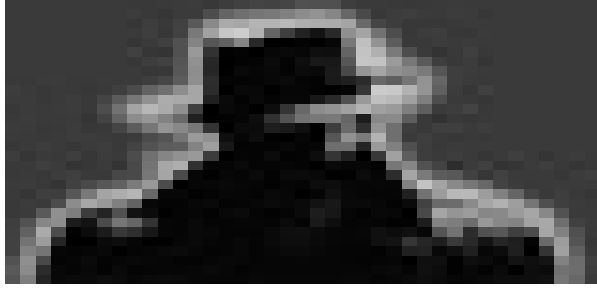


Knight



Checks Queen – A Short Story



By Randy Gonzalez gonzoscti@hotmail.com

www.drgonzo.org

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Knight Checks Queen

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“Nice view, bad shot angle” he commented to himself with quiet satisfaction. From his vantage point, Paladin Payne had a clear shot at his target. “She’s wide open. Easy prey. The only problem,” he noted under his breath, “too many people, and too many witnesses. No guns. Too much commotion, even with a silencer. Knife up close and personal, perhaps. From the back, through the ribs into the heart muscle. Maybe. Garrote from behind? Not here. Or, poison over lunch, a possibility? Arrogant self-indulgence endangers us all.” A grim smirk formed over cruel lips on a maturely handsome face. “Some people think this is a wonderful world. Others are afraid it might be the truth. If the word is given, she will be taken out, with extreme prejudice. We all face that, sooner or later. Death is footsteps behind us trying to catch up.” He thought the coffee was particularly good today. London was a fun place to be.

He was sitting in a fashionable coffee shop. Comfortably elegant, the coffee bar was inside a shopping mall outside London. Earthy colors of brown, beige and chocolate mingled to create a subdued atmosphere. His blue blazer, with gold buttons, matched the slacks. They were expensive. Soft black leather loafers gave him a casual but tailored look. The long sleeve white shirt had button down collars. His wrist watch was a Patek Philippe. Worth two hundred thousand U.S. dollars. It had a vintage rose gold dial and brown alligator wrist strap. With a platinum rectangular case, the watch spoke of elegance, style and sophistication. A dapper dresser, he appreciated the finer things in life. Dark roast espresso coffee was among those. In addition to nice clothes, he enjoyed good food, fast cars and dangerous women. Aside from the emotional baggage, he’d only been physically injured by women. Chiseled good looks, toned toughness and mannerly behavior, got him into warm receptive places. Steel grey eyes and a salt and pepper tint gave him flirting attention. But, professional paranoia kept most people at arm’s length.

“One must always have a reactionary gap tied to an effective escape route,” he mused, as he studied his target. He could see her through the huge window panes of the boutique. “Proper planning prevents poor performance was something to live by. How many things in life does that apply to?” Sarcasm and cynicism commingled in his thoughts. He sensed something. What was it? A steely stare scanned the commercial and human landscape. Shoppers huddled, lovers touched, and children’s shrill voices echoed. Rich coffees smells mingled with food cooking in fast food restaurants. Distractions were everywhere.

Bang! A sound erupted nearby. Like a muffled gunshot, the noise popped behind his back. Not good he thought. He tensed with serious focus. With deliberate skill, his right hand instinctively went inside his coat. Training kicked in. Train like you play and play like you train. Kill or be killed, never hesitate. Fingers wrapped around a Sig Sauer P232 auto pistol. Double action, the stainless steel gun held eight rounds. One in the chamber and seven in the magazine. A .380 caliber, the pistol weighed less than a pound fully loaded. Slim, compact and durable, he’d never missed a target. The barrel had a silencer. Ready to draw, he turned slowly in his chair. In a split second, he could aim and fire ruthlessly. He rotated in his seat. As his eyes stop, he saw his target.

“Nice, kid,” he said with a faint grin. Rugged features relaxed. “You almost got one in the forehead.

A small boy squealed with joy a helium filled balloon. The smile held its place across his thin lips. The boy's mom, embarrassed, attempted to recover from the sudden attention. She was good looking he thought. He recovered too and fantasized. His hand relaxed and reached for the coffee cup. Just then, the potential target of his mission moved. She had just exited an expensive women's clothing store. The shop, like Victoria's Secrets, specialized in extraordinarily expensive lingerie. Body guards followed from a discreet distance. He continued to make mental notes. Her every movement in body and expression were recorded. Tall, blonde, trim and attractive, she radiated a sensual quality.

