning of the closure, though their recollections differ slightly.

‘We had a staff meeting at 10:30 am this morning,’ said NSWGreat, where the owners announced that the ‘market was being closed and they’re taking everything with them. Said market and forums would be online for 30 minutes for us to save anything we wanted to keep.’

‘It was pretty bizarre,’ confirmed EvilGrin. ‘Verto wasn’t there. Kimble said we’d wait a few minutes for him then in a few minutes he said, “Verto isn’t coming to the meeting, or to any meetings again. Because I’m taking Evo offline in 30 seconds.”’

When Silk Road was launched in February 2011, one of the stated intentions of Dread Pirate Roberts February was to create a place where peaceful people could buy and sell drugs free from violence. Exit scams brought out the violence in people. Many of the vendors on Evolution had large amounts of money tied up—money they owed to very real people in very real life who would be very unsympathetic. Vendors posted that they feared for their lives if they could not pay their own suppliers.

Many of those who lost money in the Evolution exit scam (and many who did not, but were affronted by the heist) were baying for the blood of Verto and Kimble. They didn’t just want the money returned—they wanted those who had taken it to suffer.

The nitchefork brigade got even uglier when they started offering money for

The pitchfork brigade got even uglier when they started offering money for the identities of other Evolution staff members, all of whom were presumably as in the dark as any of their customers. Some went one step further—not just the uninvolved staff, but their families as well.

Despite the thousands of online sleuths combing for clues, following the Bitcoin and sharing their theories, the absconding founders of Evolution were never located. They joined a small but growing number of dark web drug lords who apparently got away scot-free and enjoyed their spoils in anonymity.

Whenever one market went down, other markets operating simultaneously would get an influx of new members and those without the proper infrastructure would buckle under the demand. After Evolution closed its doors, there were no consistently reliable markets for some time; users became so frustrated that many said they would forgive the owners of Evolution their sins if only they would reopen the stable and efficient market.

Thanks to the transparency of Bitcoin, pundits could make educated estimates of the amount of turnover and profit that market owners made. Thus, it did not take long before the gap in the market was filled with others attracted by the potential for massive returns.

AlphaBay launched in mid-late 2014, and it was immediately apparent that it existed purely for profit and made no pretence at the lofty ideals and morals of the old-school markets. AlphaBay was the epitome of the new darknet markets; bigger than Silk Road ever was, but darker, selling not only drugs, but weapons, stolen personal information, computer hacking tools, malware, ransomware, stolen goods and services to steal identities and ruin lives. With few exceptions, if it was illegal, it could be purchased on AlphaBay.

This was the true wild west of the dark web. There were few rules on AlphaBay, other than a ban on child pornography, a ban on any activities designed to circumvent commissions going to AlphaBay's owners, and a stipulation that any malware sold must have a built-in function to ensure it could not impact any computer in Russia, whether belonging to government, industry or private citizens.

This final rule, alongside AlphaBay's large Russian-speaking membership and the Russian-language forums that rivalled the size of the English-language ones, meant the website was widely considered to be run by Russian organised crime.

Before long AlphaBay was ten times the size Silk Road ever was. Darknet markets had come a long way from the days of the creation of a young idealistic Texan in Silicon Valley.

A third rogue agent

On 29 November 2016, Ross Ulbricht's defence team filed a letter with the US Attorney's office in Maryland stating they had found evidence that a still-unidentified rogue government agent—not a field agent, but an analyst in an office with nine-to-five responsibilities and with access to internal communications—may have sold information about the Silk Road investigation to DPR before his arrest. The evidence pointed to someone having deleted all traces of certain correspondence from the official files, including all copies. Forensics experts had uncovered some 30 pages of correspondence between Dread Pirate Roberts and a character calling himself 'notwonderful' in an administrator's backup file that had apparently been overlooked by the rogue agent when erasing all traces of his existence.

He provided DPR with real-time information on the investigation: 'Some of it is analytical, some of it matches the status of what we know about the investigation,' Ulbricht's lawyer, Joshua Dratel, said in a statement.

DPR agreed to an up-front payment to notwonderful of between US\$5000 and \$8000 and then a salary of \$500 per week for ongoing updates. The payments were to be made out to a Silk Road user going by the name 'alpacino'.

When the prosecution first came across the payments to alpacino, they had assumed it was another alias of Carl Mark Force IV and it was reported as such in the media. After the initial reports, however, all references to alpacino were quietly dropped in the prosecution of Special Agent Force.

Just as Mongoose had said, there was another corrupt government agency official who was extracting money from the golden goose that was Silk Road. This one had been able to remove nearly all traces of his or her identity with surgical precision.

A visit to Bangkok Remand

Klong Prem Central Prison in Bangkok does a roaring trade in padlocks. Most first-time visitors are unaware that they have to put their mobile phone into one of the old-school metal lockers in the courtyard before being permitted inside. If you haven't brought your own padlock, you can buy one from the admissions officer.

Visiting someone at the prison is a surprisingly simple—and very low-tech—affair. On 29 March 2017, I filled in a few details on a slip of paper stating I was a friend visiting one Roger Thomas Clark.

I'd flown from Melbourne especially for the visit, confident that he would see me. A fellow journalist—Bitcoin Uncensored podcaster Chris DeRose—had

tweeted that he was in Bangkok and I asked if he would be kind enough to check whether Clark was still at his last known address, Bangkok Remand. Since his arrest in 2015 it had been impossible to get any reliable news about the man accused of being Variety Jones. Occasional news reports would crop up that he was still there, only to be contradicted by another saying he was in the same NYC facility as Ulbricht. His appeal had been successful; his appeal had been denied. Nobody knew how to contact him by mail.

Chris rose to the challenge, attending the prison three days in a row before finally getting in to see Clark by mentioning Bitcoin on his visit slip. ‘He knows you and wants to work with you,’ Chris told me on a call after the successful visit. I booked a flight almost before I hung up the phone.

I had expected something cold and menacing, but the prison was surprisingly non-threatening. The garden areas accommodated the smokers and there were several water features as well as statues of Buddha and a variety of animals. Many of Bangkok’s ubiquitous soi dogs had made their home there, sleeping or trotting around the gardens in various states of manginess. Along the walk from the taxi drop-off point to the front door were stalls selling street food and cold water. A table manned by prison staff displayed fresh vegetables bagged up that could be bought and delivered to prisoners to supplement the prison food of rice, chilli and indeterminate meat.

A large poster dictated appropriate attire for visitors—women were to refrain from exposing shoulders, midriff or knees. Something that resembled a metal detector near the entrance buzzed every time somebody went through, although it could be easily sidestepped. A bored staff member would occasionally bark ‘phone?’ at someone whose clothes or bag might be hiding such contraband, but would wave them through before they could finish shaking their head.

The procedure to get an audience was basic, almost archaic. Visitors would fill in the slip of paper—twice, because the prison doesn’t supply carbon paper—requesting a visit with the prisoner of choice. A private copy shop would make a copy of the visitor’s passport or driver’s licence for 2 baht, and both would be presented through a window to somebody who did not seem very interested in whether the photograph matched the visitor.

I held out my hand, palm upwards as indicated, and received a stamp near the base of my thumb and another slip of paper that told me what time I could enter the visiting room. Visiting hours started at 8:30 am for 20 minute-long visits. No. 11 was displayed when I arrived and my slip of paper said I would be part of group 13. Prisoners only get one visit per day. If your prisoner had already seen someone, you’d be told once you got in that the prisoner could not see you.

There were squat toilets in the waiting room, the type you scoop water into after you finish. They weren't filthy, but they seemed to receive the minimal necessary cleaning. Classical music played over the speakers, and visitors could wait in front of a large television playing what looked like a Thai version of the classic breakfast news program. Little stores in the foyer sold snacks, coffee and cold drinks, and I bought an iced coffee to ease the oppressive heat and to calm my nerves, coffee being the first on my list of comfort foods. Staff in blue jumpsuits—they may have been trusted inmates—shifted buckets around to catch the worst of the leaks. It was the season for torrential downpours and the prison was not quite waterproof.

The 40-minute wait was nerve-wracking. I hadn't thought of what I was going to say to him and had no idea what to expect. For years, Silk Road had been my obsession and I had met countless minor players—moderators, administrators, vendors and customers—but the two who most intrigued me, Dread Pirate Roberts and Variety Jones, remained elusive. Ross Ulbricht never responded to the letters I wrote to him and nobody knew for sure where Variety Jones was.

I wondered what he would be like. I had drunk in the thousands of words he had written across various media and we had exchanged messages on MyPlanetGanja. One thing meeting people in the flesh had taught me was that the human was rarely what you expected from their online persona. Mongoose was infamous among the tight-knit seed biz community. He was known to be entertaining, erratic, verbose and unforgiving of a slight. He had a habit of messing with journalists or people he considered too nosy. Many considered him dangerous, echoing the concerns journalist Chris Bennett had about the 'Megabyte Megalomaniac' over a decade earlier.

The clock ticked over, a siren sounded and the visitors of group 12 poured out of the visiting area, as group 13 took its place quickly, nobody willing to waste precious seconds with their loved ones. I sat on one of the five stools in room 5. Some visitors came in pairs, or brought children, so the little room became crowded.

My heart was pounding. When the next siren sounded, the prisoners would take their places on the opposite side of the smash-proof window and I would finally get to meet Variety Jones.

The Megabyte Megalomaniac

Plural of Mongoose was like a puppet master, and it was eerily intriguing watching him pull the strings on the forums that made people dance in the real world: Business transactions fell apart, people retired nicknames and dropped from view, court dates came and went—but when the chance arose to interview PoM, I decided to pass. By that time, I had it from a reliable source that PoM deposited things on people's PCs via e-mail that gave him access to their personal desktops and files. Frankly, PoM scared me, and I didn't consider him a reliable source of information anyway. So why feed his fire?

— Chris Bennett, *High Times* magazine, July 2006

'Nobody has ever regretted not doing an interview; lots of folks have regretted doing one,' Variety Jones once warned Dread Pirate Roberts, when the two of them were riding high overseeing their Silk Road empire, counting commissions on millions of dollars in sales every week. Yet here he was—or at least, the man alleged to be him—not only granting an interview, but eager to provide input into a book.

My stool had become damp with sweat waiting for someone to appear opposite me as everybody else gabbed into the telephones while mine remained in its cradle. My heart sank as the minutes ticked over and it became obvious that Clark was not going to show. I didn't budge because I hoped there would be an explanation, but I grew increasingly frustrated as I waited.

A couple of minutes before the end of the session a guard picked up the phone opposite me. There had been some sort of mix-up with my prisoner. Just wait there, and he will be along in the next session, I was told. When he entered with another lot of prisoners, I recognised him instantly; not because of any photographs—all that existed online was a grainy passport shot that may or may not have been him—but because he was the only westerner there.

'I want to call you Mongoose,' I blurted into the receiver before we even exchanged pleasantries. Prisoner #58-501-04886, Roger Thomas Clark, smiled through the glass.

'Oh, please do,' Mongoose responded. 'I've been Roger too long. And the people in here, they hear "Roger" and immediately call me either "Federer" or "Rabbit". They think it's hysterical.'

Mongoose was not a large or imposing man. Standing at 5 feet 8 inches (173 centimetres), with greying hair, a receding hairline and hazel eyes, he had waved

eagerly through the Plexiglas and bars that separated us. He displayed no signs of the motor neuron disease or multiple sclerosis diagnosis he was rumoured to have, though it was hard to tell through the thick glass.

We had a bit of that awkward exchange you have when meeting somebody you know by correspondence or reputation, but not personally. He helped move it along with 'So I hear you're writing another book.' I launched into the premise of the book and the fact that I hoped he would contribute to it.

'I've refused over 200 visits,' he said with the air of exaggeration those who interact with him soon become accustomed to. 'Most of those would have been reporters.' He had had a bad experience when the prison made him cooperate with a reporter who was doing a story on Canadians in Thai prisons. Mongoose fumed for months, saying the reporter had made up things he had said for dramatic effect.

I decided to fill him in on darknet market news, and told him about Libertas having taken his appeal to the High Court of Ireland, of the incarceration of another one of our mutual online acquaintances, UK paraphernalia vendor Pluto Pete (he was genuinely shocked to hear of his sentence), as well as the news that the chief prosecutor in Ulbricht's case, Preet Bharara, had been sacked by newly installed President Trump. I related reactions on the forums to his incarceration and the latest on Ross Ulbricht's appeals process. I called Ross 'Dipper', as VJ used to refer to him.

He drank it all in, but when I told him what was happening with Bitcoin and the current markets, and AlphaBay's role as king, he cut me off. 'Don't tell me anything I shouldn't know,' he said. 'Don't tell me anything about the new markets, about AlphaBay, anything. It makes life a lot easier when they're asking me questions if I can just say I don't know. I need to be in an information vacuum.'

The talk turned to life inside Bangkok Remand. Mongoose insisted he got along well with everyone, but very much kept to himself. The other inmates mostly left him alone and he knew that rumours swirled about him being some sort of mafia kingpin. He had two minders who took shifts following him everywhere, unless he managed to shake them off.

When I told him I had just five days in Bangkok, he invited me to return each morning, other than Friday when he had a friend coming in. He said he wasn't supposed to have any one person more than twice a week, but he would be able to fix it. He told me to make sure I was there first thing in the morning, because he only got one visitor per day. Sometimes if an inmate refused one visitor, the system would reflect that he had had his visit for the day and later visitors were told the prisoner could not see them.

The young man beside me was having an excited, animated and apparently loving conversation with the equally young man sitting opposite him, to the left of Clark. They appeared to be brothers, cousins or close friends. It was difficult to imagine the sweet-looking young man being capable of murder. The odds are that he was though, because Clark was being held in the section of the prison that houses those who have been charged with murder. That meant that all the other prisoners were almost exclusively Thai nationals. Had he been put into the drug offences section, he would have had many more Western prison mates. As it was, he had nobody with whom he could converse in English, television was exclusively in Thai and he was not allowed any English-language reading materials. He spent a lot of time thinking, he said.

‘They say Thai jail is no picnic,’ Mongoose told me, ‘but it is. It is a picnic in the park—a picnic that stretches on and on and on and nothing ever happens.’

During the following visits, our conversations meandered all over the place. Each session would start with Mongoose bringing up something I had said the previous day and he would probe and clarify. He seemed to have a photographic memory for everything that was said and missed nothing. His gaze would not waver as I responded to his questions until he was satisfied with the answers.

