

# The Stolas Cipher:

Free Energy & Forbidden Knowledge

*Based on Real Life Events...*

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**! WARNING !**

*Do Not attempt any of the occult or dark magick rituals or spells.  
Any spells or rituals cast are at the users own risk.*





## Chapter 1: The Linchpin of Chaos

The Nevada desert stretched endlessly before the warehouse, a sea of cracked earth and sagebrush baking under a merciless May sun.

Inside, Markus Reed sat on a folding chair, surrounded by the ghosts of his past. The warehouse—his sanctuary, his prison—was a cavern of steel shelves, circuit boards, and half-built prototypes, the air thick with the scent of solder and cedarwood. At forty-one,

Markus was a man carved by war and loss, his broad shoulders hunched as if carrying the weight of a decade in Iraq. His hands, calloused and scarred, traced the edge of a dog-eared notebook, its pages filled with equations and occult sigils. A bottle of whiskey sat unopened on the table, a silent taunt to the sobriety he'd sworn to uphold. Markus' blue eyes, sharp as a hawk's, flickered to the bottle, then away, his jaw tightening. "Not today," he muttered, his voice a low growl, honed by years of barking orders over the roar of C-130s.

Markus Reed was no stranger to discipline. A proud veteran of the United States Air Force, he'd served 12 years with distinction, a logistics expert who thrived in the crucible of the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). Born in a small California town, Markus grew up dismantling engines and rebuilding them before he could drive, his mind a steel trap for systems and solutions. His father, a union ironworker who worked on the San Francisco and Bay bridge, taught him to see the world as a machine—every part essential, every failure fixable. By eighteen, Markus enlisted, drawn to the Air Force's promise of precision and purpose. Basic training revealed a talent for logistics, his ability to track and manage supplies under pressure earning him early notice. But it was in AFSOC, the elite arm of Air Force special operations, that Markus found his belonging.



Deploying to Iraq multiple times between 2005 and 2013, Markus operated in the shadows of the Global War on Terror, a linchpin in the chaos of war. AFSOC's mission was high-stakes: inserting special operators, delivering precision strikes, and supporting covert operations in hostile territory. AFSOC is known as death from above. Their motto is, "Anytime, any place." Markus wasn't a combatant like the pararescue jumpers or combat controllers who braved gunfire to save lives or guide airstrikes. Nor was he a Navy SEAL or Green Beret, storming compounds with M4s blazing. Instead, Markus was the invisible force ensuring those warriors had what they needed—exactly when and where they needed it. His domain was the supply chain, a labyrinth of classified assets, from encrypted radios to Hellfire missiles, each piece critical to mission success. "SEALs and Green Berets don't do inventory," Markus would quip, a wry smile tugging at his lips, "but they need someone who can keep up with their pace and deliver flawless execution."

His expertise earned him a coveted role in the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF), an elite unit uniting top-tier talent from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. The CJSOTF was a pressure cooker, tasked with mission-critical objectives: capturing high-value targets, disrupting insurgent networks, and executing operations that shaped the war's outcome. Markus' inclusion was unconventional. Most CJSOTF members were hardened operators—Delta Force snipers, SEAL Team 6 assaulters, or Marine Raiders trained to kill. Markus, however, was handpicked for his unparalleled ability to secure and manage classified assets. His work saved the Air Force hundreds of millions of dollars through innovative asset retainability—tracking equipment across chaotic battlefields—and verifiable contract sourcing, ensuring every dollar spent was accounted for. In a war where a single misplaced drone could cost millions, Markus was the man who made the impossible routine.



His role demanded independence and nerve. Operating from forward bases in Iraq—dust-choked outposts like Bagram or Basrah—Markus coordinated logistics under relentless pressure. He'd track and move shipments through insurgent-held territory, reconcile inventories during mortar attacks, and source critical gear when supply lines faltered. Once, in 2009, a CJSOTF mission to capture a high-value al-Qaeda financier nearly collapsed when a Predator drone's sensor package went missing. Markus, working alone in a sweltering conex box, traced the asset to a misrouted shipment in Kuwait, rerouted it within hours, and had it airborne by dawn. The mission succeeded, the financier was captured, and Markus earned a quiet nod from a Delta operator—a rare accolade. “You're a ghost, Reed,” the operator said. “We don't see you, but we'd be screwed without you.”

