

Mark W Tiedemann - DrinkDRINK

Mark W. Tiedemann

"Drink" was purchased by Gardner Dozois, and appeared in the July 1994 issue of

Asimov's, with an illustration by Jonathan and Lisa Hunt. A relatively new writer, Mark W. Tiedemann has made a handful of sales to Asimov's, as well as to

markets such as Universe and Tomorrow, and we have more stories by him in inventory. A professional photographer, he lives in St. Louis, where he is at work on several novels.

Here he takes us deep into the past for an unflinching and frightening look at

what it means to be compelled to drink... whether or not you are thirsty.

Madrin awoke suffocating. His right arm was pinned beneath him. In his mind, he

saw the beast above him, lowering its wet mouth to rip out his throat. Madrin swung his left arm out and kicked to get away. His head struck something solid.

The beast vanished, and Madrin opened his eyes. Darkness enveloped him.

He tried to fill his lungs to scream and tasted wool. Twisting, he freed his arm

and scraped the blanket from his face. He jumped up, throwing the blanket, and

pressed his back against the stone wall.

A taper burned on a wooden shelf across the small room. In its wan yellow light,

the blanket looked black, the cloak of the beast. Madrin's panicked breaths almost drowned the sound of blood in his ears.

Flashes of his dream kicked his heart: the beast wrestled him to the earth, still unslaked after having taken everyone else, and covered him with its mouth,

whispering "Drink... drink... drink... I thirst..."

The dream changed details from time to time, but never its essence. Madrin wished—sometimes prayed, when he thought it might accomplish something for him—that he could change the dream completely. He felt dreams ought to be more

malleable than reality, which he could never change. His parents were still dead, their bodies drained to quench a thirst that would have taken him, too, if

Brother Renard had not intervened. The beast could not hurt him anymore.

Maybe. So Brother Renard had promised. But other things Renard had said had turned out to be lies, or at least not the truth his words had implied.

The wall was cool. Madrin closed his eyes and rested his head back against the

stone. I hurt, he thought to God, I hurt deep, and still You don't make the memories go away...

Madrin looked at the rough-hewn crucifix on the wall above his pallet. When Brother Renard had given it to him, he had been filled with gratitude. "I'm safe

now," he had said. The monk had shaken his head. "No. This is only a temporary

crutch. You'll only be safe when you accept the Sacrament and join us. You must

take our Lord into yourself. When you become one of us, then your soul will have

the promise of eternal life."

"But until then, I have a protector." Madrin remembered his words clearly, remembered that he had believed it then. The cross was like his dead father's knife, possessing a plain perfection of purpose. But the little crucifix seemed

less powerful in the dark. It did nothing to keep the dreams at bay. "How many more times do I have to see my mother die?" he asked it. His father's knife, hidden now beneath his bedding, had done nothing to keep the beast away ei-'ther.

He heard noises out in the corridor. It was too soon for Matins. The monastery was still in the nameless time between Compline and the first vigils. Everyone should have been in their room, sleeping or praying. In the year he had been here, the monks more and more moved about at night and stayed shut away by day, destroying any sense of order Madrin tried to cling to. Madrin pulled on his robe and tied it hastily, then opened his door.

A man-shaped shadow stood in the corridor, Madrin started. "Weren't you sleeping, Madrin?" Brother Renard's voice was soft, almost too quiet to hear. "Yes," Madrin said. "But you're awake now. Were you dreaming again?" Madrin swallowed dryly and nodded. "Doubt," Renard said. "It's doubt." "I'm... sorry..." It seemed the right thing to say, though Madrin did not know why.