Mongoose asked for details on the extradition of Gypsy Nirvana from the UK to Maine, US, so I brought him up to speed on what I’d found online the night before. Mongoose and Gypsy had a chequered history thanks to the ‘series of dramas, arrests, claims of blackmail *etc.* over control of the cannabis supply market’ that I had been told about previously. Mongoose listened intently to my report but had little to say about the new developments.

I told him about the email from the mysterious ‘Alan’ that had fingered him as Variety Jones, and the subsequent loss of emails from my Gmail account. He decided that ‘Alan’ must be his ‘Diamond’. He repeated all of the claims he had made online about the mysterious third rogue agent, Diamond. He said he continued to gather evidence about Diamond’s identity, but until he could prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt, he was terrified that if he got extradited to the US, he would conveniently disappear.

He held high hopes for not being extradited and great fears for if he was. His case was being appealed and his lawyers told him that the Thai authorities felt the Americans were being less than honest with them about the nature of the evidence they held, and that the evidence in the criminal complaint was flimsy and all circumstantial. I asked him about the assertion in the complaint that Variety Jones, like others on the staff of Silk Road, had provided a scan of his passport to DPR, and that scan was of Roger Thomas Clark. Mongoose vehemently denied he had ever sent such a thing to DPR, although he apparently

confirmed to others he had done so.

An insider had told me that foreigners and nationals were treated differently in prison. ‘When a Thai national breaks the rules, or gets out of line, they beat him up,’ the insider said. ‘They can’t do that with the foreigners, so what they do instead is, when the *farang* gets out of line they beat up every single one of his cellmates—there could be 8, 10, 12 of them—and leave the *farang* alone. He’s then left to deal with the cellmates.’

Clark didn’t tell me any such thing—he was wary of saying anything negative about the prison after the earlier story on Canadians in prisons had landed a fellow prisoner an extended jail sentence for complaining about conditions. He did say, however, that whenever he got deliveries from the commissary store, he divided them among all his cellmates. Because of this, he only ever wanted goods that were easy to divide. Cigarettes and three-in-one sachets of coffee were the best.

‘One guy got me Pringles, which he heard I liked, but that was a nightmare,’ Clark told me. ‘I had to count out each crisp to ensure I didn’t accidentally give someone of a higher status a smaller pile than someone else.’ Such slights can cause violence in a place like Klong Prem.

Clark seemed almost nervous, and chattered away at a million miles an hour, sometimes sounding downright manic. In that way, he was very much like his Plural of Mongoose online persona. Just as with his online antics, it was hard to tell if he was living in a fantasy world. I felt he might have had a somewhat tenuous grip on reality.

I left the prison with an earful of words, but not much information. He said he couldn’t divulge a great deal that would be of use to my book then, but he expected to be out soon and then he would fly me back, we would sit down and have a whole lot to talk about. ‘Around August,’ he told me, ‘something will have happened one way or the other.’

I asked him whether we could correspond by post, or if there was anyone who visited him regularly that I could send messages through. He declined on both counts, saying that letters in English had to be vetted and translated and usually didn’t get through at all, and that he didn’t want anyone else involved. I got the impression he wanted to control every bit of our interaction.

Just as I was about to leave our final visit, he said if there was any change in his situation—either way—or he wanted me to come see him, he would get a message to me.

‘How will you do that?’ I asked.

‘Easy. You’re not hard to track down, you know,’ he replied.

The rise and rise of AlphaBay

AlphaBay continued its domination of the dark web's e-commerce activities throughout 2015, 2016 and into 2017. Every major drug dealer sold their wares on the largest and most reliable darknet market and most customers flocked there as well. New users found the interface to be intuitive and user-friendly, with most of the more technical aspects of buying illegal goods online automated for their convenience.

AlphaBay worked at keeping the software updated, providing continuous improvements to the customer experience. Those looking to purchase identity information could set the controls to return listings by location, birth year, credit limit and other useful search parameters. Drug buyers could quickly identify vendors with overnight service to their location, or sort from cheapest to most expensive or highest to lowest customer satisfaction rating. AlphaBay also facilitated access to services such as sophisticated money laundering and swatting (bomb threats and false reports to law enforcement).

Borrowing from the marketing tactics of legitimate businesses, customers were given referral links that they could provide to potential users, receiving commission from any purchases those new users made, providing an incentive for members to recruit new customers to the site.

AlphaBay invested heavily in opsec measures to ensure its owners remained safe and anonymous. The website employed security administrators and programmers to stay on top of IT security, as well as 'scam watchers' responsible for monitoring, reporting and disabling scam attempts. They hired a PR manager, moderators and customer service representatives who were removed from the operations of the business, responsible only for marketing and enquiries from the clientele. Those employees entrenched themselves on clear-web sites such as reddit, ready to respond to queries, spruik the site's services and bring in new customers whenever the chance arose.

The owners of AlphaBay were not given to rallying speeches, debating socio-political theories, opening book clubs or setting reading challenges involving complex manifestos on anarcho-capitalism. They were businessmen, running an efficient market designed to maximise profit for its owners and contractors. Their FAQ section included the question 'Is AlphaBay legal?'

Some people have really asked this question. Of course not. We are an anonymous marketplace selling drugs, weapons and credit cards. Make sure you access the website through Tor or through a VPN to ensure anonymity. We take no responsibility if you get caught.

Not everybody was happy with this new breed of darknet market. Many who had been part of Silk Road did not want to give their business to an organisation that was happy to provide poisons, weapons and tools to facilitate extortion, theft and fraud alongside their favourite drugs, so long as it turned a profit. Smaller breakaway markets emerged that had strict rules about what could be sold there, some limiting sales to only the less harmful drugs such as cannabis, MDMA and LSD. These niche markets proved popular with many of the longer-term darknet market users.

However, AlphaBay was the most visible, the easiest to use, had the best user interface and widest range. It was the 'Darknet Market for Dummies' of the dark web, simple to access and requiring virtually no technical proficiency to buy almost anything imaginable. AlphaBay was the new one-stop emporium for all things illegal and its doors were open to anyone with Bitcoin.

Another visit to Klong Prem

I went to visit Mongoose again on 12 July 2017. I hadn't heard from him, but I was starting out on a trip to Europe and the US, so he was practically on the way. I hoped he had some further news of either an imminent release or movement to the US.

As I sat in the visiting room while everyone else was talking to their loved ones, the chair across from me remained empty. I played with a small child, there to see the very young man opposite the screen of a young woman. When she lifted the child up and put the phone to his ear, the young man's smile widened and he spoke in the universal language of toddler-talk.

Eventually a guard on the other side of the screen signalled me to pick up the telephone. He held my visitor slip up against the screen. It had been adorned with some handwriting: 'Prisoner does not want any visitors.'

Mongoose had told me that messages like this could mean 'prisoner has had quota of visitors for the week', 'prisoner not allowed to see visitors', 'we could not find prisoner', or possibly 'prisoner doesn't want to see you and is too polite to say so'. I was sure it was written in Mongoose's own hand. I felt deflated. Why the sudden turnaround? He had been excited previously and eager to see me for more than his allotted number of visits. He must know I'd come to Bangkok specifically to see him. What sort of game was he playing?

I hoped it was just a mix-up, or he was expecting somebody else that day and didn't want to use up his daily visit on me. The next morning, having breezed through the sign-in formalities as an old hand, I didn't even make it into the visiting room. A couple of people around me in the waiting room gestured to get my attention, indicating that an announcement that had come over the loudspeaker in Thai was meant for me. I guess I was pretty easy to spot in the crowd, being the only *farang* there.

The corrections officer behind the glass held up my visitor slip. 'He doesn't want to see you. He doesn't want to see anybody,' was the message I got from her broken English. She made it quite clear I was to go away and it probably wouldn't be in my best interests to return.

Frustrated and confused, there was little I could do. Things became clearer when some news filtered through to me that evening. The previous morning—the day of my first visit—a Canadian dark web drug lord had been found dead in his Thai jail cell, the victim of an apparent suicide.

The death of a dark web kingpin

It didn't take long to determine that the victim was not Mongoose. According to local news, a 25-year-old man who had been in custody in a jail cell for less than a week took his own life by choking himself to death with his towel. He had been arrested on suspicion of being Alpha02, founder and owner of AlphaBay, the largest online black market in the world.

AlphaBay had been offline for a week prior to the news. Market downtime always led to rumours, panic, FUD and reassurances on reddit and various dark web forums. There would always be people who feared the worst when a market became suddenly unavailable—that the owners had exit scammed, or law enforcement had taken it down. Sometimes they would be right, but more often than not it would simply be website maintenance or a short-term problem like a DDoS attack. Members would not be warned ahead of time when a market deliberately took itself offline for maintenance, upgrades or security patching, because that would invariably result in panic withdrawals of Bitcoin, causing site instability and even more downtime.

Thus, although there was the usual panic from the jittery minority, most people were not too worried and were prepared to sit out the downtime. 'It's an established market, so outages are expected from time to time,' wrote a reddit moderator. 'When they go down we give them the benefit of the doubt as in the past they have come back up again after a few hours.'

The hours stretched into days and uneasiness increased among the dark web community, as rumours became verified news stories. There had been a major dark-web-related raid in Quebec. That had led to an arrest in Thailand, but authorities were tight-lipped whether it was a vendor or somebody related to the darknet markets. AlphaBay's PR employees continued to post updates of what they knew, but it was clear that they were as much in the dark as anybody else. They had no access to the inner workings of the website.

It wasn't until news filtered through on 13 July that the man arrested in Thailand had been found dead the day before that the enormity of what had happened at AlphaBay dawned on the darknet market users.

On 5 July 2017, Royal Thai Police had executed a search warrant on the Bangkok home of Alexandre Cazes, a Canadian ex-pat. Cazes had lived in Thailand on and off for eight years and had married a Thai, which cemented his residency.

When police swooped, Cazes was not prepared. In his bedroom, his laptop was open and unencrypted, with Cazes logged in as 'Admin' to the backend server of the AlphaBay darknet market. He also had text files with usernames and passwords that enabled law enforcement to access all of the information and

cryptocurrency—Monero, Zcash and Ethereum as well as Bitcoin—on the AlphaBay server. According to the criminal complaint, Cazes ‘served as the leader of the managers and operators of the criminal organisation who, collectively, controlled the destiny of the enterprise’.

According to personal financial statements on the computer, Cazes estimated his own net worth as just over \$23 million. Police seized assets including a Lamborghini for which he had paid \$900,000, a Porsche, his wife’s Mini Cooper and a BMW motorcycle. They also took control of \$8.8 million in cryptocurrency.

Although police had seized and shut down AlphaBay, they left its users in the dark as to what happened. Cazes was the ‘arrest in Thailand’ that had been rumoured, but nobody was aware that they had, in fact, caught the leader of the entire operation.

Nor does anybody know what happened in those seven days between Cazes’ arrest and his death. As it was reported in the *Bangkok Post*: ‘The NSB [Narcotics Suppression Bureau] locked up Cazes in one of their basement detention cells with attached bathroom. On the eve of his first court hearing, Cazes went into that bathroom with a towel, and guards later found him dead on the floor. It’s an apparent suicide. An autopsy will try to sift through the massive suspicion of yet another suicide in NSB custody.’

A week later, on 20 July 2017, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions held a press conference with FBI Acting Director Andrew McCabe and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. The Attorney General said that the US was in the midst of the deadliest drug epidemic in its history. ‘Today, some of the most prolific drug suppliers use what is called the dark web,’ Sessions said. ‘It is called dark not just because these sites are intentionally hidden. It is also dark because of what is sold on many of them: illegal weapons, stolen identities, child pornography, and large amounts of narcotics. Today, the department of justice announced the takedown of a dark web market, AlphaBay. This is the largest takedown in world history.’ He thanked law enforcement partners at Europol, in Thailand, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Canada, the UK, France and Germany.

‘This is a landmark operation,’ added the FBI’s Andrew McCabe. ‘AlphaBay was roughly 10 times the size of the Silk Road, so we are talking about multiple servers, different countries, hundreds of millions of dollars in cryptocurrency, in a darknet drug trade that spans the globe.’

The only mention of the death of the alleged owner-operator of the site in custody a week earlier was by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein: ‘Following the death of the defendant charged in the American case, our US Attorney filed a civil complaint which will ensure that appropriate action is

taken with regard to all the assets that were seized in the course of that investigation.’

Alexandre Cazes’ extravagant lifestyle suggested the dark web administrator was doing very nicely from the commissions taken from every sale of the reported 250,000 drug listings on AlphaBay. As well as luxury cars and properties, he enjoyed drugs and partying and was not faithful to his wife. He was active on a pickup artist forum, where he was frequently found to be boasting about his wealth and assets. According to his indictment, the commissions ‘were worth at least tens of millions of dollars’.

Cazes owned a company called EBX Technologies as a front to explain his income and cryptocurrency holdings. EBX was supposed to be a website design company but, according to the court documents, ‘the website for EBX Technologies is barely functional and does not appear to support any substantial business activities’.

As with Silk Road, it was a basic mistake that brought the police to Cazes’ door. He had reused a personal email address—Pimp_ Alex_91@hotmail.com—in the header of the email sent by AlphaBay to people who needed their passwords reset. Police were able to match that email to Cazes.

The darknet market community was sceptical of the official suicide-in-custody story. Speculation ranged from plausible to absurd. Many pointed out the endemic corruption in the Thai system, something that the news reports in Bangkok also alluded to. However, the theories differed as to how that corruption may have come into play.

‘Corrupt LE [law enforcement] killed him after extracting information on any cash he has stashed away,’ one redditor mused.

‘What if a bunch of cops were already getting paid off, but once Cazes got nabbed, the dirty cops had to tie up the loose end?’ asked another.

‘Thailand is notorious for having corrupt LE,’ wrote someone called murderhomelesspeople. ‘I wonder if [Cazes] paid off some guards to fake his death, he certainly has enough money to do so. Releasing a photo of him dead in the cell, seems like overkill to me, like they are really trying to convince you he’s dead.’

Given the widely held belief that AlphaBay had connections to Russian organised crime, some thought that Cazes was a patsy, a fall guy upon whose head others involved in the operation put a bounty to stop him from revealing any sensitive information about the business and those who were really in charge.

More generous-minded folk thought he sacrificed himself for the greater good. ‘Maybe he wasn’t a snitch and gave up his own life to keep them from

torturing sensitive info on users/vendor info out of em. It takes true balls to take your life away. This man is a hero,' wrote DarkKnight.

Others were having none of it. 'What the hell is the point of running a DNM [darknet market] for 3 years if your "Plan B" is to kill yourself?'

Attorney General Sessions had a message for anyone thinking of taking Cazes' place: 'You cannot hide. We will find you.'