Markus' crowning achievement came in 2011, when he was selected to be a part of an Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) team, the elite “A” team of the Army's Special Forces, embedded under the umbrella command of the CJSOTF. ODAs were the tip of the spear—12-man units trained to infiltrate, sabotage, and eliminate high-profile targets. Air Force special operators like pararescue and combat controllers coveted these slots, spending years honing combat skills to earn a spot. Green Berets and SEALs, with their grueling training pipelines, were equally envious, their egos bruised when an outsider joined the team. But the ODA needed a “high-speed supply guy,” and Markus was the best. Physically fit, with a runner's lean frame and the stamina to hump gear through Iraq's heat, Markus could keep pace with the operators. More importantly, his logistical genius and unyielding follow-through made him indispensable.

The ODA's mission was to dismantle a network of improvised explosive device (IED) makers in Baghdad, targeting a master



bombmaker known as “The Architect.” Markus’ role was to ensure the team had cutting-edge gear—night-vision optics, drone jammers, and explosive breaching charges—while maintaining operational secrecy. His innovations were game-changers. He developed a tracking system using encrypted RFID tags, allowing real-time monitoring of assets and team guys across multiple theaters. When a shipment of jammers was delayed in Germany, Markus sourced alternatives from a Marine unit, negotiating a trade in under an hour. His work enabled the ODA to strike swiftly, capturing The Architect in a midnight raid. The Green Berets grumbled about “the Air Force desk jockey” on their team, but their team leader, a grizzled captain, silenced them: “Reed’s the reason we’re not digging shrapnel out of our asses. Respect it. Besides, he makes us look good in powerpoint slides,” the captain chuckled in a stoic, yet serious tone.

Markus’ time in the ODA was a high point, but it came at a cost. The relentless pace—weeks of 20-hour days, constant threat of ambushes, and the weight of lives depending on his precision—etched deep lines into his psyche. He saw friends fall: a pararescue jumper killed by an IED, a SEAL lost to a sniper. Each loss carved a wound, and Markus buried them in work, his mind a fortress of checklists and contingencies. Off-duty, he’d joke with the team, his dry humor a shield. “You guys blow stuff up,” he’d say, tossing a protein bar to a Green Beret, “but I’m the one getting the materials for grilling t-bone steaks in the middle of nowhere.” They’d laugh, but the camaraderie couldn’t erase the nightmares—mortar blasts, blood-soaked sand, the scream of a wounded comrade.

His personal life crumbled under the strain. In 2007, during a rotation in Germany, Markus met Anna, a translator with eyes like storm clouds and a laugh that cut through his defenses. They married a year later, a whirlwind romance fueled by shared dreams



of a quiet life. But deployments pulled Markus away, and Anna grew distant, unable to pierce the wall he built around his trauma. By 2013, as Markus prepared to leave the Air Force, Anna filed for divorce, citing his drinking and secrecy. “You’re married to the war, not me,” she said, her words a knife. Markus didn’t fight her, signing the papers in a haze of whiskey and regret. He left the Air Force with a Bronze Star, a service record glowing with commendations, and a heart heavy with loss.

Back in the States, Markus sought reinvention. He enrolled in a Masters in Innovation and Entrepreneurship at a Nevada university, channeling his logistical brilliance into a new battlefield: disruptive technology. His thesis on supply chain innovation for renewable energy earned him valedictorian honors, but the ghosts of Iraq followed. Nightmares woke him screaming, and whiskey became his solace, a dangerous crutch for a man whose life depended on control. By 2025, Markus was a paradox: a genius teetering on collapse, his warehouse a fortress of prototypes and pain.