Brother Renard shrugged. "You have a visitor. In the refectory." Madrin frowned. "Visitor...?" Renard reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "It may be important to remember where your allegiance lies, Madrin. Do you?" "Yes." "Where?" "Here. To you." "Why?" "Because you saved me." "From...?" "Satan. The fiend." The hand withdrew. "Good. Remember that. All the steel in the empire cannot keep you safe, but here...?" "I have a protector." "Good. Go on, now. See your visitor." Madrin eased by Brother Renard and hurried to the day stairs. He descended two floors to the refectory and emerged into dim torchlight. Shadows shifted over the beams of the ceiling and across the walls like moonlit water. A soldier stood in the middle of the hall, his back to Madrin. Madrin crossed the stone flags, wondering who he knew that was a soldier. The man turned then. "Hanlausen!" Cleanshaven, lean face, bright eyes, thick brown hair, the soldier smiled and opened his arms to embrace his brother. Madrin ran to him and wrapped his arms around Hanlausen's waist. The leather jerkin felt cool against his face and the odor of horse and sweat mingled in his nostrils. A large, callused hand scraped over Madrin's scalp, and strong arms crushed him warmly. Hanlausen laughed, patted Madrin's back. "By Wotan, you're growing!" Madrin glanced over his shoulder. "It's blasphemy to call on the old gods in here." Hanlausen shrugged. "It's still true. It's good to see you, Madrin." Madrin grinned and it felt odd. It had been so long since he had smiled. He touched his face and laughed selfconsciously.

"What's wrong?" Hanlausen asked.

"Nothing. I'm just—I didn't expect to see you again."

Hanlausen looked surprised. "Ever? You thought I'd leave my own brother somewhere and never come visit him?" He looked around at the chamber. "Though this isn't where I left you." He frowned at Madrin. "I heard about Mater and Pater. I couldn't come. We were south, far south, in Rome."

"Rome...?"

"The Emperor's coronation. I'm sorry I couldn't be here. But—have they treated

you well?"

Madrin shrugged. "I can think of better places to be." He winced involuntarily

and looked quickly around.

Hanlausen sighed. "Well, is there any wine in this crypt? I've been on the road

since midday."

Madrin turned and stopped. Brother Renard stood in the archway to the kitchens.

"The best wine in the empire," he said and held up a bottle.

Hanlausen laughed. "Isn't it always, from abbeys like this? Thank you."

"I've roused a couple of the others," Renard said, setting the bottle on the long oak table. "We'll prepare your food. You must be hungry."

"True enough. Let me go see to my horse first, though."

"I'm sure it's been tended to," Renard said.

Madrin shivered briefly.

"Still," Hanlausen said. "I'd feel better making sure myself." He roughed Madrin's hair again and said con-spiratorially, "I don't think they get many horses to tend here." He grinned. "I'll be back."

He hurried to the exit. Madrin watched him, mouth going dry. When he turned, Renard was gone. He bolted for the archway.

The oven fires had been started. Brother Seric and Brother Win wrestled a cauldron onto its boom. They paused to give him wide-eyed stares. Renard was nowhere in sight.

He hurried to the left, toward the salt blocks and stacked pots. He pushed through the door that connected the kitchen to the slaughter house. Three huge

vats clustered in the center. Pens lined the far wall; pigs snuffled within.

The

opposite door led outside.

The air was cold. No stars showed; it had been a storm-filled month.

Hanlausen was just entering the stables. Madrin looked around. No one had followed. He crossed the open ground to the high, wide entrance to the stables

and slipped inside.

A new scent mingled with the usual stale odors of leather, oven, hay, manure—horse. The abbey possessed none. Hanlausen walked with a lantern down the

length of pens to one from which the big animal leaned its head out. In the lamplight the horse's breath was thick and smokey. Madrin hurried toward his brother.

"You ought to leave," he blurted. His stomach tingled with fear.

Hanlausen started, reached automatically for his sword, then let out a long breath.

"Don't steal up on a soul like that," he said. He reached up and scratched his

horse's forehead. The animal snuffled loudly. "I'd like nothing better. These old places, filled with monks... sometimes I think they're older than the rock they're built on. They sap the life out of a body." He shook his head and added,

quietly, "I hate them." He laughed self-consciously. "Do you? Hate it here, I

mean."

Madrin nodded and the tingle turned to a solid lump.

"Thought so. One more night, brother. In the morning we can leave."

"I... can't."

Hanlausen grabbed a pitchfork and began filling the feed trough before the horse. "Hmm? What do you mean?" He frowned at Madrin. "You didn't take vows, did you?"

"No, I—"

"Then there's nothing to keep you here."

Madrin looked back toward the stable doors. It would be wonderful.

"I've tried to leave before," he said. "Brother Renard always brings me back."

"Rightly so, too, if you just ran away. Too easy for a young boy to get lost or

hurt or killed in this country. But not with me. He shouldn't object if your own

brother takes you away."

Madrin shivered. "You have to leave. Tonight. This isn't a good place."

