SSL/TLS Certificates and Their Prevalence on the Dark Web (First Report)

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Executive Summary

As organizations focus on the digital transformation of their businesses, the importance of encryption as the cornerstone of security and privacy is increasingly vital. In 2018, over 70 percent of internet traffic was encrypted. Experts believe that this figure is expected to rise to 80 percent in 2019 (Google, 2019). Secure Sockets Layer (SSL, an older standard) and Transport Layer Security (TLS, a newer standard) certificates are essential to encryption because they authorize all encrypted communication between machines. SSL/TLS certificates are instrumental in protecting privacy and improving security, providing each machine with a unique machine identity. They control the flow of sensitive data to authorized machines and are used in everything from website transactions and mobile devices to smart city initiatives, robots, artificial intelligence algorithms and containers in the cloud.

Despite the pivotal role encryption plays in our digital economy and across the internet, the processes needed to protect digital certificates are not well understood or widely followed. As a result, SSL/TLS certificates are often poorly protected, making them attractive targets for attackers. In fact, illegitimate access to SSL/TLS certificates has played a key role in several high-profile, high-impact breaches—such as Snowden, Sony and Equifax.

To shine a light on the availability of SSL/TLS certificates on the dark web, the Evidence-based Cybersecurity Research Group at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University and the University of Surrey spearheaded a research program, sponsored by Venafi. This report details the preliminary findings of the research and outlines the volume of SSL/TLS certificates for sale on the dark web, including information on how they are packaged and sold to attackers. These certificates can be used to eavesdrop on sensitive communications, spoof websites, trick consumers and steal data. The long-term goal of this research is to gain a more thorough understanding of the role SSL/TLS certificates play in the economy of the dark web as well as how they are being used by attackers.

This is the first of three reports—the first of their kind—focused on the underground SSL/TLS marketplace and its role in the wider cybercrime economy. This report will show that there is a machine identity-as-a-service marketplace on the dark web, where fraudulent TLS certificates are readily available for purchase.

Key findings:

- Five of the Tor network markets observed—Dream Market, Wall Street Market, BlockBooth, Nightmare Market and Galaxy3—offer a steady supply of SSL/TLS certificates, along with a range of related services and products.
- One representative search of these five marketplaces uncovered 2,943 mentions for "SSL" and 75 for "TLS." In comparison, there were only 531 mentions for "ransomware" and just 161 for "zero day" exploits.
- SSL/TLS certificates are often packaged with crimeware services and products, such as malicious websites and ransomware.
- Certain marketplaces, like Dream Market, appear to specialize in the sale of SSL/TLS certificates and related services.
- Some underground marketplaces focus on packaging services with SSL/TLS certificates. For example, some sellers offer "aged" domains, after-sale support and integration with a range of legitimate payment processors—including Stripe, PayPal and Square.
- At least one vendor on BlockBooth promises to issue certificates from reputable certificate authorities. The seller also offers forged documentation, which allows attackers to present themselves as trusted U.S. or U.K. companies for less than \$2,000.
- Prices for certificates vary from \$260 to \$1,600, depending on the type of certificate and scope of additional services offered.

The Hypertext Transfer Protocol and TLS Certificates

The internet is made up of a large number of globally connected computer networks (Tanenbaum and Wetherall 2011). To allow easy communication among these computer networks and to support the transmission of data between clients and servers, common communication protocols have been developed. Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) is the underlying protocol used by the World Wide Web to support users' access to the internet. HTTP defines how messages should be formatted and transmitted between computers connected to the internet and determines how applications and web servers should communicate and respond to queries. For example, when you type google.com in your browser, your computer sends an HTTP command to the Google web server and directs it to fetch and transmit the requested webpage. Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure (HTTPS) is the secure version of HTTP. This protocol encrypts the communication between clients' browsers and the web servers they access, using one of two secure protocols: Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) or Transport Layer Security (TLS). Both protocols use an "asymmetric" Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) system to provide confidential, encrypted communication between clients and servers by binding a "public" key and a "private" key (Kim et al 2017) with a SSL/TLS certificate issued by a certificate authority. Anything encrypted with the public key can only be decrypted by the private key, and vice versa.

