



MIRANDA'S
INN

Venor sank his left hand deep into the pocket of his worn out coat and fished out a handful of shiny coins, while he was marching on the stone road. He grinned stupidly at the coins, and put them back in his pocket. If anybody found out how he had come into possession of the money, he'd probably be thrown into prison right away. It's not that much, he kept telling his conscience. Just a few coins. Nobody was gonna miss them. Plus, he was able to travel to Insomida in a slightly more comfortable manner now. Of course, he could have just gone there without staying one night in Mirnda's Inn. But since the way from Astatik to Insomida was almost a four day journey on foot, he had decided to at least treat himself to a cosy bed one night out of the three.

As the sun beamed its last rays over the edges of the Ventorania Mountains, Venor finally reached Mirnda's Inn. The smell of fresh bread and roasted meat entered his nose and suddenly his stomach was alert and eager to be filled.

"Don't worry, my friend," Venor said to his belly and patted it twice. "The coins in my pocket tell me that one of those fresh meals is gonna be yours pretty soon." The inn consisted of three houses, aligned next to each other, with the middle one - the actual inn - being twice as big as the other two. To the left Venor saw the stables full with horses of various color, and to the right, he figured, was probably the kitchen, with the smoke crawling out of the chimney.

Venor approached the heavy entrance door built of dark wood. He was about to open it when he spotted a small closed carriage arriving behind him. The coachman, a large man in his thirties, ordered his horse to halt, jumped off and opened the carriage. A hand reached out of the dark and the coachman grabbed it. The passenger stuck his head out. Venor giggled to himself at the sight of the passenger's bald head. The coachman aided the old man out of the carriage, and Venor overheard a "Thank you" from the passenger.

"Always a pleasure," the coachman replied. He leaned his whole upper body into the carriage and returned with a long stick in his right hand. "Here you go," he said and handed the stick to the old man.

Venor shook his head and entered the inn.

A wave of voices and laughter embraced him. Glasses met each other, and loud music was being played by two guitarists somewhere in the corner. Nobody looked in Venor's direction, not even when the door behind him fell back into lock.

Nervously he stared around for a bit, took quick glances at the faces around him to see if he recognized anybody. Not a single familiar person.

"Can I help you?" asked a woman's voice.

Venor turned his head and saw Mirnda. Her appearance made him blink. She had strong arms and legs, a voluminous bosom reaching out far, a double chin and curly black hair. Though, to Venor's surprise, what she didn't have in beauty, she definitely had in efficiency, good will and sympathy.

"Do you need a room?" Mirnda asked again, interrupting Venor's process of examination.

"Why, I... Yes, yes, please," Venor stuttered.

Mirnda smiled warmly. "What kind?"

"Affordable," Venor replied.

"Well, judging by your clothes, affordable is quite above your price class," Mirnda joked, adding a hearty laughter to show she was just playing with the man. She

cocked her head in the direction of the stairs and made an inviting gesture. "Come on, I'll show you around and you tell me what you want."

Venor nodded and followed her upstairs.

Each step creaked under Mirnda's and Venor's feet, sounding like a dozen rocking chairs swinging back and forth repeatedly.

"I haven't seen you around here before, have I?" Mirnda said, without looking back.

"No," Venor answered tightly.

"I keep surprising myself. With dozens of people coming by every day I still keep track of faces," Mirnda said, again followed by deep laughter. "Well, anyway, here we are. We've got rooms for one, two, three and four persons, basically. Once I squeezed ten people in a four-person-room over night, and believe you me when I say that when they came down for breakfast the next day they all seemed a lot thinner."

Venor couldn't help but chuckle and snort. Mirnda looked back at him with her warm smile, satisfied that she had made him laugh at last.

"Now," Mirnda said, opening a single-person-room. "How about this one?"

Venor shoved his head through the open door and looked left and right. There was a bed, a window with dark wooden frame, and a small cupboard with a little vase on top and a flower in it.

"Not bad," Venor said. "Is this one of the cheap rooms?"

