

This Means War
by Kim Switzer

He straightened, pushing away from the tree he'd been leaning against but staying in the shadows of the heavy, drooping branches. He tilted his head, blue eyes narrowing as he listened to footsteps passing along the path just on the other side of his leafy hideaway.

When the steps had gone by, he stepped out onto the path. "Lilith."

She turned, slow and graceful, and her fiery hair caught a beam of late afternoon sun and shot fiery glints of copper back at the sky.

"What are you doing here?"

"I did it. I left. I'm finally free." He grinned, suddenly boyish, and raised his eyebrows, inviting her to celebrate with him.

"You really did it?" Her voice rose in surprise. She met his grin with a sly smile and threw her arms around him. "Little Lucifer all grown up?" she teased. "Or did you leave yourself a way back in after you're done carousing?"

"I really did it." He pulled away from her, frowning. "I told you I would. You didn't believe me?"

"I believed you wanted to do it." She took his hand and pulled him along the path. "But he's hard to walk away from. Him and all the perks." She nudged him with her elbow, winning a reluctant smile from him. "So what did he say?"

"The usual. 'I know best, you're going to regret this, you're making a big mistake, you'll be back'" He lifted his chin, his smile turning smug. "I closed the door behind me while he was still shouting."

Lilith laughed, the sound tinkling through the forest and echoing back to them. Lucifer winced and glanced up at the sunset streaked clouds visible through the canopy of leaves.

She laughed again. "He isn't watching, Lu. He can't actually see everywhere at once. If he could, he would have found me aeons ago. We're safe here. He never looks at this place anymore."

"Are you sure? This place, right here where he started it all. You'd think he would look in once in a while, just for old times' sake."

"He doesn't have any love for this place," she said, pulling aside a curtain of hanging vines and ducking through. "He turned away from here a long time ago, when he kicked out Adam and the bimbo."

Lucifer grinned, ignoring her glare. "Still don't like her, huh?"

Lilith blew out a sharp puff of air, lifting her bangs away from her forehead and giving him a clear view of her green eyes for a moment before they were cast into shadow again. "Like her? What's to like? She has no personality. Simpering, stupid little twit. 'Yes, Adam, of course, Adam, whatever you say, Adam. Like a parrot! Only saying and doing what she's been taught, not one original idea coming out of her.'"

“She did eat the fruit.”

“Because she didn't have enough sense not to,” Lilith snapped. “The messenger was a male. She'd do just about anything some man told her to do. I'm surprised she could even pee on her own.”

Lucifer smirked but kept silent. After a moment, he asked, “So what now?”

They arrived at a stone archway set into a high brick wall, a heavy iron gate blocking their way. Lilith pulled a key on a leather thong from her bodice and turned it in the heavy lock. It moved with a deep, grating sound, and the lock fell open.

“Help me give this a push,” she said. They leaned into the iron bars, straining against them until the gate gave way, inching open just enough for them to squeeze through.

“Here we are,” Lucifer said, spreading his arms wide to take in the unkempt, straggly bushes and stands of fruit trees gone to seed. “Eden. No what?” he asked again.

“Now we make our battle plan,” Lilith said, pushing her way further into the overgrown garden.

“Battle plan?” Lucifer's voice rose in disbelief. “You're thinking of battle? Are you insane?” He lowered his voice at a sharp look from her but didn't let the subject drop. “You can't just pick a war with Heaven.”

“Why not?”

“Because. Because...” he threw his hands up in frustration. “Because he's God, and it's Heaven, and you just can't.”

“Yes, I can. I know who he is. But he's not everything he's made himself out to be. If he was all that, we wouldn't be standing here talking. He'd just whisk us back where he wants us and be done with it. But he can't do that. He can't make us do what he wants no matter what he says he can do.”

“He can make our lives pretty miserable, though,” Lucifer said.

“I know. Do you think I've wanted to skulk around in ruins and abandoned cities for all these years? I've had to hide out from him and his heavy-handed 'do what I say or else' garbage for way too long. I'm sick of living this way.” She turned and gripped his upper arms, her grasp surprisingly strong, almost painful. “It's time for a change, Lu. We are that change. We can make the world over, make it truly free for us and for everyone. We can do this.”

