

TATTOO YOU

By Daniel F. DeBono



Work! He was late for work agai...

His mundane dream was interrupted by a much more phantasmal reality. The sleep stuck to his eyes, so he could not yet see his attacker. What was strangling the very life out of him? His hands hurried to his neck; eyes finally focusing to see a green reptilian coil about his neck.

His last thought was not a sad one, not a scared one, and not at all questioning. It was ironic, irrational, and irreconcilable.

I'm being strangled by a snake in fucking Chicago!

* * *

"I'm tellin ya' Stephen, they're burning my ass on this one. Why does my precinct have to attract these media circuses?"

"I'm doing everything I can," said Detective Stephen Kubat, who had been assigned to the most important case the precinct had had in nearly a decade. "It's just so ... Damn, Jeff! We haven't found a trace! Not a hair, a partial print, not even a shittin' fiber!"

Their conversation was interrupted by two uniformed officers escorting an obviously drunk and disorderly arrestee toward the precinct holding tank.

"Lay off the coat, asshole," screamed the young Asian as he struggled against the officers.

Captain Jeff Crystal rushed away from his best detective, bringing his 280 pound bulk directly to bear with the young offender.

"Listen tough guy! You're on my **turf** now, so don't be cussin' at none of my officers, or I'll bruise your little ass so you won't sit for a week! I'm warning ya' about

that too," he said, pointing to the emblem on the hood's jacket, "that's bullshit! I ain't putting up with no Chinatown punk gang!"

"What, only your people can have **clubs**, man?"

"Don't make me put my big black fist all the way up your skinny ass just to pull out your tonsils, you little puke! You know damn well that's not what I mean."

Detective Stephen Kubat slipped out of his boss' office, then out into the night air. He was glad the punk had interrupted their conversation; anything to escape another bitch session was a blessing.

Driving home had him thinking about the case again; he went over the same details again and again. This was the most baffling case he had ever worked on by far. In his eighteen years on homicide he had never seen a "cleaner" psycho. Of course, the blood and entrails were not what any sane person would call clean, but what puzzled Stephen was the utter lack of clues. The brutal killer was antiseptic. How could a man, or woman for that part, be so brutally savage yet not leave a trace of evidence. It was too weird. There was always something.

Of course, there was one curious detail which was shared by all the victims, however, bringing this up to the Captain earned him another of the man's famous tongue lashings. At first, it did appear to be of little consequence, but it was the only shred of congruity that was evident in the case - and it was more than a bit odd. All the victims had extremely vivid tattoos. These were not run-of-the-mill anchors or "mothers" or even intricate tribal bands, but vivid snakes, knives, wolves, and bats. But that wasn't the strangest part: The guy with the knife tattoo had been stabbed repeatedly. The guy with the split-jawed wolf had his neck ripped out from what looked like a savage beast. In fact, that's what they at first thought until the autopsy. No signs of saliva, blood or hair or anything else from any animal. Stephen thought that was simply too weird.

The Captain had told him not to breathe a word about it to anyone, unless he could cobble up something more concrete. Yes, it could be a psycho tat artist, or whatever, the Captain had said, but he certainly didn't want to encourage the already

rabid media. "I can fuckin' see it in the papers now," he had yelled, "the tattoo killer, for Christ sakes!"

So, Steven quietly began to visit tattoo artists closest to the locations of the victims. There were quite a few. He spent a full three days hanging around the various parlors and interviewing one artist after another. A couple were weird enough to make him think they could be a suspect, but neither of the two seemed to possess the skill of whomever had adorned the victims.

Finally, the middle of the following week brought the detective his first break. He had enlisted the help of one of the better rookie detectives and had him scouring the PD computers for any clues. He also sent him down to the county building to check business licenses and things like that.

"Lieutenant, I may have found something. There's fifteen tattoo parlors within your map area of victims. One of them opened shop just before the first murder."

"Really? Yeah, I guess that could be something. I've already visited seven of them and nothing but dead ends so far, so any help is appreciated. What's the name of the place?"

