

Dinner for Four
a *New Avengers* fan adventure
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Rated M

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Anneau paced while her best friend's cousin basted cooling King Cake with praline brandy again. "Come on, at least gimme a clue!"

"Nope, blind dates are blind. Them's the rules."

"Enough with the Masterpiece Theater jive!" Ann's new perm started to sweat. "Does he have a job or at least teeth? And he better be 'ooh, baby, baby' or I'm gone."

Her hostess's etoufee nearly splashed another guest responding, "I never knew Diana Ross to drive men away," as Gambit unlocked the front door. Ten years earlier, Kay and Ann would've guffawed to the floor at the older woman's goof.

Now Anneau just tried to keep her thoughts to herself as a stuffy banker-type shook her hand saying "John Steed." *Aw, man, he even wears a bowler?! Crissake, Aiva—gonna kill you and your cuz for this.*

Steed took the dismayed, dowdy teacher—whom Gambit had informed him was fifty-eight and never married—in his stride. Splitting the huge bouquet of orange roses he carried in two to at least the delight of Mike's girl, John doffed his hat on the entry table beside a woman's unwieldy soft briefcase. "Pleasure to meet you, Kay. Might I know the way to your facilities, Mike?"

As the co-workers wandered off, Kay whispered, "Give the dude a freakin' chance, Ann. He did just spend 14 hours on a plane to make this housewarming."

"All right, okay?" Anneau snuck a big whiff of the half-dozen when no one could tell. The citrus perfume reminded her of running Palo Alto's Y, and, *It's hard to pout after gettin' flowers anyhow.*

Leaving his matchmaking mate drying his hands, Steed caught the woman unawares. *Rather sweet looking when she's pleased.* Taking this unexpected cue, he conspiratorially stepped forward. "Do you think Kay likes them, Anneau?"

"Oh yeah; she likes anything British or flowered." Ann moved a little east of the guy. *Nobody's voice is that gentle right away.* He was so well-groomed in that grey threepiece, his blind date wished, *At least I woulda felt in control in the "She who must be obeyed" sweatshirt Aiva gave me--if there had been time to change for this.* Her teaching wardrobe was limited to clunky uniforms of polyester slacks with plus-size necked blouses or waistless skirts. "You and Kay's husband know each other from work?"

“Civil Service,” Steed absentmindedly lied, gazing over the Barrett-Gambits’ tidied garden, then pictures on the lady of the house’s piano-forte. He dead-stopped at one of a particularly tender Ann: platinum pageboy, swan’s neck, and sparkling brown eyes bent to look at a very lucky and tall chap indeed.

“Different Mike,” his date explained selfsame snap, “back in college.”

“Really? Which university?” Steed propped in genuine interest upon a cane he’d mastered whilst in med leave from a bad fall; he could hardly admit himself to fainting after Purdey’s fatal malignancy. “I was at Cambridge.”

“I was residential advisor at our CSU,” Anneau hedged. *Oh great, bet he asks the name of my dorm now.*

“Mike mentioned all but one of its halls were named for “Hobbit” locales,” he commented, trying to keep her at ease.

“Mm-hm.” She felt so fricken’ relieved when Kay called, “Come ‘n’ get it,” from the patio.

Passing around the Fat Tuesday buffet to general gratification took most of the evening. So Kay hoped, *Please get along, guys. From what hubby and my cuz say, you could both use a lay or five.*

Getting up for water after excess okra, Gambit switched on the latest CD he’d made. A perfectly British samba filled the air. “Jolly tune,” Steed said. “Did it take you the usual to write?”

Over a mouthful of fresh cornbread, Kay’s hubby reddened. “Most holidays are busy now, Steed.”

“What’s this? An S.B. man blushing? Someone loves you, Kay,” his boss teased.

Anneau thought, *Gotta keep up with the British to stay in the loop*, but it came out shitty: “We getting the full Mardi Gras treatment for a reason?”

“Yes, for some reason I like my cousin’s friend.” Kay gently swatted Ann’s salt and pepper head.

The older woman giggled, “Okay, Bare, I had it comin’.” *Crap, did I say her nickname out loud?*

“Why bear?” Mike’s friend asked with a mild glance she didn’t buy.