As for Mongoose, I could only speculate that he was aware of part, if not all, of the story. My first attempt to visit him must have been within hours of Cazes' death, but it is possible that news of his arrest had been relayed to him through the prison grapevine. Thai police may have grilled him about Cazes, AlphaBay and darknet markets. The coincidence that they were both Canadian nationals who had made their home in Thailand and allegedly masterminded multi-million-dollar darknet markets would not have been lost on the authorities.

All I had to go on was that piece of paper: 'prisoner does not want any visitors.' I left Bangkok with more questions than answers.

Afterword

At the time of writing, the darknet markets are in disarray. After the AlphaBay seizure, users flocked to the second-biggest market at the time, Hansa. Unfortunately for them, Hansa had been quietly taken over a month earlier by Dutch national police, who let it operate until the expected influx of new members from AlphaBay. One of the most common mistakes of darknet market users is that they use the same login credentials across all markets. The Dutch police were able to use the information captured from Hansa to identify vendors across a number of markets.

‘In fact, they flocked to Hansa in droves,’ said Europol director Robert Wainwright at a press conference. ‘We recorded an eight times increase in the number of human users on Hansa immediately following the takedown of AlphaBay.’

‘The intelligence we have yielded through the monitoring of Hansa has given us new insight into the criminal activity of the darknet, including many of its many leading figures...To those who engage in criminal activity on the internet and the darknet especially you are not as safe and anonymous as you think you are.’

Even this, the worst time in darknet market history, did not dampen the appetite for drug users to buy online. The enabling technologies of Tor, Bitcoin and PGP continued to operate to protect users in most cases. It had been demonstrated repeatedly that there was a huge amount of money to be made running an online black market and for every person arrested, there were hundreds more making (or absconding with) more money than they had ever dreamed possible. The eBay/Amazon-style markets continue to thrive, improve and adapt and remain the simplest to use.

On the other side are the non-centralised markets that will sell only the lowest risk drugs—LSD and similar psychedelics, MDMA and marijuana. The Majestic Garden epitomises these and many people prefer to use it over the commercial marketplaces. Rather than a centralised marketplace that takes the orders and does the administration for a fee, it is more in the form of a discussion forum and volunteers keep track of which vendors are trustworthy. It is up to buyers to make individual arrangements with the vendors. There is no central escrow so no chance of a market owner closing shop and running off with all the money.

Peter Nash, Samesamebutdifferent, was held in New York federal prison for nearly eighteen months before finally coming before a judge, who promptly declared he had paid his debt to society and sentenced him to time served. Peter

returned to Australia, where he was at last able to pop the question he had intended to ask his partner almost two years earlier. She answered in the affirmative and they were married in 2016. He remains in Brisbane, where he is rebuilding his life, drug and dark web-free.

Gary Davis, the man alleged to be Libertas, had his case taken all the way to the High Court, and then the Full Court of Appeal in Ireland. The US remains determined to extradite him, and his chances of avoiding that fate are slim. If he is extradited, he will likely face spending the majority of the rest of his life in prison.

Andrew Jones, Inigo, remains in limbo awaiting his sentencing. His ankle bracelet has been removed and he has a job he enjoys, working with animals. His employers are aware of his history. Although he never had to testify against Ross Ulbricht, he suspects the government is taking its time so that they have him available should Variety Jones or Libertas ever face US courts.

Andrew was annoyed at how he was portrayed in the murder-for-hire discussions surrounding Green. He had been chatting online to DPR at the same time DPR was talking to Variety Jones, but the two discussions were quite separate. Andrew maintains he was never aware of the existence of Variety Jones and had no idea the other discussion was taking place. When the chat logs were reported in court, they were read in chronological order, which gave the impression the three of them were plotting Green's murder in depth. Andrew says that, although the discussion happened, he didn't think DPR was serious.

Curtis Green recovered from his 'murder' and still lives in Utah with his wife. He is writing a memoir. He spoke to Variety Jones before the latter's arrest. 'He didn't know it was me I don't think,' Green said. 'We talked about his advice to kill me.' Of Inigo, he said his colleague was 'lucky he wasn't charged with conspiracy to murder me'.

Curtis himself pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute cocaine and possess with intent to distribute. 'Pleading guilty and having the nightmare over was the best choice,' he said. He was sentenced to time served. In his hopes to cash in on his 'murder', he took umbrage at news outlets using the staged photograph without his permission. As his wife took the picture on her own camera, copyright remained with her. 'Now the photo of me being dunked isn't mine,' he said of his torture prior to murder. 'Me being dead is.' He claimed to have knocked back thousands of dollars for the photograph, and eventually came to a settlement.

Ross Ulbricht has been moved to the maximum security prison in Colorado where he is to serve out his sentence. The double life sentence without possibility of parole was handed down partly because the prosecution was

allowed to lead with evidence of Ulbricht ordering six murders for hire, despite no evidence of any murders ever having taken place, nor Ulbricht ever being charged with anything relating to murder. Had there been sufficient evidence to charge him with attempted murder, or conspiracy to commit murder, it stands to reason the government would have done so.

Murder for hire is not for the faint of heart. It has, however, become just one more service that has moved online thanks to the dark web. While the potential victims of the Dread Pirate Roberts lived to tell their stories, others were not so lucky.

PART II

Darker

PART III

Darkest

Welcome Snuff Seeker!

You have reached the dark web's darkest and greatest Red Room Very soon we will be bringing our 'roomie' into this red room and even though she has at this time not the faintest idea yet of what is going to happen to her, she will be tortured, and then she will die.

And you could be a spectator!

We will be streaming this astounding event via the TOR network with our high capacity servers at 1080P, which is the minimum screen resolution required to fully appreciate death and dying. High fidelity sound will also be included in this stream.

Take part in this once-in-a-lifetime experience!

To be present at this incredible, never-to-be-repeated event, you need to pay 0.5 BTC. Yes, that's right: for a mere 0.5BTC, you can be there and enjoy the spectacle of the bloody torture and inexorable death of a pretty young woman! Her being led into the room will be the first inkling she has that something is amiss, and you will already be in your front row seat.

This memorable event will last approximately 1 hour and will begin at 00:00 UTC, on Saturday, October 1st Applications for entry to the September 24th event are now closed. Our next event will be held October 1st Applications for the October 1st event are now open – Dark web red room welcome screen

Snuff films—myth or reality?

Snuff films depict the killing of a human being—a human sacrifice (without the aid of special effects or other trickery) perpetuated for the medium of film and circulated amongst a jaded few for the purpose of entertainment.

– David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture* (1994)

Ask anybody if snuff films exist and they are almost certain to answer in the affirmative. It is one of those topics that people refuse to believe is an urban myth. Just because there have been no verified examples of snuff movies any time in history, they will argue, doesn't mean they're not out there; humans are capable of all kinds of depravity—it could happen, so it *must* happen.

There is something morbidly fascinating about the idea of snuff films. Defining a snuff film is a bit like applying Stewart's test for obscenity: you may not know how to define it but you know it when you see it. The generally accepted meaning seems to be murder on film, for the purpose of making a movie to distribute for commercial gain. Some people believe there must also be a sexual component to it.

Most people wouldn't consider accidental deaths caught on film to be 'snuff'. A greyer area is murders deliberately filmed, but not for the purpose of sale. Pre-internet, videos like the *Mondo* series and *The Killing of America* were popular, if somewhat underground. They are compilations of real death footage, but the killings involved were caught on camera by accident. They were not done for the purpose of the film and certainly not for commercial gain.

The first known use of the term 'snuff movie' was in a 1971 book by Ed Sanders, *The Family: The Story of Charles Manson's Dune Buggy Attack Battalion*. In that book Sanders relays a story about a stolen Super 8 camera that was used to film the decapitation of a young woman with short blonde hair on a beach. Such a murder was never verified, but Sanders coined the term 'snuff movie' to describe true murders on film.

The term gained wider popularity when it became the title of a 1975 low-budget horror flick, *Snuff*, a movie so bad it scores 2.8 on IMDb. Long before *The Blair Witch Project*, the director of *Snuff* had the idea of creating a film that would be passed off as real 'found' footage. In the movie, a filmmaker kills and disembowels his assistant, while being surreptitiously filmed by his cameraman. The makers spread the rumour that a movie had been made in which a genuine

torture and murder scene took place, and many news services ate it up. The producer, Allan Shackleton, secured a showing at the National Theatre in Times Square and arranged a rent-a-crowd of ‘protesters’. The stunt worked.

‘A repulsive put-on film called “Snuff”,’ *The New York Times* said in an article headlined, ‘Snuff is Pure Poison’. The journalist Richard Edar, wrote:

The main come-on—and put-on—of the picture, made by a group of people whose anonymity is deliberate, is a scene tacked onto the end. It depicts the director and the crew of a film-within-the-film getting so carried away that they dismember one of the actresses.

I didn’t stick it out. When they took out scissors and cut off her fingers I put on my coat. By the time I’d buttoned the coat, they were applying an electric saw to her leg. By the time I was past a fascinated man on the aisle, an arm was off. I didn’t turn around as I went up the aisle but I’m told a thorough job was done.

Although nobody was fooled thanks to the atrocious acting and special effects, the marketing worked, with the film earning many times more than it cost to make. It also made the term ‘snuff movie’ part of modern lexicon.

When you ask people about snuff films, most of them have an image or idea in their mind. It is generally that which Hollywood depicts—most notably the Nicholas Cage film *8MM* or the torture-porn *Hostel* flicks. It will involve the kidnap of a person, usually female, who will be tied up, perhaps blindfolded, in an empty room, unaware of her potential fate. We are often given the viewpoint of the viewer of the snuff film, through the eye of the camera that is making the snuff movie. The victim is tortured, often raped, then killed, all for the purpose of making a film, which is then sold.

Perhaps just as fascinating as the producers of these films is the idea of the shadowy super-rich, who are able to buy anything they want. Their desires get more and more difficult to fulfil, but the harder something is to procure, the higher its value.

In one episode of the 1990s series *La Femme Nikita*, ‘Hand to Hand’, Nikita is captured by a ‘Talent Agency’ where beautiful prostitutes are forced to fight each other to the death for ‘the pleasure of perverted men’, an audience of the super-wealthy. The fights are held in a luxuriously fitted-out bunker and the men who attend are rich, powerful and have shady, unexplained contacts that can get them entry to the show. Those who pay the most can choose from the bevy of beautiful women (who are kept in line with collars that can be activated to provide electric shocks) to determine the one who will fight the champion. Men

in expensive suits sit silently in the shadows in their opulent theatre boxes as women in evening dresses fight to the death in a water-filled pit below them.

Despite these depictions of snuff films and the shadowy elite who purchase them, no verified examples surfaced over the years, although journalists and the merely curious continued to search for them.

The cover of a 1997 book by Yaron Svoray, *Gods of Death*, provided a tantalising suggestion that the former cop turned investigative journalist had uncovered the secret world of the snuff film: ‘Around the World, Behind Closed Doors, Operates an Ultra Secret Business of Sex and Death. One Man Hunts the Truth about Snuff Films’.

The book details an investigation into the world of snuff films, which Svoray claims to have infiltrated. He claims to have seen several snuff films (including one in the company of a Hollywood A-list movie star, no less). However, the book is big on promises and small on delivery. It is notable that Amazon lists it in the ‘humour’ section.

There have been no credible examples of real snuff movies ever having been made, but they remain one of the most enduring myths. In an interview with culture website Spectacular Optical, researcher and author Simon Laperrière said that snuff movies are an example of an urban legend that grows and adapts to the world around it. David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, he says, is an important movie because it ‘allowed the urban legend to adapt itself to new technologies. Here, snuff films are no longer affiliated with cinema, but also with television and VHS. Such a switch from one medium to another allows the rumor to remain actual and appear real to an audience.’ But an urban legend, nevertheless.

‘According to [the legend], there’s a secret network somewhere selling to rich individuals reels of films showing actual murders. As of 2013, we have no proof that such snuff films exist.’

The internet and blurring the lines

It is easy to believe that snuff films are nothing more than an urban legend when making one would necessitate large, expensive cameras and sound equipment, a director, and possibly even a crew. The movie would have to be made, and then physically distributed to viewers on film or a tape.

But what now, when every phone is also a camera? With half the world’s population walking around with a camera in their pockets there is more chance than ever before of catching death and mayhem on film. Publishing it to the world takes a matter of seconds.

‘The margins have become fudged,’ wrote David Kerekes in an essay in

Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media. ‘The likes of the Dnepropetrovsk Maniacs, Islamic State and Magnotta were never a foreseeable part of the original “plan”, goalposts change often in the new millennium.’

Kerekes said that the growth of the internet and ready availability of cameras meant he would need to revisit his book, *Killing for Culture*, the seminal text on snuff films. New technologies had rendered some material out of date.

Those cases Kerekes mentioned were the ones that came closest to bringing the myth of the snuff film into reality. The first is a reference to an amateur film dubbed ‘3 Guys 1 Hammer’. The video graphically depicts the murder of an innocent man with a screwdriver and hammer in the Ukraine in 2007 by two men known as the ‘Dnepropetrovsk Maniacs’. The Maniacs killed a total of 21 people and there was evidence led at their trial that they had planned to distribute the video of the murder for profit, but never had the chance before they were caught. The gruesome video is readily available on ‘gore’ sites on the internet.

Islamic State terrorists harnessed the power of the internet by deliberately filming and circulating beheadings as warnings to those ideologically opposed to them and their message. The internet is now home to a plethora of films of the beheadings of both Western and Middle-Eastern hostages by Islamic extremists. Similarly, drug cartels sometimes circulate videos of their atrocities. One video shows a cartel member whose torture was filmed by a rival drug gang; he somehow remains conscious despite his face having been peeled off, his eyes gouged out and his hands cut off. Cartels have been known to use huge amounts of methamphetamine to prevent their victims from fainting, so they remain conscious throughout the ordeal. The man is eventually decapitated with a box cutter as upbeat music plays in the background. Although these are graphic murders on film, they fall shy of the definition of snuff as defined at the start of this part.

In 2012, Canadian Luka Magnotta tied naked Chinese university student Jun Lin to a bed frame, then tortured, stabbed and eventually murdered the young man with an ice pick. Magnotta dismembered the body, sexually defiled body parts, and went on to mail the limbs to two primary schools in Vancouver, as well as the headquarters of both the Conservative and Liberal parties. He edited together an eleven-minute video that featured the torture, stabbing, dismemberment and necrophilia, but not, apparently, the moment of death.

The video, which was provided to BestGore, a Canadian shock site (although it is not clear whether it was provided personally by Magnotta), came to be known as *1 Lunatic, 1 Icepick*.