Lucifer rubbed a hand against his lower lip. “I don't know. It sounds good, but I just can't picture it working out.” He shook his head. “We could just lay low, you know? Fix this place up, enjoy being together, stay out of his way.”

“Do you think he's going to just leave us alone?” Lilith asked. “Now that it's the two of us? He's never stopped looking for me. What makes you think he would leave us alone?”

“He might, if we don't call attention to ourselves. If we start causing trouble, we risk him coming after us and dragging us back, and if he gets hold of us, we'll never get another chance to break free. But

maybe if we just mind our own business, if he sees we don't mean to cause any trouble, maybe he will leave us be. Why can't we at least try it? Just enjoy each other and what we have.”

“What do we have?” Lilith demanded through clenched teeth. “A ruined garden and a life lived in shadows? It's not enough. I've been living like this for ages, and I'm sick of it. We have to take him down. If we don't, if we don't take the reins and set ourselves and this world free, we will spend eternity hiding from him, looking over our shoulders. Is that the life you want?”

“No.” Lucifer sighed and ran a hand through his hair, leaving dark tendrils standing out on top of his head. “I just don't see how we can win a war like this.”

“I have some ideas,” Lilith said. She leaned toward him, bumping her shoulder against his. “Let's have a look at the old villa and see about getting settled in, then I'll tell you what I've been thinking.”

“I knew you would be part of this,” a voice boomed behind them. They whirled to face the underbrush the voice came from.

Leaves and vines floated aside as if lifted by invisible hands, and a tall, slender, golden haired man strode into view.

“Nathaniel,” Lilith said with a sneer. “Long time.”

Nathaniel twisted his mouth as if tasting something bitter and turned his attention to Lucifer. “What are you doing with her? What were you thinking? How could you be so stupid?”

Lucifer's jaw tightened. “I was thinking that I'm tired of pompous asses like you constantly questioning me and telling me what to do.”

“Oh please.” Nathaniel rolled his eyes. “You're just trying to impress her, acting like you've got some courage and a mind of your own. And for what? She's trash. Less than nothing.”

“Oh really?” Lilith asked, her voice low and seductive. “So that last time we saw each other, that was you just trying to take out the trash? Is that what that was, Nate?”

Lucifer scowled. “What are you talking about? What happened?”

“Nothing big,” Lilith said and smirked as Nathaniel turned scarlet with rage. “Nathe thought I would be easy pickings all on my own the way I was. I taught him otherwise.”

“Shut up,” Nathaniel bellowed. “You are not a part of this discussion. You have nothing to say to either of us. I am here to take Lucifer home, away from you and your lies, filthy whore.”

Lilith laughed, but Lucifer charged at Nathaniel with a wordless roar, catching him off guard and knocking him to the ground. The two men rolled through the dirt and decayed leaves, nearly silent except for the meaty thud of blows and grunts of pain.

Lucifer rolled on top of Nathaniel with his hands around his throat. He pulled him off the ground and slammed his head into the earth.

“Lucifer, stop it right now,” Nathaniel gasped, struggling to break free. “Stop it and come home with me before you get into even more trouble.”

“Shut up,” Lucifer screamed. His hands tightened on Nathaniel's throat, and he slammed his head harder and faster against the ground. “Shut up, shut up, shut up,” he shouted. “I am sick and tired of all of you, every minute, always running my life.”

Nathaniel squirmed away, but Lucifer pounced on him, pinning him to the ground again. He slammed Nathaniel's head down once more, but this time there was a wet, dull thunk as his head hit a hidden rock.

Nathaniel's breath gurgled, and his body went slack. Lucifer let go of him and stood up, backing away from the limp form.

“Oh no,” Lucifer whispered. He knelt and lifted Nathaniel's body into his arms, looking up at Lilith with tears gleaming in his eyes. “I just wanted him to shut up and leave me alone, just for once.”

“I know,” Lilith said. She knelt next to him and brushed the hair from his forehead. “I know.” She looked at Nathaniel's body, the blood matting his golden hair to his head, then she looked up into Lucifer's eyes. “It looks like the war has started after all.”