To facilitate confidential communications with clients, organizations need to install SSL or TLS certificates onto their web servers. These certificates bind together two important components: either a domain or server name with an organizational identity and location. When installed on a web server, the SSL or TLS certificate activates the padlock, and the HTTPS protocol allows secure connections from a web server to a browser. To support the sensitive operation of identity verification, SSL/TLS certificates and their corresponding public and private encryption keys are issued by trusted certificate authorities. Certificate authorities are charged with the task of employing stringent validation processes to ensure SSL/TLS certificates are issued only to legitimate companies, organizations and individuals. An extended validation (EV) SSL/TLS certificate is designed to be the most trusted certificate on the market. EV certificates

create verified identities and are only issued after the certificate authority verifies the identity of the requester using robust specifications laid out by the CA/Browser forum and Microsoft. These guidelines require that the requester provide several pieces of identifying information, including the company's DUNS number (unique numeric identifiers assigned to a single business entity) or a letter from a certified public accountant who can verify the legitimacy of the business, when a certificate is requested. After submitting the request, the certificate authority is required to authenticate the legal existence and identity of the requesting party by verifying the company's trade name and its operational and physical existence, as well as its ownership of the domain name. EV certificates should be issued only after these steps are successfully completed. Importantly, other types of SSL/TLS certificates—uch as organization validated (OV) and domain validated (DV) are also used to authorize encrypted communication. However, the verification information required by certificate authorities for these types of SSL/ TLS certificates varies, and once they are in use by the requester, the security feedback to users about the validity of their certificates from browsers may also vary.

The keys and certificates issued by certificate authorities are used during the beginning of each encrypted communication to authenticate the identity of the machines. However, if these certificates are fraudulent, compromised, forged or tampered with, they can be powerful tools for attackers.

Specifically, if a trusted certificate authority is breached and private keys are stolen from it, the stolen certificates could be sold in the online underground market on the dark web to malicious parties. In turn, they could use them to move silently between trusted machines, "listen" to encrypted traffic, and escalate privileges to access sensitive data (Gu and Gu 2015). Moreover, if the verification processes used by trusted certificate authorities to verify the identity of the requesting party can be circumvented or spoofed, malicious actors can be issued a SSL/TLS certificate that delivers the highest levels of trust (i.e., an EV certificate). This allows attackers to create "trustworthy" spoofed or malicious websites and encrypt the traffic between malicious servers to targeted users, making it more difficult to identify problematic behavior.

Are SSL/TLS Certificates for Sale on the Dark Web?

Malicious actors can get information on either stolen machine identities or code-signing certificates and can even establish "legitimate" identities for the spoofed websites they build in an effort to victimize their targets (Kim et al. 2017; Kozak et al. 2018) through the illegal online markets that populate the dark web. Online environments that support the convergences of cybercriminals, enablers, targets and guardians exist on both the surface web (which contains all the websites and computers that are accessible to anyone with an internet connection) and on the deep web (which is up to 500 times larger than the surface web and consists of websites that are not searchable, including innocuous sites like business intranets and medical databases; Kremling & Parker 2017). The dark web (also known as the "darknet") forms a subset of the deep web. Due to the extended anonymity that it allows, the dark web provides an attractive online platform for the development of networks and allegiances between criminals and enablers, as well as for the initiation and development of illegal activities (Maimon and Louderback 2019). A dark web market is a commercial website that operates via anonymous networks, such as The Onion Router (Tor) or the Invisible Internet Project (I2P).

Online forums and market users who employ public communication platforms over the dark web often create unique public threads that aim to ask a question or advertise a service or a product (Hutchings and Clayton 2016). The posting entity gives a description of the service or product (either needed or provided) and includes

details on pricing information, payment and contact information (Holt and Lampke 2010). These markets offer the hardware, software and materials needed to initiate all types of cyber-dependent crimes (i.e., illegal activities that can only be performed using a computer, computer networks or other forms of information communication technology (McGuire and Dowling 2013)), as well as the sensitive data harvested from victims of cyber-dependent crimes—like Social Security numbers, credit card numbers, names and addresses (Yip et al. 2013).

The premise for this research project is that among the wide range of illegal commodities that are offered for sale on these online markets and forums, it may be possible to find evidence for the sale and purchase of compromised, fraudulent and forged TLS certificates. Specifically, Kim and colleagues (2017) have recently alerted to the presence of a code-signing certificate (i.e., certificates that guarantee the authenticity of a software publisher and integrity of the software) market over the darknet. Kozak and associates (2018) have further documented the operation of four dark web vendors that issue code-signing certificates for the purpose of abuse. However, we are not aware of any previous research that provides evidence for the existence of a market for compromised, stolen and forged SSL/TLS certificates in the dark web. Therefore, our research objective was to seek evidence of their existence in underground markets and assess the prevalence of SSL/TLS certificates as a commodity in the dark web.