Simon Laperrière studied the film. ‘I came to the conclusion that while it’s not technically a snuff film (it doesn’t show the moment of death and was not made

for commercial purposes), it is currently the closest thing we'll ever get to a real one,' he said in the Spectacular Optical interview.

What was disturbing was the appetite for viewing such material. Videos would turn up on websites dedicated to gore, with names like [rotten.com](#), [bestgore.com](#) and [ogrish.com](#), that encouraged members to scour the web and find the most graphic and disturbing images and films possible of murders, suicides, torture, mutilations and accidents. The sites were competitive and tried to outdo each other with their depictions of real violence. They get millions of visitors, with the most graphic videos garnering hundreds of thousands of views and being shared widely among snuff seekers.

People are provided the opportunity to comment on videos, and the lack of empathy, perhaps even psychopathy, evident in some comments is chilling.

This is a rip off. You don't even get to see him die.

What fun is it if the victim is too drugged up to fight back?

I love the sound when the hammer goes in and then when he's trying to talk after lol.

Thats kinda cool lol...fucked but sill awesome

I really don't care about the people he killed, I'm only sad about the kittens

This gave me an erection

Such incidents brought the snuff film closer to becoming a reality, but still nothing fit in with the popularly conceived notion of what a snuff film is.

However, they did open up the question of when something became illegal to own, download or share. The owner of BestGore, Mark Marek, was arrested when he failed to remove *1 Lunatic 1 Icepick* after it was verified to be a genuine murder. He was charged under Canada's obscenity law with corrupting public morals, to which he pleaded guilty and received three months' house arrest followed by three months of community service.

The gore websites remained popular, but were restricted by laws that meant they could not host illegal material. Although the appetite for more extreme, violent and genuine material continued to grow, the sites were stymied by the fact that any website operating on the internet could be shut down, its owner identified and possibly prosecuted.

Enter the dark web.

The dark web

The dark web provided a haven for the sorts of videos that would be illegal to host on the internet. Such videos could now be hosted without fear of the site being shut down, nor of the owners, uploaders or downloaders being identified.

The dark web allowed niche sites, such as animal snuff, to operate more openly. It is an odd quirk of human nature that people who are comfortable watching torture and murder of humans might balk at harm to an animal. The outrage directed at sites dedicated to animal harm far outweighed that directed to the ones that hosted violent human deaths. But such videos fared better on the dark web. One niche in particular, ‘crush porn’, which involved women in high heels crushing small animals to death, proved to be popular underground.

Despite this, the gore sites on the dark web were little different to those on the internet. No films hosted were worse than *3 Guys 1 Hammer* or *1 Lunatic 1 Icepick*.

However, such is the nature of people, new rumours circulated about deeper, darker sections of the dark web that housed new horrors. Not only snuff movies, but real-life gladiator fights to the death, and pay-per-view murder.

Such claims tended to be hazy on the details. Were the gladiator fights *Fight Club*-type events, where angry, muscled men willingly take the 50/50 chance that they will die in a sort of winner-takes-all scenario? Is there some sort of promoter who takes bets from punters, or who sells access to the live feeds?

Or were they perhaps *Django Unchained* situations, where unscrupulous millionaires force slaves to fight to the death in a ‘kill or be killed’ scenario, for their own private amusement and that of a select group of their similarly morally bereft millionaire friends?

While none of these potential situations seems likely, gladiator fights became one of the most pervasive myths on the dark web. Conspiracy website Words With Meaning ran a ‘special investigative series’ by someone claiming to be a cybersecurity expert who needed to remain anonymous because he was a former employee of the UK Centre for Cybercrime and Computer Security. This investigator was convinced that the underground fights to the death could be found on the dark web: ‘There are literally gladiators who organise ways of fighting to death. I know how exaggerated this sounds—trust me, I’m the one trying to convince readers it is true—but there’s no joke to this claim,’ he wrote. The ‘security researcher’ was, unsurprisingly, unable to provide anything resembling proof for his claims.

That’s not to say that there are never genuine forced fights to the death; they

do occur, and are most notoriously engaged in by the drug cartels, in particular Los Zetas. 'The elderly are killed. Young women are raped. And able-bodied men are given hammers, machetes and sticks and forced to fight to the death,' reported the *Houston Chronicle* in 2011. The Zetas would force passengers off buses passing through San Fernando and stage gladiator fights to the death, with the survivor being forced to join their ranks. A cartel member told the *Houston Chronicle* it was a game they called 'Who's going to be the next hitman?' Nearly 200 bodies found in mass graves gave the man's story veracity.

Although videos of drug cartel atrocities have made their way to the gore sites, there is no evidence that these fights to the death were recorded. In particular, there were no livestreams with observers able to bet on the outcome, nor were tickets sold to the bloodthirsty rich.

Red rooms

A young man sits at his desk, door locked against any unexpected visitors. The screen in front of him shows a windowless room, dungeon-like, undecorated and sparsely furnished. Against one wall is an iron bedframe, topped by a bare mattress, indeterminate dark stains concealing any discernible pattern. The only other piece of furniture in the room is a wooden chair. A young woman strains against the ropes binding her to the chair, screaming.

As the clock clicks over to the allotted time, a huge, hooded figure enters the room, causing the young woman to scream more. On the screen, a chat box appears, with half a dozen usernames of those who are watching. The masked man looks up to the camera, awaiting his commands. The young man's fingers fly across the keyboard. 'Cut off her ear.' The hooded figure picks up a knife.

This is the scenario those who pay the requisite Bitcoin fee to a dark web red room expect to see. Red rooms are another staple story of the dark web. To describe them, you might think of the movie *Hostel*, with webcams.

In an interview with horror film site Dread Central, *Hostel*'s director, Eli Roth, said the idea came to him after a friend sent him a link to a site that allowed a person to travel to a place in Thailand and, for ten thousand dollars, walk into a room and shoot somebody in the head. 'The site claimed that the person you were killing had signed up for it and that part of the money would go to their family because they were so broke and were gonna die anyways,' he said. 'It was to give you the thrill of taking another human life.'

In *Hostel*, a shadowy Eastern European outfit lures foreign tourists to a hostel. The tourists soon find themselves bound to a chair in an isolated location. Rich Western businessmen bid for the right to torture and kill the victim, while others get to watch.

The dark web version provided the opportunity for people to take part without having to physically carry out the torture and murder. For a fee, punters would be provided with login credentials to a virtual 'room' at an allocated time. In that room, cameras would be concentrated on a person—invariably female—tied to a chair or bed, or chained to the wall by her ankle.

The entry fee provided the right to be a voyeur to the proceedings. Participants could pay extra to direct the action, typing commands into the chat section on the screen, which would then be carried out by a hooded man.

The sites became known as red rooms.

The enabling technologies of the dark web—Tor and Bitcoin—provided such scenarios with new plausibility. Tor technology meant that videos could be

hosted without revealing the location of the film. Bitcoin allowed for instant, anonymous payment by the audience to watch or participate, directing the action.

A red room site will feature a creepy picture of a dungeon or room that looks straight out of a horror movie. It will typically have a countdown to the next 'show' and invite prospective participants to click to enter. Upon clicking, a welcome screen such as the one at the beginning of this section explains what you will get for your money and contains testimonials from previous viewers, which sometimes provide graphic detail of what was done to the unfortunate victim.

Potential participants will be directed to a Bitcoin address that will unlock a download of the special software required to access the show. Entry fees are typically significant, which deters journalists and the merely curious from signing up.

Such red rooms had all the hallmarks of a scam and certainly no evidence ever surfaced that any legitimate red room existed, or that anybody was ever harmed or killed for the entertainment of a live pay-per-view audience.

Then one day in August 2015, a different type of red room promised a very different type of dark web entertainment. And anyone could join in.

The ISIS red room

It started, as these things are wont to do, with posts on 4Chan and reddit, the discussion boards popular for dark web topics: *WHOA! Is this Real??* The posts provided no explanation, but just an onion (i.e. dark web) link. The curious, of course, clicked. If they had the Tor browser, they were greeted with a message:

Greetings!

Do you think you've seen the worst yet?

On 29 August 2015 at 00:00:00 UTC, right here, on this onion address, a new market will open. One that even the Feds will love. Do not miss the market opening. There will be a free event that you will not want to miss! Watch real life terrorists turn on each other!

The greeting went on to say the site owners had captured seven ISIS terrorists whom they would humiliate ('there will be bacon'), torture, set against each other in fights to the death, and ultimately murder live on webcam at the allotted time and date.

The site promised, it seemed, that the two most persistent dark web myths—gladiator fights to the death and the red rooms—were to become reality. As it was ISIS terrorists getting tortured and killed for participants' viewing pleasure, some of the guilt that potential voyeurs might have could be assuaged. After all, ISIS had regularly made videos of its atrocities available and the public was hyper-aware of the threat of terrorism.

Unlike other red rooms, this one was funded by 'wealthy interested parties' and would be streamed free to anybody who cared to join in. Those who joined would be able to type commands into a chat box, with suggestions of appropriate punishments for the captives. The prospect of a free show ignited the social forums of reddit, 4Chan, LiveLeak and YouTube.

'This is gonna be the best date night ever!' wrote one participant.

As the clock ticked down, the site updated periodically with its preparation and plans.

We are working around the clock.

We are around a warzone and got more urgent things to worry about. But we will deliver and we will hit the deadline.

Maybe not under optimal circumstances as hoped, but the circumstances also makes things even worse for our ISIS pigs.

Enclaves of mobs were forming on the various forums chatting about the event. Although some were sceptical, many expressed hope that this one was real. Few questioned how they could verify that the people being tortured and killed were, in fact, terrorists.

‘I don’t usually condone violence, but I can’t wait to see these pigs suffer,’ was a typical attitude.

A black and white photograph of a hooded man, seated on a bare hard floor, dog bowls at his side, greeted those who visited the site. He had the posture of defeat and his captors, calling themselves Enemies of Islamic State, delighted in updating their audience with preparations:

The conditions are good here for the ‘soldiers of god’. The dogfood (shit flavored) is free and we fill their water bowl with clean water and flavor it with piss.

It’s not our fault if they don’t eat, they called for it. They are such heroes. Again, support us by watching. That’s all we need.

The next update informed the potential voyeurs that the captors had already executed two prisoners, but not to worry, they still had another five who could be used for the entertainment.

Expect fun games, mingle and torture as promised. All interactive. Still fully free. We will make at least the first hour family friendly, and explicitly warn you before things get violent.

The soon-to-be-killers had also opened up the chat room, allowing what appeared to be an army of teenage boys to spout semi-literate racist slurs. When the event started, the chat room would be used to suggest punishments and tortures for the captured terrorists.

Once they opened up the chat room, the excitement built exponentially. People started exchanging ideas for commands they would type once the show got underway. They feverishly tried to outdo each other in imaginary punishments and humiliation to be perpetrated on the hooded figures.

Other than questioning the overall authenticity of the proposed show, nobody seemed interested in querying how any viewers could verify that the captives

were who the webmasters said they were. How could we tell they were terrorists being punished for their sins and not innocent people being murdered for page views?

As the timer counted down, the suggestions became increasingly violent and cruel. Many had a sexual element to them, which the website promised to deliver.

We will sell their assholes a.k.a. human trafficking. We want to give ISIS-careers a promising future!

We will also upload materials for free. We call it the 'instagram' of happy ISIS whores or instagram of Jihad, what do you think? Having their asses sold is just too ironic to not document and eternalize and we promise exactly that.

We make Moviestars of Jihadists. It's part of the non-optional ISIS-employment with us.

By the time there were just a few hours left on the clock, the potential audience had gathered in the chat room. The few people who expressed reservations were howled down, and those who articulated concern at the bloodthirsty nature of the mob were branded terrorist sympathisers.

For some it was nervous anticipation: 'I'm nervous. I feel like it's wrong for us to be "excited" for this, but I've had the tab open for hours now, so who am I to bring up morality?' wrote one voyeur.

'Not gonna watch this since ive never been on the deepweb before and dont wanna get fucked—but pretty excited to see it [if] this shit is real or not,' wrote another. He was assured somebody would record it and upload videos to YouTube for those who were afraid of logging on themselves and watching via the dark web.

Some anti-vigilante vigilantes spammed the chat room with nonsense, trying to ensure the torture orders would not get through, and soon 4Chan took over, linking to child pornography sites. Between them, they succeeded in making the chat room all but unreadable.

Nevertheless, some torture requests made it through, and these involved everything from force-feeding bacon (which they considered to be the height of humiliation for people of the Muslim faith) through to anal rape, acid in the captives' eyes, removal of teeth, forcing them to drink bleach, dismemberment and, of course, eventual murder.

The voyeurs fed off each other's sadism. They discussed how they could drag the torture out for days and techniques for making sure the captives did not pass

the torture out for days and techniques for making sure the captives did not pass out.

The clock continued to tick down.

One participant summed up the atmosphere: 'OMG OMG OMG!'

A couple of minutes short of the start time, a refresh of the page resulted in the ubiquitous *404: Page Not Found* error.

The mob frantically refreshed in the hope that the site would come back up. Rumours began circulating almost immediately: the FBI had put it under attack; maybe ISIS had found out and stopped it; hopefully it simply buckled under the weight of all those people refreshing?

A little under an hour later, the site reappeared. 'Thank you for participating and directing the action! Stream over, will be uploading in parts.'

Shortly after, links to footage of one of the ISIS captives being tortured appeared. The video lasted a little over 21 minutes, during which almost nothing happened. Every time the 'torturer' carried out a punishment on the suspiciously pale-skinned jihadist, the video froze or jumped. There was, indeed, bacon involved.

While a few people desperately clung on to the hope that the video was genuine, the majority accepted that it was an elaborate hoax, which wound up being poorly executed. The disappointment was palpable.

'Wasn't real, it was just a hoax. And a bad one. Which is a shame because I was looking forwards to this shit for a couple of weeks!'

It was chilling to witness the mounting hysteria, the reactions of people who believed or hoped that this particular red room was real, and their anger and disappointment when the ISIS red room turned out to be a badly acted hoax.

Black Death and Facebook Live

In 2015 another dark-web site which purported to allow customers to browse photographs and sign up to bid in an auction garnered some attention. On the site Black Death, punters bid on young women whom they could purchase for any purpose they chose, including for the goal of creating a snuff movie. The site listed details of where the women had been kidnapped, their race, age, weight, height and breast size. Bids started in the high five figures, but ran well into six figures for blonde Western women. It was dismissed as yet another hoax (indeed, Motherboard readers soon uncovered BDSM porn movies from which it was apparent screenshots had been used to advertise the so-called victims) until a bizarre revival in 2017.

