

The Ring of Murder

Ol' Lizzie was getting out of hand, putting her arm around my neck, touching my ear, whispering into the other one, distracting me while I tried to order my drink. There are two reasons women get like that. Less often, its because they truly can't keep their hands off you, and are just trying to hold it all in before they give you a night that they'd like to think you'll never forget. Most often, its because they sense competition, and are establishing ownership over you like a dog leaving urine in a doorway. Elizabeth Sheckley didn't have any competition that night, because no other woman in the world had what she had, and I'd only be able to get it after she was sound asleep in the hotel room, fucked solid to the point where she wouldn't wake up while I searched her suitcase. But she didn't know that, and to her the bartender was like the white leather glove smacked in a Frenchman's face right before a movie duel. The best thing about my profession is you get laid all the time. The worst thing about my profession is the women know you do, and they get possessive to the point of annoying.

It wasn't like I didn't want the bartender. She stood at least six feet tall, with long dark eyelashes, a waist that was thin without looking like it was going to break, breasts that stuck out far enough to make the "Lorraine" hard to read on her nametag, and long dark hair with slight blonde roots. I love blondes who dye their hair black; it shows a twisted imagination that promises an interesting screw, and satisfying conversation the next day. She was wearing a top hat, tails, and fishnet stockings, like a magician's assistant, daring me to wonder about the kinds of slight of hand, mind, or body she could perform. But what I wanted didn't matter. First, there was Lizzie. Second, the bartender wasn't remotely interested. The only reason she was looking at me at all was I hadn't ordered yet. Her

lipstick was too-red, highlighting the slightly contemptuous turn of her mouth at my date's public display of affection.

The drink I wanted didn't matter either. I wanted a Nut-Buddy: Amaretto and Kahlua with half-and-half. I didn't order that because it is a "chick-drink." My second choice would have been a banana daiquiri, and my third choice would have been a Long Island Iced Tea. That's the big joke God played on me. I'm a handsome guy, good in a fight or with my Luger, I have a job that almost everybody dreams of having, and yet somehow the Lord made me like chick-drinks. I can down three Long Islands in a half hour and remain standing, but it doesn't do me a bit of good because even the white wine drinkers are thinking "fag."

So I ordered a gin and tonic. I hate them.

Her voice was soft like a children's show host or a porn star. "That will be four dollars and seventy-five cents, sir." I could hear a slight bit of contempt in the "sir." She clearly had been saying "sir" for the last few hours to men she would prefer not to speak to, even just to give them directions. I wasn't one of those men; she didn't notice me enough to care what she called me.

"Just charge it to the University."

Contempt became amusement. "Oh, are you a *professor* or something?" I didn't blame her for thinking I was putting on airs. Gorgeous bartenders get a lot of people claiming to be professors.

"I am, as a matter of fact." I offered her my faculty ID. She didn't try to hide her cynicism as she took it.

"Oh, really? What form of liberal arts? Philosophy or cultural studies?"

“Mathematics, actually.” She was reading my ID as I said this, obtaining the information through her eyes as well as her ears. -*Dr. Doug Shaw, Department of Mathematics.*

“Oh-” Women always react when they find out that they’re talking to a mathematician. My new friend distinguished herself by displaying an assortment of the standard responses in beautiful synchronicity. Her pupils widened at the same time as her cheeks flushed, showing off her fine, high cheekbones. Her left hand, the one not trying to keep hold of my ID, reflexively started to her chest, checked itself, and then didn’t quite know where to rest. She breathed in deeply, causing her chest to swell physically as well as metaphorically. Her weight shifted as more blood started moving to the lower portions of her body. And there was a new trick; I clearly saw her nipples harden, standing out from her breasts, which a moment ago were perfect representations of the graph of

$$z = \sqrt{1 - \left(x^2 + \frac{y^2}{2}\right)}. \text{ If the room was perfectly quiet, I probably would have heard the fabric}$$

of her ruffled shirt stretch in the appropriate places.

She started to say something, perhaps an apology, but she stopped. An apology would have been an admission. And she knew her arousal didn’t matter - I was with someone practically washing my ear, and she was stuck behind the bar. On her best day I would have been a hard prize to steal, and now she had just blown it. She turned efficiently to get a glass hanging from the rack, and pour gin into it. When she turned back to dispense my tonic water from the gun, she had regained most of her composure. Her nipples hadn’t, though, clearly not as interested in hiding their emotions as she was.

Lizzy had enough on the ball to understand what was going on, but I was sure she thought the whole thing funny at this point. Hot bartender says something stupid; Elizabeth gets to fuck the mathematician. I was sure that's how she figured it, and that wasn't a bad thing for her to think. I wanted her to be secure enough to be comfortable, but not so secure as to let her focus drift off getting me into her hotel room. It was a silly game, but I was pretty good at it. Mathematicians get lots of opportunities to practice.

Lorraine put my ID to my G and T, and I took them both, leaving seventy-five cents in their place. Technically, of course, a fifteen percent tip was 71.25 cents, but I chose to round up deliberately. It was a wink to my bartender, a little message that, had things been a little different, I might have been able to be persuaded to ignore her soft-science blasphemy. The world is a non-linear dynamical system, and you never know what's going to happen as t goes to infinity. It's best to leave doors open when you can.

Lizzy already had her drink, a delicious looking amaretto stone sour obtained from a mime at the other end of the bar. She started to lead me toward one of the booths, betraying the fact that she wasn't as worldly as she represented herself to be. I pulled against her, and we reversed roles. Now I was leading her, and we went to the wall next to the bathrooms, to the door that said, "Authorized personnel only." I knocked thrice, then once, then four times, then once. The door opened a small amount. "It's Doug Shaw," I said, and the door opened all the way.

