

The Signal
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Not all stories end well. Hank had told me that often enough. I'd always laughed the words away until a demon had torn off his head and made him a prophet. But Hank's words were the last thing on my mind when Lucy Booth's shadow darkened the door of my windowless office.

Too bad for me.

I had not seen her in over three years, not since my final bout in the ring with Young Stribling, but I still recognized her silhouette. No mistaking that. Even her shadow cut a nice figure. I turned off the big RK radio I bought secondhand to listen to Yankee games. It died with cheers as Lefty Gomez put strike three past Luke Appling.

Lucy hesitated in the dimly-lit hallway, her curves plastered on the misted glass of my door. My stenciled name cut right across her heart – Gustafsson Occult Investigations. I'd finally had Hank's name removed a week earlier.

I ran my palm over the stubble on my cheeks and chided myself for not shaving, then chided myself for caring. Lucy Booth was in the past.

And in the hall.

She opened the door and the scent of her perfume filled the room. She looked exactly as I remembered – plenty of curves, long curls, and long legs wrapped in a crisp blue sport suit.

My heart punched my ribs almost as hard as had Stribling but I kept it from my face and tried to sound casual.

"Surprises never cease. Long time, no see, doll."

Her cheeks reddened and I could tell from the little crease between her eyes that she was in trouble. She looked at me for only a

moment, then looked over and past me. The brick wall must have been interesting.

"Hello, Abe. It's...been a while."

I leaned back in my chair.

"That it has."

Her eyes fell on the empty space where Hank's desk had stood. She'd known Hank, too.

"I'm sorry about Henry."

The papers claimed Hank had been chewed up in a screw machine while investigating a series of disappearances. I did not see any need to disabuse Lucy of the mistaken impression.

"Sit?"

I indicated the chair across from my desk.

Her heels rang like gunshots as she crossed the floor. She lowered herself into the chair, a pretty face in a sea of blue, and looked around at the walls of my office: the golden-gloves trophies, the pictures of me and Hank, the framed newspaper articles that reported on our work, the bookshelves filled with tomes on the occult, the used radio with the bad antenna wire on which I listened to Gehrig and Ruth bombard the rest of the American League.

"I've never seen your office," she said.

"You wouldn't have," I answered, and left it at that.

Lucy had left me for a Wall Street financier while I was still in the hospital from my final bout. Her desertion had hurt more than the beating Stribling had put on me. Money had been her demon and watching me bleed onto the canvas in the third had made it clear to her that I would never have much of it.

So, while I recovered in Saint Mary's from the surgery that had left a steel plate in my head – to fix a soft skull, the surgeons had told

me – she had dined at the Waldorf with one Herman Keene, of the filthy rich Keenes. Herman Keene had kept his fortune even through the Crash of '29; no one knew how. The society pages said Herman and Lucy would marry soon.

I snapped a pencil between my fingers and she pretended not to understand the significance. The whir of the ceiling fan tried to fill the silence.

“You look good, Abe,” she lied.

I chuckled. I didn't look good. I looked like I always looked – a big Swede with a punching bag for a mug.

She reached into her blouse pocket for a cigarette, but came away empty and mumbling. I had a pack of Lucky Strikes in my shirt pocket. She saw them but I did not offer her one.

“What are you doing here, doll?”

“Do we have to do all this, Abe?”

I raised my eyebrows, all innocence. “Do what, doll? I'm only asking a question.”

She could not hold my eyes. She looked away and stared at my trophies while she spoke.

“It's like this, Abe. I need help and you're all I've got.”

I tried to keep the resentment from my tone but could not. The ceiling fan dispersed it through the room, poisoning the air.

“Since when? Have Herman Keene help you. Have Herman Keene *buy* you help. That's what he does.”

Anger turned the crease between her eyes into a ravine – I knew the expression well – but she did not get up to leave. That showed me something. She *was* in trouble. And Herman Keene and his money could not fix it. She still stared at the trophies, at the articles, at nothing.

"Karl is missing, Abe."