On 11 July 2017, British Page 3 glamour model Chloe Ayling was allegedly kidnapped in Milan, having been lured there by a fake modelling shoot. The model claimed to have been drugged with ketamine and bundled into the trunk of a car by two men. She was then held, bound to a chest of drawers, in a remote farmhouse a couple of hours out of Milan. Her kidnappers told her they planned to auction her with a starting bid of \$300,000 on the dark web. She had, they said, been put up for sale on Black Death, where there had already been offers made to buy her.

In an implausible twist, the kidnappers decided to release Ayling six days later, after she told them she had a two-year-old child. It was against Black Death's rules, they claimed, to kidnap and sell mothers. The man who dropped her off, Polish-born (but UK resident) Lukasz Herba, was promptly arrested. His alleged accomplice, his brother, was arrested not long after.

Ayling's story came under scrutiny when it was revealed that she and Herba (whom acquaintances described as a deluded, narcissistic loner) had been spotted shopping for groceries and shoes together during the time of the ordeal. Witnesses claimed they thought the two were a couple. Upon her return to the UK, Ayling employed the services of a celebrity agent to navigate the talk show circuit. Nevertheless, she stuck to her story, claiming she did not try to escape during the shopping outing because she feared for her life. At the time of writing, the two brothers remain in custody, and Herba has reportedly confessed to the elaborate kidnapping. However, the mystery remains as to whether Black Death exists as a real or hoax website, and what, if any, role the brothers had in the site.

Hoax or not, how far are we from the real thing? If a red room ever comes to fruition, it is more likely to appear on the clear web than the dark web, perhaps

even through our most familiar websites. Facebook Live, the application that allows anybody to broadcast live to their friends or the public at large, has already provided a platform on which people have livestreamed their crimes, including a number of suicides and at least one murder.

One of the most disturbing aspects during the suicides was that viewers responded much like the mob in the ISIS red room. They cajoled, insulted and encouraged the victims to complete the task.

In April 2017, Steve Stephens filmed himself on Facebook Live as he killed a homeless man. He said the killing could be blamed on his ex-girlfriend. 'She's the reason I'm doing this,' he told his victim.

And on the dark web, it remains a tediously common question: 'How can I go deeper in the deep web? Where's the *really* dark stuff?'

The really dark stuff exists. Truly horrific things take place on the dark web. Those who ask, however, are rarely prepared to face the truth of just how dark the dark web can go.

The darkest corners

We're building digital tools to fight human trafficking. Basically, the purchase and commerce for human trafficking is happening online, just like everything else now, and so we're building digital tools to fight back against it.

—THORN: Digital Defenders of Children

Innocent Screams is only for discussing and sharing the rape, torture and death of people (and animals). Yes, that does mean you can post pictures of children being violently raped and killed (there are even sections just for that) but it is not your place to post random CP [child pornography]. All posts must deal with real abuse of some sort or it will be deleted. Furthermore, if you are easily offended you should NOT join. You have been warned. If you're not a pansy ass bitch and still want to join, then welcome to Innocent Screams!

—Welcome page to a dark web hurtcore site

'Father accused of raping daughter, 2, in livestream on the dark web'. The headline is sickening, but it is not isolated. The dark web is a breeding ground for child predators, declares one tabloid newspaper after another, and the market continues to grow.

It's the stuff of nightmares. One of the most common fears of those venturing into the dark web for the first time is that they will stumble across child pornography. The fears are not without foundation; child pornography is rife on the dark web and anybody who goes searching for it will find it in no time. However, the chances of stumbling upon it accidentally are slim. The sites usually require registration and they leave the visitor in no doubt of what lies beyond the login screen.

When the first darknet markets started trading on the dark web, the idea was that they would allow and encourage completely free trade. But even the most hardcore libertarians found the belief in free trade tested when vendors began to offer child pornography and abuse materials for sale on the websites. The markets all had an XXX section and, in between codes for cheap access to premium porn sites on the clear web, that section would soon be flooded with questionable material.

No matter what people were browsing the darknet markets for, most balked at the idea of child exploitation material. This was something that was beyond the

moral compass of decent people, and even the vast majority of otherwise indecent people. Any market that allowed the sale of such materials came under fire from its current and potential customers. Excuses of being unable to police what people bought and sold on an open market held no water. Some market owners argued that freedom meant freedom to sell *anything*, including those things that the majority thought to be abhorrent. After all, the typical users were themselves on the fringe of respectable society, buying drugs or weapons; surely it was hypocritical to try and ban the people who were even further to the fringes.

[Freenet.org](http://freenet.org), a smaller anonymity provider than Tor, but one that was known for its population of child abuse sites, claimed, ‘the true test of someone who claims to believe in Freedom of Speech is whether they tolerate speech which they disagree with or even find disgusting’. But such arguments fell on deaf ears, and black-market customers were quick to threaten a boycott of any business that allowed the sale or dissemination of child exploitation materials. Even if market owners wanted to allow such items for sale, it became commercially unviable to do so.

Not being able to promote their wares on the large and well-known markets did not stop child exploitation from proliferating. Pedophiles and predators simply created their own corner of the dark web, where their sites were grouped together—forums, chat, images, videos and worse—under different headings to cater to different tastes. These sites provided the opportunity to download all manner of porn that could not be found on the regular internet. This included child porn (prepubescent children), jailbait (young teens), zoophilia or bestiality and hurtcore, which involves children, adults and animals genuinely being subjected to pain and, in some cases, torture.

The sites had names like Playpen, Toybox, Child’s Play, Kinder Surprise, Lolita City, Giftbox, The Love Zone; the pedophiles took all that was innocent and turned it into something sick and disturbing. It was not difficult for predators and pedophiles to find each other on the dark web. The most well-known gateway to the dark web, the Hidden Wiki, blatantly separated its porn section into adult and underage, the latter grouped in a section called Hard Candy.

The child pornography and exploitation market is the most disturbing aspect of the dark web. It’s not just the images and videos that are uploaded by the terabyte, but social forums where child abusers share tips on how to sedate young children while keeping them awake, psychological tricks and ways of covering up their crimes. Seeing chat rooms in which offenders graphically describe sex acts with prepubescent children in the same terms you might expect to hear used for adult porn stars is beyond disturbing.

In October 2011, Anonymous launched Operation Darknet, with a goal of exposing those who accessed child pornography over Tor. Anonymous is the name given to the vigilante hacktivist (hacker-activist) collective spawned from 4Chan, a discussion forum and image board where most contributors post under the username 'anonymous'. Anonymous is not an organisation with central membership that one can join. It is at best a loosely associated collective.

Those who identify as Anonymous enjoy trolling people and organisations (the Church of Scientology is a favourite target) and they are quick to claim responsibility for distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks on corporations they perceive as evil. They have often been accused of internet bullying. However, they have also become known for tackling social justice issues, some of which caught the attention of the world. One such initiative was Operation Darknet.

Operation Darknet was one of the early examples of a combination of technical know-how and social engineering as weapons to expose those hiding behind Tor's hidden services. Anonymous posted a pastebin dump of what they claimed were names and IP addresses of people who had accessed child pornography through the dark web's Lolita City, the largest site under the Hidden Wiki's Hard Candy banner.

Media coverage and a groundswell of support followed Anonymous' actions for the next few days. As usual with such events, the coverage started with online technical and gossip news services like PC World and Gawker, but within a few days spread to reports in *The Wall Street Journal* and on the BBC. Most of the services repeated the official line Anonymous had taken: 'We vowed to fight for the defenseless, there is none more defenseless than innocent children being exploited.'

Hard Candy continued to be restored from backups, and after the 20 October restoration the owner of the site sent Anonymous a message: 'To the vandals, you vandalize the page 1,000,000 times, we will correct it 1,000,001. It will just go back and forth. We are here to stay. People want to run DDoS attacks over tor and think it hurts us, it does. It is our GOD given right that we can choose to have our sexual preferences for youth. It is the same for any other porn community. It is not what we choose to become, it is who we are. You Anonymous aka #OpDarknet do not have the right to censor us.'

Anonymous responded with the launch of Operation Paw Printing. In a clever form of social engineering designed to unmask some of the users of child porn sites and frighten the others, they tricked visitors to Hard Candy and Lolita City into clicking on a button, which had actually been placed there by Anonymous and would then log the user's information.

Disguising the button—which was only available on the Hard Candy gateway to child porn—as a ‘Tor security update’, Anonymous harvested the IP addresses of 190 unique individuals from around the world over a 24-hour period.

On 2 November, in another pastebin message, Anonymous described in detail how they had unmasked the IP addresses and provided their rationale for these actions:

Operation Darknet was never intended to bring down Tor or the ‘darknets’. The only purpose of Operation Darknet was to reveal that a service like the ‘Tor Project’ has been ruined by the 1% using it for Child Pornography. The rest, 99% consists of Chinese/Iran journalists, Government intelligence fighting a secret war with Al-Qaeda, and us Anons who believe in the right to Free Speech.

However, Child Pornography is NOT FREE SPEECH. We proved beyond doubt, that 70% of users to The Hidden Wiki access the HARD CANDY section, ‘a secret directory’ used by the pedophiles to access sites like Lolita City and The Hurt Site, a site dedicated to trade of child rape.

Anonymous’ efforts were in vain. Law enforcement was unable to use the IP addresses, illegally obtained, to track down users of child pornography. Their one small win was their regained popularity among many internet users who had become tired of apparently ad hoc attacks on businesses, organisations and websites under the Anonymous name. They earned their right to be classed as hacktivists, rather than garden variety hackers. In the following years, they hit the limelight again for forcing the authorities to investigate rape allegations that had been covered up, most notably the Steubenville High School rape incident. Two popular footballers had carried an unconscious teenager from place to place, sexually assaulting her and filming their crimes. The young girl did not know she had been raped until the pictures started circulating on social media. Most of the town rallied behind the boys until the intervention of Anonymous, which resulted in the conviction of the rapists. Three other people were indicted for obstructing the investigation into the rape. Anonymous also became known for unmasking and shaming trolls who stalked and bullied their victims, sometimes to death, from behind the safety of their keyboards.

They vowed to continue the fight against child abuse sites: ‘We will continue to not only crash Freedom Hosting’s server, but any other server we find to contain, promote, or support child pornography.’

But there was one consequence of Operation Darknet that the members of Anonymous could never have foreseen. When one particular person checked the sites to see what all of the fuss was about instead of revulsion he felt

tries to see what all of the fuss was about, instead of revulsion, he felt excitement; instead of turning away, he sensed he had found his people.

The making of a predator

There were many who watched the Anonymous takedown of Lolita City with interest. One of these was someone who was a regular on 4Chan, where much of Anonymous' work either originated from or was discussed in depth. He had given himself the name 'Lux', after a brand of soap. Lux desperately wanted to earn respect and cachet in the dark web. He fancied himself as quite the security expert, and had studied the darknet markets, hoping to be able to offer his services there. He found, however, that the markets' security was tight and clearly administered by professionals. They had no need for the comparatively rudimentary skills of Lux. So he turned his attention to other, deeper, darker, parts of the dark web.

'It was kind of a morbid curiosity that drew me towards it,' he would later say, claiming that at first he wanted to help Anonymous in their fight to take down the pedophiles. He would insist that he had no predilection towards children when he started logging in to the sites. But as he delved further into the murky depths of child pornography, his attitude began to change. 'It was quite a supportive community. And this was at a time where I was really struggling with depression and the aspergers was at its worst,' he said. 'I kind of found, I dunno, like a home in there. Like a support network.'

The child abuse sites, which did not have the millions of dollars of profits available to them that the darknet markets enjoyed, were significantly less secure, and those who accessed them far less technically proficient and security conscious than their drug-buying brethren. Lux was keen to offer security advice and the sites were keen to accept it.

Lux created the persona of an American pediatrician. He claimed to have had numerous sexual encounters with children, as well as maintaining an ongoing sexual relationship with a specific six-year-old. He said all the things he thought would give him a role and status among pedophiles. 'I guess as time went by I kind of gained the trust and respect of that small community,' he said.

Lux craved acceptance, approval, adulation; all things he could not get in his real life, or elsewhere online. He was not special or talented. Nothing he did made people interested in getting to know him, or even talking to him. When he entered this world, he felt at home. All the people within the virtual walls of the gated community were reviled and hated, but also, they felt, misunderstood and persecuted. Some wore the revulsion of others towards them like a badge of honour.

'It wasn't until I came across the Tor pedo community that I was able to truly

feel comfortable with [my] attractions,' he told journalist Patrick O'Neill in his one extensive interview.

Lux set about providing security tips and advice to keep pedophiles safe from the long arm of the law. He knew how to strip metadata from photographs and videos, and secure computers against prying eyes. The people he helped were grateful; they thanked him and praised his efforts to keep them safe. He was getting the acknowledgement and appreciation he craved so badly.

One person became particularly close. Lux struck up a friendship with a man who called himself Wolfman Jack. Together they created Lux's first website in Tor, which purported to allow darker and more extreme material than was permitted on most of the sites. It was the first of many sites, and their development gave Lux a purpose. 'Most nights when I get home from work, instead of sitting back and watching TV, I bust out my laptop and get working on the PedeEmpire hopefully creating something which makes the community at least a smidgen better,' he told O'Neill.

Another in his circle was Skee, who operated The Love Zone and shared child abuse content with Lux's sites, including acts he had committed himself. Skee did not share the craving Lux and some others had for publicity. 'WHY the hell would you give this information out, why would you be stupid enough to risk ruining peoples lives by destroying the secrecy we have spent years building?' he asked those who were willing to cooperate with journalists. 'Information is power and your just giving out information about a group of people doing a highly illegal activity, its not a fucking joke, 250 years in jail is not a fucking joke. You dont give out any information regardless of how knowledgable you think you are.'

Lux, however, revelled in his growing notoriety. The ever-growing network of sex offenders on the dark web turned to him as the oracle of child exploitation, something that gave him great satisfaction and self-worth. He provided exceptional customer service and went to great lengths to ensure the users of his websites remained anonymous.

Abusers began to approach him for other advice. Pleased and proud to be called upon, Lux offered direction on how to groom and sexually abuse young children, how to ensure there were no signs of sexual penetration, how to drug children so they would be awake during the abuse but would have no memory of it afterwards, and how to kidnap, kill and dispose of a child's body.

Over the next couple of years, Lux created more sites to satisfy the tastes of different niches of the online pedophile population, providing what he believed 'the community' needed and wanted. As his sites grew in number and popularity, he created an umbrella group that housed a variety of sites dedicated to child porn and abuse material. He called it PedeEmpire, and Lux was the

to child porn and abuse material. He called it PedoEmpire, and Lux was the emperor.