The "Dedikind Domain" wasn't as nice as it used to be, before Dr. Shepard started letting the physics people in, but it was still a decent place for two people to have a drink and talk. There was Jacko the pianist, playing loudly enough to be heard but not so much as to dominate. He was currently working through Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, but would

switch to blues piano when he saw me. I like blues piano, and Jacko liked me. There were hooks coming out of the walls, and each one had some cast-iron and leather bar-puzzle. You know the kind: a configuration of chains and straps, and you have to get the little ring off of the big horseshoe. Some of them were quite difficult, but most were easy as a Rubik's cube. There was a stairway at the far end of the lounge, leading to a room where people could go to break the law, prove a theorem, have sex, or anything else that required privacy. Two men and two women were playing bridge at a little card table near the foot of the stairs. If you had the money, and the faculty ID card, any or all of them would go up to that room with you. There were only three paintings on the wall, which most of us referred to as the "fake reproductions" to annoy Shepard, who had been very proud of his original Escher, Dali, and Dufy. I suppose you had to be there; it was funny at the time. There were some large tables in the middle of the room, with glass tops on marble pedestals. All were empty except one that had six people clustered about a seventh. Three of them were seated, the rest standing, craning their necks to see what the focus of attention was drawing on a piece of paper. From the sloppy way they were dressed I could tell that they were algebraic number theorists. Algebraic number theorists are nice enough guys, very smart, but they tend to keep to themselves. They'll help you out if you're in trouble, of course, but when they say, "my pleasure" they don't really mean it. I heard the one writing explain something in German, but I couldn't make out the words. One of the standees, Hugh Mason, looked up when we came in, and he nodded to me. I'd bailed him out of prison once, on a whim, and so now we were bonded.

There were booths at the sides of the room, upholstered in crimson vinyl. The bouncer who opened the door now indicated one of them with a motion of his head, and we

sat down. Normally, nobody would have told us where to sit, but Groden (for that was his name) must have started having delusions of situational authority. I didn't push it; I had other things to think about. We sat across from each other. She extended one leg to rest on my thigh, and I took the high-heeled shoe off her foot. I sensed she wanted me to massage it, but I decided to wait. Let her earn the pleasure.

"Thank you so much for meeting me, Mister Shaw," she said.

"My father's name is Mister Shaw."

"I'm sorry, Doctor Shaw." Had this been a purely social occasion, I wouldn't have corrected her. But it was becoming increasingly clear that Elizabeth Sheckley had spent too much time away from Academicians, and was sloppy with her etiquette. And there was the very real possibility that she and I would be meeting a few professors before all this was over. I try to be a placid man when circumstances allow it, but there are many who don't share my philosophy. Had she made that mistake in addressing Dragan Tomic, an Analyst of my acquaintance, he wouldn't have checked her gender before becoming violent. The Ivory Tower isn't a playground. If you want to visit, you have to make sure you don't wind up falling off.

The ironic thing is that my father isn't "Mister Shaw", either. After he retired from his civilian job to become a minister, he sank a great deal of money into obtaining a mail-order credential, technically making him a Doctor of Divinity. He lives in New Mexico, using his "Donald Shaw, Ph.D." to get theater tickets and free tobacco from the gullible, and to occasionally get his crackpot articles published. His behavior would be the biggest shame of my life, if I wasn't so fond of chick-drinks. So it was the second biggest.

O! Lizzie took my hand, tracing what she must have thought were abstract patterns in my palm with her finger, but were really just Lissajous figures. Somebody needed to say something, and it was my turn to talk. But I didn't get a chance to. Good. I didn't know what to say.

"Douglas, so far, this evening has been the greatest evening of my life."

"Glad to hear it."

"And I don't want to spoil it."

"You won't."

She smiled an innocent smile. "I actually believe you. God damn you, I actually believe you." And then she held my hand down, hard, with her left hand, and her right hand had a thing in it that looked like a thumbtack with a bulb in it, and she jammed it into my wrist, and I got very tired, and my last thought was that she was wrong to believe me, because she *had* spoiled the evening, so she was wrong and in a way I had won.

Before Elizabeth Sheckley was a beautiful treacherous woman, she was a pretty, happy little girl. I didn't know her personally then, but I saw her picture on her tenth birthday. Her father, Bruce Sheckley, and I were close friends, and he showed me her picture as he was bemoaning the fact that he couldn't be with her on her special day.

I wasn't the only person who saw the picture that day. We were sitting in the Flamingo Hilton casino bar along with five Complex Analysts that Bruce was friendly with. Bruce wasn't an Analyst, although he wasn't *not* an Analyst. In a profession where almost everybody finds themselves in a sub-sub-specialty or branch of the Art, Bruce Sheckley was that rare person who knew something about everything. In fact, he knew quite a lot about everything. Bruce looked a little bit like a character out of Irish folklore: Twinkling green eyes, a pot belly, and a bright orange beard that perfectly balanced his curly hair. The Computer Scientists across the hall from my office often debate whether or not there is a way to distinguish a sapient entity from a clever artificial intelligence program. I have part of the answer: If a being has consciousness, then he will find himself liking Bruce Sheckley within five minutes of meeting him. It didn't matter if you were an Analyst, an Algebraist, or even a Combinatorist like me, Bruce Sheckley had a way of making you think that you had something important in common with him, and thus with all other mathematicians. Even the statisticians, physicists and chemists enjoyed being around him, and there were rumors that Sheckley sometimes threw darts at an Economist bar in the seedy part of Campustown. I didn't believe that, but if any human being was capable of befriending an economist, it was Sheckley.

The Mathematical Association of America had rented the hotel out for our annual conference, so the money was flowing in a steady stream from the blackjack dealers to the

bar. The seven of us had been drinking hard for about an hour, but weren't feeling it yet. Bruce had passed little Elizabeth's picture around, and one of the Analysts had passed around an abstract of his latest paper. I couldn't understand a word of it; these were "Functions of a Single Complex Variable" Analysts, and I'm a Combinatorist, as I said. I'm sure Bruce understood some of it, but not all of it, and that was okay. When Bruce Sheckley was at the table, it didn't matter as much who understood what, who proved what, who was working for whom. We were smiling and talking like any other table of tourists when I looked up to make eye-contact with Paavo the Finn.

Paavo Vihavainen pissed a lot of people off, because he was every bit as strong as he was smart. We became friends when we were in graduate school, finding ourselves in the same marksmanship class. We hung out in different circles, but we always found time to get together during these gatherings, to exchange news about our lives, and our common acquaintances. I know how that sounds, but don't forget what kind of liquor I like. Paavo also has been known to indulge in the occasional daquiri.

But I was talking about his strength. In Finland, he had been an Olympic Skier, but had gotten too bulky to fly the way the champions do. He'd considered using his intelligence and steady hands to become a surgeon, but the mathematics community enticed him with a few choice conjectures, and a year later we were at the University of Illinois, shooting machine guns at targets while monitors ensured our heart rates stayed below 70 beats per minute. Mathematicians aren't usually intimidated, especially in graduate school when we're too young to have seen the pain and death that inevitably follows fearlessness and bravado, yet most of our colleagues steered clear of Paavo. Bravery is one thing, suicide is another,

and Paavo could clearly snap someone's neck like a twig in the time it would take him to say, "Bamm! Bamm!"

