

A Matter of Life & Death

NEW AVENGERS Fiction

BY CINDY PHARES

Chapter One

Gambit brought his car to a halt in front of a small apartment block. He smiled as he stepped from the car and shut the door. He walked briskly down the basement stairs, stopping at the first door he came to. He smiled again and rang the doorbell.

"Good morning, Purdey," he said as she opened the door.

"Ga—Gambit! Is that you," she asked questioning, looking at the beard he had grown while on holiday.

"Can I come in," he asked.

"Yes, sorry," she replied, ushering him in.

"Do you like it," he asked as he ran his hand over the beard.

"Yes, I do. You don't look half bad."

"Thanks a lot," he laughed.

"What in the world made you decide to grow a beard," she asked while pouring two cups of coffee.

"Thank you," he said, accepting the cup from her. "Steed did, actually. Got a call from him while I was on holiday. Told me that a matter had come up requiring our attention. He wouldn't go into any details over the phone but asked me to grow a beard."

"Well, he hasn't mentioned anything to me either, so we're both in the dark."

"Ah! I wish we were in the dark," said Gambit wickedly.

"Very funny, Gambit. Give me a few minutes to change and then you can drive us to headquarters," Purdey said as she stepped inside her bedroom.

Chapter Two

"Well, senor, your fate has been decided. A few days from now, Friday to be exact, you'll be executed before a firing squad. That gives you four days to live, so enjoy the short time you have left."

"But I didn't do anything wrong, damn you," said the man as he grasped the iron bars of his cell.

"Then what do you consider killing a man—a good deed?"

"He was trying to kill me. He's been following me for days now. If you kill me, you are going to have to answer some questions."

"You are no longer in England, Senor Samuels. You are on foreign soil and are therefore subject to our laws. We will not discuss the matter any further," said the man as he walked away.

The man inside the cell sat back down on the cot and let his shoulders fall. Only one man knew where he was and he knew he could help.

"God, let him get here before Friday," the man said to himself.

Chapter Three

"Good morning, Steed," Mike and Purdey said in unison as they stepped inside his office.

"Morning, have a seat. How was the holiday," asked Steed as he continued to look through the file cabinet.

"It was fine. Do I pass your inspection," asked Gambit as he stood.

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"Inspection," asked Steed as he pulled a file from the drawer.

"The beard. Remember the call you made to me?"

"I'm sorry," said Steed as he averted his attention from the papers in his hand. "Yes, looks fine. Should do very well. I'm afraid that we don't have much time, so we'll have to start immediately."

"What is all the secrecy about Steed," asked Purdey.

"Chris Samuels," replied Steed, handing each of them a photo.

"Never heard of him. Who is he," asked Gambit, looking at the photo.

"He's one of us. A double agent, working undercover in Germany for the past two years. His identity was revealed to them somehow and he barely escaped with his life. However, Germany sent agents to capture him. He couldn't come back to London right away. German agents were already here. For two months now, he's been traveling, trying to lose his pursuers. Presently, he's in El Salvador in a prison which is a modern day Devil's Island. Sources report that he killed one of his pursuers there and was arrested on a murder charge. He's to be executed Friday, according to the latest report."

"And we're supposed to rescue him," asked Gambit.

"Exactly. That's where you come in, Mike. You're going inside the prison."

"That's where you and I come in, Purdey. But I'll tell you about that later. Can you two be packed and back here in an hour?"

"Sure," said Gambit as he crossed to the doorway.

"Fine. I'll meet you two out front in one hour."

Chapter Four

"So Samuels doesn't know me," said Gambit as the ministry private jet left the runway.

"Right. Once you are inside the prison, you'll contact him and let him know that you are there to help him."

"How do you and Purdey fit in, Steed," Gambit asked suspiciously.

"No need to worry. I guarantee you that execution won't take place. Have I ever let you down?"

"No, of course not. You said this place is a modern Devil's Island; does a savage commandant go along with it?"