"Cheap rooms? Who told you I had cheap rooms?" Mirnda said, nudging Venor in his right side, laughing. Venor opened his mouth to say something, but Mirnda cut off his words. "The rooms don't differ, except in size, of course. I only offer a few options. Like, dinner, no dinner, breakfast, no breakfast, room service, no room service, special care for horses, no special care for horses. You get the idea."

Venor frowned, looked up for a bit and then said: "I want a room, dinner and breakfast. I don't have a horse."

"No horse? Where are you coming from?" she asked with a tone of doubt in her voice.

"Astatik."

"All the way on foot?"

"Yes," Venor said angrily. Just skip the personal questions, old hag, he thought.

"So, uh, is that all? How about room service?" Mirnda asked.

"No," Venor declined.

"Massage?"

Venor raised his right eyebrow. "Nah."

"Bath?"

"Hm, well..." Venor scratched his chin. "Nah."

"Are you sure?" Mirnda asked.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Just asking. Well, seems like we got ourselves a deal," she said and clapped her hands, making her whole body tremble.

"What do I owe you?" Venor said, reaching for the coins in his pocket.

"Ten eyes straight," she said, holding her hand in his direction, palm upwards.

Venor turned away from her, and looked down on his hand, holding the coins close to his face. He counted carefully, whispering the numbers to himself. Twenty-three in total. He picked ten, faced Mirnda again and paid the fee.

She bowed slightly and smiled. "Thank you very much, young man. I hope you're gonna enjoy your stay."

"I'm sure I will," Venor said, showing his two rows of yellow teeth.

"Oh yes, the door can only be locked from the inside," Mirnda said, pointing at Venor's room. "I've gotten rid of keys because people kept forgetting to return them to me."

"I see, so that means I shouldn't keep belongings inside while being outside, right?" Venor asked, scratching the back of his head.

"That would be wise, yes," Mirnda said and chuckled. "Don't worry, though. If somebody should lock you out of your room, there's still my master key that can open every door in this house and I always remember the rooms of my customers." Venor nodded and touched his belly. "Say, when's dinner?"

A few moments later Venor was sitting at a table, munching on a cooked piece of beef meat and drinking strong beer. A different bunch of musicians were performing now, the singer telling stories about legendary heroes and beautiful women, the crowd applauding, laughing and cheering whenever the lyrics contained jokes, twists or vulgar words. There were about a dozen tables in total, and Venor's table was standing close to the wall on the inn's entrance side. Venor ignored everybody in the room, and the other guests seemed to disregard him as well, fortunately. As he emptied his cup he noticed that the old man he had seen in front of the inn was now coming down the stairs, step by step, tightly holding his walking stick in his left hand, and with Mirnda aiding him to his right. To Venor's confusion Mirnda and the old man appeared to be headed for his table. Nervously Venor chewed his meat and looked at the trophies and valuables on the walls: Stuffed animal heads and paws, rare and expensive animal hides, swords and daggers, and various paintings of landscapes and people Venor didn't recognize.

They were indeed approaching Venor's table, he realized in shock. Why would Mirnda not place the geezer at an empty table?

"There you go," Mirnda said and helped the old man sit down.

"I am very much indebted to you, my lady," he said in a soft voice, leaning his stick against the table.

"The usual to drink and eat?" Mirnda asked, as her customer shuffled from side to side to find a good sitting position.

"The usual will do just fine," he answered, nodding deeply. Mirnda disappeared into the kitchen.

Venor was bouncing his right leg up and down with his foot and chewing faster, trying hard not to meet the eyes of his new counterpart.

"Good evening, sir," the old voice said in Venor's direction.

Irritated, Venor didn't answer at first, still looking around as if searching for something.

"A very fine night, is it not?"

Venor now realized in despair that the codger actually was talking to him. For the first time he looked the man into his dry eyes, which were surrounded by wrinkles and gray skin.

"Yes," Venor said, while chewing meat.

"Is this your first time in Mirnda's Inn, my friend?"

"Why?" Venor felt watched and violated in his privacy.

"Every first timer appears quite aroused - myself included," the wrinkled lips explained.