"I'll agree to that!"

He's not taking me seriously, Madrin thought angrily. He glanced back at the entrance. For an instant, he thought he saw movement, but no one was there.

"Come with me," he said. His heart hammered. "I've got to show you something."

"Just a moment..." Hanlausen said, emptying a bucket of water into the horse's trough.

"Now!"

Hanlausen jerked, startled, and frowned at Madrin. "Now you take care how you talk to me. Mater and Pater are gone, and it's my place to be head of the family. You don't—"

Madrin bared his teeth. "This is important!"

Hanlausen hesitated, then nodded. "All right. Show me."

Madrin led him to another door that led out of the side of the stables.

Hanlausen hung the lantern on the post. It was a short distance to the barn, through the barn, into the smithy. By this circuitous route, Madrin made the way

to the galilee, then into the chapter house.

Incense tainted the air. None of the braziers were lit, only candles, which provided star-points to guide the way. The small assembly room was connected to

the transept of the cathedral. When they entered here, sound changed. The vastness of the place drew them in, forced eyes upward to search out the vaults,

hidden in darkness. In day, light streamed through the tall windows, cast marvelous shapes on the floors, among the pews, across the sanctuary. At night,

only the candles by the altar and at the entrance gave light, and it was insubstantial. The objects so illumined seemed only suggestions of the things they were by day, incomplete, and somehow false.

Madrin took Hanlausen up onto the sanctuary. Madrin's heart raced. His brother's

hand hovered close to the hilt of his sword. Behind the altar, Madrin found the

release for the doorway that was built into the wall below the towering crucifix. The dying Jesus stared down at him with lifeless eyes.

The door snapped open.

"Gods!" Hanlausen stepped back at the smell.

Madrin's lips curled involuntarily, and he nodded, and took a candle from the pallet nearby.

"Breathe through your mouth," he whispered. "It's not so bad then."

They ducked through the short door into a small, bare chamber.

Stretched and tied on a raised granite bier was a robed form. A pan lay beneath

the slab. Madrin stayed back while Hanlausen, drawing his sword, stepped up to it. The odor was suffocating; Madrin felt his skin crawl, as if it were trying to slide off of his muscles. In the corner lay a heap of bones. "What's this...?" Hanlausen asked. "It killed Mater and Pater. Brother Renard captured it and brought it here. He says it can't die, only be locked away, imprisoned, in a sacred place. He says it's not really a beast, only that it's been wandering the earth, alone, for so long that it forgot what it really was." "And what does he think it really was?" Madrin shook his head, staring at the restrained form. "He says its blood is the source of eternal life. He says it is the Host." Hanlausen stared at it for a long time. "In Rome," he said quietly, "I heard controversies—some said heresies, but I couldn't see any difference between what was said to be true and what was not—among all the priests and bishops. None of them can agree on anything. One I heard, though, got an old monk expelled. He told how when the Christian savior, Jesus, rose from the dead and walked the earth for forty days, that at the end of that time he went up to heaven. Nobody disputes that. But a few suggested it was just his soul that went, and left his body behind. This old monk said that since Jesus was the son of God, he was immortal, so that his body must have survived." "Do you think it's true?" Hanlausen shook his head. "Wouldn't make sense, would it? Everything else they say about this Jesus, being the son of God, why would God leave him behind, body or soul?" Hanlausen swallowed loudly. "But if one old monk in Rome can believe it..." "It killed Mater and Pater," Madrin said. "Brother Renard says that it can't die." He shook his head impatiently. "Everything here is inside-out and backward." "I've traveled to Rome and back in the emperor's caravan," Hanlausen said. "I've seen a lot, more than I wished I had. I swear to you, though, there's nothing that can't be killed." "I've seen it walk after being run through."

"With steel, maybe."  
"It's sleeping now, but it's alive. It moves, anyway. I said that this was a bad place. You've got to leave. Tonight."  
The figure on the bier was almost bald; long strands of dark hair clung to a veined skull. The eyes were sunken deep. The skin had the appearance of desiccated parchment. It wore a bishop's silk robe. One thin arm bore dozens of inch-long scars and a few scabs.  
Hanlausen gestured to the bones in the corner. "What's that?"  
"The patron saint of the abbey. I forget who."  
Hanlausen backed away from the bier. His hands shook.