## Chapter 2: The Weight of War & the Valedictorian's Vice

The neon sign of the Rusty Bolt flickered above the dive bar's entrance, casting a sickly green glow across the cracked pavement of downtown Reno. It was 9:47 PM on a chilly May evening in 2025, the air sharp with the tang of sagebrush and exhaust. Inside, the bar was a haze of cigarette smoke and despair, the jukebox crooning a mournful country tune about lost love. Markus Reed sat at the far end of the counter, his broad shoulders hunched over a glass of whiskey that shimmered amber under the dim lights. At Forty-one, he was a man who carried the weight of war in every line of his body—his jaw tight, his blue eyes sharp but shadowed, his hands scarred from years of handling crates and gear under fire. He wore a faded black hoodie, the Air Force logo on the sleeve peeling at the edges, and a pair of jeans that had seen better days. The whiskey was his third of the night, but he sipped it slowly, as if savoring the burn could keep the ghosts at bay.

Markus' mind drifted to a memory from 2011, one that clung to him like the desert sand that still lingered in his boots. He flashed back to when he was attached to the ODA and the Architect was captured. During that raid a mortar round hit their exfil point, killing a SEAL named Torres. Markus could still hear Torres' laugh, a booming sound that cut through the tension of their forward base, and see the blood soaking the sand where he fell.

The memory jolted Markus back to the bar, his grip tightening on the glass. His heart pounded, a familiar rhythm of adrenaline and guilt, and he downed the whiskey in one swallow, the burn a fleeting distraction. The bartender, a grizzled man with a gray ponytail named Hank, slid another glass his way without a word. Markus nodded, but his eyes caught the reflection of a biker at the other end of the bar—



—a hulking man in a leather vest, his gaze lingering too long. Markus' instincts, honed by years of scanning for threats in Iraq, prickled. He shifted slightly, angling his body to keep the biker in his peripheral vision, his hand brushing the pocket-knife clipped to his belt. War had taught him to trust no one, a lesson that clung to him even in civilian life.

Tonight, the bar was a refuge, but not a safe one. The biker stood, his boots scuffing the floor, and Markus tensed as the man approached. "You're in my seat, soldier," the biker growled, his breath reeking of beer, a tattoo of a skull glaring from his forearm. Markus' eyes flicked to the man's hands—no weapons, but fists like sledgehammers. "I'm not a soldier," Markus said, his voice steady despite the whiskey's haze. "And I'm not moving." The biker sneered, reaching for Markus' glass, but Markus was faster, his reflexes honed by hand to hand training for combat. He grabbed the man's wrist, twisting it hard, and slammed his elbow into the biker's nose with a sickening crunch. The biker stumbled back, blood streaming down his face, and Markus was on his feet, the barstool clattering to the floor. The other patrons froze, the jukebox's twang the only sound as Hank shouted, "Take it outside!"

Markus didn't wait. He threw a crumpled twenty on the counter and strode out into the night, his knuckles stinging, the biker's curses fading behind him. The cold air hit him like a slap, sobering him enough to feel the weight of his actions. He'd always been good at surviving—war, divorce, the bottle—but at what cost? His hands shook as he lit a cigarette, the ember glowing like a beacon in the dark. He walked the three blocks to his apartment, a dingy one-bedroom above a pawn shop, the neon "Open" sign flickering through the window. Inside, the place was a mess of takeout boxes, engineering textbooks, and a disassembled circuit board on the coffee table—a project for his Masters thesis on supply chain



innovation for renewable energy.

He collapsed onto the couch, the cigarette still burning between his fingers, and stared at the ceiling, where a water stain spread like a map of Iraq. His mind churned, the fight at the bar a mirror to the chaos he couldn't escape. He'd always been the man who kept things together—gear in Iraq, missions for the ODA, even his marriage, until it fell apart. Now, he was unraveling, the whiskey a temporary fix for a wound that wouldn't heal. His phone buzzed on the table, a text from a classmate, Lena, reminding him of tomorrow's graduation party. Markus had aced his program, graduating as valedictorian, but the honor felt hollow. He'd thrown himself into his studies, hoping innovation could save him, but the bottle had followed, a shadow he couldn't outrun.

As he stubbed out the cigarette, his eyes fell on a package by the door—an eBay purchase he'd forgotten, ordered in a drunken haze a week ago. The label read *Grimorium Verum*, a rare occult book on the history of innovation, its cover worn and embossed with a faded pentagram. Markus snorted, the irony not lost on him. He'd bought it on a whim, intrigued by the idea of ancient secrets fueling modern breakthroughs, but now it felt like a taunt. He tore open the package, the book's brittle pages crackling under his touch, and flipped to a section on the 36th demon of the *Ars Goetia*: Stolas, a Prince of Hell who taught astronomy, herbalism, and the properties of precious stones. The sigil—a star-like glyph with owl motifs—stared back at him, its lines shimmering faintly under the flickering light of his lamp.