Venor scoffed and took one giant bite. His meat was almost gone. He promised himself he would leave the table as soon as the meat was completely in his stomach. On a table close to Venor's a man with a huge belly leaned in their direction and shouted: "Now if that ain't a voice I reco'nize!" He stood and moved his corpulent body thundering towards the old man, who replied: "Glenry, how are you? You seem to have lost weight!"

They shook hands. Venor could swear the old man's hand was getting crushed.

"Haha, still telling anything but true stories," Glenry said, patting the old man on his back. He turned around and raised his right arm. "Look here, people, Stam has the guts to come back again," he yelled with a joking look on his round face.

The whole room turned eyes on Stam in front of Venor, cheered his name, greeted him, and raised their jugs and cups in his direction.

What have I gotten myself into, Venor thought, feeling his head turn red.

"Now Stam, I'm sure you've got another goodnight tale for us in that tricky mind of yours, am I right?" Glenry laughed.

Stam shook his head and grinned, as any person would when asked for something by a lot of people, already knowing that he would agree after the next push.

"Come on, Stam, we all wanna hear one, don't we?" Glenry asked around, making an offering gesture with his left hand spanning the whole room. The response was quite positive, and Stam grinned even wider, enjoying the attention.

Meanwhile, Venor sunk lower and lower in his chair.

"So be it then," Stam agreed. People grabbed their chairs, carried them closer to Venor's table and sat down in a wide circle around Stam. The musicians ceased playing, jumped off the stage and joined the lot.

Mirnda brought a crystal clear glass of water and a plate with two slices of bread with thick layers of butter.

"Much obliged, Mirnda," Stam said.

"You're welcome, Stam, now you better entertain my guests or I'll eat that myself,"

Mirnda joked. The crowd roared with laughter. Stam only grinned.

"I will try my best, dear," he replied. "Let me see."

Now is the time, Venor thought. If I don't leave I will be stuck here for the rest of the night.

"What is your name, friend?" Stam asked Venor.

Venor's body almost trembled with nervousness. He hesitated, saw that a few dozen eyes were awaiting his answer and just blurted out his name.

"Interesting name," Stam mumbled. "Oh, by the way, it is Venor's first night at Mirnda's," he said, pointing and smiling at Venor. All people surrounding him cheered, applauded and welcomed Venor.

"Why is this happening to me?" Venor thought.

"Now this reminds me of a particular story," Stam mumbled again, staring at his walking stick for a while. "In Astatik there lives this young boy named Farmond. His parents are long gone already, and the streets are his shelter and home." Stam took a sip of his glass and a small bite of his bread.

"He's torturing us again," one of the crowd said, and everybody else responded with a quick chuckle.

"He sure is," another one added.

Stam stayed calm, swallowed, leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, relaxing his back a bit. With a smirk he continued. "One day Farmond is out to steal apples from one of the stands in Astatik. Usually he goes through the same plan. He asks a merchant for a free apple, and if declined he simply fetches one when the merchant isn't looking. The merchants usually don't stay in the same place for long, so he is rarely remembered in case he gets caught."

Stam's voice spoke each word carefully pronounced, with the necessary emphasis to immerse the crowd around him. Venor caught himself hanging on the old man's lips as well and had to admit to himself that maybe Stam was a good storyteller after all, credit where credit was due. But he still liked neither Stam nor his audience. Now that Stam was taking another short moment to consume water and bread, Venor once again tried to think of a way to escape this awkward situation.

Stam's voice conveyed further elements of his story, using gestures to support his magic.

"This particular day, however, Farmond is out of luck. He casually approaches a stand full with fresh and ripe fruits and asks the merchant for one apple. As most of the time, Farmond's wish is denied, so the boy strolls away, hides behind a wall and watches the stand for a good moment to strike. Quite a while later the merchant is quarrelling with another merchant of the opposite stand about price undercutting, and Farmond sees an opportunity. Like a cat about to kill a mouse, he dashes out of his hideout, runs towards the stand, takes an apple and jumps away."

Venor sweated beneath his coat. Why out of all the possible stories would Stam tell one about a thief? His hand in his pocket played nervously with the coins.