Besides a common fondness for the wrong sorts of drinks, we were bonded together by something else. Paavo needed someone patient to help him with his English, someone unafraid enough to tell him when he was talking like the Incredible Hulk. And me? I wasn't content to merely get through graduate school with moderate combat skills. I wanted to be the best. And I wouldn't feel that way until I could beat the crap out of Paavo Vihavainen.

So every Saturday, no matter how much I had to get done before Monday, Paavo and I would meet in a field in picnic area in the rural outskirts of Urbana. We'd talk to each other in English for about two hours, until Paavo stood up, stretched his arms over his head, and said, "That's enough."

Then I would spring up and attack him. And he would kick my ass.

I'd like to end this by telling you about how, on the night before my thesis defense, I finally won a fight with Paavo Vihavainen. But this is my real life, which doesn't always go the way I think it should. I defended my thesis with a huge black eye and sprained rib. And an undamaged mountainous friend in the front row of the auditorium, understanding every word of English that I said. Not of the mathematics, though. My thesis was in Enumerative Combinatorics. Paavo was setting them on fire with Complex Analysis: Functions of Several Complex variables.

I'm sorry for all the nesting; I was telling you about the night at the Flamingo.

Bruce and I were sitting at the table, drinking with the Complex Analysts, and Paavo the Finn spotted me. He also recognized Sheckley, so he started to approach our table. I couldn't think of a way to wave him away without attracting attention to him, so I nudged

my red-bearded socially adept friend, assuming he would think of something. Bruce looked at me questioningly, and one of the Analysts noticed, so I couldn't really do anything about it. Besides, by then Paavo was almost at the table, and he overheard a swatch of the conversation between two of our companions, understood it, so he pulled up a chair to join us.

If you weren't reading carefully, you might not realize why we were in such a dangerous situation. Yes, Paavo and all the others were Complex Analysts. But Paavo studied Functions of *Several* Complex Variables, and we were currently getting drunk with people who studied Functions of a *Single* Complex Variable. And there were Bruce and I, sitting between the Montagues and Capulets, all of whom were probably packing heat. And a shot in the head from a stray bullet is the QED to end all QEDs.

Bruce knew my facial expressions enough to get an idea of what was happening, so he subtly steered the conversation away from mathematics, and toward other areas of interest to all mathematicians. We started talking about which governments were the best employers. We started talking about the best places to get rid of large sums of cash. We started talking about the best places to hit some innumerate asshole that you needed to spill something when you didn't want to leave a mark. We *started* talking about a lot of things, but Paavo kept bringing the subject to that damn paper in front of Sheckley and me. "So, what were you discussing before Paavo came - " he looked at me embarrassed "before I came here?" Finally, he reached over and took it from me and began to read. The table fell silent; mathematics was being read.

At this point I was hoping he would be smart enough to realize the score, and let his distance from us approach infinity. But as smart as Paavo the Finn could be, he could be

equally stupid, as if he sometimes made a sign-error when consulting his IQ. He was smart enough to understand every idea in that paper, but too dumb to realize that there wasn't any more to it.

"Very interesting result," he said, "but what happens when you add more dimensions?"

The pause was tense. The only person who couldn't hear the total lack of conversation, who couldn't feel the lack of warmth, who couldn't sense the lack of safety, was the guy who was genuinely curious about the pages in his hand.

"What do you mean, 'more dimensions?'"

He still didn't get it. "Everything in this paper only talks about one variable. I mean, it was nice to start with the trivial case, but what happens..."

It was starting to dawn on him.

"...when you add..."

Fighting its way through bone-hard cortex.

"...additional..."

He got it now, but the message didn't get to his mouth in time.

"complex variables?"

As I've said, there are many branches of mathematics. The two largest ones are Algebra and Analysis. The Algebraists have a reputation for taking a great deal of pride in their fields. If you need some property recovered, you can count on them to listen carefully, quickly factoring out any irrelevant data to arrive at the kernel of what has to be done. And they will usually do it discreetly.

The Analysts have a reputation for being thorough. If one of them wants to really fuck somebody up, there is a good chance that the victim will wind up with literally every bone in his body broken exactly once. Unlike the Algebraists, who value principle ideals, the Analysts aren't interested in things that they can't demonstrate as measurable. They act, and act quickly. Where do I fit in? Some people say that Combinatorics lies between Analysis and Algebra. I like to think it sits above them.

The reaction to Paavo's statement was instantaneous. While he was pronouncing the last syllable of the phrase "complex variables" the mathematician across from him, a walrus-faced bastard, crouched like a spring with a low elasticity constant, hands under the lip of the table which he overturned to begin the attack. The feel of wasted liquor in his lap was like an electric shock to the Finn. While rising to his feet, he swung out with his right arm, as if he was trying to get his balance, and it was only a coincidence that the back of his hand connected with the man next to him, smashing his nose and knocking him over backwards in his chair. Years of training had me standing up and ready before I consciously realized that the fight had started, while years of friendship gave me the knowledge that Bruce Sheckley was standing next to me, equally prepared.

It isn't a hard configuration to imagine. You have Paavo standing like a mountain, facing four angry men. There's a fifth getting up from the floor, face full of blood, with a ceramic ashtray in his hands. And there's Bruce and I standing, ignored by all, with one of us, that would be me, tugging on the other's arm, trying to walk away from the situation. Cowardice wasn't the issue, etiquette was. This was a fight among Analysts. We didn't belong. Bruce didn't move.

The ashtray hitting the Finn's head wasn't more than an annoying distraction. But a distraction was all that was needed for him to be hit in the stomach and face, and kicked in the knees and groin by the men in front of him. He went down, the bottom of a punching heap. Tough as he was, he was probably going to get the worst of it. Bruce didn't move.

I made the mistake of making eye-contact with my immobile colleague. Everything changed without a word being said. It was no longer a fight among Analysts. It was one person being beaten up by five people. I called Sheckley a name that I'm sure he knew I didn't mean, and we each grabbed a body from the top of the pile, making it our fight, too.

My guy was the Ugly who knocked over the table in the beginning. He smoothly changed focus from his downed enemy to his standing one. I didn't know he was wearing brass knuckles until they connected with my stomach. I'd managed an uppercut before it connected, which probably did as much damage to my right hand as it did to his jaw. But when I was doubled up, it was a good thing that he was hurting, too. Otherwise I'd have gotten a knee in the face and probably wouldn't be telling this story now, or any story that involved opening my mouth wider than it takes to slip a straw in.