"You wouldn't want him as your best friend."

"Sorry I asked," replied Gambit as he looked out the window.

"Steed, I've been meaning to ask you. How does Gambit go about getting in the place?"

"I'm sure that you two will be able to create a noticeable disturbance," said Steed settling back in his seat.

Gambit and Purdey exchanged momentary glances and settled back to

glad to be off the plane.

"The prison which you saw from the air is to our left. The village isn't very far from here. We'll ride in together, check in at the local police department--that's where our informer is. After that...we all know what we have to do."

"Sort of like Daniel walking into the lion's den, eh," laughed Gambit.

"Gambit, I do wish you wouldn't make jokes like that," said Purdey, her voice holding a worried tone.

"Sorry," he said as Steed started the jeep.

Chapter Five

"Steed, come in. Have a seat," said the officer as they stepped inside the small building.

"Greg, good to see you again. Any further news?"

"No, none at all."

"Mike Gambit. Purdey." Steed made the introductions short. "Mike will be going in. Purdey will stay here with us."

"Everyone at one time or the other has tried to escape once. The commandant is very militarily disciplined; don't get on his bad side. He can employ many methods of punishment. Do be careful."

"Well, no one said this assignment was to be fun. Come on, Purdey. We've got a bit of trouble to stir up."

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"What'll it be, gent," asked the

"Exactly. That's where you come in, Mike. You're going inside the prison."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that," replied Gambit, not exactly pleased.

"Exactly how do they escape, Steed?"

disturbance," said Steed, returning back in his seat.

Gambit and Purdey exchanged momentary glances and settled back to enjoy the flight.

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Hours later, the three British agents were at their destination, all

"What'll it be, gent," asked the bartender.

"Two beers," said Gambit as he laid money on the counter.

"You know, Mike, Steed didn't give very much detail. Suppose you do get Samuels out. Then what?"

"From the way everyone talks, that's not the easiest task in the world. But don't you worry, I'll be careful."

"Hey, you at the bar," said a rough, harsh voice.

"Me," asked Gambit as he and Purdey turned.

"Thought I wouldn't find you, eh? I don't take a liking to people who cheat at cards."

"You must have the wrong man," said Gambit, turning away from the man.

"Oh no, I remember you very well," said the stranger putting his hands on Gambit's shoulder.

"I think you better remove your hands, sir. Now!" Gambit's voice was tense.

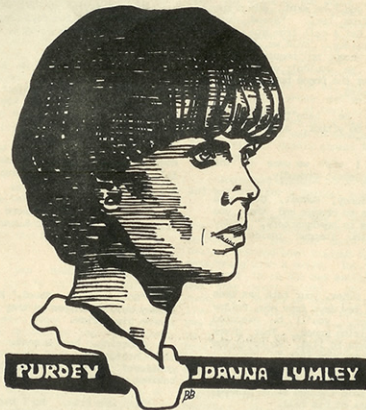
"Why don't you make me?"

Gambit stood and the man removed his hands.

"I'm not the guy you're looking for."

"I say you are," the man said, taking a swing at Gambit.

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Gambit ducked and reacted with a blow to the man's right jaw. It didn't seem to phase him as his next blow sent Gambit stumbling backwards, crashing over tables.

"Mike, please stop! Just give the money he says you owe him," cried Purdey.

"No way. He started it and I'm going to finish it."

Gambit lunged at the man once more and knocked him to the floor. He then put his hands around the man's neck and began to squeeze.

"Alright, break it up, break it up," shouted the police as they entered the bar and pulled Gambit off the man.

"What's going on here," asked one of the officers.

"Tried to kill me, he did," said the man as he rubbed his neck.

"That's true. I saw the whole thing," confirmed the bartender.

"They're lying," said Purdey. "He started it," she pointed to the man on the floor.

"You two better come along with us," said the officer.