PedoEmpire

Lux's PedoEmpire was designed to be a one-stop shop for all things pedophilia; anything from pictures of barely-clothed children—torn from underwear catalogues or downloaded from friends' Facebook updates of a day at the beach—to materials designed to satisfy the darkest and most depraved tastes of the sickest individuals. Grouped under five tabs—'News', 'Pedophilia & CP' ('verified selection of websites I personally use or recommend'), 'Empire', 'Utilities and Safety' and 'Uploads'—were links to everything imaginable.

There were forums for users to chat with like-minded individuals, with messages grouped under themes and subjects, like any other internet message board. There were video streaming (PedoTube) and image upload services. 'I would also like to find a way where I can have PedoTube completely open to the public and not require an invite, but it's proven to be much more difficult than I originally thought it would be,' he told O'Neill, 'but it's definitely something that's on my to-do list!'

An entry point and one of the most visited of the sites was the PedoWiki. Just like its innocent wiki cousins, this was a receptacle for all types of education, history and knowledge-sharing which could be added to, corrected and updated by members of the PedoEmpire. It grew to nearly 600 articles over 1200 pages, under headings like:

- Child Porn Stars
- Debate Guide (a guide for arguments to use against anti-child-porn crusaders)
- Research
- History of Child Porn

The PedoWiki proved popular, with over a thousand active contributors. The pages within garnered over 3 million hits.

Elsewhere in the empire, while some sites required an invite from a trusted member to get access, most would allow basic viewing privileges, but members would have to prove themselves to gain access to 'premium' areas. 'Leeches'—those who consume without sharing—were frowned upon and would soon find themselves excluded from anywhere but the entry page to the site. New members were required to share images or film, with preference going to fresh footage that had not been shared elsewhere.

Lux required different levels of intensity of participation depending on the site and area within the site. The merely curious were free to browse photographs of naked or partly clothed children, but to gain access to more pornographic images, members had to upload pornographic images of their own. To earn entry to the exclusive Producers' Lounges, members had to prove they were personally active with a child, by providing never-before-seen footage that included the child holding a sign with a unique identifier, such as the name of the site or a phrase dictated by Lux. Some members scrawled their username onto the child's skin with a marker.

Such measures not only kept leeches at bay, but also assisted in keeping law enforcement out of the sites. It was one thing for law enforcement agents to purchase drugs from the darknet markets, but producing and uploading child pornography was a different matter altogether. As there is no way of producing the material without harming a child, certain areas remained off limits until somebody was arrested and handed over their login credentials. Even then, access might be short-lived, because the most exclusive areas required ongoing uploads of new materials.

Lux's PedeEmpire grew in membership, content and popularity as use of the dark web became more widespread. He never charged for any materials, nor, he told O'Neill, did he ever intend to. As far as Lux was concerned, he was providing a service to a marginalised section of the community, not a commercial enterprise.

Some pedophiles were content with the material provided, but others sought increasingly depraved and violent photos and videos. On 28 February 2013, Lux created a new site to satisfy the cravings of those who wanted the most extreme thrill. It gained thousands of followers and members in no time at all. Lux's new endeavour was universally agreed to be the worst child abuse website that ever existed.

Hurt2theCore

Hurt2theCore is a forum that's dedicated to open discussion and allowing people to express their uncensored thoughts and ideas about pedophilia and child sex. This means that we welcome both the Child Love and Hurtcore aspects of it. If you do not feel comfortable in discussing or viewing material that deals with both these topics, then this is not the place for you. Otherwise, welcome to Hurt2theCore!

– welcome page of Hurt2theCore (2013)

‘My name is Lux,’ the man quickly becoming the most reviled person on the dark web wrote in a note to law enforcement officers. ‘Not only do I maintain the largest suite of child pornography on Tor, I also have complete control over the largest number of proven producers in the world.’ He had the right to make these claims thanks to the phenomenal and continued growth of his PedeEmpire.

The dark web was full of anonymous and pseudonymous characters who held various levels of fame or infamy within the net’s dark underbelly. Some, like Dread Pirate Roberts and Bitcoin creator Satoshi Nakamoto, were lauded as libertarian heroes and visionaries. Many of the most prolific drug vendors were admired despite their outlaw status.

Then there was Lux. His name became known as it seeped out of the murkiest corners of the dark web, whispered with revulsion and disgust by some, while the majority tried to pretend he did not exist at all. Even the pedophiles who dwelled in the cesspools of the dark web had a hierarchy of the ‘acceptable’ level of abuse they could tolerate. The type of materials available through the Hidden Wiki’s Hard Candy gateway varied widely, from otherwise innocent photographs of children through to increasingly extreme and exploitative materials.

‘The issue I can’t shake in my mind is that in the general population equates everyone like us with slime like Lux and his cohorts. It reinforces the sick shit they make TV and movie detectives uncover. It is so disheartening,’ wrote someone in a ‘pedo support community’, whose forum profile stated he liked both boys and girls, aged four to fourteen.

The efforts of hacktivists like Anonymous did little, if anything, to stem the availability of child abuse material on the dark web. Following the brief and ultimately unsuccessful DDoSing of Lolita City, if anything, the type of material being shared got even more extreme. The most horrifying trend was towards filming not just sexual abuse of children, but the deliberate infliction of pain on them for the entertainment of viewers. Lux was the king of hurtcore and he gained a reputation of such cruelty, most pedophiles shunned him. However, to a small (but still disturbingly large) subset he was a hero and he revelled in that status.

Others tired of Lux’s incessant self-aggrandising as he boasted of his empire being the biggest and best, the most extreme and shocking. Some were even suspicious that he was not one of them, procuring hurtcore materials not because it was something he was into himself, but because the attention it got him fed his ego.

It is difficult to determine the first use of the term ‘hurtcore’ but its etymology

is clear—it is hardcore infliction of pain in a pornographic context. It describes a subset of pornography that involves rape, harm and even torture—not simulated, but real. There has always been a market for this sort of material, but the internet allowed like-minded people to congregate, discuss and share images, stories and film that would give most of us nightmares for life. Lux’s new site delivered images that specifically dealt with pain and torture—it could apply to animals, adults (provided it was non-consensual) or children; given Lux’s fan base, it almost universally applied to the latter.

Hurt2theCore was accessible by anyone, but there were sections that were cut off to those who did not provide new material. The base level was for Active Members—those who posted frequently and included child exploitation materials in their posts. But the pinnacle was to get entry to the Producer’s Lounge, where the most senior members of the site shared their ongoing, real-life experiences with children in their lives.

H2TC was split into different forums, sub-forums and threads, just like millions of other forums on the web. By July 2013 it had 7728 members, with 22,236 posts on 2192 topics. Forums included Hurtcore: Discuss how you like to make them scream; Bestiality; Practical Child Education: Advice and guides on how to get what you want from kiddies; Sex Tourism and Prostitution: Where to find them sexy little kids. The videos and image forums were broken down into sub-forums of male and female, babies and toddlers, jailbait and adult.

Members were ranked according to how many posts they had, with the more prolific posters accorded a higher level of respect in the community:

0 Posts	Rape Victim
10 Posts	Kiddy Fiddler
50 Posts	Child Molester
100 Posts	Child Fucker
250 Posts	Certified Rapist
500 Posts	Hurtcore Master
1000 Posts	Your own custom title

Beneath their avatars, members would list their age and gender preferences. Once a member had 100 posts and had been a member for at least a month, Lux or one of his volunteer moderators would review the member’s posting history and if they liked what they saw, they would grant access to the Active Members section. Members were warned that if they tried to game the system by posting short, undetailed posts, they would not be provided access to the more exclusive areas.

Lux was active in the community and nothing was off limits to him. One member wanted advice about filming the abduction, rape and killing of a five-year-old girl in Russia. Lux first had to be satisfied that the member was serious and not simply fantasising. ‘OK good. So you do have a plan and this is not just fantasy for you,’ Lux said upon receiving the requisite proof. ‘I have many contacts willing to purchase such a video.’ He provided significant and detailed advice to the murderous Russian.

Lux would provide practical advice for those who were submitting videos, including how to clean them of metadata and, if the videos were shot by the members themselves, how to ensure there was nothing in the background to give them away. He deemed too dangerous for distribution the abuse of a seven-year-old girl who suffered from MS and was mute, as she was too recognisable. However, he told the member he should make videos for his own gratification. ‘At least you know she can’t cry for help.’

The members of his site came from all over the world, with many working in a field where they had access to children. One member, Jabber, worked in a home for mentally impaired children in the UK.

Such was Lux’s craving for admiration and acceptance, he gladly took on the role of the most evil creature of the dark web. There was always a small group of sick, twisted predators who looked up to him.

With that reputation came pressure to keep producing and providing ever more extreme subject matter. Lux was always on the lookout for new material to satisfy his growing membership. He had already heard of the film that was reputed to be the most extreme depiction of hurtcore available. Lux was determined that Hurt2theCore would host *Daisy’s Destruction*.

Daisy’s Destruction

The dark web is home to all manner of rumours and creepy stories, most of which are exaggerations, lies or hoaxes. There were always stories of websites and videos that were gruesome beyond anything anyone had ever seen. Many people believed there was a further, deeper, darker section of the dark web, called Mariana’s Web or the Shadow Web, where the select few discovered the key to unlock the greatest horrors. Snuff movies, of course, and worse. There were sites that detailed cruel Nazi-style experiments on homeless people, who would die in the process. Gladiator fights to the death. A collection of psychopaths who played demented games of conkers, swinging babies by their ankles to try to crush the skull of their opponent’s child. A man who created human sex dolls by severing the limbs of girls and women and removing their

vocal cord, while keeping them alive.

Such things were no more than the imaginings of perverse and demented minds and could be relegated to pure fiction. The stories often had their genesis in the Random board of 4Chan or the nosleep subreddit, and were designed to be as shocking as possible.

In early 2013, rumours began circulating the dark web of a film called *Daisy's Destruction*. Details would vary in the telling and passing around of the content of the film, but one thing was for sure—it involved torture of a young girl. Many claimed it was torture and murder. As happens with such things, soon everyone had heard of the film, everyone knew somebody who had watched it, but there were few first-hand accounts, and those who claimed to have watched it seemed to recall different details of what was contained therein.

As the rumours swirled, the inconsistency of the stories caused most people to write the film off as being yet another dark web urban legend. The ratio of fiction to fact in the stories that made their way around reddit and other clear-web forums was skewed heavily to the former. On the other hand, there were enough coinciding stories that substantiated the fact that it did exist in some form. One site's name cropped up repeatedly as the source for much of the detail about the film. If anywhere would host it, Hurt2theCore would.

Lux wanted to maintain his reputation as the source for the most extreme materials on the dark web. He set out to find and host *Daisy's Destruction*.

His sources were able to point him to an organisation called No Limits Fun, a production company—complete with logo—that produced hurtcore videos of young Asian girls, tied in dog chains, being abused. Lux opened up negotiations with the producer, who went by the name Exciteagirl, to purchase the full video of *Daisy's Destruction*. He offered NLF \$900 in Bitcoin, which was swiftly rejected. The producer wanted significantly more, claiming No Limits Fun videos could sell for up to \$10,000 through private networks. Exciteagirl said that No Limits Fun could create more custom videos for Hurt2theCore if they were to enter into a business relationship. However, as Lux was not inclined to charge members to access any productions on his site, he could not afford the asking price.

Relations soon broke down between the two for the film that No Limits Fun dubbed 'a pedo-delicacy in 1920 × 780 resolution; more than 45 mins to enjoy!' However, Lux was able to procure four short extracts—a total of twelve minutes of footage—from other sources, which he released one at a time, free to his members in revenge for the deal falling through. Once it was available on Lux's sites, it would lose its value as a privately circulated film. As he released each part, he encouraged his viewers to post in the comments which part of the film—

which tortures—they would like to see next.

Lux wanted to be sure everyone knew that *Daisy's Destruction* could be found for free exclusively on Hurt2theCore. 'Those NLF guys deserved me leaking DD. They were whiny bitches,' he told one forum, where he went for support and accolades. Lux loved the power and cachet he got from being the one who had the mythical film and the ability to grant access to others.

The footage was as horrifying as any rumours, short of the actual murder of a child on a screen. The words 'Introducing Daisy's Destruction' above the NLF logo in the opener were followed by a twisted pastiche of text and stills from the film: 'Come see a child's mental ruin...her innocence lost...Used as a tool...she will learn how to please her mistress...her body will be ravaged...her dignity stolen...Helpless, she will hang for your entertainment.' In the ensuing video, the eighteen-month-old girl was subjected to rape and excruciating torture—kicked, slapped, pinched, punched, penetrated with large pieces of ice and other objects, her genitals burned with a lighter, sex acts performed on her by a masked female, and hung upside down while being urinated on. The child screamed in agony throughout in a soundtrack that haunted the dreams of those who had to watch it in an attempt to bring the producer to justice.

Lux posted links pointing to Hurt2theCore, but in almost every case, it was considered too extreme and was soon removed. But there were those who sought it out. Download after download, the snippets of film spread throughout the network of pedophiles and then out into the clear web to those whose curiosity could only be sated by watching it for themselves. Lux had delivered what nobody else could. He was the emperor.

In pursuit of monsters

‘What would happen if Lux is caught?’ mused a member in a post on Hurt2theCore. He was assured in the responses that Lux was too careful to ever get caught. Lux himself joked that if it ever happened, everyone would know because he would go down in a blaze of glory.

International law enforcement agencies were well aware of Lux and his PedoEmpire. The dark web served to gather the worst producers of violent child exploitation materials in one place, but the technology meant it was more difficult than ever to trace them to their physical locations. The monsters were scattered across the globe, but able to communicate with each other with a few mouse clicks.

In 2013, Operation Downfall, a joint Europol/FBI Violent Crimes Against Children initiative, had seized the servers of Freedom Hosting, the same service that had been the target of Anonymous’ Operation Darknet in 2011. The service’s willingness to host any site without question or censorship meant that it was the most popular choice for child exploitation sites.

What the authorities found was a collection of the largest and most egregious child sexual abuse sites in the world. Not just repositories of child exploitation materials, the sites encouraged members to actively and frequently produce child pornography and child exploitation matter. The sites depicted child abuse including sexual penetration, bondage and torture involving toddlers and infants.

FBI and Europol intelligence had determined that a user known as Lux was infamous as one of the top child sexual abuse facilitators around the world. He was known as the most powerful and prestigious of child abuse offenders, having strong supporters, but also abusers who did not like him because of his cruelty.