Markus' breath caught, a chill running down his spine. For a moment, he swore the sigil pulsed, indigo light tracing its edges, but he blinked, and it was gone. "Too much whiskey," he muttered, tossing the book onto the table. But as he lay back, the image



lingered in his mind, a whisper of something forbidden, something powerful. He'd spent his life managing chaos, ensuring others could fight their wars. Now, as he drifted into a restless sleep, the weight of his own war pressed heavier than ever, and the sigil's glow followed him into the dark as he fell asleep.

The morning sun filtered through the grimy window of Markus Reed's Reno apartment, casting jagged shadows across the clutter of textbooks and circuit boards. It was 10:32 AM on Saturday, May 26, 2025, and the air smelled of stale smoke and regret. Markus groaned as he rolled off the couch, his head throbbing from last night's whiskey and the bar fight at the Rusty Bolt. His knuckles were bruised, a dull ache radiating from where he'd slammed his elbow into the biker's nose. The memory of the scuffle flickered through his mind—sharp, visceral, like a mortar blast in Iraq—but he pushed it down, focusing on the day ahead. Today was his graduation from the University of Nevada, Reno, where he earned a Masters degree in Innovation and Entrepreneurship as the valedictorian. It was a triumph, a lifeline after the Air Force, but the honor felt empty against the weight of his unraveling life.

Markus stumbled to the bathroom, splashing cold water on his face. The mirror reflected a man carved by war: forty-one years old, with blue eyes that held too many ghosts, a jawline sharp beneath a few days' stubble, and scars on his hands from years of handling gear in the field.

He dressed in a wrinkled button-up shirt and the same jeans from last night, the Air Force logo on his hoodie a faded reminder of who he'd been. The graduation ceremony was at noon, followed by a party at a classmate's loft downtown, but Markus' thoughts lingered on the strange book he'd opened last night—the Grimorium Verum. Its pentagram-embossed cover and the sigil of



Stolas, a Goetic demon, had unnerved him. He'd dismissed the faint indigo glow as a whiskey-fueled hallucination, but the image stuck, a whisper of something he couldn't name. Shaking off the unease, he grabbed his cap and gown from the closet, the black fabric crisp and untouched, and headed out, the book left on the coffee table like a sleeping predator.

The ceremony at the university's quad was a blur of pomp and heat, the Nevada sun relentless even in late spring. Markus sat among his classmates, his mind drifting as the dean praised his thesis on supply chain innovation for renewable energy—a system to track and source materials with military precision, born from his AFSOC days. When his name was called as valedictorian, the crowd's applause felt distant, a hollow echo against the memories of mortar blasts and fallen comrades. He gave a brief speech, his voice steady but clipped, speaking of innovation as a battlefield where every failure cost lives. "We don't get second chances," he said, his blue eyes scanning the crowd, "so we build systems that don't fail." The words were for his classmates, but they were rooted in Iraq, in the lives he'd saved by ensuring a drone was fueled or a radio worked.

After the ceremony, Markus joined the party at a loft on 4th Street, a trendy space with exposed brick and string lights, filled with the buzz of graduates and cheap beer. He stood by a window, a plastic cup of whiskey in hand, watching his classmates laugh and dance. The normalcy of it grated against him, a reminder of how far he'd drifted. He'd thrown himself into his studies to escape the war, but the war had followed, creeping into his dreams and the bottle he couldn't put down. His phone buzzed—a text from Lena, the classmate who'd messaged him last night. "Where are you hiding, valedictorian?" it read, and Markus spotted her across the room, her auburn hair catching the light as she waved.