"Base, this is Lookout, over," a body guard said into his cuff sleeve. "All units alert, U.S. Queen is on the move." The officers hovered around her and moved quickly. "Move the car to the main entrance."

"Roger that, over," the base station's human voice echoed in the body guard's ear piece.

"Base, Lookout here, over," the body guard radio back. "Standby, U.S. Queen is entering another store. We'll be a few more minutes, over."

"Potentially inept, inattentive, distracted. They're nervous. Typical. They must be new to this assignment," again Payne whispered to himself. His mind calculated time, distance, cover, and spatial alignments and so on. "Their security detail could be comprised he thought. She would've insisted on junior security officers. Probably all single good looking young men. I'll bet hubby number four gets sent on business trips frequently." He carefully watched the woman, making mental notations. "Always go with maturity and experience. Hire professionals." He smiled confidently. "Any minute, I should be receiving a phone call." On cue, his cell phone vibrated. He slowly took a sip of his espresso, showing no hurry to answer. Time, talk tactics. Patience requires fortitude and stamina. "I'm listening," he said with a devilish grin, after flipping open the phone.

"Black knight," the gruff officious voice said. "You have a green light. Suspicious are confirmed. The business deal must go through before another incident. Recovery is essential." There was brief pause, as the owner of the voice breathed into the phone. A heavy sigh echoed. "Transaction's complete. The usual amount for special services. Your account in Geneva's been upgraded. Continue as per agreement. No loose ends. We were never here and this never happened. Good bye." Click and that was it. The other end was silent.

"Done," he replied and closed the phone. Cold, quick and deadly. Objective not personal. Again, to himself, he said, "Knight checks queen. Green light the sanction. One less politician and traitor to worry about. One less leak in the governmental bureaucracy. The alleged checks and balances are frail. The ends do in fact justify the means. Moral imperative are situational at best." He glanced at his watch, "Too early for a martini. To the car we go. A quick drive to the country to visit a mansion."

A maze of electronic countermeasures interconnected with data relays. Secret Satellites in geo-sync orbit received and transmitted scrambled information. Uplinks and downlinks spoke to each through multidimensional communications grid. At the other end of Payne's encrypted conversation, two men sat in a darkened room. The corner office was large, ornately furnished and comfortably official. Illuminated by one small 19th century style desk lamp, one man sat behind a huge oak desk.

Dim lighting kept intentional shadows in place. Cloak and dagger mysteries were fully operational. Two men spoke knowing the room had been sanitized earlier. Even at the heart of the intelligence community, no one took any chances. At Langley, Virginia, the CIA case officer and supervisor discussed their project.

“Can we trust him on this one?” one asked the other. He was sitting in front of the desk in brown leather overstuffed chair. “I mean, I know he’s good and reliable. But, this project is very sensitive. In fact, it’s very dangerous for us all. Failure is absolutely no option.”

“Are you kidding me?” The one who spoke on the phone answered. He was sitting behind the desk. “He’s the best. Used to have your job, head of covert operations. Now, he’s a rogue warrior, a ronin, and he’s on our side, thank God. He’s gotta gun, superbly skilled, and will travel anywhere anytime for his country. Naturally, he’s paid well for services rendered. No family, few friends, he’s an island unto himself.” He thought for a moment. “It’s not him I’m worried about. I don’t trust the President.”

“I don’t either,” the other answered. “He’s interfering with the Intel ops. Yet, a rogue knight may ultimately figure this out. Much rests on a lone gunman. Operation Check Mate cannot fail.”

“I understand that all too well,” the man behind the desk replied. “In the last operation, we lost ten million and three agents died. Vital information to the war on terrorism was comprised. Troops in Iraq have been comprised. The leak came from the Ambassador’s office in London. An investigation was conducted. The mole has to be the Ambassador. Everything points to her.”

“We better be right,” the other answered. “We’re sending an assassin against one of our own. The President really blundered on this appointment. He wasn’t thinking with the head on his shoulders. I sure hope his liaison with that movie star was worth it. The cost to our intelligence operations has been severe.”