Mike knew it was useless to resist. He took Purdey's hand and they were escorted from the bar.

Chapter Six

(Tuesday morning)

"Prison! I didn't kill the man," shouted Gambit.

"You attempted to kill him and that's our law," said the officer as Gambit was taken outside to a waiting jeep.

"Don't worry, honey. Call John. He'll be able to straighten this mess out," he said and kissed her.

"Let's go," called the officer to the driver.

"I guess all we do now is wait," Purdey asked Steed as he came up behind her.

"We wait. Greg, the officer we met last night, will keep a close watch on Gambit for us."

*

"What have you brought us today, captain," asked the prison commandant as he looked at Gambit.

"Mike Gambit. Nearly killed a man last night. Put him in the hospital even."

"I see. That will be all, captain."

"Yes, sir," said the officer as he left Gambit to his task.

"As long as you obey the rules, senior, you will have no trouble. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I think I do."

"You'll answer 'yes sir' or 'no sir,' said the commandant as he looked menacingly at Gambit.

"Yeah, right. I'll try and remember that."

"YES SIR or NO SIR," repeated the guard as he slammed the stick he held against Gambit's ribs.

"Yes sir," said Gambit, holding his side.

"Put him in cell thirty-three for a while. When lunch is served, let him out with the others."

"Yes, commandant."

"Senior, remember what you have been told," said the commandant.

"Yes, sir," replied Gambit as he was taken from the small building.

Gambit looked among the prisoners as he was escorted to his cell. He thought he saw Samuels or at least it looked like him. Perhaps he could find out when lunch was served.

"I don't guess it would do any good to say I'm innocent," said Gambit as the guard shoved him inside the cell.

"Once you are in here, it is too late, senior," replied the guard as he walked away.

Gambit sighed and moved away from the bars. He rubbed his aching ribs and laid back on the cot, thinking of his plan to get Samuels out of the prison.

*

"Well, he's in there now, Steed. All we can do is wait. Why don't you get a few of his things—razor, cigarettes if he smokes, things like that. I can take them out to him tomorrow. Also give me a chance to see how he's doing."

"Fine. I'll have the things for you shortly," said Steed as he stepped outside.

Chapter Seven

Gambit looked around cautiously as he walked towards the man he saw earlier who he thought to be Samuels.

"Chris Samuels," asked Gambit just above a whisper.

"Yeah," the man replied.

"Steed got your message. Mike Gambit—I'm here to help you escape. Your execution won't take place."

"I understand. Thanks."

Gambit nodded and walked away. "I'll have to give it a try tonight," he thought as he looked at the stone walls. He had remembered seeing some rope outside the commandant's office earlier. Yes, he would definitely

have to try tonight.

* *

"Steed, exactly how do we help Gambit," asked Purdey as she gathered a few things for him.

"Tonight he'll make an escape attempt which won't succeed. Tomorrow he'll be in detention so to speak, so that only leaves Thursday. He'll come over the wall again Thursday night with Samuels. You and I will be waiting there with a jeep. Plane will be waiting for us at the airport. We'll land at an airport in Florida, change planes and continue on our way."

"Does Gambit know all of this yet?"

He will tomorrow. Greg will give him the message."

"You know, Steed, Mike doesn't look half bad with a beard. Gives him a sort of rugged look."

Steed smiled. "Let's drop these things off with Greg. Then we'll get a bite to eat."

*

Night came but to Gambit it seemed to have taken forever. It was 10:00 p.m. when he pushed the door to his cell open. He looked about cautiously and made his way safely to the courtyard. As the searchlight passed, he ran quicky to the

commandant's office. He managed to conceal himself just as the light passed again. Safe once more, he made a loop in the rope and had it securely caught after two attempts. Letting the rope go, he hid by a bush and cursed silently as the light made a continuous sweep. Another cautious look and he was ascending the rope. Two minutes later he was over the wall.