Lena Carter was a tech journalist, a sharp-minded woman in her late twenties with a knack for asking questions Markus didn't want to answer. She wore a black dress that hugged her frame, her green eyes glinting with curiosity as she approached. "You clean up nice, Markus," she teased, her voice warm but probing. "Didn't expect the valedictorian to be so... intense." Markus forced a smile, taking a sip of whiskey to steady himself. "I'm not big on crowds," he said, his tone clipped, but Lena wasn't deterred. She leaned closer, her perfume a mix of jasmine and ink, and asked, "You were in the military, right? Air Force? I heard you were with some elite unit. What was that like?"

The question hit like a punch, and Markus' grip tightened on the cup, the plastic creaking. "It was war," he snapped, his voice sharper than intended, pulling himself back to the present. "I kept the gear moving. That's all you need to know." Lena's eyes narrowed, sensing the wall he'd thrown up, but she pressed on, softer this time. "You're a genius, Markus, but you're hiding something. I can tell." He met her gaze, his jaw tight, and said, "Good. Keep it that way." He downed the rest of his whiskey, the burn a familiar anchor, and turned away, his heart racing.

The party stretched into the evening, and Markus drank more than he should have, each glass a brick in the wall between him and his memories. He avoided Lena, her questions too close to wounds he couldn't touch, but her presence lingered, a reminder of the connections he'd severed. By 9 PM, he was back at his apartment, the loft's noise replaced by the hum of the pawn shop's neon sign below. He collapsed onto the couch, the whiskey bottle from last night now empty on the table, and his eyes fell on the *Grimorium Verum*. The book seemed to pulse in the dim light, its cover a siren call to a man desperate for purpose.



Markus opened it, the pages crackling like dry bones, and returned to the section on Stolas. The sigil stared back at him, its star-like lines and owl motifs more vivid than he remembered, as if the book had been waiting for him. The text described Stolas as a Prince of Hell, a teacher of astronomy, herbalism, and precious stones, commanding 26 legions. “Forbidden knowledge,” Markus muttered, his voice slurred, the whiskey loosening his inhibitions. He traced the sigil with a finger, half-expecting it to glow again, but the room remained still, the only sound was his heavy breathing. Yet the idea of ancient secrets fueling innovation sparked something in him—a flicker of the fire that had driven him in Iraq, the need to solve the unsolvable.

He stumbled to his laptop, a newly opened whiskey bottle in hand, and he opened eBay, his fingers fumbling as he searched for more occult texts online. If Stolas offered knowledge, maybe there was more to find—something to push his thesis beyond renewables, into something revolutionary. His vision blurred, the screen swimming, but he clicked “Buy Now” on a listing for another grimoire, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, muttering, “Let’s see what else you’ve got, demon.” The purchase confirmation glowed on the screen, and Markus laughed, a hollow sound that echoed in the empty apartment. He didn’t notice the sigil on the *Grimorium Verum* flicker again, a faint indigo light tracing its lines, as if something ancient had taken notice.





### Chapter 3: The Sigil's Call & The First Ritual

Markus Reed woke with a jolt and quick start, his heart pounding as if he'd been running through the deserts of Iraq. His mouth tasted like ash and regret, the remnants of last night's whiskey clinging to his tongue like a bad decision. He was sprawled on the couch in his Reno apartment, the late morning light of May 27, 2025, seeping through the grimy window, casting harsh lines across his bruised knuckles. The hangover was a beast, clawing at his temples, but it wasn't the pain that jolted him awake—it was the dream. A crowned owl with glowing emerald eyes had stared at him from a void of swirling stars, its talons carving a sigil into the sand, the same sigil from the *Grimorium Verum*. The owl's voice, resonant like a distant galaxy, had whispered, "Seek the stars, mortal," before the dream shattered, leaving Markus gasping for air.

He sat up, his head spinning, and rubbed his eyes, trying to shake the image. The dream felt too real, too vivid, a far cry from the usual PTSD nightmares of mortar blasts and fallen comrades. His gaze fell on the *Grimorium Verum*, still open on the coffee table where he'd left it after his drunken eBay spree last night. The book's pentagram-embossed cover seemed to pulse in the dim light, and the page on Stolas—the 36th demon of the *Ars Goetia*—lay exposed, its star-like sigil with owl motifs staring back at him. Markus swore it shimmered, a faint indigo glow tracing its lines, just as it had before he'd passed out. "Not again," he muttered, his voice hoarse, but he couldn't look away. The sigil held him, a silent challenge, as if daring him to dismiss it as a hallucination.