That hit me below the belt. I leaned forward in my chair and frowned. Professor Karl Booth was Lucy's older brother, the chair of the newly endowed Occult Studies department at Columbia. He had first introduced me to Hank and got me interested in the occult, in the world that only a few of us saw. He'd also taught me backgammon. I owed him a lot. I'd lost touch with him after I'd lost Lucy.

"Define 'missing,' Lucy."

She looked everywhere but my face.

"Missing as in disappeared. He was helping Herman—"

"*Helping* Herman? Karl?"

Karl respected only the intellect, which made his affection for me all the more inexplicable. Not money. Not status. Not Herman Keene.

Lucy licked her lips and finally held my eyes for a moment. "Herman is one of the backers of the Empire State Building construction. The most important backer, really."

The Empire State Building. I had seen the artist's rendering in the *Times*. They'd torn down the Waldorf to build it. I figured that monstrosity had about the same chance of being built as someone breaking the Babe's homerun record. Man was not meant to hit more than sixty homers in a season, or to build something that brushed the clouds.

"A dozen workmen have died on the job," I said. "Herman's running a sweatshop. The paper said they suspended further building pending investigations."

She nodded and her blonde curls bounced.

"Herman will get things going again."

I had little doubt. A little money went a long way with city inspectors and cops.

"What help could Karl be to Herman Keene? He's not an engineer."

Lucy shook her head. "I don't know. But...often I heard them talking." She looked at me sidelong. "Several times Karl said the word 'Astiroth.' He seemed frightened."

The name rang a bell. Astiroth – one of Lucifer's crew. Things were serious, then.

I reached into my pocket and tapped out two Lucky Strikes, lit, and passed one to her. She gave me a grateful smile, took it in a shaking hand, and had a long drag.

"What is Astiroth?"

"It's a name," I answered. I looked her in the face. "I haven't seen anything about Karl's disappearance in the press."

She nodded. "Herman has kept it quiet. He's worried about more bad press. He...he doesn't know I've come to see you."

I did not let on how that pleased me. I tapped some ash into the glass ashtray on my desk. "You and Karl weren't close, Lucy. Why the stir?"

She regarded me with eyes as gelid as December. "He's my brother, Abe."

I nodded. And he was my friend. That was enough.

"I'll help you, doll. Let me do some research. Meet me back here tonight, say eight. You have a key to Karl's place?"

She nodded.

"Bring it. I'll want to look around."

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After she'd gone, I pulled copies of *Van Koorl's Guide to the Netherworld* and Jameson's *Demonology* from the office bookshelf. Age and use had yellowed their pages. Hank's handwritten notes filled the margins. He'd usually been the one to do the research, the brains to my brawn. He'd always derided Jameson as a poor translator of the Dark Speech. I didn't know enough to complain. No one would have ever described me as bookish. Thuggish, more like.

Still, I did my best imitation of Hank, found a few references about 'Astiroth,' and learned what I could. Even those snippets made me worried for Karl.

Lucy returned at eight sharp, still beautiful, still dressed in blue, but in flats rather than heels. I'd just finished my Chop Suey from Lee Ho's.

I pushed back my chair. "Got the key?"

She nodded.

"Good"

I walked past her to the coat rack and pulled on my jacket. Hank's black, felt fedora still hung on the rack. I looked at it a long while, then put it on. A bit small, but tolerable. I could not fill his shoes, but I could fill his hat.

"What is going on, Abe?" she asked my back.

I turned around and played dumb. "Doll?"

"I want to know, Abe. You're not telling me everything."

I stared into her pretty face and saw the resolve. I sighed, pulled out two cigarettes, lit them, and handed one over. She'd need it.

"Should I sit?" she asked.

I blew out a cloud of smoke. "Up to you."

She stood her ground and held my eyes. I gave her credit for that. I decided to be straight, bad news first.

"Astiroth is a demon, doll. A demon of the earth."

She looked startled but asked no questions. I credited her for that, too. I went on:

"You know a bit about demons from Karl, but demons are not what you think. And this one is even less so. It hasn't had a body since Sumerian times but its cults have thrived for centuries. It had a good following among the Indian tribes hereabouts. Lucy..." I exhaled another cloud of Lucky Strike, "...Astiroth demands human sacrifice.