"Brother Renard makes me do penance here," Madrin said. "He locks me in while it's awake and feeding. Brother Renard says it can't touch me as long as I have faith. I stay here while it feeds and it looks at me and all I want is for it to die. It never does." He looked up at Hanlausen. Tears blurred his vision for a moment, streaking the candlelight. "Renard keeps me here. He says I can have immortality if I— if I—" Hanlausen squeezed Madrin's shoulder. "No, you are coming with me." He turned suddenly and left the chamber. For a few seconds, Madrin was alone with the beast. He watched it intently, wondering from moment to moment if he saw it move. Then Hanlausen was back. He had a wooden crucifix in one hand, taken from one of the candle racks in the chancel. He ran the blade of his knife over the long arm, bringing it to a point. "I told you I've seen a lot in the emperor's service," he said. "Many things in this world are terrible indeed... splinters of evil, I heard one old priest say. A lot of them get mistaken for gods or demons." The wood chips struck the floor like leaves on damp soil. A dozen strokes and the stick was sharp. "But there's nothing that can't be killed." Hanlausen sheathed his knife, strode up to the bier, and drove the stick down into the breast of the beast. It arched up against its bonds. The mouth snapped open, and Madrin glimpsed the filed teeth. He turned away, squeezed his eyes shut, and pressed against the wall. Please, please, no, let it die, don't, no, please, please, ran through his mind, directed to no one in particular. When he was a child, Wotan still ruled these lands, but the Christian priests had been here a long time, and finally Christianity replaced the old ways; then the beast came and took his kin, one by one, until Renard saved him. Saved him to use him, to serve him, to be there for night visits, someone to release guilt and anger to in endless talks designed to justify the things that Renard did. With what Hanlausen had just told him, Madrin believed now that the Christians had not so much moved into the spaces left behind by a retreat of the old gods as that they had shattered those gods, and now the shards of them continued to crawl through their old dominions. The Christian priests possessed a power that the old gods could not resist, but most of them used it clumsily, seemingly unaware that they had it. Renard was not unaware. A hand touched his neck. He whirled. Hanlausen stood there, looking grim. On the bier, the beast was slumped, head at an unnatural angle. The crucifix protruded from its chest. The stench was worse now. "It's dead," Hanlausen said. "I promise, it is." Madrin shuddered and left the chamber. He'd thought that it would feel different to be free, to know that Renard could not threaten him with the beast anymore.

But now he realized that he would still have to run and hide from Renard. If that were possible. The world was eaten with the malignancies of such men and he

no longer believed that anyone could keep him safe. Not even his mother had been

able to guarantee that.

"Come on," Hanlausen said. "We ought to leave."

Madrin nodded and hurried to the annex door. It was shut and locked.

"So?" Hanlausen said. "Let's use the other door."

He strode down the middle of the nave, his boots echoing around the vaults.

Madrin ran after him. In the very center, it was blackest; he could not see Hanlausen. Madrin looked back at the candlelit sanctuary. For an instant, he thought he saw someone moving just beyond the circle of light. He jerked around

and fixed his gaze on the tall doors.

Hanlausen pushed one of them open. Cold air rushed in, brushed against Madrin's

face. Beyond there was light. He sprinted for the door. Before he could reach it, Hanlausen was seized by both arms.

Brother Renard held a torch at the head of the monks. They stood around Hanlausen. Madrin hesitated at the threshold; he was still in the shadows.

The

torchlight bathed the scene in shifting yellow light and picked their eyes out

in bright points, set their breath aglow.

"An odd way to show gratitude for hospitality," Renard said. His face was drawn,

as if in pain. He started forward. "Bring him along."

Madrin scurried into shadow, crawled among the pews.

They enveloped Hanlausen. Madrin heard him shout something, followed by a sharp

blow and a grunt. He peered over the pew in front of him and saw everyone gathering before the sanctuary.

Brother Renard went to the door behind the altar and ducked through. A moment later he emerged, carrying the pan. He set it on the altar.

"It wasn't enough," Brother Renard said, "that men nailed Him to a tree and wasted His gift. He told us that through Him we would all know eternal life. Through the Sacrament, we can share in His immortality. But we will find it necessary to kill Him again and again, until the Day of Judgment."