Research Design and Methodology

To accomplish our research objective, we dived into online markets and hacker forums that were active on the Tor network, I2P and the Freenet during the data collection period from October 2018–January 2019 and searched for "for sale" listings of stolen, fake and forged TLS certificates. Our research team discovered close to 60 relevant online market webpages on the Tor network, I7 webpages on I2P,

and no relevant webpages on the Freenet (see Appendices A and B for the list of dark web markets we monitored). To explore for the presence of SSL- and TLS-related ads in each market, we typed in "TLS certificates" and "SSL certificates" in the search bar of each market. We performed 16 weekly searches across all 60 websites during the project period.

Results

We observed evidence for the relevance of SSL/TLS certificates in the cybercrime ecosystem in five of the Tor network markets we observed: Dream Market, Wall Street Market, BlockBooth, Nightmare Market and Galaxy3. Table I presents a typical summary from one of our weekly searches on the number of mentions of SSL and TLS certificate listings. Note that the number of mentions we observed did not vary significantly throughout the duration of the project. For comparison purposes, in this table, we juxtapose the number of SSL/TLS certificates mentions with the number of mentions for two other

popular products on these markets: ransomware and zero-day exploits. As may be observed in the table, there is a considerable variation with respect to the number of mentions of SSL/TLS certificates across the markets observed. While the number of mentions of SSL/TLS certificates is high on the Dream Market, it is lower on the Wall Street Market and Galaxy3, and it's even lower on BlockBooth and the Nightmare Market. Interestingly, the number of mentions of SSL certificates is significantly higher than the number of mentions for both ransomware and zero-day exploits in three out of the five markets.

Table I. Mentions Count for Search Perfomed on December 3rd

Web Name	SSL Certificates	TLS Certificates	Ransomware	Zero-Day Exploits
Dream Market	2912	64	512	160
Wall Street Market	10	4	13	I
BlockBooth	3	I	0	0
Nightmare Market	2	0	5	0
Galaxy3	16	7	I	0

Figure 1 presents a screenshot of a typical ad in which SSL certificates were mentioned in the Wall Street Market.

Note that some of the commodities offered for sale on this market are malware, security vulnerabilities and exploits, as well as stolen accounts and credit card credentials. The vendor in this ad provides the design of "trustworthy" e-commerce stores aimed to support the operation of

online fraudulent activity. SSL certificates are mentioned second in the list of services offered by this vendor, along with "aged domains" (i.e., websites that have been registered and active for a long period of time, which makes the site appear to be more legitimate. SSL/TLS certificates and aged domains are used to convey trust to website visitors and search engines.

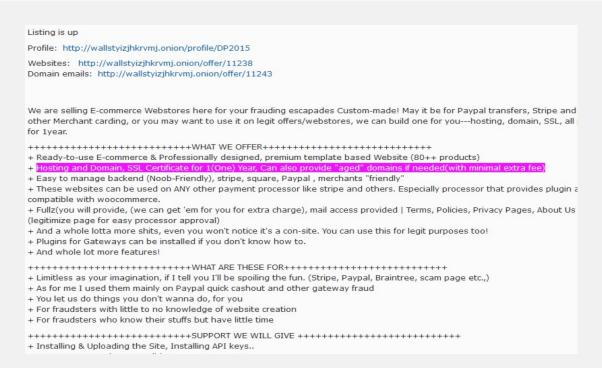


Figure I. SSL Certificates Sold along with Website Design Services (Wall Street Market)

A visit to this vendor's website reveals important details about the operation. Figure 2, for example, discloses more details about the vendor, along with an explicit statement regarding the proposed website's goal (i.e., online fraud). Figure 3 presents a more detailed list of services than those

presented in Figure 1, as well as a list of services that will not be provided by the vendor under this umbrella. Finally, Figure 4 shows the asking price for the vendor's service (\$170), the number of products already sold (10) and customer ratings (which seems to be very high).