Exiting the mall to the parking area, Payne produced a brown briar pipe. The ritual of pipe lighting followed. A black leather pouch held a smooth aromatic cherry blend. The gold plated lighter had an insignia. It bore the image of a medieval knight bearing a sword and shield. The knight was slaying a dragon. He pressed the blue-green butane flame to the tobacco in the pipe’s bowl. His quarry was a politician and a diplomat. To him, politicians were basically useless. He lit his pipe, puffed a few clouds of bluish smoke, and visually searched for his Mercedes. A few spaces away, there she was, a Mercedes McLaren SLR. One of the fastest cars on the highway. The SLR’s shiny black surface glistened with rain droplets. She could do two hundred miles an hour with little effort. Special accoutrements of bullet resistant material protected the exterior body and windows. Naturally, the windows were tinted.

Paladin Payne was the hunter stalking his prey. No amount of pompous grandstanding, political backstabbing or bogus promises to continuants, would protect this politician. Didn’t matter whether they male or female. Matters of national security justified the means. Regardless of what it took, at the end of the game, who won mattered the most. Cautious, careful and clever, Payne knew exactly who he was after. His email had already contained a dossier on the target. Formerly of the U.S. Army Special Forces, he retired from the Central Intelligence Agency. During the week, in the U.S., he taught psychology at the local community college. He consulted for the local police, profiling criminals.

During the weekends, he sometimes disappeared for days at a time. Going to exotic places, he plied his special talents. And, at a place called the Farm, in the remote woods of Virginia, he taught new recruits how to kill. Still, on other occasions, he carried out contract assignments for his previous employer. For Paladin Payne, life was a chess game. He enjoyed playing immensely. The game had been very profitable. A knight is another word for paladin. This soldier of fortune was akin to the Japanese ronin of ancient times. A masterless samurai, Payne had no connection to the complexities of bureaucratic organizations. Thus, he shared no loyalty to those in power. He was loyal only to himself. A loner, he was a stranger to long term relationships. Paladin knew pain throughout his entire life, personally and professionally. One jagged edge after another. Shards of broken promises stuck to him. Yet, such experiences had honed his senses and strengthened his skills. He knew how to clean up the messes politicians created. There were times, for the sake of national security, he brought that pain to others. Today was no different than many other days that preceded this one. The retired colonel was about to exact justice in the special way he knew how. One loud mouthed pompous elected official said the wrong thing at the wrong time. As a result, people in another part of the world died torturous deaths. They just didn't get it.

He sat in his Mercedes a discreet distance from the wrought iron entrance. Flipping through the data file in his cell phone, pictures flashed on the screen. Winfield House was the first picture. Located in Regent's Park, this was the home of the U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James. The mansion sat on twelve acres of pristine forest land. A fifteen foot iron gate protected the main entrance. Surrounding the compound was huge stone fence. Electronic surveillance systems did most of the work in providing on site security. A police detail of two cops stood watch at the gate.

"What'd you think, Jade?" He said to the beautiful Eurasian woman next to him. She was his cover companion in London. They'd worked together before and shared more than assignments. Long black hair hung down her back. A short tight black dress clung to her lean taut figure. He liked the matching stiletto heels with straps around the ankles. And, he relished in knowing Jade Neko was every bit as professional as he. With her, he could forget about painful things. He longed for the orient. "Your thoughts?"

"I think," she answered in a thick British accent, "she's easy. Security is lax. Too much confidence. She's arrogant, decadent and careless with herself." She enjoyed his warm hand on her thigh. His fingers tracing the outline of a dragon tattoo. "Poison in champagne would be my preference."

The U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain was Golda Edge. She was a famous movie star. Her legend, somewhat fading, carried her into the political arena. Outspoken, she lashed at oil companies while she drove gas guzzling expensive cars. Payne thought movie stars should stay out of politics. To him, they were naïve celluloid manifestations of the public's hidden fantasies. They knew nothing of the real world outside of Hollywood. In his mind, Tinsel Town was a plastic world of make believe.

Ambassador Edge went by Goldie to her friends. She was flamboyant, wealthy and highly opinionated. She never allowed the facts to confuse her version of the truth. Her appointment by the president was a dicey decision. But, in the world of politics, symbolism over substance was often more important.

"The business of government," Payne said to Jade, "makes for strange bedfellows."

"Were you talking about me or you?" She was quick to respond. They smiled and held hands.