I swept with my foot, and he went down, and I jumped on top. A punch with my right was deflected, but it wouldn't have done damage if it connected. My hand was really shot; it was like hitting him with a loaf of only slightly stale bread. I got another punch in the stomach, and the brass knuckles got me in the throat. I couldn't breathe, but I didn't need to when I was ramming him in the nose with my head. My Reverend Dad used to say I had a "thick skull," and was correct. The crunch I heard sounded like applause, urging an encore. I obliged, and he went very still after that. I gave myself the luxury of a three count to get my lungs working again, and stood up to see what was going on with the rest of them.

The odds should have been good. Sheckley, Shaw, and the Finn versus four others. Equality, if we counted Paavo as two. I'd gotten my guy, right? I did my part.

Unfortunately, I counted wrong. I'd counted Paavo on our side. There's a saying, "When you take on one Analyst, you're fighting them all." It didn't matter that we were saving his caveman hide, as soon as Bruce and I got involved, Paavo stood with his Discipline. By the time I had won my battle, Paavo had my friend in a full nelson, and the other three were taking their turns. Now I was in a fight I really couldn't win, and I wasn't about to walk away from Bruce. So I picked up a chair. Someone else responded by picking up a gun. There were two shots fired. The first hit me in the side. I'd thought that I was lucky because the second one missed. I was wrong. True, it didn't hit me, but I wasn't the target. Sheckley died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. The bullet should have passed through Paavo's body, too. Maybe it did, maybe it didn't. The point is, he lived, and I lived, and we didn't get together to chat anymore at mathematics conventions.

I didn't need to open my eyes to know where I was when I came to. I'd accumulated hundreds of hours hearing the distinctive hum, interrupted by rhythmic clicks, of that particular air-conditioner. The upstairs room at the Dedikind Domain also had a unique alcohol-graphite-coffee-gunpowder-chocolate odor. It wasn't strong, but it had lurked in the background during many of my best theoretical breakthroughs, most pragmatic deals and strangest sexual experiences, sometimes all occurring simultaneously. I could even tell which of the three chairs I was tied to, and (by the echo of the a/c) that I was in the corner of the room farthest from the door, in the little aisle between the queen-sized bed and the television cabinet. I could have given you lots of useless details. The vibration in the floor was from the piano, and the quick beats meant that Jacko's shift had ended and Eddie's had started. Eddie was playing Ragtime, which meant that he'd gotten laid recently. Lots of useless details.

If I opened my eyes for just a second I could find out the crucial piece of information: Was I alone? But I dared not risk checking that way. If I had a friend, I didn't want him to know I was awake just yet.

It isn't too hard to filter out a source of regular noise like an air-conditioner or even a jackhammer, if you have intelligence and patience. All you have to do is concentrate on hearing amplitudes and frequencies instead of pressure waves in time. When you do it right, your source of unwanted volume will look like a little spike (or series of spikes), and all you have to do is ignore the spikes. It's like performing a fast Fourier Transform, only without doing the calculations. Slowly and carefully, I got rid of the hum, and then the clicks. My own quick heartbeat came next. After a few minutes, I did indeed hear breathing. Slow and regular, not alert at all. And then... the turn of a page. One person, reading a manuscript.

The pages were turning slowly, meaning that my captor wasn't just browsing, but actually reading. This was going to be easy. When I was a first year graduate student at Illinois, it was required that we take at least one Algebra course, one Analysis course, and one course in a different field. My Analysis course was the standard Complex Analysis course, in which I learned that I don't really like Complex Analysis. My Algebra course was in Algebraic Topology. I found it quite interesting, especially when we discussed one particularly useful sub-specialty: Knot Theory.

While freeing myself, I was also counting how many seconds passed between page turns. After the ropes were loose, I waited until my literate host was halfway through a page, and then leapt up. I hit him solid, knocking him hard to the ground. I didn't think he would get up after a shot like that, but he did, because he was Paavo.

There wasn't really a need for conversation, which was good, because I didn't want to be threatened by someone who learned English from me. That's the type of thing that's annoying without crossing the satisfying threshold of irony. He pointed at the chair, and I shook my head. And then he couldn't point anymore because both index fingers were tucked into fists.

I was pissed off because I was all slow and in pain from the dope. I'd wanted my inevitable big fight with Paavo to take place when we were both at our best. That's a lie; I really just wanted it to take place when I was at my best, and when other people thought he was at his. If he didn't get a lot of sleep the night before, it wouldn't have mattered to me. This was not going to be a pleasant confrontation.

"Who hired you?" I didn't say. "Why was I taken here?"

"Paavo isn't going to tell you. Get in the chair." He didn't respond.

"Fuck you," I didn't cry out before not hitting him a square one on the chin. He didn't then respond by throwing a roundhouse, which didn't clip me as I got out of the way, not kneeling him in the groin. As he didn't bend over, I didn't get the perfect opportunity to grab his head and knee him in the face.

This is what did happen: He drew a .45, pointed it at my chest, and indicated the chair with a motion of his granite head. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't going to let myself get shot, but I wasn't too keen on being tied up again either. I needed advice, but I didn't have any friends around. Well, I had a former friend:

"I'll tell you, Paavo, I'm not going to let myself get shot, but I'm not too keen on being tied up again either. What do you think I should do?"

His finger tightened on the trigger, enough so that he would know that I noticed. Enough so that I would also know the gun would be likely to go off by accident if it were anyone but an expert holding it. Again, he indicated the chair.

I wasn't the only person afraid to repeat a gesture: "Paavo. I'm not going to let myself get shot. But I really am against the idea of being tied up again. What do you think I should do?"

Finnish people have this one weird facial expression that they only get when they hear someone say something incredibly stupid. A confused look, that seems to be wondering how both the speaker and Andrew Wiles could be oxygen-breathing primates on the same planet. He gave me this look. And then he said, "I think you should escape," and moved the gun a little too close to me.

I've been in some very strange situations in my career. I've fucked women who wanted to kill me, and I've killed women who wanted to fuck me. I've spent 72 hours

straight in an Opium den, designing missile guidance systems with a 96 year old addict genius who made Ramanujan look merely clever. And the one thing I've never worried about was protocol.

But here I was, wasting valuable seconds, wondering whether or not it would be polite to say "Thank you" to Paavo, as he stood there, giving me a break. Three seconds passed before I made my decision. I kicked the gun out of his hands, dove for it, and aimed it at him. A very slight grin played on his lips. He was thinking that we were even, that he was some sort of Gentleman now, allowing me to back out of the room gracefully.

"Thank you," I said, and shot him, trying to get him right in the head, where he shot Bruce. An unfortunate muscle spasm caused my arm to twitch, so he wound up with a bullet in the throat instead of in the head, but I was gone before I could see him die.

