

MASTER vs. MISTRESS

by
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MASTER vs. MISTRESS

“This is a dilemma for the mind of Solomon,” said Madame Joan Devereux, proprietress of the Inn of the Red Chrysanthemum, as she took a sip of her cordial and settled further into her sofa. “Alas, I am no King Solomon.”

Charles glanced over his shoulder at the fair young woman—the babe in need of splitting—standing in shadow in the back of the room with her eyes downcast and her hands clasped demurely before her in perfect submission. Through her thin chemise, he could see hints of her garters and the form of two slender legs. With her thick eyelashes, charming little nose, and soft flaxen curls cascading to breasts that required no stays for lift, she had caught the attention of nearly every patron within the inn Madame Devereux maintained for members to indulge their most taboo proclivities.

Another woman, with reddish hair coiffed starkly from her face, stood an arm’s length from Charles and protested to Madame Devereux, “I approached her first.”

“A happenstance facilitated by distance,” Charles replied with a polite bow.

The redhead did not look at him, but he sensed he had irked her. He regretted the antagonism of his first exchange with Mistress Scarlet, as she was known at the establishment, but he saw an opportunity worthy of risk.

“Regardless, the rule here is that the master or mistress with senior standing may have their choice among the neophytes,” Mistress Scarlet said. “Perhaps Master...”

“Gallant. Charles Gallant.”

He bowed once more, but his civility failed to encourage a more friendly reception from her. Even from a distance, he had discerned her aloofness. But if she had desired no one to approach her, she should have attempted less provocative attire. Befitting her sobriquet, she wore stays of red silk, edged in black with black ribbons. The color and shape of her stays might have been a fashion from the previous century. The garment pressed her breasts tightly to her body and barely came above the nipples. She wore a shift and stockings, but no petticoats, and had completed her ensemble with shoes and a loosely draped banyan of the same vibrant red as her stays.

With his hat and gloves still in hand, his coat buttoned, and his cravat perfectly tied, Charles felt overdressed for the establishment.

“Perhaps *he* is unaware of the rules we have instituted,” Mistress Scarlet finished.

“*I* instituted,” Madame Devereux clarified.

Despite the dim lighting afforded by the few candles about the drawing room, Charles could see the color in Mistress Scarlet heighten. She had always been prone to blushing, he recalled. He found it becoming. It would be even more becoming if he were the cause of her flush. His

groin tightened at the thought.

“Yes, Madam,” Mistress Scarlet acknowledged with lowered eyes.

It was a small movement, but it gave him hope.

“If seniority decides,” he said, “I doubt there is a member who has more years than I.”

Surprised, she examined him more closely before turning back to Madame Devereux with raised brows.

Madame Devereux finished her drink. “Yes. You were a patron shortly after the inn had been renamed the Red Chrysanthemum”

“I was one of your first patrons.”

“But how long has his leave of absence lasted?” Mistress Scarlet objected. “I have not seen him here in my time.”

Charles did not correct her. She had seen him before, during her first year as a patron of the Inn. She had merely forgotten. He did not fault her for it. He knew her then as Miss Margaret Barlow, and at the time, she had been quite immersed with a selfish cad named Damien.

“I have the more recent, uninterrupted tenure,” Mistress Scarlet added.

Madame Devereux sighed. “I never thought to have such a predicament or that ‘seniority’ required a definition.”

“A simple refinement, Madame. With all due respect to Master Gallant’s past patronage, I do not think anyone would fault you for granting senior standing to one who has demonstrated a more current loyalty?”

Madame Devereux looked from one to another, then to the young woman behind them. “Miss Lily, come forth.”

Eyes still downcast, Miss Lily took a step forward.

“Closer. You may look at me, *ma cherie*. Ah, yes, you are quite the lovely thing. I can see why they should both desire you. What a lucky girl you are. Tell me, who would you prefer? Mistress Scarlet or Master Gallant?”

The young woman’s eyes widened. “It is not my place to choose, my lady.”

“We have ourselves an unusual situation. You may assist in its resolution.”

Mistress Scarlet stiffened. Charles guessed she felt a little betrayed by Madame Devereux, but she could not defy the proprietress and turned to smile at Miss Lily. Miss Lily looked first to Mistress Scarlet, then to Charles. He knew himself to be handsome in form and countenance and instantly caught the brightening of appreciation in her doe-like eyes.

“I know not, my lady...” Miss Lily demurred, returning her gaze to her hands.

“It is too difficult to ask her to form a judgment on appearance alone,” he offered. “Appearances offer little prospective on the experience to be had. May I suggest that we aid her decision with samples of what she may enjoy?”

Mistress Scarlet narrowed her eyes at him. Her skepticism of him was much higher than he anticipated, but it did not daunt him.

“We could, each of us, have a turn with Miss Lily, for no more than, say, an hour each,” he continued. “At the conclusion, Miss Lily will have much better information with which to make

a decision. Whomever Miss Lily chooses may then claim their heart's desire for the appointed sennight."

"An inspired thought, Charles!" Madame Devereux praised.

Mistress Scarlet frowned and eyed the quality of his cravat, the tailoring of his coat, and the shine of his boots. "Master Gallant appears to be a gentleman of means. I know nothing of his character, and I mean no impertinence, but what if he were to offer Miss Lily a monetary enticement that I could not match?"

No impertinence, he echoed to himself. The devil she didn't. But she had provided him the opening he needed.

"I invite Mistress Scarlet to bear witness," he said.

She stared at him, disbelieving, then pursed her lips in displeasure. The image of those lips wrapped about his cock flashed through his mind.

He turned his attention to Madame Devereux, a safer subject. "But I do not require the same courtesy. Your trust in her is sufficient for me."

Out of fairness or to prevent him from claiming too much gallantry, Mistress Scarlet responded, "We should both of us submit to the same rules. But it is quite possible that, at the end of this little trial, Miss Lily remains undecided."

"I am confident my abilities will not fail to persuade."

His arrogance provoked the answer he needed from Mistress Scarlet. Her hazel eyes hardened.

"Very well. I accept this proposal."

"One hour each with a respite for Miss Lily in between. The winner is awarded the maiden of his choice."

"Or *her* choice."

Charles suppressed a smile. He rarely adopted this much hauteur, but he had Mistress Scarlet—Miss Greta, as he preferred—right where he wished. His first visit back to the Inn had exceeded all expectation.