"Alarm! Alarm," shouted the guard who stepped from the building and spotted the rope. Within minutes, a search party was organized and outside looking for Gambit.

Gambit stopped his steady pace for a moment and caught his breath. A twig snapped and suddenly he found himself surrounded.

"No one escapes from this prison, senor," said the commandant as he approached Gambit.

"I think I just found that out," said Gambit, his voice rough.

"You were told earlier that it is either 'yes sir' or 'no sir,' said the commandant as he slammed his club against Gambit's side.

This time Gambit felt the rib break and he winced with pain as he grabbed his side.

"Bring him. This one will have to learn the hard way," said the commandant as he started back towards the prison.

BY CINDY PHARES

In the first half of this story (printed in last issue), the NEW AVENGERS fly to El Salvador in an attempt to free Chris Samuels, a double agent on the side of the British, from a high security prison. Steed arranges to get Gambit into the prison under the guise of a prisoner, to help Samuels escape. Gambit soon learns, however, that escape from the prison and its tyrantical commandant, is next to impossible. Gambit's first attempt at freedom ends in failure.

Chapter Eight

"When one tries to escape, Senor Gambit, he must suffer the consequences. However, since it is

your first day here, I shall not be too hard on you. You may find yourself a bit uncomfortable," said the commandant as Gambit found his back against a stake and his hands tied behind him. "It is cool at night and you'll find it pleasant. But night turns into day and the sun's heat can be unbearable, especially when one has to go without food and water all day. Do I make myself clear, senor?" said the commandant sternly as he pressed the club he held in his hand against Gambit's aching side.

"Yes, sir," he said breathlessly. He couldn't afford to talk back; he could get worse than a broken rib, then he surely couldn't help Samuels.

"Good, we understand each other then. Don't try anything else that would be considered foolish," said

the commandant, still pressing his stick on Gambit's side. "You may live to regret it!"

"Damn you," muttered Gambit as the man walked away. His hands tied securely, he could do nothing to relieve the pain inflicted upon him. He had been trained for this sort of thing though. He thought of Purdey and tried to forget the situation he found himself in.

Chapter Nine (Wednesday)

With the others eating and from the sun's position in the clear blue sky, Gambit guessed it to be noon. The sun was hot as it beat down upon him; sweat ran from his face and had soaked his shirt. His chest ached every time he took a breath and he

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wondered how much longer they would keep him out there. His legs ached from forced standing and he longed to lay down; his shoulders ached—he wasn't sure he would last much longer.

"Are you all right," asked Samuels, his voice just above a whisper.

Gambit nodded, not attempting to speak.

"I better go. Commandant is coming this way," said Samuels.

"Ah, afternoon, senior. I trust we are doing well today?"

"I'm surviving," he said with an effort.

"Tell me, senior," said the commandant as he looked at the large bruise on Gambit's side. "Why is it so hard for you to answer simply 'yes sir' or 'no sir'? Perhaps another few hours out here would change your attitude?"

"Yes, sir," replied Gambit, not wanting his broken rib touched.

"Good. You're learning. We'll see what progress you have made in two hours then."

*

"I'm going out to the prison now, Steed. Need to add anything to that message I'm to give to Gambit?"

"No, can't think of anything

else. "How about you, Purdey?"

"Tell him to just be careful."

"Okay. I'll be back in an hour or so."

"We'll be waiting."

Chater Ten

"Come in, captain. What can I do for you," said the commandant as he looked up from the papers he was reading.

"I've brought some things for the prisoner I delivered yesterday. Razor, books..."

"All right, we'll see that he gets them," replied the commandant as he looked through the bag.

"I wonder...his wife asked me to deliver a message to him. Is it possible I could speak with him?"

"Wife? Message?"

"Yes. She talked with a lawyer..."

"Yes, you may talk with him, captain. Come with me. I'm afraid he tried to escape last night and he chose to learn his lesson the hard way."

