

## FIRESTONE - Absinthe Bar

Jess and I walked to the Absinthe Bar. When we arrived there, there was a queue out the door. Pietta and Jimmy waited at the front of the line talking with a big guy and tall brunette and waved us over.

“Kai, Jess. This is Hunter and Tash. They work for my father,” Pietta said. We shook hands and chatted while we waited to get into the bar.

Five minutes later we sat at a big table in another tunnel shaped bar. It was small, crowded and dark, sparsely lit with only a few dim lamps. The walls and low curved ceiling were lined with posters of influential people and hundreds of bottles of Absinthe. On the table was a bowl of sugar cubes, a bowl of teaspoons and a giant water jug on a pedestal with four little taps at the bottom.

Pietta returned with a tray of glasses with a shot green alcohol in each. She wore a funny floppy red hat and told us all to choose one from a big wooden crate full of hats. I looked around, I hadn't noticed before, but everyone was wearing a funny hat. “It's a tradition here to swap hats with anyone you meet. Also a tradition to drink absinthe. I'll show you how to set it up,” Pietta said.

She put the tray on the table, removed all the drinks, and returned the tray back to the bar. She placed one glass under one of the taps of the water jug, rested a teaspoon on the rim of the glass and placed a sugar cube on the spoon. Only it wasn't a teaspoon but an absinthe spoon, like a flat teaspoon with holes in it. Then Pietta turned the water on to a tiny trickle, letting the water drip over the sugar and into the glass. She told us all to do the same and wait for the sugar to dissolve. Then we could drink it. The rule was a maximum of three Absinthes per person.

Ten minutes later all of the drinks were ready. We all said cheers and I took a sip. It was horrible, sweet and incredibly strong. I took another small sip. No need to put a limit on my consumption, I doubted I could even finish one.

Alas, by the time we'd finished the third one, we were all drunk. Some of us more than others. Jess and Tash were wasted, talking in a language that only they could comprehend. Hunter seemed okay; he was quiet with one hand around Tash, and stroked her hair with the other, they had moved closer and closer to each other as the night went on. I was very merry, Jimmy slept slumped on the table, and Pietta looked wonderful.

“Didn't you have any Absinthe?” I slurred with a grin.

“Yes, I had the same as all of you,” Pietta said.

“But you look sober. And gorgeous.”

She smiled at me, and flicked her hair. Then I flicked my hair, but my hair was too short to flick, so I flicked it again, then rubbed my thumbs and fingertips together instead.

“We should probably get going, look at this lot, ” I said, “are they going to be okay to sail in the morning?” grunted a bit of a laugh.

“We have a crew, we just have to get back to the yacht and tomorrow will take care of itself. It’ll take us all day to sail to Ibiza, so they can sleep all day if they want, they’ll just miss the best way to see the Mediterranean.”

“Hunter. You ready to roll mate?”

Hunter had been watching me with Pietta but didn’t seem to notice anything. I glanced at Jess, she was too drunk to notice anything, and I felt a pang of guilt for flirting with Pietta. Then I looked at Jimmy, he was asleep in his chair, head slumped on the table and he snored softly. Pietta shook his shoulder gently and he roused, confused and bug eyed. “Yeah, let’s go, I’m tired, this is the longest I’ve been awake for over two weeks.” He stood and helped Tash to feet. She swayed and Hunter steadied her. She looked at him, her pupils dilated, cheeks rosy. I held Jess’s hand, made sure she was alright and gave her a tight hug.

“I love you baby,” she said.

“I love you too, sweetheart,” I said and kissed her. “Let’s go and get some sleep.” We left the bar, each couple had one person in control and one not so much.”

Outside my heart hammered. On the other side of the road stood a small group of men; the three that I’d fought at the Irish bar plus another guy with tattoos on his face. The tattooed man held a thick chain with a big stocky dog on the end. I couldn’t focus on the dog enough to work out the breed because they were in the shadows and the Absinthe was warping my vision, but I knew it was a fighting dog, Pitbull or Rottweiler, Staffy. Shadows of fixed objects moved back and forth, like they were breathing, lights flared in all directions and I had slight after-images of moving objects. I hadn’t noticed it inside the bar, maybe because I was accustomed to the surroundings, or maybe my adrenaline was intensifying the effects. I laughed at hallucinations and eased myself in front of Jess.

“Fuck. Hunter, how are you feeling? Jim, you with us?” I said.

“I’m good buddy, wide awake now and I feel strong. Maybe we should have showed less mercy on these guys and incapacitated them rather than just embarrassing them,” Hunter said.

“Jimmy won’t be much use to us, let’s walk that way and see what happens” Pietta said, and pointed to the dock. “I don’t they’ll attack us right here.

We all steered our drunken partners down the road. They group followed us from the other side of the road. We edged away from them a little, but they still followed us. We were past the shops and bars within two minutes. We were ahead of the group by forty metres or so when I heard the rattle of the chain as the tattooed man removed it from the dog's neck. He said, "Morte!" which Pietta told me means 'kill' in French. The dog charged after us, twenty metres away now at full speed. The group ran behind the dog.

"Fuck. Jess, Tash, don't stay here, try and get back into the bar, go the long way round, we'll take care of these clowns. Jimmy, you go with them," I said. The dog growled; it would be on us in a few seconds.