“Neither,” he replied, putting his arm around her toned shoulders. “I don’t consider either of us strange. We fit nicely together. And, I enjoy our assignments.”

“So do I,” she breathed a sigh of pleasure. Rubbing his thigh in return, she added, “Now, how do you want to play this out? Stealthy, or up close and personal?” Her cat-like reflexes, competent capabilities and deadly precision had always impressed him. And, he couldn’t forget her other skills as a woman.

“Up close and personal,” he answered, leaning closer to her. They kissed. Her smooth soft lips were succulent and dangerously seductive. The smell of her was intoxicating. He thought of cherry blossoms in full bloom. Delicate petals of the flower opening down the center, revealing a secret place. “I want to move in close. I want to see her face when I do it. Poison sounds good. I have a small supply of an untraceable substance. Instant cardiac arrest. We’ve field tested a newer version. Quick, silent and deadly. A medical examiner’s worst nightmare.” He reached inside his coat. A gold colored envelope slid across Jade’s lap. “How would you like to go to a party?”

“U.S. Embassy seal,” she commented, her voice laced with British inflection. “How nice. We’re going somewhere? Thank you.” She teased. Almond eyes spoke of Japanese heritage, commingled with English upbringing. Long slender fingers opened the envelope. Red lacquered nails knifed the edge of the flap. “A reception. A splendid thing to do. Black tie. At the mansion. What shall I wear? Decisions, decisions. I’ll have to go shopping you know. Something daring? Or, something discreet? Let’s see, this is a business expense, right?”

“Absolutely, a business expense of course,” he agreed. Another kiss. “How about something daring? We need distractions. Here, use mine.” He pulled a slim black leather bi-fold wallet from his jacket. An American Express card appeared.

“Lancer Lovejoy,” she read the name on the card. “Haven’t heard that one in a while.” An eyebrow rose over perfectly applied green eye shadow. “Always like that name. The implications provoke the imagination. Do we have time for a leisurely lunch at my place, Lancer?” She taunted him with a darting pink tongue.

“I certainly hope so,” he said, refusing to discipline his inclinations. “Some day, I want to run off and disappear with you. Maybe an uncharted desert island.”

“I wish you would,” she answered, stretching in feline fashion and wrapping herself around him. “You better drive fast. Hope you’re hungry.” He was hunger and he drove fast.

The stately mansion was ornate, historically reflective and bedecked for the party. Ambassador Edge often went over-board for such festive occasions. In Hollywood style, she was outlandish, catering to every possible culinary taste and fashion. Music carried a thumping beat and demand people dance. Champagne flowed freely, and the food was extravagant. From head to toe, the ambassador wore a golden gown that trailed the floor. Her blonde hair was pushed high on her head. The fingernails were gold as well. Her husband, as usual was nowhere to be found. She probably sent him out of the country so she could party all night. Dignitaries of one sort or another mingled in the crowded grand ballroom.

“Given my seven day rule,” Payne explained, as he and Jade danced. They cuddled close. Their cover mysteriously fabricated as foreign journalists. “Surveillance, study and strategy, for seven days. After careful analysis, if everything’s still the same, I do the sanction.”

“In this case?” Jade flashed a sensual gaze. “You’re not certain are you?”

“No,” he whispered close her ear. She tingled at the feel of his warm breath. “Something’s not right. This is Friday. A death occurs. An assassination turns into martyrdom. Followed by a resurrection and the imagery of a fallen heroine. A lot of news coverage. Washington’s got it wrong. Bad Intel. If we play this out, we’re not the knights in the game. The moves are all scripted. A deception within deceptions. Langley’s being manipulated. We’ve become pawns.”

“By whom? And, for what ends?” The words dripped from her mouth. “Her husband?”

“Yes,” he breathed heavily. They spun on the dance floor, gripping with clutching motions. Their tango was alluring to envious eyes. “The jilted king. A devious wife with wanton proclivities.”

“This is a domestic dispute,” Jade grinned devilishly. “Her death gets headlines. The President gets coverage in the mourning process, along with the husband. This is about the business of politics and the politics of business.”