"Alastor Kuei's Parlor Of Unusual Tattoos. Just at the edge of Chinatown."

Lieutenant Kubat deepened the creases on his pronounced forehead. The name sounded familiar, but from where? "Let me see that," he said, pointing to the print out the young detective was using as a cue card.

Kuei. Steven knew he had seen that somewhere recently, but just couldn't figure out where. It hit him suddenly however, when one of the unies rounded the corner, carrying of all things, a jelly doughnut.

"Davis! Man, am I glad to see you," Steven said excitedly.

"What's up, sir?" asked the young officer.

"Remember that Chinatown gang kid you brought in last week?"

"Yeah, what about him?"

"What did you run him in for?"

"He was graffitiiing the wall of some small grocery store on Shay Street. Nothing big. Just wanted to scare the kid a bit. What's up"

"No big deal, but what was the name of his gang?"

The younger man's lips totally engulfed the doughnut, dribbling viscous raspberry goo down his chin. "Some Chinese shit ... I don't remember, Lieutenant."

"Run and get me his file, and don't get everything all sticky, dumbshit," said Stephen, smiling and shaking his head.

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Stephen pulled the address from the file; trying to read and drive at the same time. He made a left onto his target road, drove about a quarter mile, and turned into the drive of a small, avocado bungalow.

After a few raps at the door, an elderly Chinese woman opened the door, smiling.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Lieutenant Stephen Kubat. Is Sai home?"

The woman obviously didn't speak English, as she went into a short musical burst; a melodic scale of Chinese, meaningless to the detective, yet pleasing to the ear. She then turned and called for what Stephen figured was her grandson.

"Sai?" greeted Stephen, as the youth walked to the door.

"Yeah?"

"Cand I come in? I have to ask you a couple of ques...."

"Aw...come on! I told 'em everything last week. All I did was paint a couple pictures on a wall. Don't you guys have a better way of spending our taxes?"

"Uh, you've got the wrong idea. I'm only trying to get some information. You're not in any trouble."

"Damn straight."

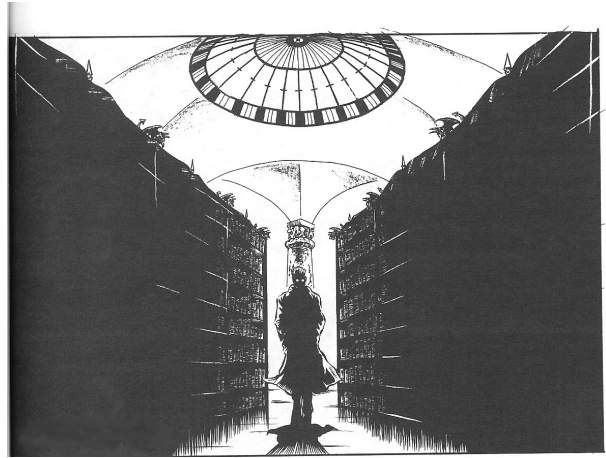
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Stephen was antsy because he had to wait until the following day to go to the library. His computer was down so he couldn't do a Web search after leaving Sai's

house and by the time he raced over to the library last night, it was already closed. Now, every computer station was occupied by someone or another. *Ridiculous.*

He suddenly had an idea and headed for the reference section. It had been a long time, but the library's huge Encyclopedia Britannicas had helped him out before. Before he spotted the book, however, his eyes caught something even better.

"Encyclopedia Of Religion And Ethics," he mumbled, grabbing a huge, leather-bound tome, and heading off for an empty seat.



He flipped through the pages, stopping when he came to demon. The directory then broke into categories by nationality. He quickly flipped to the Chinese section looking to validate the information he had received during his visit the night before. He scanned the page until his eyes rested upon his desired target. Sai had told him the truth; it was right in front of him in black and white. Kuei was a Chinese name for demon. The boy had told him that the name of their "club" was the demons. *That* is what had caught Stephen's eye.

It didn't go into much detail regarding the name, but there was some interesting historical beliefs about the evil deeds of the demons. He read on and on into the Christian Section, the Coptic, Egyptian, and finally the Greek.

