

**GREEN LIGHT TO
PARADISE**

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SAMPLE

It started in a club filled with smoke, thumping music and flashing lights. Kali had never been overly fond of clubs to begin with. She enjoyed the music, and there was something magical about being in a room so filled with moving bodies that they pressed in on each other regularly in time to the music, but she would always have some kind of accident that would ruin the evening for her and often many of the other patrons. She was a jinx.

She turned away from the dancing people, her long ponytail swaying behind her head before it settled between her shoulder blades while she glanced up at the TV. A flashy music video was playing with scantily-dressed dancers showing off more body than any vocal proficiency. The song was terrible, but to the delight of the crowd it had a good dance beat.

“Hey, great song, eh?”

Kali registered that the voice was talking to her distantly. She turned and looked at the man who had settled into the bar stool next to her, unsurprised by his tousled brown hair or his red-rimmed eyes. The drink in his hand was nearly full, but it clearly wasn't his first one.

“Not bad,” she yelled back over the noise. “I prefer something with more depth of sound.”

“Yeah, great sound!”

Communication in such places was understandably sacrificed for the thrill of pounding dance beats.

“We should hang out together.” At least she hoped that was what he said to her. She was trying not to look at the idiot and she missed the key word of the sentence. He may have just told her ‘we should get take-out together’ or ‘we should make out together.’ He may have even suggested ‘we should suicide

together' but she somehow doubted the happy moron would suggest something as morose as joint suicide.

"Uh-huh," Kali answered unenthusiastically. She looked about the moving crowd of dancers for familiar faces in the crowd but failed to see anybody she knew. What she saw were happy people, all so carefree and letting everything go. It was frustrating that she couldn't feel so free. This was no more her world than the one she spent the daylight hours in.

"Do you want to go back to my place later?"

Kali rolled her eyes. This one thought highly of himself, she thought with some amusement. She didn't bother to respond to him and instead took another sip of her drink. It wasn't particularly good beer, being that it was slightly watered down, but it was available and it made it impossible to answer for a few moments longer.

Her companion put his hand on her leg. She nearly jumped at the unexpected and unwanted physical contact. She met his glassy-eyed stare with a dark glare of her own. Perhaps she needed to be less subtle with this one. "Take your hand off my leg before I break your arm."

The hand was removed, but he slid it down off her knee rather than remove it cleanly. "Relax, relax! I'm not that kind of guy."

Kali was going to respond as to what kind of guy she thought he was, but her beer exploded into a wet mass of amber fluid and broken glass even as she opened her mouth to let him have it. She sat still for a moment, looking at her hand accusingly.

"Whoa!" was all the guy could respond. Kali studied his startled features and then those of the crowd nearest her, who were suddenly interested in her quiet seat. She noted that an employee was already trying to get to her with a broom in hand and a scowl on his face.

"Well, I think I've had enough fun for one night," she said to no one in particular. It was always best to leave before the bouncers saw reason to escort you to the door. A broken glass was nothing to get worked up over, but if she already lost control once tonight, it might happen again. It was a sign that she was already too tense and needed to go home and decompress. Besides, her pants were wet and she smelled of that beer she had been pretending to enjoy.

Kali passed by her companion without another word or look. She was aware that he was watching her. She wondered if he understood what he had just witnessed. So far she'd been lucky enough to escape notice. Humankind had a rather dim view of those with curses like her.

Kali nodded to the bouncer on the way out, aware that he was watching her carefully, but not with the look of intimidation he would reserve for a known troublemaker. This was the look of confusion and concern. "Hey Tails, did he cause you any trouble?" the big guy asked. His calm disposition and smooth accent were unexpected of a man that large.

Shaking her head, she answered, "No, it's okay. I'd just like to go home." She didn't much care for his nickname for her, but this bouncer had seen her and her long hair before. He clearly created mental names to help him remember people.

"Do you want me to call you a cab?"