Operation Downfall put Lux squarely in the sights of law enforcement around the world. Although it was the nature of the dark web that authorities could not determine the locations of those who used it, when people post online often enough, they start to leave hints and clues that experienced detectives could use to narrow in and, hopefully, pinpoint them.

The closure of Freedom Hosting did not deter the child exploitation sites for long. Lux moved his empire to its own personal hosting where he built anonymous image-sharing services, video streaming, chat rooms, forums and a hosting service—his PedoEmpire. He took great delight in what he saw as a win over law enforcement:

Well, it looks like this Empire hasn't fallen yet! To any L E A /law enforcement

well, it looks like this empire hasn't fallen yet! TO any LEA [law enforcement agency] whom may be reading this Fuck you. You can not keep us down, and every time you try we will just get bigger and bigger, so thanks for the publicity and leading more pedophiles to where you cant catch them.

To my fellow pedos: it won't be long now until all of the major CP sites are back up and running. In the mean time, I suggest you spend your newfound free time by going out and fucking some kiddies!

Lux believed himself to be invincible, administering his sites and sourcing the most depraved material while seemingly impervious to any law enforcement efforts to track him down. He continued to be a polarising figure on the dark web and in the child exploitation community. To appease those who were highly engaged in the pedophile world but disapproved of hurtcore, he opened Love2theCore, which was devoted only to the twisted version of 'love' in that world—what he called 'the softer side of kiddy porn'—while Hurt2theCore would continue to cater to hardcore and hurtcore. As with other sites, accessing discussion forums was free to anybody, but to view any media, users had to upload at least 25mb of their own media first. Lux even created two-tier access—apply with non-nude material and be granted access just to non-nude boards, or apply with preteen hardcore to be granted access to all content.

The majority still wanted nothing to do with Lux, or any of the sites he administered. 'The operator of that site is known to be a dishonorable man,' a 'regular' pedophile warned somebody who had posted in a forum asking about membership to Love2theCore. 'I'd stay away from it. It ain't worth being associated with someone personally responsible for the distribution of *Daisy's Destruction*.'

In early 2014, Lux became spooked. He felt law enforcement closing in and made a bizarre decision. He sent an email to the FBI's cybertip line offering up details of his customers: 'My name is Lux and not only do I run the largest online suite of child pornography websites on Tor, but I also have a knowledge about its users (and their identities) unrivalled by anyone out there.' Lux said he was willing to hand over control of his empire, including administration details for all sites under the PedoEmpire and server details, as well as access to his emails. Law enforcement would have full control of his Lux persona. 'On top of that I also have complete control over the large group of proven producers on any site,' he told them. 'I am sure that access to this, let alone everything else I am offering you is merit for the conditions I will outline below.'

The conditions included \$50,000 in Bitcoin and immunity across all jurisdictions. Not surprisingly, the task force was not interested in acquiescing to

either demand.

‘It is clear you are not taking my offer seriously,’ a frustrated Lux wrote when it was obvious no money or immunity would be coming his way. ‘It is NOT a game, these are real lives you are bargaining on. It’s now clear that if I want to fix this problem I need to do it myself. I will get rid of these people because no one else will. As you do not want to be part of the solution, I bid you farewell.’

Lux announced to his inner circle that he would be closing down the sites under the PedoEmpire umbrella. Some reacted by posting child abuse in his honour. One fan sent him a number of images of his nine-year-old niece, naked and forced into a sexualised pose, with a note scrawled on a piece of paper balanced on her legs: ‘Lux, you’ll be missed’ followed by a crude reference to her uncle’s activities. The two men had built up something of a friendship after Lux tutored him in removing identifying features, such as his tattoos and his victim’s face, from the videos he supplied.

On 24 June 2014, true to his word, Lux closed down his sites, saying: ‘today is the day that I walk away. There are personal issues which my close friends have been made aware of that have forced me to make this decision.’

It did not take long before hubris and his desperate desire to be emperor in his own sick, twisted world resurfaced. Early in August 2014, he boasted in a private chat to someone he trusted that he had killed off ‘Lux’ and had been reborn as ‘Buddha’. Buddha was working on a new site, Innocent Screams.

Lux captured

When detectives swooped on a house in a suburb around 20 kilometres out of Melbourne on 26 August 2014, they were confident they had their man. Countless hours of infiltrating the world of child exploitation and hurtcore had led them to this nondescript house in a quiet street in a country not usually associated with such extreme subject matter. What would Lux, the worst of the worst, the most reviled pedophile in the dark web, be like?

Lux had presented himself as an American pediatrician with considerable life experience. Detectives knew that in the house was a white, working class man in his fifties who worked as a mechanic, his wife, son and daughter. ‘We thought for sure we knew who it was,’ a police officer involved in the case said.

As they tore apart the house, they soon realised it was not the mechanic they were seeking, but his son: a young man barely out of his teens, who rarely left his bedroom where he sat day and night hunched over a computer. He was eerily calm as they read him his rights.

Matthew Graham, born 21 September 1992, was, like many young men his age, shy and insecure around people. Unable to develop friendships at school and unsuccessful with the opposite sex, he had no social life and increasingly turned to his computer for comfort. Online multi-player game World of Warcraft was his only form of social interaction, and he spent many hours in his room gaming and forming his only relationships outside his immediate family.

Soon the discussions in the gaming room led him to explore forums populated by other young socially awkward boys and men, in particular the discussion board favoured by gamers, outcasts and deviants: 4Chan. There a whole new world opened up to him, a world of anonymity, where he could be anyone or anything he wanted. He was fascinated by 4Chan’s most famous accomplishment, the spawning of the hacktivist collective Anonymous.

Matthew considered himself asexual. He had a single unsatisfactory sexual experience as an adolescent, and a neutral response to pornography. As the teenager had become more and more isolated, crippled by social anxiety, and threatened by his peers, he withdrew from his family and spent all of his time in his bedroom. His desperately worried parents sought help from a psychologist, who tried to treat him for his extreme social phobia, but Matthew was uncooperative.

Towards the end of high school, Matthew watched with fascination as Anonymous announced on 4Chan that it would be attacking Lolita City, the underage porn section of The Hidden Wiki, a gateway site to the dark web.

Matthew thought it would be run to help, and for the first time he went and looked at what could be found in this new, dark version of the internet he had not visited before.

Anonymous did indeed take down Lolita City for a short time, but were ultimately unsuccessful in making any lasting dent in the dark web's child pornography websites. Anonymous was not interested in Matthew Graham's help. The pimply teen had once again been rejected and deemed useless by those whose acceptance he craved. But now he had been exposed to new communities of even greater misfits than those he found in online games and on 4Chan.

Things did not get any easier when Matthew started at La Trobe University, where he was a nanotechnology student. Although he was intellectually quite bright, he was socially immature, more comfortable around children than people his own age, although not sexually attracted to them. He was a babysitter for his neighbour's young children, but there was no evidence that he ever touched them inappropriately. University did not last long. 'I just started at uni and it was kind of not really a good time and all that,' he told police later. 'Even though I don't then and still don't consider myself a pedophile...and then yeah.'

Once he dropped out, he stopped interacting with his parents, and spent all his time in his bedroom. Over the next three years he rarely emerged. He had developed an anxiety condition that meant he could not eat in front of other people, so he did not join his family for meals.

In between playing online games, he became increasingly intrigued by the dark web and what could be found there. He desperately wanted to become somebody, and thought there would be people there who would appreciate his computer skills. He started looking at drug and weapons sites, and eventually wound up at child porn sites and entered a world that both repulsed and fascinated him. Inside the chat rooms he found people whose warped views distorted lines of reality and fantasy; he could never tell what were true tales of depravity and what were fevered imaginings. He was most drawn to the forums where like-minded people tried to top each other with how outrageous and disgusting they could be.

From text-based forums it was not a huge step to move on to image boards. The infamous Random forum (known simply as *b*) on 4Chan was a repository of twisted images that sometimes included death and mayhem, and occasionally child pornography. Graham started needing more than *b* could provide. He moved into the depths of the dark web, seeking out more and more depraved images, and became titillated by what he saw. He never had a normal emotional response to abhorrent images, and now he started compulsively masturbating to them. Previously asexual, he could eventually only masturbate to images of

children being harmed.

When he discovered a requirement for his technical proficiency in some of these sites, Matthew Graham moved into a world that gave him the respect that he craved and a sense of satisfaction. The unemployed teenager who lived with his parents finally felt as if he was someone special. He was Lux, and Lux was emperor.

The police tore apart the Graham household, seizing all of Matthew's electronic equipment, including USB sticks which they soon discovered held the most depraved collection of pornography they had ever encountered. They heard about his multiple psychiatric diagnoses of schizoid personality disorder, anxiety and depression. They spoke to his bewildered parents, who had no idea how to help when, like so many troubled teens, he refused their comfort and aid. As the teen grew into a young man, it had become increasingly difficult to draw him out of his room. They thought he was gaming; they could never have dreamed he was building his wicked empire right under their noses.

Within the dark web, the child abuse communities were abuzz with news of the arrest, as well as others that seemed to be related. Also in Australia, 33-year-old former childcare worker Shannon McCool, known as Skee on the dark web—he who had implored Lux and others to eschew any form of publicity—was jailed for 35 years for the sexual abuse of seven children, six of whom were in his care. Authorities also caught the uncle of the young girl who had been forced to hold a farewell sign when Lux retired. He too received a hefty jail sentence.

There was nothing high-tech about the way these dark web predators were identified and captured. They were caught thanks to methodical, unrelenting police work combined with clever, targeted social engineering, carried out by law enforcement agencies working together across the globe. Task Force Argos was responsible for the Australian arrests. Skee, for example, had been caught after a high-ranking member of his site The Love Zone had been busted and had handed over login details for his VIP membership. Those credentials provided access to exclusive sections where members were less reserved with each other and shared materials more freely. Among those materials were images by Skee that had not yet been stripped of metadata, including information about the camera used.

Skee's home country was an open secret among those who knew him, and from there police set about narrowing down his interests and studying the grammar, spelling and form of his writing. One officer noticed that he began a post more often than not with the greeting 'hiyas'. This was unusual enough that, after scouring millions of websites and forums, they were able to narrow their target down to about 5000 suspects. Continuing to pare down the list, they

matched men who had similar interests to Skee through normal clear-web social networks. Of those, only one worked with children according to his Facebook, which also had a picture of his vehicle, registration number visible. They raided his house when they determined from his history that he was most likely to be online, and caught him with his laptop open. Once they had him, they were able to match the camera found in his home to the metadata on the pictures, as well as identifying a freckle on his finger.

After catching Skee, police were able to impersonate him online and continue the chain of unmasking child abusers around the world.

The child abuse communities applied their own twisted version of morality to make sense of the arrest of Lux. A user called Chairman on Pedo Support Community wrote:

Lux was a pathetic little boy. Endearing in his own way, but providing passages for the monstrous to occur. A secret community none of us would admit to knowing the name of would never have existed without Lux giving them an initial platform. A certain girl has had her life ruined—despite having what we could argue was a healthy sexual relationship—because of Lux’s arrogance. He rolled over exactly as expected—for love and attention, as I’m sure law enforcement agents promised him. Lux was incredibly insecure and that made him incredibly dangerous—nothing mattered as much as his ego. Thus H2TC, then L2TC, and on and on...

We should pity him to some extent.

We should pity the lives he impacted much more.

The girl whom Chairman considered had been in a ‘healthy sexual relationship’ was the nine-year-old girl who had been abused by her uncle for three years. Chairman proudly declared his own preference for sexual partners to be girls aged six to eleven.

Others were shocked that the sophisticated American pediatrician was not what he seemed. ‘What!? This kid is Lux!? Guy is younger than me! And weirder! How’s that possible!?’ wrote Unleashed Loser, predator of six-to-twelve-year-old girls. ‘He was supposed to be Darth Vader! But he’s a 4chaner!’

When a reporter from Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper, Chris Johnston, visited Matthew Graham’s South Morang house a while after his arrest, he found that it had been sold to unsuspecting new owners. The house had been vacated quickly,

it seemed; a mess was left behind and the new owners discovered graffiti scrawled inside a bedroom wardrobe: 'Parents should be afraid of raising children like us.'

They painted over it.

Peter Gerard Scully

Once *Daisy's Destruction* gained notoriety, an international manhunt set out to track down those responsible for the vile video. Cross-border task forces studied every detail of the No Limits Fun footage to narrow down the geographic region of the abuse. On 20 February 2015, Peter Scully, an Australian man living in the Philippines, was arrested, literally with his pants around his ankles, and charged with an array of offences. Later it emerged that not only was he behind *Daisy's Destruction* and various other films produced by NLF depicting the rape and torture of children, but the remains of an eleven-year-old girl were found buried in a shallow grave at a house Scully previously rented.

Scully, a father of two, had fled Australia some years before to avoid fraud charges. He had orchestrated property and computer scams that allowed him to fleece millions of dollars from duped investors. He told *60 Minutes* that he was not a pedophile while in Australia, nor when he first arrived in the Philippines. He claimed he could not pinpoint when or why he became such a monstrous abuser of children.

Scully and his girlfriend, Liezyl Margallo, ran NLF from Mindanao in the Philippines, producing videos of themselves carrying out heinous crimes on children from as young as eighteen months. Scully would force children to perform sex acts on each other and his girlfriends, as well as himself, as he filmed them for distribution. He also forced the children to dig their own graves in his backyard, telling them they would eventually be buried there.

In some cases, the parents of the children willingly handed them over to him, believing him to be a benefactor who would provide them a better life than they, in their desperate poverty, were able to. Other times Scully's 'girlfriends'—former child prostitutes in their late teens—were tasked with finding street kids for him to 'adopt'. Scully would send his girlfriends out with instructions to find specific-aged girls—never older than twelve—and lure them back to his home with the promise of food.

Despite allegedly absconding with millions of dollars in ill-gotten gains from Australia, and earning up to \$10,000 for a single video, Scully did not seem to live an extravagant lifestyle. The house in which he was captured was modest and unrenovated, as was the house where the body of eleven-year-old Cindy was found.

Wearing a grotesque Mardi Gras mask, Liezyl Margallo carried out the physical torture of Daisy, as well as children in other films. She and Scully were charged with kidnap, rape, torture and murder. Heinous though his crimes were,

they were not crimes that carry the death penalty in the Philippines. There were reports that authorities considered reinstating the death penalty to execute Scully, an initiative that had considerable support from the public, but that never eventuated.

Daisy was found alive and taken into care, but she sustained permanent physical injuries from her treatment by Scully and Margallo, and will never be able to bear children. Margallo claimed Scully had filmed Cindy being strangled to death, but police did not discover any such footage. There were many hours of documented sexual abuse and torture of children, but it stopped short of film of any murder.

