

***Absinthe and Chocolate* by Dale Amidei**
From: Chapter 1—The Green Faerie

Chapter 1 - The Green Faerie

Moscow
The Russian Federation
Day 42

It was almost possible to fool herself into believing that she was just another tourist. Sitting on the edge of the hotel's luxurious pillow top mattress, the woman used her left hand to zip up the side on the second of her fashionable Tessa hiking boots. She then adjusted the tensioning straps to a perfect fit. The footwear completed her ensemble if not her load-out, and the basic black theme matched her mood. Subdued midnight's raven clothing set off the tone of her pale skin and fiery shock of bobbed, auburn hair. She was ready, except for her final show prep. Even her lipstick, as red as her coiffure, was managed to perfection.

Rebecca Boone Hildebrandt moved her lithe, small-statured but athletic frame to her largest suitcase. Inside was a small wooden box with a sliding cover. Its artisan—a craftsman in Paris—had carved her initials in his flawless and flowing script to match the embellishment found elsewhere on the lacquered wood.

For years without fail, she had performed the same ritual before each mission like the one facing her this day. The woman sighed. Picking the receptacle up with both hands, she carried it to the hotel's table in the sitting area of her suite.

Once the container was oriented toward her chair, she sat down. Boone hesitated, pushing the decorative box back to almost the middle of the table. Her elbows then her hands came to rest on the tabletop and her forehead atop them.

After a moment of silent contemplation and a heavier, calming sigh, Boone clenched her fist and raised her head. Her right hand reached out and slid the cover back.

It was her travel kit. Neither the proper glass nor its antique, silver-plated spoon came with her into the field. Likewise, the rice milk she preferred as a mix did not travel

well. Included instead were only the bare necessities of the tonic that, as she knew now, was part of what had helped to keep her going for so long.

A small bar of Godiva chocolate, unopened, lay alongside an unadorned shot glass. Next was the engraved, silver hip flask from that little shop she had frequented in Saarbrücken. Nestled in the box as well, a square of green silk padded the contents. She straightened, adjusted her posture, then spread and smoothed the cloth before her. Afterward, each component could be positioned for what had almost become a ceremony.

Unwrapped only to the first square, the Belgian confection was now ready. Boone then held the small glass up to the morning light of the window. Drapery and sheers there spread wide to let in the sunshine reflecting from the fresh mantle of springtime snow. Its crystalline refraction helped illuminate—almost beautify—the Moscow morning. The one-ounce tumbler was nearly perfect, without spot or print. After blowing an errant speck of dust from its surface and performing one final inspection, she set it in the middle of the tightly woven square of green.

Next came the cap of the flask, and the woman could indulge in the bouquet of the contents. Closing her eyes, Boone could sense the fennel and *Artemisia Absinthium*—Grand Wormwood—mixed with the green anise. The herbs gave this blend its distinctive verdant hue.

The words of the English writer, literary historian, scholar, critic and wine connoisseur George Saintsbury, particularly applicable this day, returned to her from her college studies. “A person who drinks absinthe neat deserves his fate whatever it may be, for the flavor is concentrated to repulsiveness, and the spirit burns like torch-light procession.” She whispered the words through a grudging grimace. *So be it.*

She poured the measure to what she knew would be the exact level of one ounce avoirdupois. Lifting the glass again, Boone took advantage of the rays of the morning sun. She could almost see the Green Faerie dancing there and longed for the onset of the effects of the oily, fragrant thujone mixing with the warm comfort of the alcohol content. The latter would settle the case of nerves already building in her. The former would restore her mental acuity to the level she would need on a day such as this: another that promised once more to stain her soul with the blood of her fellow man.

Boone stared into the shot of absinthe, seeking the answers that, so far, had evaded even her deepest introspection. In all the travels of her body and her mind, she was yet unable to settle some of those she knew in her heart to be the most basic.

Before leaving Paris she had written as much into her journal: *What have I become? Did I ever have a choice? A new day is soon upon me, dawning, as it will on every man and every woman across the face of this world. Lives begin each day, and they certainly end. Each story has its first and last page. Is it that I am to write only endings? Whose pen, afterward, will write my own? Is that quill yet in the inkwell, or is it brushing the rim, readying for the scribe's perfect stroke? Is it poised now above a parchment of which I will never know before it is far too late?*

Her rational side knew that an opportunity for altering the course of her life would eventually need to be seized in the present. If she was to remake herself, there was yet time. Life could transform as it moved forward, and hers was moving still. Change could occur moment to moment, and the promise of that magic was always found in the times ahead—even if it was as close as the next second.

A glint of sunshine, filtered through the glass and liquor, made the measure of Century in her hand look like an emerald. The drink she had poured appeared now to Boone as both beautiful and terrifying. She knew that some, if asked, would give the very same description of her.