“You’re deliciously correct,” he sighed holding her arched back, timing the music with precise rhythmic thrust. “He’s a major contributor to the re-election campaign. The President’s down in the polls. They’re both manipulating the intelligence reports. Each gets what he wants. A husband scorned, a politician embarrassed. Dangerous combination with a simple solution. Instead of knight checks queen, the pawns decide the divorce settlement. She’s worth more dead than alive. The husband pays out nothing, but gains everything. The President covers an indiscretion and climbs in the polls.”

“Imagine that,” Jade quipped. “A husband who can’t be trusted, with a wife who can never be trusted. Go figure the relationships between men and women.” She ran fingernail daggers up and down his back.

One of her fingers tapped the golden signet ring on his right hand. A black onyx inlay portrayed the knight of a chess piece. Underneath, a crystalline quantity of special cyanide rested. A simple direct twitch of the finger opened the tiny compartment. Sleight of hand movement was required to execute the maneuver. He had done it before. So had she. They were a remarkable team and noticed the graceful movement of the waiter. Two champagne flutes on a silver tray moved toward the ambassador and her husband. Music increased in tempo. Paladin and Jade swirled in the direction of the intended couple. The waiter crossed near the dance floor. Paladin and Jade danced around him in fluid motion. No one ever saw the movement. Not even the waiter. A wave of a hand, a feint and subtle gesture. The white powder fell into the golden liquid. Bubbling, the expensive champagne accepted the intrusion. Cloaked by its chemical nature, the deadly microscopic granules mixed with the fluid. Traces vanished. Submerged, waiting and ready to strike, the poison strained in cocked anticipation.

“How do you know he’ll drink the right one?” Jade kissed him lightly on the neck. Their dancing slowed to a waltz. “It’s a gamble if the wrong move is made. The knight checks the queen, instead of the king. A sure and certain check mate is required.”

“Watch carefully,” he answered, holding her momentarily at arm’s length. Her breathing increased with the tempo, while her body tensed in readiness. “The husband is right handed. She sits to his right. He will present the champagne flute closest to her with his right hand.” Paladin rotated Jade in a clockwise fashion. Like a feather to his touch, she moved with graceful elegance. “Playing the gentleman, he’ll serve her the glass, assuming the game is in play.”

“The king attempts to check the queen.” Jade traced the outline of his face with a long finger. “Yet, he will drink his last toast to her, his intended victim. Two knights checkmate the king instead. Game over. No longer pawns, but rogues whose gaming was a gamble.”

“We work so well together,” he answered. “Later, the male knight and the female knight, once again, become as one.” He turned her in the direction of the target. “Watch this.”

“You’re right,” Jade answered. Her voice always alluring and enticing to him. “The husband’s hand grips the slender moistened flute and offers it to his wife. He chose as you predicted.”

“Her lips touch the edge of the potent vessel,” he sighed, looking into Jade’s eyes. “They toast each other. She drinks. Swallows. Her eyes dart to a handsome young man nearby. She scans him up and down. A smile breaks over her face.”

“But,” Jade continued their joint observation of unfolding events, “he hastens the conclusion. In a rush, he gulps his own refreshment. Content with his own hurried revenge. Satisfied he has won. His honor restored, he fails in making his move too quickly.” Paladin kissed her small hand and held it in his.

A hush fell over the crowd, as a look of horror came over the ambassador’s face. She screamed. Her husband, shocked by the pain, clutched his throat in horrid anguish. He tried to speak, but the poison was instantaneous. Both his hands dug at shirt collar. Buttons flew off. With a gasp, followed by gurgling sounds, his body convulsed. A ghostly expression filled his face. He smashed across the dining table. Glasses, cups and dishes shattered. A few quick spasms and he was dead. Chaos ensued. Cell phones came out of pockets. Calls were made. Security personnel panicked. Sirens blared in the distance.

The next day, in the darkened office at Langley, Virginia, an email would be opened. The senior case officer would read it. The message would say, “Original moves based on false assumptions. Game reconfigured. Knights checkmate king. Awaiting new game.” He rotated to one side in his swivel desk chair. With a smile, he said to himself, “He figured it out. He’s good.” His hand reached for the mouse. The cursor found the delete button and the message vanished.

“So, darling,” Jade began, “what was this game about?”