Specifically, Jameson's had provided that Astiroth required sacrifice of 'mind and body,' whatever that meant. I could have used Hank.

Lucy put her hand to her mouth.

"My god! We have to find him, Abe!"

I nodded. "We'll start at his place. See what there is to see. Maybe he left a clue."

Another time I might have gone straight for Herman Keene and grilled him. But I was wearing Hank's hat. And Hank would have gone to Karl's first. He would have called it being thorough, being cautious, being prepared. After all, Herman could have been involved. I was going to do this Hank's way, slow and sure.

We took the trolley uptown, then fought our way through the street traffic of automobiles and people, until we reached 101st street. The dim streetlights illuminated a row of three-story brownstones, Karl's among them. A full moon crested the roofline.

The windows of Karl's place were dark. I checked the street, saw nothing suspicious. We crossed to the door and Lucy gave me the

key. I fumbled with the lock in the dark, cursed, and finally got it. I opened the door and stepped inside.

A punch to the side of my head put sparks behind my eyes and sent Hank's hat flying. I whirled and lashed out with a wild backhand right. Enough of my fist met jaw to stagger my attacker. Another man grabbed at my arm and tried to wrench it backward. His mistake; he did not have strength to match me. I twisted, pulled him before me, unloaded another left, and sent him careening toward the door.

Lucy screamed as the man tumbled past her, down the porch, and into the street. His companion darted past me and after him.

I shook off the effects of the blow to my head and tried to gather my bearings. Neither thug was much to look at – unshaven men in cheap worker's dungarees, one bleeding from the nose, the other from his mouth. They looked like stonemasons.

I stepped out onto the porch, fists clenched.

"You boys should have brought some more friends."

They looked at me, at each other, at Lucy, and high-tailed it down 101st. One of them shouted, "Astiroth will have you!" as he fled.

I chased them for two blocks and lost them in an alley. When I returned to Karl's I found Lucy waiting for me on the porch.

"I was worried, Abe. Are you all right?" She gently touched my head.

I ignored the thrill her touch sent through me.

"Fine. I took harder punches than that when I was fighting for nothing in Crown's Gym. Lost 'em, though."

She nodded and put a hand over one of mine. "You're still handy with your fists. I'm glad to see that."

"Not something you lose," I answered softly.

"No. I guess not," she said.

I would have kissed her, then, but heads poked out of the windows of some of the adjacent brownstones and the moment passed.

"Come on," I said, standing, and together we walked into Karl's home. I retrieved Hank's hat, put it on, and turned on a light.

The thugs had rifled the place – chairs overturned, Karl's collection of first editions and antique books tossed haphazardly about, drawers thrown open, working papers scattered like leaves. If there was a clue about Karl's fate there, we'd never find it.

"He has a safe," Lucy blurted, and waded through the destruction for the small library. I followed. She put her shoulder against a small walnut desk and slid it across the hardwood, then threw back the Persian carpet on which it sat to reveal a floor safe.

"You know the combination?" I asked.

She nodded, knelt, and set to work. In moments she had it open – I saw cash, a few passports, some gold artifacts, and...a book on demonology by an anonymous author. I grabbed it and flipped through the pages. Karl had dog-eared a section on Astiroth. I skimmed over it while Lucy continued to examine the contents of the safe.

Demon of the earth, I read. Preferred sacrifice is strength and knowledge.

I puzzled over that. It differed from Jameson's translation, which would not have surprised Hank. I read on:

Devouring maw. Veins of the earth. Night of the full moon.

"Lucy—"

"Abe, look."

Lucy pulled a roll of paper from the safe – blueprints – and slowly unrolled them.

“The Empire State Building,” I said, recognizing it from the drawings I’d seen in the paper. Lucy spread them out on the floor and we studied them. Karl had written the word ‘Astiroth’ across the building’s foundation. Next to it was the word “receiver,” dotted with an exclamation point.

Now I knew why the thugs had been in worker’s dungarees. They were not stonemasons. They were construction workers.

Lucy must have made the same connection. She looked up at me, eyes wide. “They found something while digging the foundation of Herman’s building. That’s why he needed Karl.”