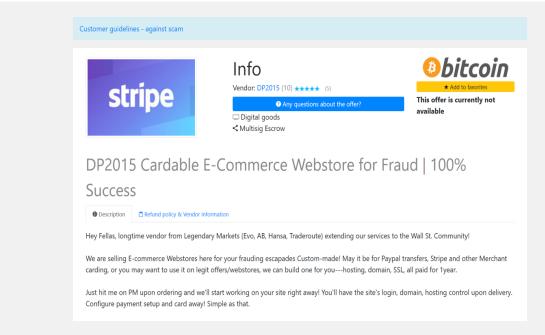


Figure 2. SSL Certificates Sold to Create Fraudulent Website for E-Commerce

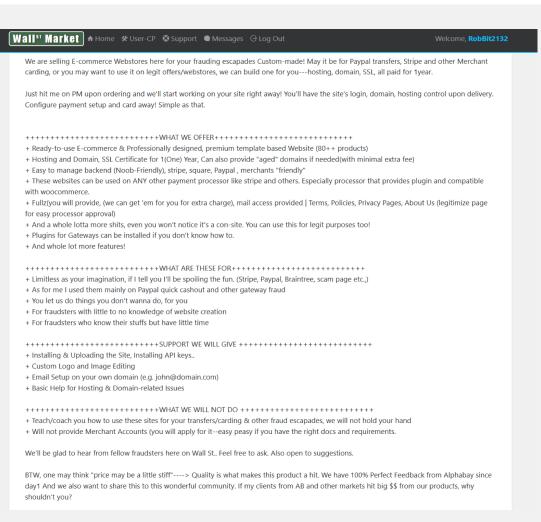


Figure 3. SSL Certificates and Services to Create Fraudulent Websites (Wall St. Market)

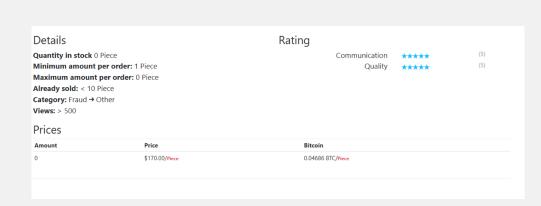


Figure 4. Price, Previous Sales and Customer Ratings of Fraudulent Websites with SSL/TLS Certificates

Similarly, Figure 5 presents evidence for another vendor on the Dream Market. This vendor's ad, and many others like it, mentions the issuance of SSL certificates and the use of aged domains as key services provided by this vendor.

Two insights are worth mentioning. First, this vendor's presentation of the service provided is subtle and implied (unlike the language used in the previous ad). And second, the price for this service is less than €200.

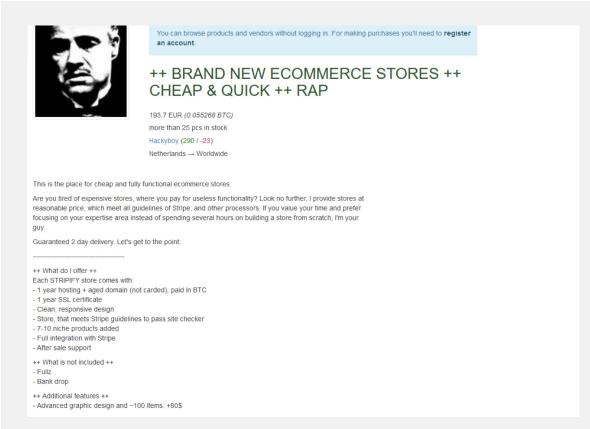
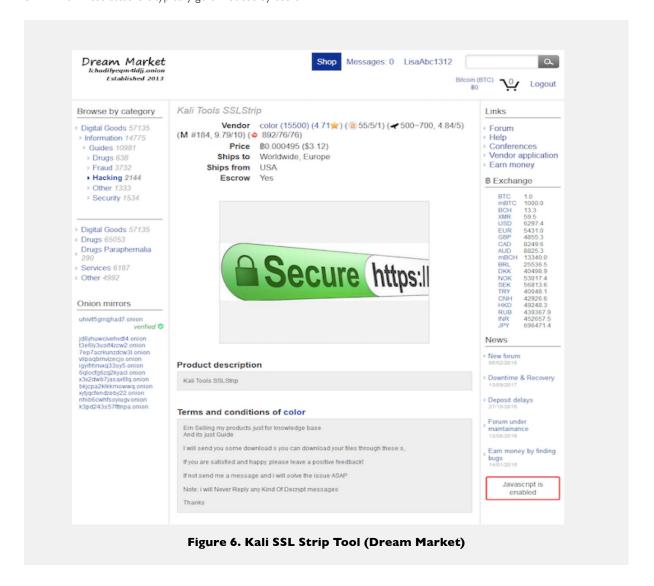


Figure 5. SSL Certificates Sold With Website Design Services (Dream Market)

SSL/TLS certificates were also mentioned in various tutorials produced by anonymous authors. In addition, we found evidence of the availability of SSL stripping tools in the Dream Market. SSL stripping is a specific type of man-in-the-middle attack in which an attacker can prevent a web browser from upgrading to an SSL connection to HTTP or HTTPs. These attackers typically go unnoticed by users.