There is little doubt that Peter Scully harmed many more than the three children whose abuse he has been charged with. However, much of the prosecution's evidence against Scully, including computer hardware, memory card, camera, computer monitor, video recorder and chains, were destroyed in a fire that gutted the Hall of Justice in the Philippines earlier that year.

Scully's accomplices—his 'girlfriends' who carried out much of the abuse on the children, while wearing masks under Scully's direction—could be considered more victims of his depravity. Liezyl Margallo, the young woman who featured in *Daisy's Destruction*, however, showed little remorse and went on the run soon after Scully's arrest. NLF released more videos and it emerged that Margallo remained in touch with Scully, who many believed continued to carry on his business from prison.

Lux in court

‘It was my clear duty to watch it,’ the judge said. ‘I wish it hadn’t been. It is the worst thing I have ever seen.’

The County Court justice who had been allocated the sentencing hearing of Matthew Graham was reluctant to view *Daisy’s Destruction* and was now letting Matthew Graham—and the rest of the courtroom—know what he thought of it. ‘To you it was just footage for your stock,’ the judge said. ‘It was pure evil.’

The prosecutor had insisted that the judge view *Daisy’s Destruction* to understand the true nature of the materials Lux sought out for his site. Some allowance for the judge’s sensibilities had been made by way of removing the sound. (One police officer involved in the case mentioned that the sound—the continual screams of a toddler being brutalised—was the most gruesome part of the video.) The judge was not at all keen. ‘Do I really need to see it to form a view that this material is depraved?’ he asked.

Graham’s own barrister had not seen the clips, nor did he have any desire for the judge to see them. Graham was silently sobbing in the back of the courtroom as the learned people had their debate.

‘There was prestige in being able to deliver *Daisy’s Destruction*. It was highly sought after?’ asked the judge.

‘Yes,’ agreed both prosecution and defence.

‘And it was for a reason, right?’

‘Mr Graham does not dispute the description of the material,’ the defence barrister said, acknowledging that it was the ‘worst of the worst’.

The prosecutor read out precedents supporting her request. ‘Seeing it brings it home,’ she said, ‘in a real and tangible way rather than just reading a description of it.’

Although the judge agreed he was legally obliged to view the video, he was in no hurry to do so. The discussion was held in the morning, and it was agreed that His Honour would watch the film at lunchtime. After lunch, however, he reported he had not been able to bring himself to watch it. At 4:00 pm the prosecutor suggested he might like to watch it then. ‘I don’t think I’m quite up to it right now,’ he said.

The judge eventually excused himself for half an hour the next day to view the footage. When he returned to the courtroom he was pale and quiet.

‘How any human can view that impassively...’ he said. ‘The infant was being tortured, actual physical torture...an extremely trusting, vulnerable child who begins smiling wearing a nappy and ends a wailing physical wreck.’

In a quiet, high-pitched voice, the young man with no prior criminal record answered 'Guilty' to each count read out to him. Life had not been easy for Matthew Graham since his arrest. Although housed with other sex offenders, he had been assaulted and abused by both prisoners and guards. Just as it had been online, in prison he was looked upon as lowest of low for his crimes. He had been in protective custody, where he would remain for the foreseeable future. Members of his family, including his sister and his father, the man police had originally thought was Lux, sat through the hearings in a show of support.

When a scene-by-scene description of *Daisy's Destruction* isn't the most depraved thing you hear before noon, you know you are in for a really tough day. Among the charges, Lux was accused of aiding and abetting the abduction, rape and murder of a five-year-old child in Russia. But it was the detailed description of the abuse of a seven-year-old profoundly disabled girl—in a wheelchair with MS—that forced several people to leave the courtroom and caused the eyes of the father of the defendant to well up. Graham's father wept openly as the court heard a transcript of the conversation between Lux and the abuser, where Lux advised him that the film would be too dangerous to sell, but he should make it for his own gratification. Even more vile was the cavalier way in which they spoke about their victims. Joking that as the seven-year-old was mute, 'at least you don't have to worry about her accent giving her away'.

As more horrors were read out in court, spectators, including some members of Graham's own family, stumbled from the room, traumatised by what they were hearing. Those who stayed heard of three-year-old Sarah, with a plastic bag over her head and rope around her neck and the word 'rape' scrawled across her stomach. There were descriptions of images of children engaged in bestiality and photographs that purported to show children decapitated or raped to death. A fifteen-year-old girl had been blackmailed into penetrating and torturing herself on video while holding up signs as a sick advertisement for Hurt2theCore.

Matthew Graham spent the two-day hearing alternating between looking around the courtroom defiantly and sitting hunched over in apparent distress, occasionally sobbing quietly. His defence team made a valiant effort in introducing mitigating circumstances that should reduce his sentence. No contact offending had been alleged against Matthew Graham. He never profited from his crimes in any way. He was a sad, friendless little boy who was desperate for attention and accolades from his peers.

Meanwhile the people who had given him healthy and positive attention—his family—stood by him in court, even while their hearts broke. Graham's family had the most difficult situation of 'hate the sin, love the sinner' there could possibly be. No doubt there are those who would judge and revile them for standing by their son, nephew and brother. But nobody looked more bewildered

standing by their son, nephew and brother. But nobody looked more bewildered than Graham's father about how the monster came to be. Certainly, there was nothing to suggest that he in any way created the fiend. No abuse, no neglect; there was no suggestion of anything but love and helpless support as he and his wife struggled to help their son cope with the world.

'They would never in their wildest dreams have imagined you were living the twisted, evil life you were in the dark shadows of the cyber world,' the judge told Matthew, who bowed his head.

On 17 March 2016, the County Court sentenced Matthew Graham to fifteen years in prison. With good behaviour and concessions, he could be released in as little as ten years.

'I have seen some shocking things over the journey of my career and I have never seen anything like that,' said the judge. 'I can find no like cases—your case is without parallel.'

Many were outraged by the apparent leniency of the sentence. Some compared his sentence to that of serial pedophile Geoffrey Robert Dobbs, who had molested at least 63 girls aged between a month and fifteen years old over 28 years. He was given two consecutive terms of indefinite imprisonment with a nominal sentence of 30 years.

Is setting up websites and encouraging others to perform vile sexual acts and commit vicious violence as evil as carrying out child molestation personally? It is a question the courts must wrestle with.

As this was a high-profile dark web case, comparisons were naturally drawn between the sentence handed down to Lux, who ran a website dedicated to the torture of children, and Dread Pirate Roberts, who ran a website to sell drugs. Most would agree the former is a far greater crime than the latter (and it is hard to compare sentences from different jurisdictions), but Matthew Graham will still be a relatively young man upon his release, whereas Ross Ulbricht was sentenced to never be released, and is expected to die in prison.

It is safe to say Lux will spend his next ten to fifteen years in similar conditions to those he had in the time already served—in protection and solitary confinement. Just as on the dark web he was reviled; in prison even the most hardened criminals have no sympathy for the likes of Lux. He may not survive the process at all.

Online, the news was met with ambivalence from much of the pedophile community. 'For me Lux always stood for NLF and hurtcore and as such I despised him,' wrote BabyBoyLove, whose preference was boys and girls aged three-plus. 'He is now paying the price for his deeds and he is now another name in the past of darknet. I figure it is best to let him be in the past and fade away.'

‘Not only was this ass hat responsible for torture and likely death of children, he has made life so much more difficult for the remainder of this community,’ said foolsareus, who likes nine-to-thirteen-year-old girls.

But one user appeared quite happy at the sentence that seemed lenient for the crimes. ‘Cannot wait to see him in 15 years. He’ll be still quite young to admin a site, really,’ said Chairman.

Fighting high-tech predators

While law enforcement around the world continues to do what it can to close down these sites, and identify and prosecute those behind them, the technology can be tricky to navigate. Most children sold as sex slaves online are advertised on the clear web—most notably Craigslist—but the anonymising technologies of the dark web provide a safe haven for predators to meet, discuss, share and develop methods to evade detection.

Despite Lux’s PedeEmpire falling, replacement sites began operating to fill the void immediately. Law enforcement agencies find it can be more difficult to intercept the child abuse circles than the commercial enterprises, because often, like Lux’s empire, they are run not for profit but purely for the purpose of sharing with like-minded individuals. The numbers quoted for Scully’s No Limits Fun productions seem to be unverified and, given his living arrangements in the Philippines, can be treated with some scepticism.

One member of the online community said, ‘nobody is making any money whatsoever. Mainstream media has fostered the impression that children are being rampantly abused to fuel a multi-million-dollar industry, but that is just not the case. I’ve been “consuming” on[-]topic material for over a decade and I have never even provided a real email address to any website, much less any form of money. The only thing we spend is time. There have been only a handful of fleeting companies that tried to turn a profit peddling child nudity. They always get shut down, people who paid get busted and all the content becomes freely available and even ubiquitous. Exclusivity is all someone has to offer when selling child porn and it doesn’t take long for that to go away the way stuff is traded and shared. That’s why it has never been and never will be a sustainable business as long as child pornography remains illegal.’

On the other hand, many pedophiles are desperate to befriend like-minded people, which leads to them providing personal information that can eventually be used to identify and locate them. The police officers who go undercover to elicit this information have one of the toughest jobs around.

International law enforcement agencies, including Task Force Argos, continue

to infiltrate the realms of child abusers operating within what the predators believe to be the anonymity of the dark web. Sometimes their methods raise troubling questions. The FBI took over and ran one of the internet's largest child porn sites, Playpen, for a couple of months in 2015. The FBI infected the site with software designed to identify users. One of the pedophiles charged from that sting subsequently sued the government on the grounds that the agency enabled him to access the site.

Then Task Force Argos, in conjunction with US Homeland Security and Canadian and European authorities, was revealed to have run another major site, Child's Play, for over a year. Child's Play had over a million users, around a hundred of whom were regular producers. When agents infiltrated and took over the sites, they purposefully rose as high within the networks as possible to enable them to gain the trust of more users, and hopefully save more lives. But sometimes to keep up the charade, the infiltrators had to post child exploitation images themselves.

Meanwhile, a man who sought 'ideas for a blackmailed 15yo' from Hurt2theCore's customers and then posted videos of the results was revealed in October 2017 to be a Cambridge-educated doctor. The depravity of 28-year-old Dr Matthew Falder rivalled that of Scully and Graham as it was revealed he had similarly blackmailed over 50 people of all ages, forcing them to carry out degrading acts which he uploaded to the dark web. He was an active member of H2TC and encouraged another member to rape a four-year-old boy and post the video.

In February 2017, the masked woman in *Daisy's Destruction*, Scully's live-in partner Liezyl Margallo, was arrested. She had been living a life of luxury, Instagramming herself in exotic locations, and had exchanged telephone calls and text messages with Scully, leading Philippine authorities to suspect he continued to mastermind a dark web pornography and child torture operation from his jail cell. Peter Scully seems to have certain comforts and luxuries not afforded all prisoners in the Philippine system. He escaped the looming threat of capital punishment and pleaded not guilty to all charges, forcing a protracted court battle within a sometimes corrupt system. Much of the evidence against him was—some would say conveniently—destroyed in a suspicious fire.

We can hope that Margallo's arrest is the end for No Limits Fun. Sadly, children, especially those in impoverished countries, continue to be exploited and abused to satisfy the twisted desires of a demented few. Technology continues to develop to provide protection for those who want to carry out their heinous crimes.

And for those who want to know just how far the dark web goes, they have an answer. This is the darkest web

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AFTERWORD

I struggled with whether to include certain events and people in this book and decisions to do so were not taken lightly.

Dark

I was unabashedly a fan of Silk Road prior to its demise. As an active drug law reform advocate who is firmly against the war on drugs, I knew Silk Road offered drug users a safer alternative for procuring their drugs. I believed in the philosophy of the Dread Pirate Roberts which allowed people to purchase drugs for their own use in a violence-free environment. I loved that the site took the high moral ground and refused to allow the sale of anything the purpose of which was to harm or defraud another person.

I was devastated when the peace-seeking libertarian I thought I had come to know was accused of blithely ordering the murders of six people, three of whom had never done him any harm. When the accusations failed to materialise into charges in court, I held onto the possibility that the conversations were never held at all; perhaps they were even planted to turn DPR's followers against him.

However, not only was there a mountain of evidence to support their existence, once I personally spoke to people on the other sides of the discussions with Dread Pirate Roberts, I could not deny those conversations took place. DPR and Variety Jones were prepared to kill people to protect their business.

Whilst I find the cavalier attitude to murder abhorrent and DPR lost my support, I still believe that Ross Ulbricht was not granted due process and that his sentence is manifestly excessive. I also believe that Silk Road was a safer place to purchase drugs than the 'real life' alternatives and operated on a more ethical model than any of its successors. To me, the Silk Road I knew provided an insight into what a post-prohibition world might look like and it was overwhelmingly positive.

Darker

My opinion of Yura did an about-turn in the process of writing this book. When I started, which was before Amy Allwine's murder, Yura was threatening me and carrying out his scam with little regard for potential consequences. It was purely a money-making exercise for him and I did not feel I owed him any obligation of confidentiality.

By the time I submitted the manuscript we'd had many hours of conversation. The murder shook him and he subsequently claimed to actively inform law enforcement organisations around the world of the details of people prepared to pay large sums of money to harm or kill other people. I can't help but hope that writing this book does not put him in danger of arrest so that he can continue his twisted version of being a dark web Robin Hood.

In the interests of full disclosure, some minor parts of ThcJohn's chapters have used creative licence to imagine thoughts in his head and conversations with friends, having built up a picture of him from his many emails to Besa Mafia and to Chris. I do not think they affect the integrity of the story.

Darkest

[Part III](#) of the book was incredibly difficult to write and I often considered abandoning it. I never downloaded or viewed any illegal pornography and did not personally view Daisy's Destruction, instead relying on a scene-by-scene description by the officers who had to document it.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say I never want to return to that part of the dark web again. I wish I could say I exaggerated the horrors, but if anything, I sanitised them.

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To my amazing family and friends who support me, cheer me on and worry for me. I love you all. To my stankids James and Steph, that goes for you too.

for me, I love you all. To my stepkids, James and Steph, that goes for you too, but I don't want you reading this book for a few more years, okay?

Finally, to my incredible partner Cam, who takes death threats from hitmen in his stride, spends his holidays being my chauffeur and bodyguard, who never complains as I drag him to prisons or to meet people who either don't have real names or have too many names, who has been my biggest fan and my greatest support and who gives better advice than anyone, I love you and could never have done this without you.