My wallet and car keys were gone, so I took his. He carried a class B license, had thirty-eight dollars, was two Subway Stamps short of a free sandwich, didn't mind using cheap condoms, was a member of the Walgreen Clown Club, qualified for the Discover card, and kept important phone numbers on the back of a dog-eared Chiropractor's business card. I took out the Subway card, and put it in his shirt pocket. I could earn my own free sandwiches without his help.

Fortunately, his keys were Toyota keys. The Toyota corporation had never really understood the importance of a good random number generator. Most people don't know that you can tell a lot about a Toyota from looking at the key. It belonged to a 1996 blue Camry, with a good chance of having pinstripes, but no factory installed air-conditioning or cruise control. Clearly not his; Analysts only drive expensive cars, usually black or red. It wouldn't be difficult to find the right car in the lot.

The last thing I did before leaving the room was to grab the article he was reading. It was about 20-30 pieces of looseleaf paper covered in Bruce Sheckley's handwriting. Things were almost back on schedule. I thought I'd be going to bed with Elizabeth to get these pages, but Paavo turned out to be the one I'd screwed.

Mildly happy with my witticism, I proceeded down the stairs with the papers under my arm, at a casual pace. I had no idea if Paavo had any friends in the lounge, but passing through was the only way I could get out of the building. If someone was going to attack me, I wasn't going to save myself by creeping down the stairs looking like Peter Lorre in Casablanca.

Nobody noticed me, because nobody was there. I must have been out for quite a while. Groden the bouncer was probably paid well to let Paavo and I stay around after closing time. God-damn peanut-headed ape-man. I told Shepard not to hire a bouncer who wasn't even able to finish a masters degree program, but I've already told you about Algebraists and their ideals.

The Camry turned out not to have pinstripes, but it did have Hugh Mason leaning against it. He didn't look bored. Algebraic Number Theorists don't get bored. People talk about the "special relationship" that England has with the United States. Algebraic Number Theorists have that kind of relationship with reality: they can visit for extended periods of time, getting along fine and speaking the language, but it isn't really their home. There was no way of knowing how long he'd been leaning there.

"Where's Paavo?" he asked, in the same tone of mild curiosity you'd ask a colleague, "Did you get a haircut?"

"Are you disappointed?" Hugh gave me a blank look. Algebraists don't take sarcasm well. They consider it in the same class as a sign-error.

"More surprised than disappointed. I was expecting both of you, naturally."

"Well, you just have me." I was going to be threatening, but Hugh's total infant sincerity, coupled with all the questions screaming in my brain, left me unable to put forth an attitude.

He checked his watch. "3 AM. Paavo thought you wouldn't even be conscious until 4. We may as well get started. Hop in."

"I want to drive." That was sincere. It would be a mistake for me to get in the car at all, and I knew that. But something really unusual was going on. (You know the drill by now. Paavo was an Analyst, Hugh was an Algebraist, I was a Combinatorist. Who wanted us all in the same car and why?) I wasn't even sure if I was supposed to be a captive or not. I figured that if I was allowed to drive, then at least my life wasn't in danger. And if Hugh was going to pull a gun and force me into the passenger seat, at least our relationship out in the open.

"Suit yourself," he said, and opened the unlocked passenger door. I came around to the driver's side, and started it up.

"Go North on 275," he said, and I did so. After about five minutes, his lips started moving, very slightly, although he wasn't saying anything. He was doing Algebraic Number Theory.

I grew impatient. "Paavo isn't coming with us because we had a fight and he lost. I don't even know why I'm in this fucking car."

Hugh looked at me, as if waiting for me to ask a question. When none came, he faced forward again. After about five more minutes, his lips returned to their silent motion. As much as I enjoy the company of Really Smart People, they can be quite a pain in the ass.

“...so I would appreciate if you tell me what all of this is about.”

Hugh sighed. He'd probably explained the score to somebody else at some point, so explaining it to me would be like reworking a previously-solved problem. If he didn't owe me a favor from way back, he probably would not have made the effort. But he wasn't going to explain any more than he had to. “What do you already know?” he asked.

“Not much more than everyone else does. Sheckley came home from six months in Israel about a year before he died. He had been all excited about a paper he wrote there, but didn't talk about the specifics to anyone. He'd mentioned a collaborator or two, but no mathematician in the Middle East copped to having worked with him. Almost everybody thinks he was laying the groundwork for a king-hell practical joke, but died before he got a chance to spring it.”

That wasn't all I knew, but that was all I needed Mason to hear. I didn't tell him that one of the collaborators was a combinatorist named West, who was a teacher of mine when I was in Graduate School. I'd run into him at a conference two years ago, where he was adamantly and drunkenly describing to an amused crowd that the very best way to ensure that you get the most peanut-butter out of a jar was by removing it in wedge-like chunks, so the remaining substance was in the shape of a Pac-Man. I wasn't laughing; I remembered that Bruce started scooping his peanut-butter that way right after he'd returned from Israel. A quick check with some of my friends at United verified that West was also in the Middle East at that time.

Hugh paused, waiting for me to go on. "You cannot be telling the truth. If you do not know what the paper contains, then why is it that when we sent Elizabeth after you, your interest in her grew enormously when she mentioned that she had the paper in her hotel room?"

I told the truth. "Sentiment. This might have been my friend's last paper. I wanted to read it. Perhaps get it published posthumously."

"Mathematicians aren't known for their sentiment."

"Nor for their lack thereof." This wasn't true, but Algebraic Number Theorists are suckers for a nice dual construction. He let it pass. "Tell me about the paper."

"As you've guessed, it was not a joke. Bruce had worked with another combinatorist, and a Cabbalist. According to his daughter, Bruce thought this was his finest work ever. He was able to map the ancient Hebrew tree-of-life to the corners of a dodecahedron while, at the same time, showing that these points corresponded to the forms derived from the arithmetic-geometric inequality, and certain decompositions of product graphs into complete bipartite subgraphs."

There were two things he could have meant. One was unlikely, the other unbelievable. "The edges..."

"Yes, the edges of the dodecahedron correspond nicely to the various meanings of the verticies, and the faces also have natural, intuitive meanings. A very pretty piece of work."

"Why didn't he publish?" Bruce was notoriously slow about publishing, but certainly West would have pushed him in that direction.

"I would have had it been me. But Bruce took pity on their third collaborator, who was heavily into the upper echelon of the Cabbalistic movement. The idea that the tree of life

would actually fit onto a Platonic solid would cause a major revolution in that community. He wanted some time to break the news to them gently, or assassinations might occur. Unfortunately, his tact was less than ideal, and he was killed."

