Puzzle 9: Storyline

Backstory: The protagonist (P) has a sister who commits suicide after being humiliated by a computer scam/hack. The scam/hack was thought to be the work of a guy who supposedly went on to become a kingpin (K) of an online crime syndicate.

Setup: P has leased a remote desktop from RBC (Romanian Business Community) with the purpose of tracking down K. In order to do this P must get enough money to purchase various high end malware tools.

Article 1: P.E.’s rise

When most people think of the great criminal syndicates they think of the mafia in New York and Chicago in the early 20th century, or their later progeny represented so artfully by Tony Soprano. Others think immediately of the great drug trafficking cartels of the 1980’s and 1990’s. The Medellin Cartel and the Cali cartel, which raged war in Bogota and Cartagena and their modern counterparts, the Mexican cartels now engaged in wars inside cities like Juarez just on the other side of the American border.

And with constant news that the Mexican cartels have made further progress in establishing their empires we can all be forgiven for not noticing the rise of a new criminal cartel, one which is taking root not in barrios, but in the expanding virtual worlds we inhabit. Just as many Americans, even those snorting the white powder at the source of the cartel’s power, had little to no idea of what was going on in places like Bogota – so do most of us these days have little awareness of the ‘electric war’ taking place in the remote corners of the internet.

In the early days of sites like ‘Silk Road’, which live in a shadowy reflection of the world wide web – the so called ‘dark web’ – a self proclaimed hacker and criminal entrepreneur going by the handle @pabloESC\_ (the original handle had no @, but this user has since created a twitter account – because even criminals need social networking) started posting about his desires to organize an online syndicate that could rival the loose connections of internet Mafioso primarily residing in Russia and nearby countries. At first glance the user name is just hacker mumbo-jumbo – ESC is typically used to indicate ‘escape’ as in the key on your computer used to end programs. The “\_” is just more nerdy décor: underscores are often used in variable names in computer programming. And yet when taken more literally the name reads as: Pablo-Esc-bar. The name cannot be read as anything other than an homage to arguably the most successful crime boss in history: Pablo Escobar.

Through the last few decades of the 20th century Pablo Escobar built the most successful Narco-trafficking empire in the history of the world – at least when measured by monetary success. Some estimates put his wealth at between 30 and 50 billion dollars at the peak of the Medellin Cartel he operated. Even knowing all the atrocities that Escobar and his collaborators perpetrated, including the bombing of Avianca Flight XX, many people still can’t help but feel a little awed by his business accomplishments.

It becomes apparent in reading the early messages posted by @PabloESC\_ that he was more inspired than horrified by the legendary drug dealers accomplishments. “He had his own fucking zoo!” was an early comment on 4chan, a site known for avid enthusiast of animae, and more importantly, the dark web.

How exactly does one break into online crime? It isn’t clear where @PabloESC\_ started, but upon getting a foot in the door, presumably with the existing online syndicates, he had adapted the real Pablo’s knack for spotting and exploiting true business opportunities in the cracks of society where decent people try to steer clear.

The most efficient way to make money in any industry, as most wall street bankers well know, is to take a cut of other people’s revenue, in the form of fees for services rendered. Microsoft and Apple don’t by themselves change the world – but they provide the support – the hardware and software infrastructure – that allow all the other businesses in the world to operate. @PabloESC\_ appears to have taken a similar strategy in building up his online syndicate, officially deemed ‘The Organization for the Promotion of Online Freedom’, but most commonly referred to as the Iasi Cartel, because it is believed that @PabloESC\_ was based out of Isai, Romania when he (or she) began operating early online scams. Unlike the drug lords who may be somewhat physically tied to the places they begin – cocaine can’t be grown anywhere after all – the cyber criminals of today may operate from anywhere in the world. Some suspect @PabloESC\_ left Romania long ago.

The Iasi Cartel specializes in providing online infrastructure to other online criminals. They rarely participate directly in hacks or scams themselves anymore. Instead they provide a suite of cloud services that allow their clients to more easily manage their criminal activities. These services include software that makes hacking intuitive to a degree that would have made Steve proud, as well as providing online servers and data warehouses. Like the great Columbian syndicates before it, The Iasi Cartel is also believed to have tentacles stretching outside of the strictly criminal domain. They are suspected to be behind the cloud infrastructure corporation RBC (Romanian Business Community), which operates out in the open, in an apparently legal fashion, by carefully avoiding doing anything outright criminal.

There’s little reason to believe that the Iasi Cartel and its capo have come close to duplicating the real Escobar’s monetary success – one source familiar with the criminal operation puts estimates of the cartels revenue at 1 million a day (Escobar brought in 60 million a day at his peak) – but Iasi does appear to be growing. The FBI recently launched an investigation into the Iasi Cartel from within its cybercrime division. Some believe that the NSA and CIA may also be providing the FBI with information.

One thing is for certain – as cities like Juarez continue to burn out here in the real world, things are starting to smolder a bit in the virtual one. If the US and other sophisticated countries can’t do better than the Mexican government (or the Columbian one before them) in holding back these cartels, the online world as we know it may soon be consumed in flames.