"Be careful Kai," Jess said.

Hunter took his shirt off and wrapped it around his hand. "I'll take care of the dog then I'll help you."

Ten metres till impact with the dog. It was a Pitbull, thirty kilograms of solid muscle and a mouthful of sharp teeth in its powerful lock-jaw. Hunter moved in front of me and Pietta stood behind me.

Pietta said, "I'll try and keep the short guy busy, go straight for the tattooed guy Kai, get that fucking chain off him!"

The dog didn't slow down, charged right at me, Hunter blocked its way like he was my bodyguard, his covered hand stretched out in front like a bone. The dog lunged and jumped at Hunter. Hunter aimed his hand at its jaw and braced himself. The Pitbull latched on. The force of the dog's weight pushed Hunter back, regardless that Hunter was three times heavier. The dog landed and its strong neck and shoulders thrashed and tore at Hunter's hand.

Hunter steadied himself even as the shirt around his hand turned red. The dog continued to shake and toss. It growled and pulled Hunter's hand down, then up, then left and right. The growls were awful, Hunter was silent. The group of guys were almost caught up, the tattooed guy swung the thick chain above his head, all four sets of eyes were fixed on me. The tattooed guy glanced at his dog and smirked at Hunter's hand that dripped blood.

Two of the guys circled behind me, one was the big leader from the Irish bar, and the tattooed guy swung his chain at my face. I moved back in time to see the chain pass in front of my eyes and I felt the wind touch my face. Adrenaline banished the effects of the Absinthe, my subconscious once again took control, and I moved like I was on remote control. I lurched at the tattooed guy, my left arm raised and went over his right arm with the chain, pinning his arm to his side.

Hunter threw himself at the dog, his bloody hand still in its mouth. He directed all of his

weight and strength at his wrapped hand and pinned the dog's head to the ground. The dog's legs and body thrashed, its strong neck no longer able to move its head, the rest of its body moved instead. "Shhh, good boy, calm down boy, I don't want to hurt you." He rested his over elbow on the dog's throat and put his weight on its windpipe to suffocate it.

With my arm over the tattooed man's arm with the chain, I pulled him toward me and drove the top of my head into his nose. I felt his nose squash and I heard a squelch. He screamed and dropped the chain. I let go of his arm and cupped my hand behind his bald skull. He leaned forward and I brought my own knee into the bottom of jaw as hard as could. He stayed on his knees for a moment and collapsed forward, his head made a knocking sound when it hit the road. Someone grabbed me in a bear hug from behind and the leader from the Irish came at me from the front.

Hunter had his weight on the dog's throat. The dog no longer thrashed. The fourth guy approached Hunter from behind.

"Behind you Hunter!" I yelled but not in time. The guy kicked him in the side of the head. Hunter rolled off the dog. The dog didn't move. Maybe it was dead, or just unconscious, I couldn't tell but I hoped it stayed down. The last thing we needed was an angry dog to deal with too. The guy lined up to kick Hunter on the ground. His right leg swung back, his arms out to sides to balance, he didn't notice Pietta beside him. She pushed him on the side and he tripped over the dog. Pietta pounced while he was down and stomped on his face with all her force. His body jerked and he let moaned.

The big guy came at me, his friend was still crushing me from behind. I lifted my knees to my chest, letting the bear hug guy hold me up. He lost his balance and staggered forward. He didn't let go of me but my weight forced him to his knees. I heard the crack of his knees on the road and his grip on me loosened. My left hand rested on the chain that the tattooed guy dropped and I wrapped my hand around it and stomped my feet on the road. The force was enough to break free of the bear hug and I jumped up, the weight of the heavy chain pulled against my arm as I landed next to my attacker. I whipped the thick chain at him and the end lashed into the side of his face. He slumped on his side next the tattooed guy. The tattooed guy moved and groaned but didn't get up.

The big guy froze for a moment, glanced around at his fallen friends and took a few steps back. His face paled as he appraised the situation. I was his main focus, but he glanced at Hunter closing in behind him and Pietta walking over. Jimmy and the girls approached from up the street, now that the immediate danger was over.

"Have you changed your mind mate?" I asked the big guy. He didn't answer and looked

around for an escape. "I'm willing to overlook this attack and let you walk away with your friends." I looked at the pile of his friends. "When they wake up, that is."

"Fuck you!" he backed away, not taking his eyes off us, he disappeared into the darkness, leaving his friends on the road.

"How's your hand, Hunter?"

"Dunno. Haven't looked at it yet." He unwrapped the t-shirt from around his hand. The t-shirt dripped with blood but his hand didn't look bad. He made a fist and opened his hand, then made a fist again. His index finger stayed in a fist when he opened his hand and blood oozed out of a deep puncture wound on the back of hand above the first knuckle. Around the puncture was already swollen and bruised.

"Can you move that finger at all?"

He moved the finger back and forth a little, then wiggled the tip a bit. "That's about it."

"Should be okay, just swollen so you can't move it far. How much does it hurt?"

"Not at all mate. Ever since I came of hospital, I haven't felt much pain. Like, I can sense something is wrong, but I don't respond to the pain like I used to.