"Usually," Stam continued, "somebody would yell a word or two after Farmond. But this time it isn't just one merchant. Farmond's ears hear a lot more voices than normally. While he's running fast through the alleys of Astatik, he looks back and sees a bunch of people starting to run after him. He turns several times, hurts his toes on a pile of wood that he tries to leap over, and pushes through other people's legs, as if he were running through a forest. The calls and yells become louder, Farmond realizes. His escape route leads him to the Astatik cemetery. You all know the cemetery of Astatik. Unlike the one in Insomida, this one is basically just a bunch of small hills behind the church with gravestones for the dead, most of them even without names."

The crowd acknowledged that fact with a few nods and approving hums.

Stam poked his forehead twice with his skinny index finger. "Farmond thinks fast now. He could run out of Astatik into the woods and rest for the night. Astatik is a place he can't be seen for at least ten or maybe even twenty days now. He curses himself for being careless. One last time he looks back over his right shoulder, stumbles, falls over -"

Stam held still with both hands raised up at the height of his eyes. Then he formed a fist with the right hand and punched the left palm hard. "And Farmond's head hits a gravestone and the apple rolls out of his hand."

The audience's disappointed moaning filled the inn's air. Stam sipped his water with an impish look.

"Now hold on, I'm not finished yet," Stam said. "In the evening Farmond wakes up next to the gravestone that knocked him out. He looks up and sees the apple a few feet away, crushed into a brown pile. The boy feels cold and notices that there are no clothes covering his body anymore. The merchants must have stolen them and - rather childishly - trampled on the apple to emphasise their anger. Farmond stands up slowly, feeling dizzy, touching the wound on his head. It's getting dark, and despite the pain, the young lad thinks fast about what to do for getting shelter." Venor would've enjoyed being swallowed by the ground, just to be finally gone. Dozens of eye pairs would follow him if he were about to leave. So he just sat there, chained to the chair by shame, trying to recall a good memory.

Stam rambled on, like a rock rolling down a slope. "After a while Farmond decides to stay in his hideout in the forest for some time and lay low. Fortunately, just recently he discovered a second set of clothes from a fresh corpse deeper in the forest. And so for the next few days, he stays in the woods. However, one can't live on nuts and berries forever - not if apples, meat, bread and other delicacies can be stolen. Thus a few days after his escape, he drags himself back to Astatik. At first he doesn't realize any change. Just like usual, the market is packed with all kinds of people. Even the king wanders around, glancing at every dealer's inventory. I suppose we all know the king's behaviour."

Some members of the circle around Stam giggled hesitantly. Realizing that little joke hadn't exactly hit, he fired the next few words out of his mouth.

"Between all those bodies Farmond looks up, just to see the sky. At first he thinks that his mind is playing tricks on him. While glancing up into the blue, he notices blurry little letters above the heads of every passing stranger. He concentrates and strains his eyes trying to focus on the letters, but the more he tries, the more the letters seem to vanish. Only with the side of his eyes he's able to make out what those lines and circles are: Numbers. Long chains of almost invisible, cloudy and fuzzy numbers, sometimes reaching ridiculous lengths, almost the size of their carriers."

"The brat's becoming a mathician!" somebody yelled.

"It's called mathemastician," another man replied arrogantly.

"Quiet, you fools, let Stam talk," Mirnda called in her low voice from the bar she was standing at, grinning and drying dishes with a towel.

"Yes, ma'am," one man apologized.

Stam cleared his throat and his eyes met Venor's, who looked away in sudden fear.

"Curious, Farmond leaves the market place and stops in front of a window in an alley. In his reflection he also sees a number, just as uncanny as all the others. With the side of his eyes he attempts to read the digits. A shadow of fear falls over his face, as he suddenly realizes the last digit's value is constantly dropping by one, with fierce regularity. Again. And again. Like water dropping from the roofs after heavy rain. From excitement his heart is pounding blood through his veins with an almost unnecessary, exaggerated force - and Farmond notices in shock that every time his heart beats, the number on top of his head drops by one."