He turned to the crucifix above, spread his arms, and began Mass. The Latin droned out of him sonorously, hypnotically. Madrin rocked side to side to the rhythmic tones. His eyes grew heavy and he bumped his head on the pew.

A hand clutched his robe, and he was pulled to his feet. Renard held him at arm's length, eyes wide and somehow sad.

"I teach and teach, and still you do not learn," he said. He carried Madrin to

the altar.

Hanlausen was stretched across the marble, blood trickling from his scalp.

The

pan rested beside him, its contents glistening darkly in the torchlight.

"Life eternal," Renard announced loudly. "A gift to the faithful, through the Sacrament."

He dipped a golden cup into the dark liquid in the pan and thrust a thumb into

Hanlausen's mouth. Madrin felt the scream push against his teeth, a pressure both inside and out that threatened to crush him. All the monks were ill, more

and more they kept to the shadows, tended to be awake only at night, their skins

showing a delicate desiccation as they accepted Renard's ministries, as they

accepted the Sacrament, the blood of the beast. But they all came back for more,  
hopeful for immortality, yearning toward each word Renard spoke. Now Father Beldag, the abbot, was almost always bedridden. But not Renard...  
He poured the liquid into the unconscious warrior's mouth. Madrin's scream faded, unvoiced. Suddenly, Hanlausen jerked, choked, and tried to move.  
"Hold him," Renard said.  
Four monks gripped his arms and legs. Renard poured more into Hanlausen's mouth.  
"Drink," he said. "Drink. The blood and body of Our Lord gives us our bond to eternal life, that we may stand before Him at the end, whole and living!"  
Hanlausen choked again, swallowed. Then he convulsed, his eyes bulged. His mouth  
opened and he screamed.  
"Transubstantiation," Renard said quietly. He went back into the hidden chamber  
and returned a moment later with a slice of something grey. He placed his hand  
on Hanlausen's forehead and the soldier quieted.  
Madrin squeezed his eyes closed. He did not want to see, he did not want to know.  
"Eat," Renard said, his voice loud in Madrin's ears. "Do this... to remember... you  
carry the substance, the vitality... you shall become our benefactor..."  
Renard gave bread to the monks, not this...  
Hanlausen screamed again.  
Madrin wrenched free and ran.  
Tears blinded him as he left the church. He cowered in his cubicle. He stared at  
the crucifix on his wall and his thoughts filled with anger, rage, sadness.  
His  
brother... now there was no one left of his family. All that had kept him from accepting Renard's ministries was gone.  
Brother Renard entered his room.  
"I forgive you," he said. "You still haven't accepted God. The soldier, though,  
should have known better."  
"My brother."  
Renard smiled. "We'll forgo penance this time. Perhaps you've learned your lesson. Perhaps you'll soon be ready to receive the sacrament, just as your brother was. I had hoped it would be you instead... but it was time for a new host." He touched Madrin's face gently. His fingers were cold.  
Brother Renard left and Madrin did not move for a long time. His face tingled where Renard had touched him. He looked up at the crucifix. In spite of what Brother Renard said, this had nothing to do with God or Jesus, or even with the  
Old Gods—this was a more ancient evil. After the sound of Renard's footsteps had  
faded, Madrin reached under his bed for his father's knife.  
He took the crucifix from the wall and began sharpening it.  
"There's nothing that can't be killed," he said, over and over as he worked.  
"There's nothing that can't be killed." When it was sharp enough, he hid the crucifix and the knife in his robe and crept from his room.  
Madrin slipped from shadow to shadow all the way back to the cathedral. No one  
was there.  
He opened the hidden chamber and stepped inside.  
Hanlausen, robed like a bishop, was tied to the granite bier. Blood dripped slowly from his arm to the pan on the floor. Madrin stepped up to his side and  
and



looked into his face. It was grey, lifeless. Cuts marred his neck. Hanlausen's eyes snapped open. Madrin jerked back. His brother gazed at him with black, empty eyes. No tears, but pain. So much pain. Madrin took out the crucifix and showed it to Hanlausen. Hanlausen nodded and closed his eyes. Madrin drove it into his brother's heart. Hanlausen shuddered, then lay still. Madrin sat against the wall by the door and cradled the knife, waiting for Brother Renard to return. "There's nothing that can't be killed," he repeated. But he intended never to take anything on faith again. He caressed the knife. This time, he would find out for himself.