"I believe most of them do, commandant."

Greg had seen prisoners in worse shape than Gambit was but he was worried about him.

"Mike, your wife asked me to give you a message. She talked to John and he'll arrive at 10:00 p.m. tomorrow night. Er, commandant could we speak alone? I have a private message from his wife."

"Very well, but make it short," said the commandant, walking away.

Greg lowered his voice, "go over the left wall at 10:00. Steed and Purdey will be waiting with a jeep. Bring Samuels. Plane will be waiting at airport. Tomorrow night, 10:00 p.m. You okay?"

"Fine. Message understood," Gambit replied weakly.

"Got to go. Be careful," and with that Greg left him.

"Finished?"

"Yes, commandant. I'll see myself out."

The commandant walked over to Gambit.

"Well, senior. I see you are still surviving."

Gambit did not answer, his lips were dry and cracked, his throat parched. Each attempt to speak made his throat feel as if it were on fire.

"Perhaps you did not hear. You have a broken rib, another could make you talk."

Gambit raised his head and looked at the man, hatred in his eyes.

"Yes, sir. I am surviving," he said hoarsely.

"Excellent. A slow learner but you are making progress. I'll release you at 5:00. That is in three hours. I think next time you will answer correctly to start with."

"Sir! Water, please, sir," said Gambit pleadingly.

"In three hours you may have all the water you want," said the commandant as he walked away.

Gambit laid his head back against the pole, looking at the sky, his eyes half closed. "God! Let those three hours pass quickly," he thought to himself.

Chapter Eleven

"Steed, message delivered and understood," said Greg as he met Steed and Purdey at the local bar.

"How is he," asked Purdey, her voice carrying a worried tone.

Greg hesitated momentarily.

"Greg, he is all right, isn't he," asked Steed concerned.

"I've seen guys in worse shape. He's going to be fine, nothing to worry about."

"They haven't beaten him, have they," asked Purdey.

"No. Really, he's okay. Take my word for it."

Steed looked at his friend doubtfully, but for now, he and Purdey would have to believe what he told them.

"Senor," said the commandant as he and two guards approached him.

"Sir," said Gambit, his voice only a whisper.

"Good. You will not try to escape again?"

"No, sir!"

"You will answer 'yes sir' or 'no sir'?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You have learned your lesson then?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Excellent. Cut the rope from his hands."

Too weak and tired to stand, Gambit slumped to the ground.

"Listen well, senor. Do not do anything foolish or make the error of answering wrong. The first time you do, you will regret ever having set foot in this country. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Take him to his cell."

Gambit moaned painfully as the two guards picked him up and carried him to his cell.

"I shall have food and water sent in shortly," said one of the guards as they laid him on his cot and left.

Gambit held his side and moaned as he positioned himself on the cot. He hoped he could make it over the wall tomorrow night.

Chapter Twelve

"Don't talk," said Samuels as he knelt by Gambit's bedside. "You've been out for a while. How do you feel?"

"I'm all right," said Mike as he

"Steed, I can't sleep. I'm worried about Mike. I'm certain that Greg was holding something from us."

"I know. I guess we'll have to wait till tomorrow night. I wouldn't worry too much. Mike can take care of himself."

"You're right, of course. Good night, Steed," said Purdey as she went back to her room.

Chapter Thirteen (Thursday)

"Psst, Mike," said Chris softly.

"Chris. Hey, were you here last night?"

"Sure was."

Message. I'll get you at 10:00 tonight. Steed and Purdey will be waiting outside the north wall for us. There will be a plane ready and waiting at the airport. Think you can do it?"

"I've been running a long time now, Mike. You better believe I can do it. I better go, someone's coming."

"I trust you slept well, Senor Gambit," asked the commandant as he stood outside his cell.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. You'll be confined to your cell for a few days. You understand, of course?"

"Yes, sir"

"I'll have dinner sent to you shortly. Maybe you feel more like eating now."