Stam formed his right hand into a grabbing gesture, and while opening and closing it, he imitated a heart's beating sound with a low double-thump in his throat.

The audience was silent, but in Venor's mind a storm of thoughts about a possible plan of escape was raging.

Stam's hand returned to normal. "Farmond turns away from his reflection and trots to the market. He's got to find out what happens when that number reaches zero, although in one part of his mind a rather sinister answer to that question is already lurking. He wanders around for the rest of the day, looking at a hundred different ghostly numbers, but the smallest he can find is still seven digits long. Three days he continues to analyze numbers, and some people look at Farmond and think the boy's blind, for he keeps staring into the sky. The feeling of uncertainty almost drives him mad - when finally, almost by accident, a very small number appears. The carrier is a crooked man slurping down a narrow, misty alley, with long white strains of hair hanging loosely from the bald glimmering surface of the top of his head. Three cloudy digits. Farmond stays out of the man's sight and watches from afar. As the number reaches ninety-nine, the first digit fades away in little pieces, like a mug, breaking on the floor after a ten feet fall. The old man coughs hard, and Farmond asks himself if a call for help were the correct way to act now. The alley is practically empty, and the few people passing by don't seem to care about what happens to a lowly beggar - such as Farmond himself."

Stam paused for a moment, looking at his half-empty glass. Venor was still conceiving a desperate plan of stealing himself away, and yet - a part of him also wanted to hear the end of the story.

Stam's wrinkled lips continued forming words to enchant all ears surrounding him.

"Farmond watches in fright as the number above the old beggar's head steadily decreases closer to zero. The throaty coughing gets worse, sounding like a crow hovering above its prey. Panic strikes the beggar, and the numbers fall faster and faster. Three, two, one. The beggar gasps for air, his lungs shrieking like rusty hinges, his eyes staring into a different world already. Zero. The last remaining digit falls to dust - the beggar dies with a grotesque expression on his face."

To everyone's surprise, Stam forced the remaining water in his glass down in two large gulps with a grim look. He wiped away a few stray traces of water on his chin with the back of his hand.

"Farmond runs. For the first time in his life, he grasps the actual idea of running away. His legs have never carried him so fast through the streets and alleys, across the meadows and hills, over sturdy ancient roots into the forest. Only in his hideout - a small cave barely visible if you don't know what you're looking for - his heart reminds him with brutal pumping of Farmond's own fleeting number."

"Is this going to get any darker? Because I'd like to be able to sleep in this fine inn," a man somewhere in the back joked. People giggled and clinked their jugs.

Venor folded his arms and sighed, pouting.

"Two days pass. Farmond rarely eats and drinks, appearing even skinnier than usual as a result. Sleeping is almost impossible - too disturbing are the images that surface upon closing his eye lids. His stomach screams for food, demanding more than just berries and nuts. The thought of returning to Astatik for food and human company crosses his mind. The high crowns of the surrounding trees seem menacing, their threatening nature intensified by the lack of sleep. Farmond finally gives in, and marches into the village."

"We need another round, Mirnda," a raspy voice proclaimed. Resounding laughter followed.

Mirnda grinned and swiftly gathered empty glasses and returned with cleaned and filled ones.

Venor looked for a sign of anger in Stam's face, being constantly interrupted and all, but there was only confidence and wise, tested patience to be read.