Article 2: P.E.’s History

In recent months the world has started to get wind of a new criminal organization that has emerged from years spent mostly in the shadows: the Iasi Cartel, which has been previously reported on. But as we learn new details about the criminal syndicate and how it operates, there are still gaping holes in our understanding of who is behind it.

The real Pablo Escobar lived out in the open, even trying to run for president at one point. But @pabloESC\_ not only shuns the spotlight – who he (or she) is, is a complete and utter mystery.

Recent speculation, though, posits that the crime boss who began as a scam artist in Iasi may not be an eastern European, but may instead be a home grown native.

Six years ago the police in [], NJ discovered the body of [name of girl] who had been murdered in a deserted parking lot of an industrial district. Relatives of the girl claimed that she had previously been the victim of an online blackmailing scheme in which a hacker had obtained discretionary information and photos and threatened to publish them online unless she paid a ransom. The relatives further asserted that she had been planning to meet the hacker on the night she was murdered.

An investigation discovered that Melvin Thomas, a 21 year old from a neighboring Jersey borough, was very likely behind the hacking of [name]’s computer. However, the police were never able to make a connection to Thomas that would stand up in court. Six months into the investigation, which had mostly stalled at that point, Thomas left the country – boarding a flight from Laguardia to Bucharest, Romania. Immigration records suggest Thomas never returned to the states.

Of course there are many hackers, many hackers who may have other criminal leanings (like murder) and many hackers who live in Romania (see this piece on ‘Hackerville’). So what other evidence points to the possibility that this New Jersey low-life went from tragically failed internet blackmail schemes to the head of the largest online criminal empire to date?

As stories about the Iasi Cartel have become more frequent and in the public’s mind, people who knew, or at least knew of, Thomas have come forward with revealing information. Friends and acquaintances have described Thomas as bright, though not brilliant, with an affinity for computers and, more telling, with an obsession for gangsters, or at least a certain kind of gangster. Growing up in the state that brought us real life mob bosses such as [], as well as fictional ones like Tony Soprano, Thomas often made comments about the inferiority of east coast mobsters who ran trash collection and sewage maintenance companies to gangsters like Al Capone who built real criminal empires and lived in real luxury. But even Capone, in Thomas’ view, could have taken a page from the drug cartels, especially Pablo Escobar, who Thomas apparently thought to be the epitome of what a criminal should aspire to.

Sean Friedman, who went to high school with Thomas, told me that “he just thought the Medellin Cartel was like the greatest organization ever put on earth. He didn’t explicitly say he wanted to go be a criminal and start a cartel like that – but he made it clear that if you were going to be awed by any criminals, it shouldn’t be fat Tony Soprano – but Pablo. If you have to kill people to get ahead, he would say, you might as well be making billions and not just millions.”

Others who knew Thomas said he had originally planned to be a stock broker and make it big on wall street. But before dropping out of high school he became enthralled with computers and quickly decided that he might have more of a chance to hit it big in technology than in stocks. Several years into teaching himself everything he could about operating systems, programming and the web, he felt he was no closer to making serious money – he turned down a programming job with a starting salary of 70K because he knew he’d likely top out at 150K as a programmer in his life. He wanted to be filthy rich, and short of starting the next Microsoft, which he had no idea how to do, he needed to find a new path forward.

Some people who knew Thomas through online forums said his hacking skills were good, but not great. “He wanted to be this great hacker, but he was mostly just a Script Kiddy,” one online source told me who wants to remain anonymous. Script Kiddy, or Kitty, is someone who just mindlessly runs programs built buy others in order to attack other computers. “He quickly realized he could be a lot more successful in online scams and stuff if he just used prepackaged hacking software.”

Although his family would not speak with me, I did track down a few closer friends who offered a little insight into Thomas’ mind. I wanted to know if they believed Melvin Thomas was capable of killing someone, and if they could ever have imagined him as the head of a global crime syndicate. The short answer was no, on both counts. But, the longer answer was more nuanced. “Melvin was a generally nice guy most of the time, he wasn’t cruel, not the kind of kid that took people’s lunch money or burned ants with magnifying glasses. But he wasn’t totally normal either. Something always seemed a bit off. He wasn’t the kind of friend that you trusted to be there when you really needed him. He was just sort of selfish. He talked about being rich one day and it seemed to be the only thing he really cared about. So maybe,” his onetime friend paused, “maybe something just switched one day – like maybe he realized he couldn’t get what he wanted and play nice with everyone – maybe he just gave up on trying to be a nice guy, or pretending to be a nice. So I guess its possible – I still don’t think he did it – but who knows.

Two people take less convincing. The brother and sister of [girls name] have been convinced of Thomas’ guilt in the murder of their sister from day one. And once you’ve killed someone, up close and in person, for a paltry amount of money, why would it be hard to take part in larger criminal activities in an online world where you never even had to be bothered to look your victims in the eye? At least, this is what they had said to family and friends, or really anyone who asked, in the years immediately following their sister’s death. Their whereabouts recently are, like Thomas’, also unknown. I could not reach them for comment on this article. Their parents believe they went on a backpacking trip together. Perhaps they did. Perhaps they headed off to Iasi to see what they could learn.