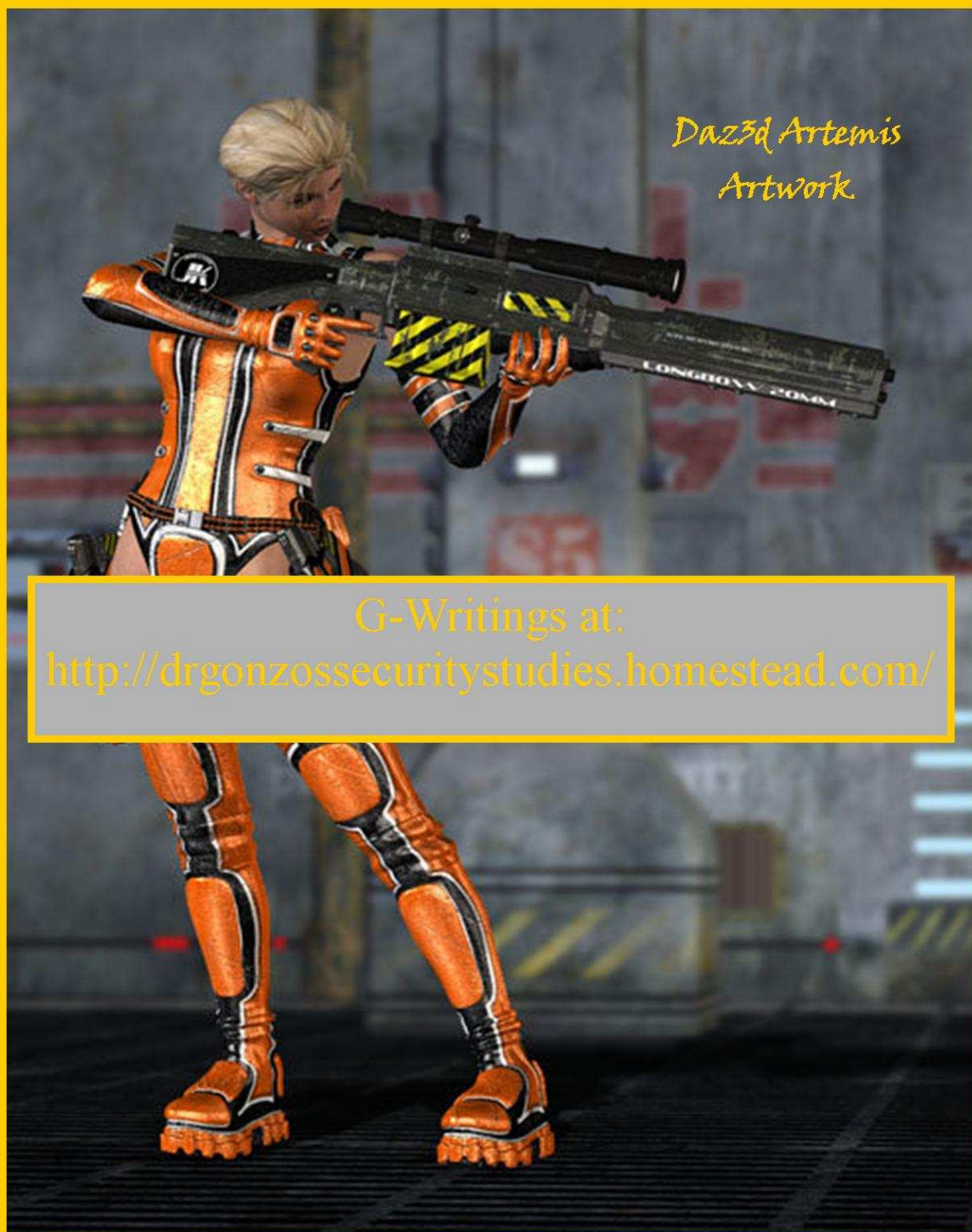
“All games we play,” he answered, “are about love or money. This one was about love. The kind that gets distracted and out of control because we get selfish.”

“Fascinating how things come to an end,” she replied. “Game over until next time.”

“How about trip to Tokyo?” Paladin asked Jade. The powerful engine of the Mercedes roared as they left the mansion. “We could visit the family. What’d ya say? You be the queen in our game.”

“Sounds wonderful, let’s do it,” Jade replied with excitement. Her hand stroked his face, tracing the handsome features. Her head fell to his shoulder and she rested. “Knight checks queen?”





*Daz3d Artemis
Artwork*

G-Writings at:
<http://drgonzossecuritystudies.homestead.com/>