Stam used the opportunity to proceed. "Farmond is now constantly reminding himself to avoid any form of fear, aggression and stress to keep the rate of heartbeats low. He isn't good with numbers, but last he checked his reflection in a pond, merely five digits were flying above him. The thought of dying like the old beggar in the alley forces Farmond's heart to beat faster, yet through deep breathing and concentration he manages to calm down a bit." Stam cleared his throat and shifted his body into a more comfortable position on his chair while continuing. "He reaches Astatik on late afternoon and the market is crowded as usual at this time of the day. Farmond sees numbers, sometimes reaching into other numbers, forming an unreadable fog. It almost looks like the whole market place is covered with a layer of smoke. While sneaking around and searching for a spot to hide, his eyes recognize a fairly low number: Three digits - again. Farmond stops walking, and looks at the numbers' owner: A woman, approximately forty years old, with a warm, confident aura surrounding her. She's carrying a basket filled to the rim with various groceries. Farmond's gaze shifts to the numbers, and back to the woman. Against his better judgement, he approaches the woman, and his mouth opens, saying: 'Something terrible is going to happen to you.' The woman turns to him. 'What do we have here?' she says, with the slight arrogant tone of an adult talking down to a child. Farmond stares at her numbers, now reaching sixty-three. The woman smiles like a caring mother, and pats Farmond on his head. 'Go back to your house, child. The market is a place full of thieves, too dangerous for children like you. Go on, go on!' Her numbers still entangle Farmond's eyes. 'Are you blind, boy?' the woman asks. Farmond rips his gaze away from the figures, shrugs and leaves. The woman shakes her head and minds her business again. After Farmond has walked a dozen steps, he hears the woman screaming. He turns around, and watches as the woman's face transforms into a mask of surprise, and the basket falls out of her hand, spilling its content on the street. However, she remains standing. Farmond looks closer at the scenery. The woman holds the back of one hand before her mouth and stares at a man half as old as the woman. The man smiles - and his eyes fill up with tears. They practically jump at each other and hug, but Farmond notices it is not hugging between, say, a married couple, rather between a mother and a son. 'Finally,' the woman whispers. 'I made it,' the young man sobbed into his mother's shoulder. The zero above the woman's head breaks apart, but instead of disappearing - the little pieces increase in size, and form yet another row of numbers. Farmond checks her son's digits: They seem to have restarted as well."

"Stam, you're killing us," one of the audience said. "Just like last time when you told a story about the girl who could hear the thoughts of rocks and trees."

Mirnda threw a wet towel at the man, who had disturbed the moment, and pressed her index finger on her lips. "Shhhh!"

"The new discovery," Stam said, "fills Farmond with hope and relief for a moment. But then his mind wanders off and he sees other reasons for the numbers to end, events that are far worse than death. While watching the mother and her son embracing each other, he compares what had happened to the beggar to the lucky

event of the people in front of him and tries to figure out a pattern. Was the beggar a bad person to deserve death? Is the woman a good person then? But why did she - apparently - lose her son in the first place? And, what kind of person is Farmond himself?"

Stam let the last few words sink into his listeners' minds. Venor was sulking, trying not to appear interested in Stam's - far too thrilling - hogwash.

"With this new question injected deeply in Farmond's brain, he trots through the alleys in search of food and shelter for the night." Stam paused as if turning a page.

"Several days fly by, and the only number close to zero Farmond ever sees is his own. And the day comes earlier than expected, when in the morning Farmond looks at his digits in a pond's reflection and realizes: Today is the day. The uncertainty of the type of the event ahead makes him feel helpless and afraid. The sheer possible outcomes of the last counted heartbeat are too much to grasp. One final glimpse at the smeared cloud above Farmond and he knows that the end should be reached by nightfall. How to live the day on which the path of his life will change forever, possibly even end? He could hide in the forest. But that would make it too easy for fate - or whoever's counting heartbeats - to just send some hungry wolves and kill Farmond. No. The boy decides to just go on like usual and see what happens. He leaves the woods and visits Astatik with heavy steps. Every impression of Farmond's surroundings could be the last, thus his senses work twice as hard to hear, see, taste and feel everything with an almost greedy passion, to assure that these valuables will stay in Farmond's mind even beyond his death. He walks through the alleys, absorbing everything like a fresh baked bread sucking itself full with milk. He greets every passing stranger. They return disgusted looks, and even curses, but Farmond even clings to those bad feelings like a hunter to the most precious treasure. Since it might be my very last day, Farmond thinks, I will steal myself a slice of pie."

"Speaking of pie, Mirnda," a woman interrupted Stam's story once again. Everybody laughed in short relief.

"No pie today, pals," Mirnda retorted from the other side of the room. "Ask again in the morning."

The crowd answered with a disappointed "Awwww".