SSL strip tools allow attackers to strip away the encryption offered by HTTPS links, and they also make it possible to redirect and map those links to homograph-similar HTTPS links.

Figure 6 presents a For Sale ad of a Kali SSL Strip tool for less than \$5.



Although SSL certificate mentions in both Dream Market and Wall Street Market are primarily packaged as either website design services or for stripping encryption of HTTPS links, the mentions on BlockBooth typically offer a standalone service that provides EV certificate issuance for interested parties. In Figure 7, we present a screenshot of an ad posted by the vendor 'bulkaccounts' that advertises the vendor's ability to issue EV certificates for U.S. companies without

asking potential clients for any verifying information. The cost for each certificate starts at \$1,300. In the description section of the ad, more details are provided about the types of services offered. One notable finding from this section is the vendor's promise to supply EV certificates from reputable and trusted certificate authorities. Additionally, the vendor promises to provide full documentation for forged companies, including D-U-N-S numbers.

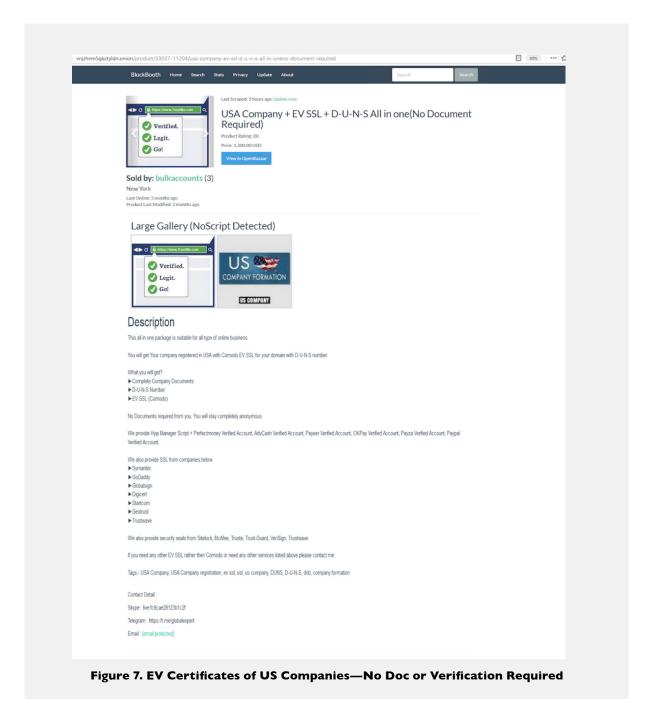


Figure 8 presents a screenshot of an ad posted again by bulkaccounts. In it, the vendor advertises issuance of EV certificates for U.K. companies without asking potential clients for any verifying information. The advertised cost for each certificate starts at \$1,000. However, after contact with the vendor, it seems that the true asking price for this product is closer to \$1,600. After reading through the description section of the ad, we find similar details to those offered for the issuance of its EV certificates for U.S.

companies: The vendor promises to supply EV certificates from reputable and trusted certificate authorities, along with documentation for the forged companies. Importantly, since registration of a U.K. company seems to be more complicated than that of a U.S. company, the vendor also offers company formation services.

Figure 8 presents a screenshot of the post advertising this service.