Both women grinning, Ann laughed harder, “Oh we need waaaay more pican punch before swimming—I mean singing’—a Loose Hall round of ‘Lord Henry.’”

Her grey-eyed jollity made Steed and Mike chuckle, too.

Almost a bowl of punch and three hands of some card game called “Tripoley” later, tears of laughter squeezed out of Steed’s usually reserved expression to learn “Lord Henry” was the most disreputable mongrelization of “Bingo was his name” ever sung.

“Oh Lord Henry! Oh Lord Henry!” the women drunkenly shouted its fourth stanza. “As we lie upon the pearly sheets with nothing on at all.” Mike made a purple face at the latest ‘pearly.’”

Someone’s having a nice time later, his and Kay’s elders both surmised. John made another connection. “Ah, so the song’s where ‘Bare’ comes from?”

“Last verse, same as the first: a little bit louder and a whole lot worse.” Ann hugged Kay’s shoulder pretending the Britisher never asked, singing to Mike’s tipsy pianoplaying, “Ohhhh, Lord! OH, Lord! OHHH LORD! As we lie upon the pearly sheets with nothing on at all!”

At a nearby hound’s inopportune baying, their party literally and figuratively broke up. “Time good little Gambit and Missus were in—“

“Mike! Shush! Goodnight you two or hubby and I won’t make church tomorrow. Anneau knows the way around the house, John, and there’s no need to wake up for services if you’re jet-lagged.”

Hushed, more intimate chortles sent he and his blind date, with an exchange of knowing looks, from the parlor to Gambit’s quieter front yard. Steed and Ann walked a few streets to a city park she knew.

Snoggedly picking her way through wet pine chips to sit on a bench left of a jungle gym, the former house matron stretched improbably trim ankles in half-boots. “I am so wasted,” she snorted. Sharing that bench seemed to surprise her.

Anneau didn’t know if a “too drunk to know best” fake-out joke she remembered from Loose Hall’s road trip to the L.A. Improv really worked as a pick-up line. But John’s voice was so mellowly Bond, she had to get a leg up. “You are tooo nice, y’know?”

“Yes, now let’s drive you home in my rental,” John planned to say. Only a third of it came out before the gel very effectively kissed him. Coming up for air, his warm hands just about next to her damp bosom, Ann continued her pursuit.

“Don’t you think I’m nice, John?” She put cold fingers under his vest to mostly start scoping out what body all that worsted suit hid.

Realizing her platinum eyes, far from being soused, gleamed with clarity, unamused Steed decided, *She needs a bit of her own game*. “I think you’re smashing,” he aped in his best Ronald Colman impersonation, before weaving expert magic on her pretended ‘doubts.’

Startled to score this fast, Ann's flinch melted and her head dropped against his collarbone as he vigorously one-upped her kiss. She couldn't feel her Spanx pinching or wool pants itching, just his hard-chested heart under her touch.

"Baby, you can drive my car." Ann's truly nice contralto singing a favorite Beatles tune of Emma's caught his flattered ear once John turned over Anneau's Chrysler engine. But her flat turned out to be a mess of half-drunk bottles, school exams, and stale food. He couldn't hide his distaste.

Mood killed by his disgusted reaction, she soberly griped, "Well just leave, then! I don't want you."

Pride stung despite having all his faculties intact, John wanted to snap, "I never said a word!"

Different emotion half-choking her, Anneau seemingly perceived her errors from a confessional curl on her loveseat: "I don't want me, either."

If she'd faked being maudlin, too, then Steed would've left further satisfied with his silence. Some vulnerability in her words made him cross the one room flat, see the rasher of educational merits proudly displayed, and a half-empty bottle of Imitrex rolled under her sofa bed.

He knew about that kind of megrim. "Prescriptions never help with being 'on your own' at our age, do they, Annie?" he commiserated.

Bleary with her glasses off, she reached for them on the living room floor, fell in his waiting arms, and wished, *God, just let him touch me once and I won't play no more.*

Still-tender neck at his fingers, travel-weary, he subconsciously plucked a loose thread from that brimming bustline and found her warmly-breathed, "Ohhhhh . . .as we," coaxed more honesty than mere skill from his kiss. He crushed Ann's musky perfume to him as they dropped below view of her unperturbed Burmese cat.

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