Venor now had yet another reason to try and go to bed soon - to wake up and munch delicious baked sweetness. Surely Stam's tale couldn't go on forever. He continued shuffling his coins in his pocket, desperately trying to speed up the flow of time. Stam, somehow accustomed to such a difficult people, carried on. "Astatik only houses one bakery - we all know of its high quality - and when stealing from it you've got to be poised to face the consequences. Farmond knew that the bakery was close to the market, thus always surrounded by a throng of villagers and merchants in the morning. By midday most of the stock is gone, except a few expensive products, such as pie. Since it's noon now, Farmond realizes, it should be child's play. He moves closer to the market, takes a shortcut through an alley, and his nose already catches the smell of fresh bread. Casually, he trots into the small bakery, trying to appear like a regular customer - despite his clothes and general condition. Only one man in plain rags is lingering in front of the stand, looking curiously at the left over stock of the day. The actual baker is a towering, hairy man, sweating all over, his arm sleeves rolled up. When the customer before Farmond pays and leaves, Farmond steps forward and asks for a piece of pie. In the past he would have never

taken such a risk. His heart almost bursts of anxiety and he imagines his number decreasing faster and faster. The baker turns away, leaves for a short moment, followed by the shady string of his numbers, and returns with a small piece of yellow pie in his right hand. Before the baker can ask for payment, Farmond darts forward, snatches the pie out of the man's big paw, and leaps towards the door. In panic he miscalculates his steps, stumbles over his own foot - and falls. The baker, recovered from the surprise, marches to Farmond and smacks him on the back of the head. Farmond's body hits the wall next to the door and he blinks repeatedly, seeing a fuzzy darkness trying to embrace his eyes. 'You little brat,' the baker spits. 'You chose the wrong spot to steal.' And with those words he opens the door and kicks Farmond so hard in the side that he flies out of the bakery and lands on his face ten feet away from the house into the dirt. To Farmond's own surprise, the whole time his grip has never let go of the pie, and he opens his hand inch by inch, and sees the squished crumbles. Still lying on the floor in pain, he smiles bitterly and sinks his teeth into the yellow mass in his palm, mixing taste of blood and dirt with the pie's flavor. Chewing, he stands up wearily. The world suddenly rotates around him, his head pounds wildly and he bends over to spill out the just eaten pie on the cold alley ground. He drags himself into a dark corner and his body slumps down next to a window with a candle light. The sky is getting darker and mist rises. Farmond's body aches terribly. Once more he has to vomit his carefully collected food and water. It is too early to die, he thinks to himself. I can't die now. I've still got time, haven't I?" Stam rubbed his temples for a moment, concentrating. "The young boy sees his end coming, finding it highly ironic that his life should cease because of a piece of pie, which he stole only because he knew he was going to die. He remembers far worse beatings in the past. His body should recover. But why is it hurting so much? For a long time he's just sitting there, his hand still full of crumbs, his lips and chin covered with half-devoured pie. Maybe it takes that long to die, he wonders. Later, when the sky is pitch black and the only light shines from the candle behind him, he concludes that his number should be close to zero now, especially because his heart has been beating twice as fast since the incident at the bakery. He guesses that he's probably already dead, even though blood is still being pumped through his veins. Maybe this is what happens to people. They're just sitting there where they've died, living the final moment in eternity, while the world surrounding them is frozen."

One last time Stam took a short break to catch his breath. "Five. Four. Three. A chill grabs Farmond by his arms and wanders across his body. Two. One. He closes his eyes - and his number turns to zero, the circular digit falling to dust and fading away. A long silence follows. Then - the door next to Farmond opens, and a middle-aged woman sticks her head out. 'Oh my, what's going on here?' she says while stepping out of her home. 'Boy, you look terrible, what happened to you?' She cowers next to him, feeling the temperature of his forehead, examining his whole tormented body. 'Come in, son, I'll fix you a warm soup and we'll get you back together in no time,' she says, helping Farmond stand up. Weakly, he tries to make out the woman's numbers - there were none to see. With her arm around his shoulders, they walk into the warm and cosy home."

Venor stood, pushed his chair back so hard it fell with a thundering bang, leaped upstairs, disappeared in his room and locked the door.

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