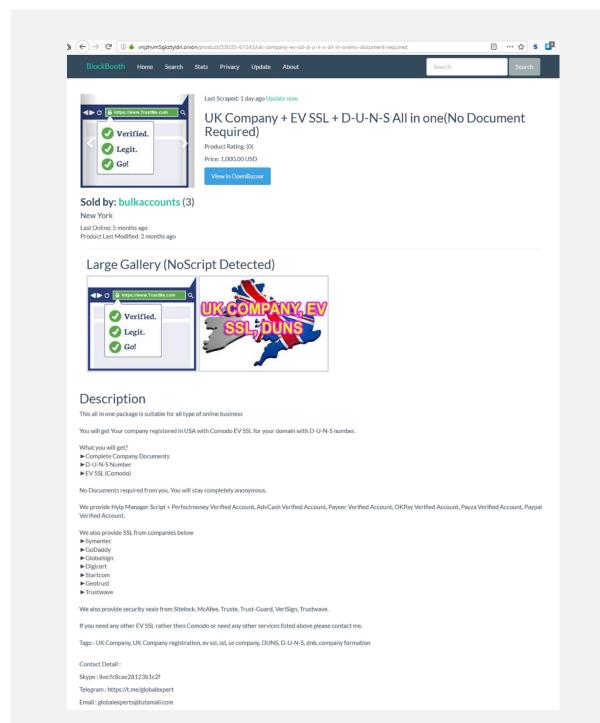
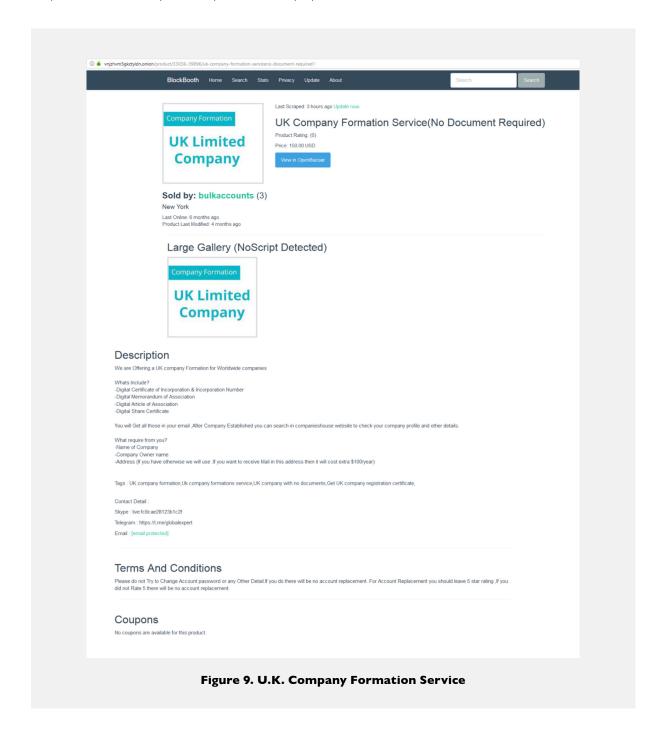


Figure 8. EV Certificates for U.K. companies—No Doc or Verification Required

As indicated in Figure 9, the vendor offers full support in establishing a company's identity in the U.K., in addition to all of the required legal documentation associated with this process. The client only needs to provide the company

and owner names as well as some form of physical address. The charge for this service is \$150. If buyers don't have a physical address, the vendor offers to provide one for an extra \$100.



Discussion

SSL and TLS certificates issued by trusted certificate authorities are designed to serve as machine identities, ensuring confidential communication between servers and clients. Before issuing these certificates, and especially before issuing EV certificates, certificate authorities are obligated to employ a stringent set of validation data of the requesting party designed to verify their identity. Although prior research has suggested ways to detect fake SSL and TLS certificates (Gu and Gu 2015), as well as the way they can be used by adversaries to generate attacks (Birge-Lee et al. 2017), we are not familiar with any past research that

provides evidence of fake and stolen certificate markets. This project provides evidence of the existence of an online underground market for TLS certificates, specifically the presence of vendors on online underground markets that are promising to issue EV certificates for U.S. and U.K. companies for less than \$2,000. At this point, we are not sure how large this market is, whether the quality of goods offered matches vendor listings, or which parties are interested in purchasing these commodities. However, we plan to continue our research and keep investigating this issue.

References

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Appendix A. Tor Network Markets Monitored

Dream Market Valhalla Green Road OnionDir Wall Street Under Market EuCanna Amazon GC Empire Market BlockBooth Hidden Answers The Peoples Drug Store Silk Road 3.1 Apollon Smokeables Stack Wolfs Rapture DutchDrugz's CannabisUK Imperial Tochka/Point Psychedelicum Nightmare Black White Cannazon Dutch Magic Fresh Onion Hacker Group CGMC CarlieUK Cocaine Oday forum Rent-A-Hacker

Berlusconi Market Pushing Taboo Hidden Wikis Chinese Darknet Market

AltBay Cocaine Market Hacking forum PlaceMarket
The Majestic Garden The French Connection Free Hacks German-Plaza
Olympus Glasswerkz Australia The Hub Galaxy 3
Midland City AlphaBay Dread

Black MarketZionDNMAvengersCave TorDrug MarketLINKS Onion

Appendix B. I2P Network Markets Monitored

LegworkDumpteamDarknetnowEepstatusHidden AnswersDark realmExchangedChanDead

Lifebox Anongw Hidden Answers
Black market Anonsfw 12P forum

Visibility Difracker