Markus was no stranger to the impossible—a ghost who made the impossible happen. But this was different. This wasn't a missing drone or a botched supply drop. This was a book, a sigil, and a dream that felt like a summons, tugging at the part of him that



craved purpose after the war had stripped him bare.

He stood, ignoring the protest of his aching body, and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, downing it in gulps to clear his head. The apartment was a mess—takeout boxes, engineering textbooks, a disassembled circuit board from his Masters thesis—but the *Grimorium Verum* dominated the space, its presence heavy. Markus flipped through its pages, the brittle paper crackling under his touch, and reread the entry on Stolas. The demon was a Prince of Hell, commanding 26 legions, a teacher of astronomy, herbalism, and the properties of precious stones. The text promised “hidden knowledge,” a phrase that sent a shiver down Markus’ spine. He’d built his career on uncovering the hidden—lost shipments, classified assets—but this was a different kind of secret, one that felt both ancient and dangerous.

A sharp knock at the door startled him, the book nearly slipping from his hands. He tensed, his military instincts kicking in, and grabbed the pocketknife from his jeans, flipping it open as he approached the door. “Who is it?” he called, his voice low, ready for a fight. “Delivery,” came a dull reply, and Markus relaxed slightly, peering through the peephole to see a uniformed courier holding a small package. He opened the door, signed for the delivery with a scrawl, and took the package—a thin, padded envelope with an eBay seller’s label. It was the book he’d bought last night in a whiskey-fueled haze: *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, another grimoire, supposedly a companion to the *Grimorium Verum*. The coincidence of its arrival, mere hours after his dream, felt like a cosmic joke, but Markus wasn’t laughing.

He tore open the envelope, revealing a leather-bound book, its cover etched with arcane symbols. The pages were yellowed, the print faded, but the section on Stolas was marked with a faded ribbon, as



if the seller had known exactly what Markus was looking for. The description mirrored the *Grimorium Verum*'s: Stolas, Prince of Hell, teacher of celestial and natural sciences, appearing as a crowned owl or a man. But this text included a ritual, a step-by-step guide to summoning the demon, complete with a sigil that matched the one in the *Grimorium Verum*.

Markus traced the sigil with his finger, his pulse quickening as the indigo glow returned, brighter this time, undeniable. The room seemed to dim, the air growing heavy, and for a moment, he swore he heard a faint screech—an owl's cry, echoing from nowhere and everywhere.

Markus dropped the book, his knife clattering to the floor, and stumbled back, his breath heavy and taken away. "What the hell are you?" he whispered, staring at the sigil, now pulsing like a heartbeat. His mind raced, torn between rational skepticism and the primal fear of the unknown. He'd seen enough in Iraq to know the world held mysteries—luck that saved a mission, instincts that warned of an ambush—but this was beyond reason. The sigil's glow faded, leaving him trembling, his hangover forgotten in the face of something he couldn't explain. He picked up the Lesser Key of Solomon, flipping to the ritual instructions: a salt circle, a gold candle, sage incense, and a chant—"Stolos Ramec Viasa on ca"—repeated 36 times, Stolas' rank in the *Goetia*.

The idea of summoning a demon was absurd, the stuff of horror movies, but Markus couldn't shake the dream, the owl's voice, the sigil's glow. He'd spent his life solving problems, finding what was lost, and now, with his life spiraling—PTSD, alcoholism, the hollow victory of his valedictorian title—he craved something more. His Master's thesis had been about innovation, about breaking boundaries, and Stolas promised knowledge that could redefine the



world. “Hidden sciences,” he muttered, the words a lifeline. He thought of his time in the ODA, the missions where he’d sourced gear to take down monsters like The Architect. Maybe this was another mission, a new battlefield, one where the stakes were higher than ever.