“Come on,” I said to her, and pulled her to her feet. “We’ve got to get to the construction site. Now.”

“What is it, Abe?”

“A full moon,” I said, and headed out into the street. I cursed myself for not bringing my gun or my knuckledusters.

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By the time we crossed town to the construction site, the moon had risen above the rooftops to glare down on the city. The construction site was deserted. The whole block felt hushed. The distant ring of a trolley’s bell carried from another world.

“Where’s the security?” I asked.

Lucy shrugged.

“We should get the cops,” I said, channeling Hank through his hat.

Lucy looked alarmed. "Abe, Herman can't take more bad press. It will sink the project. All his money is tied up in it."

And all *your* money, I thought but didn't say. Like I said, money was her demon.

"We can do it ourselves," she said. "Please, Abe. What if there's nothing? Let's at least look."

I looked into her face, frowned, and nodded.

"If it gets any hairier, we find a cop."

She nodded and patted my arm in gratitude.

A chain link fence surrounded the site, which took up several city blocks. Mounds of dirt and rock, wheelbarrows, picks, shovels and other equipment lay in neat piles here and there. I turned to Lucy.

"You should wait for me here."

"No, Abe. We do it together."

I knew that tone and did not waste time arguing.

"Up we go, then," I said, and helped her over the fence.

The moon cast malformed shadows on the earth.

We picked our way through the site. I was not sure what to expect so I grabbed a crowbar along the way and handed Lucy a hammer. As we drew closer to the center of the site, I started to hear voices, chanting.

I looked at Lucy and put a finger to my lips. She nodded, eyes wide. We snuck forward in a crouch until we reached the top of the foundation pit. The papers said that Herman Keene had three hundred men digging in two shifts and I believed it. The hole was already fifty feet deep and ten times that wide. It might as well have been a quarry. Herman Keene had burrowed through the flesh of the earth to reach its bones, onto which he would graft the steel and concrete of his building.

"Demon of the earth," I muttered and stared down into the darkness.

"Devouring maw," Lucy said, rapt.

Twelve figures stood in the moonlight at the bottom of the pit, chanting. They wore black robes and surrounded a circular black hole, like a well, or the mouth of the beast. I thought I recognized one of the cultists, the tallest, who held a long knife in his hand.

"Christ, is that Herman Keene?" I asked.

Lucy edged closer to me. "I think so. And that's Karl," she said.

Karl Booth lay stretched out and naked on the ground within the circle of cultists. He was not moving and I figured him unconscious or already dead.

The cultists swayed as they chanted. Herman stood threateningly over Karl. A dark gas issued from the mouth of the well, from the maw. That well must have been there long before the site had been chosen for the building. Keene had probably known it, had probably set his crews to work to dig it up. But why?

"We've got to get down there, Lucy," I said.

"A scholar and a warrior for Astiroth of the Earth," she said.

Her tone was strange, the words puzzling. I started to turn to her and she cold-cocked me in the head with her hammer.

I swear I heard a clang like a church bell. My vision went blurry and I started to fall. I lost consciousness cursing both Lucy Booth and Jameson's poor translation. Body and mind, my ass. Astiroth wanted a warrior and a scholar, and now it had both, in the form of me and Karl Booth.

Hank would have laughed.

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The chanting brought me back to consciousness. Lucy had hit me squarely in the skull, right on my metal plate. Otherwise I'd have still been out cold.

I kept my eyes closed, so as not to tip my condition, and took stock of my situation. I was lying on my back on stone, presumably at the bottom of the foundation pit. The cultists encircled me; I could hear their chanting all around me. A smell like rotting meat filled the air. I presumed it issued from the unholy well. A sound came from the well, a clicking sound, like insects, like static. A human voice said,

“This scholar is offered to you, Astiroth of the Earth, to hallow this ground, on which we build your edifice.”

The chanting intensified and I heard the sound of something sliding down the well. The clicking from the well intensified, grew...eager. I imagined Herman Keene dumping Karl's limp body into the demonic maw while Lucy looked on, chanting and swaying.

Her own brother.

I had no gun, no crowbar, and a dozen cultists around me. I knew I could not win a fight, but I'd entered the ring many times knowing that, and it never stopped me from giving Hell before I went down.