This story rang true. Cabbalists can be quite testy.

"Sheckley was going to show the paper around at a math conference, as a prelude to publishing. This information got to the wrong people, and he, too was assassinated."

"I was there when he died. It wasn't an assassination."

"You were there when he died, and it was an assassination."

"But that would mean that Paavo had been hired to provoke that fight."

When mathematicians want to say "eventually comprehensible" they use the word "obvious." If they want to convey the concept "obvious" they use the word "trivial." This means that mathematicians have no word that means "trivial." So when a colleague says something completely trivial or self-evident, the mathematician's response is to look as if he's just farted. I got that look from Mason.

Other things became "trivial" to me as soon as I saw that look. If Paavo was working for the Cabbalists, then so was Hugh, and (if I continued driving) so was I. "Alright. So this secret organization wanted to get rid of Sheckley's paper. They hired Paavo to kill him, and now they hired him to recover the paper. How do you and I fit into all of this?"

"He was not hired to recover the paper. They didn't need him to do that. They merely paid Elizabeth to let them look through her father's documents, and then they bought one. Paavo, you, and I were hired to translate the paper into a language they can understand."

"I won't do it."

“Elizabeth and Paavo were in charge of persuading you.”

“It didn’t work.”

“As you’ve said. Take this exit.” I really shouldn’t have, but I was hooked.

Mathematicians have a lot of strengths. You don’t want to go up against one on the target range or in the boxing ring, in a barroom drinking contest or an international smuggling cartel. But we do have one big weakness: we are curious bastards. I wanted this conversation to continue.

“The paper is primarily of my field and yours. Paavo was going to be there in case we ran across any Analytic foolishness. Bruce was known to slip it in his Algebra papers, just to be difficult.”

I didn’t understand how any of this had to do with my field. I am very proud of my work on the Finite Projective Plane conjecture. I like to flatter myself into thinking that someday I may be killed because of my bijection between the circle-plus operation on perfect planar difference sets and the addition tables of finite fields. But if that is to happen, it is a long way off.

“What paper of mine in particular brought me to your attention?”

Hugh permitted himself a chuckle. It was contemptuous. Gratuitous modesty wasn’t encouraged in our job, and I certainly was sounding modest. “I refuse to recite your Curriculum Vita to you, Dr. Shaw. But the results you obtained in ‘The Ten Sefirot and the Twelve Tribes of Israel’ were quite revolutionary for their time, and we believe that ‘Jewish Gnostics and Hebrew Acrostics,’ although amusing, betrayed a deep, secret understanding that you were understandably reluctant to reveal.”

I didn't write those articles, but I'd heard of them. I'd even tried to get through the second one. I normally wasn't interested in Jewish Mysticism, but I felt compelled to try to read them, because they were written by my father.

My father. D. Shaw, Ph.D. They wanted a mathematician and a Cabalist, and they'd accidentally combined Shaws. And I'd be damned if I told them any differently. It was time to hurt some people. Because they'd killed Bruce Sheckley. And, more importantly, because I felt like it. And what was the point of going through the hell of becoming a mathematician if you couldn't indulge the occasional urge for wanton mayhem. The bastards were dead meat.

I needed to let Hugh "persuade" me.

"How much did they think they could buy us for?" He named a large figure. "I'm persuaded."

"Paavo didn't think it would be that easy. I disagreed with him."

"You were right." I got the fart-look again, and shut up. We soon pulled into the driveway of a nice ranch house in a mid-range suburb. Elizabeth Sheckley opened the front door. She was wearing a pink bathrobe that would have been provocative even if it weren't loosely tied. She hadn't been awake long enough for the color to come back into her face. Her hair was clumped into random directions, like a mild medusa. She looked like hell. She looked like a goddess.

"Nice to see you again," I said, wondering if I wanted to kill her, and if I would when I got the opportunity.

"Polite of you to say so," she replied. I did and I wouldn't.

"Let's get started," said Hugh. No layers of meaning there. He'd probably been anxious to get started for a long time. 4 AM was just an abstract concept to him.

Elizabeth accompanied us to a dining room, and left us there. There was a portico along a wall, supporting a stack of legal pads, some pencils, and a couple of laptop computers. There were no books around, but I was sure that there was some room in Hugh's house that was lousy with them.

I made sure to sit down first. "Okay, now leave me the hell alone for a few hours." Hugh understood that. Many people work best alone. I especially needed time by myself, because I didn't know shit about the Kabbalah, and I was going to have to act like I was an expert. Hugh bowed slightly, and I was alone. I took a fresh legal pad and a sharp pencil, and turned to page one. It didn't take long to leave the dining room, Hugh's house, the United States. I was in a mathematics paper. It didn't matter where my physical body was.

I understood very little of what I was reading, but the structure was familiar to me. Definitions, Theorems, Proofs, Corollaries. And it was unmistakably Bruce. I wouldn't be able to tell you why a particular part was brilliant or another part was routine, but I could tell you which parts were which. I'd read enough of his papers to understand his rhythm.

Definitions, Theorems, Proofs, Corollaries. And the occasional Porism. I fucking love my job. And its not the action (although I like that) and its not the danger (although I like that) and its not the money (although I like that) and its not the weapons (although I like them) and its not the women (although I *really* like them). When it comes right down to it, I love the world that I get to visit for the price of a legal pad and a pencil. Definitions, Theorems, Proofs, Corollaries.

I'd read through the paper twice, and my back hurt. My watch told me why; I had not moved in five hours. My first legal pad was almost full, and I had to stand to get a new one. It hurt. Hugh or Elizabeth must have been in to check on me, because there was an

untouched cup of coffee within my reach. But they knew enough to leave me alone, as I would leave any of my colleagues alone when they were in a transcendental state.

Definitions, Theorems, Proofs, Corollaries. You are floating in space, and suddenly you are standing on a river bank. Grass, trees, and rushing water appear and grow more and more distinct. Soon you can not only see your surroundings in vivid detail, but you can see that the other bank is even more pretty, and it is just a matter of crossing on stones, some wide and easy to step on, some small and fragile. But you cross, and there is a huge tree with giant luscious fruits ready for you to pluck effortlessly. And you eat, but then you notice that there is another river a few paces away, and an even more inviting bank on the other side. Definitions, Theorems, Proofs, Corollaries.