Markus spent the day preparing, his logistical mind taking over. He cleared a space in his apartment, shoving aside textbooks and takeout boxes, and raided his kitchen for supplies. He found a bag of sea salt in the pantry, a leftover from a cooking experiment with Anna, his ex-wife, and a gold candle from a Christmas gift he’d never used. Sage was harder to come by, but he remembered a bundle in a drawer, bought on a whim at a local market for “cleansing energy.” He laughed at the irony, the sound bitter, as he set up the circle with military precision, pouring the salt in a perfect ring, orienting it to the north like a compass heading. The candle went in the center, its wick unlit, and the sage beside it, ready to burn. He copied Stolas’ sigil onto a piece of printer paper, using an indigo marker, his hands steady despite the tremor in his chest.

By evening, the setup was complete, but Markus hesitated, the weight of what he was about to do pressing down like a mortar shell. He sat outside the circle, the Lesser Key of Solomon open on his lap, and poured a glass of whiskey, the bottle nearly empty. The amber liquid gleamed, a familiar comfort, but the owl’s voice from his dream echoed in his mind: “Seek the stars, mortal.” He set the glass down, untouched, a small act of defiance against the addiction that had followed him from Iraq. “Let’s see what you’ve got,” he said to the sigil, his voice steady, a warrior facing a new enemy.

The air in Markus Reed’s apartment was thick with the scent of sage after he burned it, a sharp, earthy tang that clung to the walls



“You know,” Liam said, his voice barely above a whisper, “I’ve been wanting to say something for a while.” He stood, closing the distance between them, his height casting a shadow that felt protective, not intimidating. “I’m not great at this, but... I like you, Nora. A lot. And I’ve been too nervous to do anything about it.”

Her breath caught, Dantalion’s visions flashing in her mind—Liam’s hungry gaze, his imagined kiss. This was real, not a vision, and the vulnerability in his eyes mirrored her own. “You don’t seem nervous now,” she said, her voice soft, a smile tugging at her lips. She stepped closer, their bodies inches apart, the heat of him drawing her in.

Liam laughed, a nervous, genuine sound. “Trust me, I’m a mess inside.” He reached out, his fingers brushing her cheek, tentative but deliberate. The touch sent a jolt through her, electric and intoxicating, as if Dantalion’s magic had ignited every nerve. “Is this... okay?” he asked, his eyes searching hers.

“More than okay,” Nora whispered, her hand finding his chest, feeling the steady thud of his heart. She tilted her face up, and Liam leaned in, his lips meeting hers in a kiss that was soft at first, exploratory, then deepening with a hunger that stole her breath. The office faded, the world narrowing to the warmth of his mouth, the press of his hands on her waist, pulling her closer. Dantalion’s magic pulsed through the moment, making the kiss feel like a spell, each touch amplified, each sensation a fire that burned away her doubts.

But as their lips parted, a whisper of foreign thoughts slithered into Nora’s mind—fragments of strangers’ fantasies, raw and disjointed. A woman imagining a lover’s hands, a man’s fleeting desire in a crowded bar. She stiffened, pulling back, her breath ragged



like a whispered prayer. The salt circle on the floor gleamed faintly in the flickering light of a single gold candle, its flame casting jagged shadows across the sigil of Stolas—indigo lines on printer paper, trembling as if alive. It was just past midnight on May 28, 2025, the hour when the world seemed to hold its breath, and Markus sat cross-legged outside the circle, his hands gripping the Lesser Key of Solomon like a lifeline. The room felt smaller, the walls pressing in, the hum of the pawn shop's neon sign below a distant drone against the pounding of his heart. He'd prepared the ritual with flawlessness—salt aligned to the north, sage bundle smoldering in a chipped mug, the sigil centered beneath the candle—but now, as the moment loomed, doubt gnawed at him, a familiar enemy from his days in Iraq.

Markus' blue eyes darted to the whiskey glass on the coffee table, the amber gold drink sat untouched since he'd poured it hours ago. He'd resisted the urge then, a small victory, but the temptation had returned, stronger now, whispering promises of courage. His hands shook, not from withdrawal but from the weight of what he was about to do. Summon a demon? The idea was insane, the stuff of late-night horror flicks, but the sigil's glow last night—bright, undeniable—had shaken him. The dream of the crowned owl, its emerald eyes and cosmic voice, had felt like a summons, a challenge he couldn't ignore.