"Yes, sir. I think I do."

Gambit glared at the man as he

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Chapter Twelve

"Don't talk," said Samuels as he knelt by Gambit's bedside. "You've been out for a while. How do you feel?"

"I'm all right," said Mike as he struggled to sit upright.

"This is Jim. He can fix that rib for you."

"Jim. You two shouldn't be in here."

"Don't worry. We've got lookouts posted," said Samuels.

"Take a deep breath, Mike," said Jim as he sat down by Gambit and put his hand on Mike's chest. "Poor guy," he replied as Mike lost consciousness. "Tear some strips from his shirt for me."

"He'll be all right, won't he?"

"Yeah, he'll be fine by morning, Chris...there, that should do. Let's get out of here."



continued on his way. After 10:00 he wasn't saying 'yes sir' unless he absolutely had to.

Chapter Fourteen (Thursday night)

Night seemed to come much too slowly for all those concerned with the prison escape. Steed and Purdey made one last check on the plane and left the small airport at 9:40 p.m.

Gambit glanced down at his watch, 9:48. He looked about cautiously as he once more picked the lock to his cell. The way clear, he made his way, slowly, silently to Samuels' cell.

"Chris," whispered Gambit.
"Ready to go?"

"You bet. Let's get out of here," said Samuels as he joined Gambit.

"Wait here," said Gambit as they made it to the courtyard. "When I signal, cross to the wall, but watch the light," he continued, whispering.

Samuels nodded as Gambit made his way to the guard house. A few minutes of searching and he found a rope he hoped would be long enough. Samuels watched carefully and as Gambit signaled, made his way to him.

"Soon as the light goes around, get the rope caught," said Gambit as he handed the rope to Chris.

"Will you be able to make it, Mike?"

"Yeah. There's a beautiful blonde waiting for me on the other side," he laughed. "Get down."

"Five minutes, Steed," said Purdey nervously.

"I think they're about to pay us a visit, Purdey," replied Steed as he saw the rope catch securely.

Purdey turned her attention to the wall as did Steed and a minute and a half later, Chris Samuels was safely over the wall. Safe once more from the light, Gambit gripped the rope and started his ascent. His broken rib slowed his pace a bit and as he got to the top, the light caught him. "Damn it," he said to himself as gunfire sounded. Reacting fast, he gathered the rope and slid down safely to the awaiting jeep.

"Over the wall," shouted a voice.

"Hold on," yelled Steed as the jeep pulled away and gunfire sounded behind them.

"Thanks, Steed. I owe you my life," said Samuels as Steed approached the waiting plane.

"You'll be completely safe when we're in the air," replied Steed as he brought the jeep to a rather abrupt halt.

"Take care, Steed. I'll settle things here with the government."

"Thanks for all your help, Greg. Take it easy," said Steed as he shut the door on the plane.

"Mike, you aren't saying much. Are you all right," asked Purdey concerned as she brushed his fallen hair from his forehead.

"I am now," he smiled as he laid his head back and closed his eyes.

"How can I ever repay you and your two friends, Steed," asked Samuels.

"Only doing our job, Chris," said Steed as the small plane disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter Fifteen (Two days later in England)

"Here's the report you wanted, Steed," said Gambit, handing him several sheets of paper.

"Fine. I trust that you are feeling better?"

"Much better, thank you. Can't work for a couple of weeks. Field duty, anyway."

"Has the whole incident been settled now," asked Purdey as she entered Steed's office.

"Yes. Greg has settled the matter with prison and government officials of El Salvador. Chris Samuels is briefing the agent who shall take his place and we three are home safe and sound."

"Well, I've had my share of prisons," said Gambit. "After that experience, I'm not going to do anything that will get me thrown into one."

"Next time, we'll get you a job as a guard," laughed Purdey.

"I think I'll treat you both to dinner. Shall we go?" Steed ushered his two young friends from his office.