I heard the scrape of shoes on stone and imagined Herman Keene standing over me.

At the very least *he* was going to bleed.

“And this warrior, Astiroth, is offered to you—”

Hands seized my arms and legs and I lurched into motion. Two left hooks and a straight right in rapid succession had me on my feet and two surprised cultists bleeding and staggered.

Herman Keene, holding a jagged ceremonial knife in one hand, recoiled with shock. "What the—"

I kicked him in the stomach and ended whatever he might have thought to say. He dropped the knife and I kicked it down the well.

Lucy shouted, "Kill him! Astiroth hungers for a warrior!"

A moan issued from the well and the stink of a graveyard issued forth. The knife must not have agreed with it.

"Come on!" I shouted, fists raised and turning a circle.

The cultists looked about in shock, from me to the demonic appendage. The men wore glasses, had paunches. They looked like bankers, not demon-worshippers, and none closed on me. The two I'd put down crawled away over the rocks.

"Not a one of you with any guts?" I challenged.

Herman Keene eyed me coolly and stripped off his robe.

An excited murmur went through the rest of the cultists. Lucy looked on with glowing, eager eyes. I'd seen her watching me in the ring with just that look.

"We're long overdue for it, Keene," I said.

He lunged at me and I let him have it. He surprised me by taking a few punches and giving a fair account of himself. But I'd been beaten by heavyweights, by the best. Herman Keene was neither. My lip was bloody and my eye dotted before I finally put him on his back for good, groaning and bloody. I daubed my lip and looked around at the others, ready for any other takers. They weren't looking at me. They were staring down at Herman.

"Go on, Abe," said Lucy, eyeing her husband-to-be. "We have our warrior."

I looked at her, at Herman, and understood.

Like I said, money was her demon. And Astiroth.

"Say nothing to anyone, Abe. We'll be watching."

I didn't give them time to reconsider and high-tailed it out of there. I heard Herman Keene's screams as I ascended the pit. I spared only one glance back. Herman was already gone, fed to the hole. A greasy tendril had emerged from the maw, flopping, glistening in the moonlight, as thick as a telegraph cable. It reminded of something but I could not remember what. I put it from my mind and fled the site.

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Lucy must have been in Herman's will, for she continued the construction after his 'disappearance.' And with the demonic foundation laid and the maw sated, I watched the Empire State Building rise into the sky in a mere eighteen months. What would soon become the tallest building in the world was built on a demon's shrine and consecrated in the blood of Karl Booth and Herman Keene. My dread grew as the metal, stone, and glass skin wrapped around the girders. Anytime I walked the streets, I felt it looming over me, over the city. I imagined that greasy tendril coiled around the foundation, corrupting the whole building.

I never told anyone of the events in the pit. What good would it do? They won't shut the building down and no one would take the word of an ex-palooka.

I never saw Lucy Booth again and she enjoyed Herman's money for only a short time. She vanished the day the building was opened to the public. Whatever happened to her, I hope it was awful and prolonged. She deserved no less.

For a long while the building's purpose plagued me. At first I thought maybe Astiroth was trying to build his way back to Heaven,

using the Herman Keenes of the world as his puppets. But that did not seem to fit. I kept thinking again and again of the tendril, of the word Karl had written at the bottom of the blueprints: "Receiver."

It hit me one day in my office, while I was listening to the Yankees beat the Dodgers on my old RK.

A receiver.

The Empire State Building was only incidentally a building. First and foremost, it was an antenna, the demonic tendril like the wire in my RK, the whole building a receiver through which the demon at its root received unseen signals from...somewhere or someone, and distributed them through the veins in the earth.

I hear the signal in my dreams and wake up sweating, screaming. I can never recall what it says. I'm glad for that.

I am concerned more and more about what might be coming. *Van Koorl's* speaks of something called the Hellstorm but I can no longer trust what I read. Reading is what got me into this.

I miss Hank, especially now.

This is what I know: more and more skyscrapers are planned in cities around the world. And if even a fraction of those spires clawing their way into the sky turn out to be antennae, well...I fear the world is in for a hell of a broadcast.

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