The vegetation, the fruit, and even the water, soil and stones were all new and incomprehensible to me, but I was able to make the journey. Somewhere, a galaxy away, someone's leg fell asleep and a crick formed in his neck. But that wasn't interesting at all, and it was odd that I'd even noticed. And I crossed the last bank and found myself in a place

that was

exactly where I'd left. If I'd bent over to sniff a flower, I would have been squirted in the eye while an incidental riff from "Laugh-In" sounded.

I tried to make my body stand up in the real world, but I only managed to lift myself enough to get hurt. Elizabeth and Hugh were there right away. Not soon enough to prevent me from falling over my numb legs and down to the floor, but soon enough to hear me swear a few times. They helped me walk the blood back into the bottom half of my body, one leg moving in front of the other in agony. I wound up leaning against the kitchen counter,

holding a glass of orange juice in my cramped right hand. No sunlight was coming in the kitchen window. I checked my watch, but couldn't read it. It was blurry.

"Hugh?"

He understood. "8:30 PM. Saturday. You've been at it for about 17 hours."

"Wow." Slowly, and in control, I stretched my arms up over my head and stood on tiptoe. It had been a while. It was an effort to understand his words; part of me was still applying Affine Transformations on the graph formed by the Tree of Life and the ten Sephiroth.

They were looking at me expectantly. To hell with them. I had some thinking to do, about some practical matters, and I wasn't in the condition to do anything but rest. "I need to sleep"

"Are you sure?" asked Hugh. What he was really asking was, "Will you lose half of what you learned when you sleep? Shouldn't you tell me everything you can now?"

"I'm sure," I replied. What I was really saying was, "I'm sure." I was, too.

They helped me to a barely furnished room with a double-bed. I saw Elizabeth kneeling over me, and her robe falling over her shoulders. Her breasts were teardrop shaped. I hope she had a good time with my body, because I had no use for it for the next few hours.

She was next to me when I woke up, one hand holding mine, like we'd fallen asleep watching a romantic movie projected on the ceiling.

I disengaged and dressed quietly. She woke up to the sight of me sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, Paavo's gun aimed at her wonderful chest.

"I -"

"Quiet now"

She didn't panic. Quietly: "Don't shoot me."

"Why not?"

She couldn't think of an answer. I'm glad she respected me enough not to lie and say that she loved me. There isn't enough respect in this world. I thought that the least I could do is return the respect, so I put the gun down and admitted, "I'm not going to shoot you."

I just lied to you. I put down the gun because she was gorgeous and shooting her would be an act of vandalism.

No, that's also a lie. I put down the gun because I could see my old friend in her face, and it hit me that the last thing in the world he'd want was for me to shoot his daughter.

Wrong again. The truth is that I have no idea why I put down the gun. Some days you just don't feel like killing your enemies, you feel like talking to them.

"You know what I want to know, so begin," I said. I've found that that's the best thing to say to a woman when you have no idea what you should ask. Elizabeth spoke, but first she did something that made me trust her completely; she leaned over, and pulled the sheet up over her torso, stopping only at the neck. If she were about to make up a story, she would have left it down, knowing the effect her partial nudity would have on my judgment. Covering herself was almost like a declaration of honesty.

"You want to know how I got mixed up with these people."

I didn't say anything. It sounded like a good enough thing to know.

"You remember, when my Dad died, how people were always visiting us. Dr. Lefton would come a couple times a month to clean the gutters and fix the shelves and things like

that. Dr. Halberstam once bought me a pretty dress and took Mom and I to the opera. And do you remember that time you came over with the boomerang?"

I cringed at the memory. Given my thoughts about Elizabeth over the last three days, the last thing I wanted was to remember teaching her how to throw a boomerang when she was ten. "I remember."

"Every once in a while people would ask me about that paper. Dr. West told me that I should just tell them that it was lost, and that people could ask him if there were any more questions. But not everyone stopped asking. They wanted to know where it was, they wanted to look at it."

"Why didn't you give it to them?"

"Mom insisted that nobody ever see it. I think it was spite. She blamed the Math community for taking Daddy away from us, and she took solace in that we had something that they wanted. Only she and I knew where it was hidden."

"I'm curious -"

"It doesn't matter now, but I still can't tell you. It's silly, I've done so much against her wishes, but now that she's gone I can't tell her last secret."

"I'm sorry." I was, too. I had meant to keep in contact with her, but as the years went by, circumstances - no, not circumstances. I got careless. I got distracted. I was a selfish jerk and stopped checking on Bruce's family. And I'd bet my laptop that all of Bruce's other concerned colleagues and friends had stopped coming around as the years went by.

"How long has she been gone?"

"Not very long. He was at the funeral. He wrote a large check just for the privilege of looking at the papers. The money ran out quickly, and then he wrote me a larger one just

to borrow them. And then more just for getting you to take me out that first time. And finally for that last ..." She didn't cry. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that. He promised me you wouldn't be hurt, but I still shouldn't have done it." She didn't say, "Oh, I'm sure you must hate me." I was starting to really like Elizabeth Sheckley.

"So West was the one who wrote the checks?"

"No, not Dr. West." And then she told me who it was, the person who showed up at her mother's funeral. The bastard who clearly was paying everyone. The person who I would ultimately have to kill.

"I'm gone," I said. I had to put my gun down while I finished getting dressed, but I knew she wouldn't pick it up. That part of the game was over. "Tell Hugh that everything he needs to know is in my notes, and it won't take him too long to figure it all out."

"When do we see each other again?" Elizabeth stood now, her nude body lit in rose-tones from the sun coming through the curtains. But I didn't see what was in front of me. I saw a sad, quiet, pretty little girl in a park, holding a boomerang, saying that it never came back to her when she threw it. "It's like Daddy. It's never going to come back."

"We don't," I said, and then I knew I was wrong. "Not for a while. But make sure to invite me to your wedding."

Shock. Hurt. Anger. Understanding. "I will. Good luck, Douglas."

"Thanks."

I took the Camry.

I knocked at the door the Dedekind Domain at precisely 5 o'clock, the moment that it opened. I knocked thrice, then once, then four times, then once. The door opened a small

amount. "It's Doug Shaw," I said, and Groden slammed the door shut. I had quietly removed the hinges a half-hour before, so I didn't care that much. He was shocked when I ripped the door away, but had started his roundhouse before his conscious mind had fully processed the situation. I ducked, broke his nose with my left palm while knocking the wind out of him with my right fist. It really wasn't much of a fight. Groden was a 300-pound professional bouncer who was a former heavyweight contender. I am a mathematician.

I wasn't going to fight Dr. Shepard - He was going to meet Paavo's gun.