He reached for the whiskey, his resolve crumbling, and took a long swallow, the burn from the liquor was a familiar fire down his throat. "Screw it," he muttered, his voice slurred, the alcohol loosening the knot of fear in his chest. He set the glass down, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and picked up the sigil, its indigo lines shimmering faintly under the candlelight. The Lesser Key of Solomon instructed him to chant Stolas' enn—"Stolos Ramec Viasa on ca"—36 times, the demon's rank in the Goetia,



while visualizing an owl with glowing eyes. Markus lit the sage again, the smoke curling upward in lazy spirals, and he began the chant, his voice halting at first, the words foreign on his tongue.

“Stolos Ramec Viasa on ca,” he repeated, his military discipline forcing rhythm into the slurred syllables, his eyes fixed on the sigil.

By the 10th repetition, the air grew heavier, the candle flame flaring brighter, casting a golden glow that danced on the walls like a living thing. Markus’ pulse quickened, his chant faltering as the sigil pulsed, indigo light tracing its lines with a heartbeat rhythm.

“Stolos Ramec Viasa on ca,” he continued, his voice louder now, driven by a mix of fear and defiance. At the 36th chant, the candle flame surged, a column of fire that nearly touched the ceiling, and the room plunged into darkness, the neon hum silenced. Markus froze, his breath caught, as a low screech echoed—an owl’s cry, piercing and otherworldly, coming from the center of the circle.

A shape emerged from the shadows, materializing as if woven from the smoke itself: a great owl, its indigo feathers shimmering like a starfield, crowned with a golden diadem etched with constellations.

Its eyes glowed emerald green, piercing through the darkness, pinning Markus with a gaze that felt like a blade. The owl’s talons, sharp and glinting, scraped the floor, leaving faint scratches that glowed with indigo light, as if carving sigils into the very air. Stolas, the 36th demon of the Goetia, stood before him, a presence both celestial and menacing, evoking wisdom and dread in equal measure. Markus’ mouth went dry, the whiskey’s courage evaporating, but he forced himself to speak, his voice a rasp.

“Stolas... I—I summon you. I need knowledge. Something to change the world.”

The owl’s head tilted, its eyes narrowing, and a voice resonated, deep and resonant like a distant galaxy, laced with a sardonic edge.



“Free energy, mortal? You seek to reshape your world, yet you drown in whiskey. Amusing.” Stolas’ talons clicked, the sound a sharp counterpoint to Markus’ heavy breathing, and the demon continued, “Sobriety is my price. Knowledge comes with sacrifice. Will you pay?” Markus stared, his mind reeling, the whiskey haze making the moment surreal. Free energy—a technology to upend industries, to free the world from oil and gas—dangled before him, a dream he’d chased through his Masters in Innovation and Entrepreneurship. But sobriety? The bottle had been his crutch since Iraq, a shield against the nightmares of mortar blasts and Torres’ blood-soaked sand.

He laughed, a bitter sound, and shook his head. “You’re a hallucination,” he said, but his voice lacked conviction. Stolas’ eyes flared, and the owl spread its wings, indigo feathers shimmering with starlight, the air crackling with unseen energy. “Deny me if you wish,” Stolas intoned, “but the stars do not lie.” A vision flooded Markus’ mind, unbidden—a schematic of a rotor, its gears interlocking with crystalline precision, powered by stellar harmonics, a hum of infinite energy. The blueprint burned into his memory, vivid and impossible, and Markus gasped, clutching his head as the vision faded. The owl folded its wings, its gaze unyielding. “Sobriety, mortal,” Stolas repeated, “or the stars bleed you.” The candle flared once more, and Stolas vanished, leaving only a faint screech and the scent of cedarwood in the air.

Markus sat frozen, the sigil now dull on the paper, the candle reduced to a puddle of wax. His hands trembled as he grabbed a notebook, sketching the rotor schematic from memory, his logistical mind racing to capture every detail. The vision was real—too real—and the implications staggered him. Free energy could change everything, but Stolas’ price loomed like a specter. He glanced at the whiskey glass, now empty, and felt a pang of dread. The demon’s



words echoed: "Sobriety is my price." Markus had laughed off the pact, but the scratches on the floor, glowing faintly with indigo light, told him this was no hallucination. He'd opened a door he couldn't close, and the war he'd fought in Iraq felt small compared to the one he'd just begun.