"I think I'd like to walk for a bit," Kali answered. The bouncer put his arm in front of her, blocking her path. She looked up into his eyes, tilting her head upward to the man clearly more than a foot taller than her more average size. Despite the tattoos and tough appearance, there was a look of concern on his face that was strangely comforting.

"Miss, this is hardly the part of town you want to wander through alone."

"I'll be okay, thanks."

She had to stare into his eyes a moment longer before he accepted her response. He nodded reluctantly and let his arm fall to his side. "You be careful."

She only nodded in answer. What more could she say anyway? No words would make him believe her. So she stepped by him into the street. If he knew who she really was, he would never have let her past.

The city was a depressing place consisting of towering buildings of ancient brick, concrete and glass, surrounded by gardens of asphalt and streetlights. It had rained while she was inside. Now everything had that damp sheen of moisture that reflected a slight shine yet swallowed much of the light. The dampness also gave the cooling evening air a bite that made Kali shudder.

This part of the city was on the edge of the old quarter. Here the decay that infected the city was evident, but civilization still maintained its tenuous hold. The lights still worked, the buildings still seemed maintained, but if one looked closely the signs were clear. There were boarded-up windows in the building across the street. The one next to it had a new door, but chunks of the brickwork around the main entrance were missing. There were a few people in the streets, although they spoke in hushed tones and hurried past the homeless who huddled beneath the streetlights.

Even the homeless stayed out of the true darkness of the

alleyways. Sometimes the monsters from the old city ventured this far.

Despite the dangers, Kali chose this area for her escape for a reason. Here nobody cared who she was. Here she would not darken her father's name further and she needn't worry about the media.

Here she was anonymous.

Sighing, Kali began walking down the street toward the main intersection. It would be easier to get a cab there that would return her to reality. It would not be as easy as finding one from the city core to take her this far out, but then it never was.

She thought back to the club and wondered again if the young man had seen her secret. She watched her hand as she squeezed it into a fist, noting one knuckle that sparked a greenish light as it popped. Some monsters, she thought darkly, could live uptown with the rich folk.

She was learning to contain monsters and magic, and yet she was infected by the very powers that threatened the city. She really was a jinx.

Feeling a wave of revulsion of her curse, Kali vented. She let the power within her burn brightly before she formed a small green ball of shifting light no bigger than a gum ball within the palm of her hand. It wasn't even a pretty shade of green. She threw it, hard, aiming for the trash bin on the far side of the street.

Unfortunately, she missed. Kali winced as the green light struck the side of a three-storey building that still had a few glass windows left. She tensed as the light was absorbed into the concrete, but only the sounds of the night followed.

She allowed herself a moment of relief at the magic misfire.

A hand slapped down on her shoulder and tightened with a firm grip. "Hey Tails," said the familiar voice of the bouncer from the club. Kali turned and looked up once more. This time he wasn't so friendly-looking. "What the hell was that?"

At that moment Kali learned that she had not misfired at all. There was a creaking sound, a strange crack and the sound of glass breaking. Kali and the bouncer both looked to the building together, just in time to see the three-storey structure collapse in on itself. Brickwork fell, support members toppled and surrounding homes disappeared into a rising dust cloud. A few bricks even landed in the street near where they stood, one sliding to a stop at her feet.

And then silence. The building had collapsed in on itself, leaving nothing more than a pile of rubble at the side of the street. It looked like a wrecking ball had targeted one building

amidst the city block and had knocked it down.

Strangely, there were no shouts of panic or pain. Aside from the sound of an angry car alarm, the city seemed to accept the collapse of the building.

“Oops,” she offered meekly.

“I think,” the bouncer said in a business-like manner, “that you should sit down and wait with me for a little bit.” Not that he was giving her much of a choice with that tight grip on her shoulder. With his free hand he drew a cell phone. Apparently he had the police on speed dial.

“Yeah, better send somebody to 15th and Celebrity Way. I’ve got an arsonist here you’ll want to meet. You might want to get Sentinel involved.”

Kali winced. So much for anonymity.

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