One paragraph in particular caught his attention. It read:

...in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus (1477), after the murder of her husband, Clytemnestra boasts that she herself is the incarnate demon of the Pelopids, 'so gross with

o'er grown flesh'. In such capacity the evil demon often bore the special title Alastor.

Alastor Kuei ... Evil Demon! He looked at his arms, watching the hair rise on end from the swelling goose bumps. Could this be it? It *had* to be ... *something*. Of course, it was just too bizarre to think a demonic tattoo artist was killing off a bunch of civvies in his precinct, but there very well could be an insane serial killer tat artist out there. Actually, even that was difficult to come to grips with.

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The next evening, Lt. Kubat drove over to Alastor Kuei's Parlor Of Unusual Tattoo's. The sign said the parlor was open until eight - which seemed very early for a tat place to close shop, even during the middle of the week. He only had about ten minutes to check the place out.

He opened the iron grate door, which squeaked hesitantly, like it was only opened on the rarest occasions. The inside of the parlor was very dim. The only lighting Stephen could see was several large red candles sitting atop gaudily-formed tall, tarnished silver candleabras. Weird statues and other grotesquery adorned the place; most of it Far Eastern in origin, some of it Byzantine.

Stephen's visual search of the place was interrupted by a man who walked out from behind a red-velvet curtain, which must have led to a storeroom, or possibly the proprietor's living quarters.

"May I help you, sir?" asked the short wizen-faced man.

"Oh ... I'm just looking." said Stephen as he grabbed up the "art book" which contained the designs for the various tattoos that the artisan could fashion.

The old man smiled - a knowledgeable smile, and stroked his long Ghengis Khan style moustache. "Hope you find what you are 'looking' for."

Stephen tried to remain calm, but could tell he appeared nervous. He tried to steady his trembling hands as he paged through the book; not really looking at the pages, just trying to act like he was.

"We close soon, but no rush. You take your time and look and I'll be right back," said the man, disappearing behind the curtain.

The detective then began to carefully look at the tattoos. Nearly immediately, he felt shock and revulsion as he began to recognize the works. There was the bear with the vicious claws, the snake, the wolf, the eagle. Then, there was the knife with the dripping blood. The eerie feeling he had experienced in the library returned, only it was tenfold stronger. He didn't know what he could do. It wasn't enough evidence to arrest him, but this killer may have been crazy, but he certainly wasn't stupid. No one who was stupid could have done what he had been doing - or was it even him?

Again, the old man interrupted his solitude, seemingly appearing out of thin air without a sound.

"Have you made a selection?"

Stephen looked up, and stared at the old man's crooked smile.

"I'm not sure I've found what I'm looking for."

The old man lifted his hand, pointing his claw-like finger in Stephen's direction.

"I think you have, detective!"

* * *

The world went momentarily black for Stephen Kubat, before he regained the faculty of his senses. He tried to raise himself from the chair which he surprisingly

and seemingly suddenly was sitting upright in, but he couldn't. He began to seat and the hair on his neck rose. *There were no ropes!*

"Do not struggle," said the old man, not looking up from the pillaging of Stephen's wallet, "Detective ... Kubat. You can't get up."

"But ... but how did you know I was a cop?"

"Men are so silly! I have had centuries to study human ways. I knew you were not here to purchase a tattoo. I could tell you were up to something. Anyway, I knew someone would start to catch on soon, someone always does - eventually. Thus another chapter in my unending book of perils ends, only to start over somewhere else. What a marvelous game the master lets me play!"

This can't be, thought Steven. He wanted to scream but he was paralyzed by fear.

The old man walked over to the seat at which Stephen seemed to be glued to; held in place by some supernatural bond which he had no hope of freeing himself from. Wrinkled fingers with long, sharp nails looking ever more like the claws of a reptilian beast, ruffled through the pages of a leather-bound tome. He reached up to a shelf and took down a tray with the various tools of the tattoo artist's trade. He began arranging the various bottles of colored inks and needles on the small table next to the chair.

He looked up at Stephen, smiled, and said, "How do you like dragons?"

The End