At 5:00, the place was like \emptyset , the empty set. Shepard's office was behind a door under the Escher. He'd be there, behind his oak desk, living out the last few moments of his life.

The door was unlocked.

Mistake: I had assumed he would be alone.. A man stood in front of the desk, between myself and my quarry. I didn't notice that he was wearing a nice suit and dark glasses. I didn't notice that he had little infinity symbols on his lapels. I didn't notice a lot of things, because I was distracted by the flame thrower aimed at me. That sort of thing takes focus in a tableaux.

"Hey! I want a piece descended, or aflame." His English was poor, but the sentiment was clear. I pointed Paavo's gun at the floor.

"Nice goon, Dr. Shepard. Was Groden too intelligent a hire?"

"Groden's not the one staring at a flame thrower, Dr. Shaw."

"Touché."

"State the argument against having my associate kill you."

Shepard was a logical man. So I stated my case succinctly. "One: You need my help to interpret Sheckley's paper. Two:" This was bad - I couldn't think of a good "Two." But I had to say something.

"Two: There's no real reason to kill me, and it is against the law. You know, this would be easier if there wasn't a flamethrower aimed at me. It's distracting."

The thug spoke. "For a time, I point continued at caller."

Shepard nodded. "The pressure won't last long. One: you killed one of my employees. Two: you left him dead in my establishment, bleeding all over the place. Three: you burst in here with your gun drawn. Four: Professor Mason called earlier to tell me that you had completed your work and left your notes. I don't need you; you are a threat; and if there is police trouble, I will have witnesses that will testify that you were killed in self defense. Anything else?"

No, nothing else. Except for one thing. Something was in my head. Something really important. A piece of information that was in my brain, hurling itself at my skull walls trying to get attention. And I was too much of an idiot to hear what it was screaming.

"Sir, I feel a large necessity to crispy flame the guest"

It was the minion. The way he talked. The inconsistent grammar. But something was very consistent. I couldn't quite get it. And I was going to be dead very soon. "Crispy flame." I could practically see his strange sentences written out in my mind:

Hey I want a piece descended or aflame
For a time I point continued at caller
Sir I feel a large necessity to crispy flame the guest

And there it was. 3 - 1 - 4 - 1 - 5 - 9 - 2 - 6 - 5 - 3 - 5. His word-lengths were the digits of Pi. Which meant he was some sort of number-mystic freak, fluent enough to clearly

have obsessed about Pi for a very long time. A Caballist. I had had it wrong. I wasn't going to be killed by Shepard's hire; I was going to be killed by his employer.

My Reverend Dad had once said, "The truth will set you free."

And in this case it would. Who would have thought that all I would have to do to save my life was to be candid and honest?

"Before you have me killed, allow me to tell you the results of Sheckley's paper."

"As I have said, I don't need you for that. I have Mason."

"But I can tell you about them now. It will save you a week or two of waiting." I addressed this comment to the guy with the flame-thrower. If he was the boss, then Shepard was no longer relevant.

" 'Why?' I pose. A whole fortnight to decode notes you wrote?" 31415926535 without even a pause.

"Maybe a few days less, Hugh *is* smarter than I am." I hated to admit that in front of Shepard. But if I wound up on fire, my ego would roast right along with the rest of me.

"But I'm here, now. And I think you would be interested in what I have to say."

Shepard was also smarter than I am. He must have figured out that I had a reason for being so generous. "We've waited this long; we can wait a little longer." He had a gun drawn. The flame-thrower suddenly was demoted to the second most interesting thing in the room.

"Nix! I said I elect rationale to murder enemy." I couldn't resist. "How do you DO that?"

"How? I live a rigid existence. Do reveal swift the noted synopsis."

I didn't speak until Shepard lowered his weapon. I continued to wait until it left his hand completely. "Sheckley and his coauthors were clearly not as expert in the Kabbalah as you or I." This was technically a true statement, if the "or" was taken the right way. "But they did understand the idea of equivalence. The Hebrew word for 'love' has the same numerical value as the word for 'oneness', so we say they are related in some way."

Slight faux-pax; I was talking basics to an expert. I continued:

"That concept is a major one in mathematics, too. We call it equality, isomorphism, homeomorphism, depending on the context, but it comes down to showing two different things to be, in some sense, the same. Two apples, Two people, Two atoms, we call all of them 'two.'

"I believe all of the authors had something in common, just as a pair of apples and a pair of atoms do. The authors were intellectually playful. The reason you've probably had trouble getting people to understand the paper in the past - " from the look on both faces, I could see I was right " - was that they were probably too serious about it. This was a paper about taking analogies, meta-analogies and the like, to extremes. Proving theorems for their sheer beauty, and attempting to structure some proofs to (in an abstract way) resemble the very statements of future theorems. Other branches of mathematics added and abandoned for their sheer aesthetic value. In short, my captors, this paper could be viewed as Art for Art's sake, Math for Math's sake, or an incredibly brilliant practical joke, depending on your point of view."

"But I want a great discovery ..." whined the number-mystic

"That is, I'm afraid, a matter between you and Dr. Shepard. I've done the work I was asked to; I did it promptly, and I have to note that I have not yet been paid. Please send the check to my University address. I'm sure the two of you now have a lot to discuss."

...and I walked out, closing the door behind me. I didn't have to worry about my sudden exit, nor my tone, because by the end of my small speech the flamethrower was no longer aimed at me. I took three confident steps, and then I almost passed out. Slowly now, breathing deeply, I stepped past Groden, who was at his post, sitting on a stool. We made eye-contact, but neither of us were in any mood or condition for a rematch. In the front room now, eyes straight on the door, when a voice: "What would you like, Dr. Shaw?"

Lorraine was dressed impeccably, looking even better than she had that previous night. Behind her was a mirror, and I was there, clothes rumpled, sweaty, unshaven. And I could see me approaching the bar, sitting down, and I could hear me saying, "Strawberry daiquiri, please."

I think the first sip came right out my pores, but the second one stayed inside. My God, it was good. The first drink after almost losing your life is always delicious. Lorraine was still in front of me, staring.

"You may need a new job soon," I said. "This place may be changing hands."

"I had that feeling when I saw Groden sprawled on the floor."

How was my drink finished so soon? She took the glass.

"You know, I noticed that you over-tipped the other night..."

"Did I?" That was a hundred years ago, wasn't it?

"Maybe I could return the favor in some way?"

I was too tired to flirt back. It must have been obvious, because she came around the bar, took my arm, and we walked out together, with her supporting some of my weight. Right before we got to her car, I heard the fire alarm going off at Shepard's place.