

Chapter 104 - Ludus

Before I could fully gather myself, still gasping for air through the pain and exhaustion, a sharp *snap* rang out. I didn't even have a chance to react, before I felt an immense force slam into my side, and the next thing I knew, the world spun violently around me.

My body was clearly airborne for a moment, until I went crashing and bouncing off the street, tumbling at least a dozen meters before I finally skidded to a stop.

Pain.

Searing, unrelenting pain radiated from my left side, sharp enough to almost drown out everything else. Breathing felt impossible, each attempt a shallow, wheezing gasp that sent fire through my chest.

'Broken ribs... Maybe a punctured lung?' The thought drifted through the haze of agony, my mind barely able to keep itself tethered to reality.

Blood splattered the ground as I coughed violently, trying to move, to force my body to turn and face whatever had just thrown me like a ragdoll. My limbs screamed in protest, every inch of me resisting the motion as I struggled to lift my head.

'There's only one person left who could've—' The realization came sluggishly, the dots connecting slower than they should have. My blurred vision gradually cleared, tears of pain stinging my eyes as I squinted at the figure calmly walking forward.

Carinola Valir.

Her toothy grin stretched wide, exuding an air of terrifying nonchalance as she strolled forward.

Her eyes stayed locked on Jade, who was still sprawled on the ground, her hands scrambling against the blood-slicked pavement in a desperate attempt to put even a shred of distance between herself and the predator bearing down on her.

Every movement Jade made was uncoordinated, frantic, and drenched in raw fear.

She was *terrified*, and rightfully so.

Carinola, though? She wasn't in a rush.

Not even close.

There was not even a *hint* of urgency in her stride, no sign she thought either of us posed the faintest threat to her.

She radiated an aura of pure menace, her entire demeanor screaming that she was in complete and utter control. She wasn't just winning—she was *enjoying* it, too.

I tried to move. To do something. *Anything*.

But nothing worked.

I could barely manage to tilt my head, let alone muster the strength to stand or fight.

My body wasn't responding, the sheer agony radiating from my side anchoring me in place like dead weight.

My Ego, which had been working overtime to keep me focused and alert throughout all of this, was beginning to falter under the unrelenting pain.

It was still there, still holding on just enough to keep me conscious, but the icy clarity it had provided earlier was fading rapidly as it lost its battle with the sheer number of things that were wrong with me.

I was out of options. Out of time. Out of everything.

Watching Jade claw desperately at the ground, her wide, terrified eyes flicking between Carinola and whatever faint hope might lie behind her, I couldn't stop the sinking realization that I'd utterly *failed*—not just myself, but *her* too.

'Fucking stupid, Sera!' My inner voice practically screamed at me, drowning out everything else. *'If you hadn't played around like that...! If you'd taken this whole thing seriously from the very start...!'*

The weight of my decisions hit me like a ton of bricks, the pain in my body momentarily eclipsed by the sheer frustration and regret clawing at my insides.

I *had* hesitated far too much.

Carinola Valir was way out of my league—that much was obvious from the start.

But the enforcers she'd sent? They hadn't been.

Not with the gear Misha had provided me.

Not with the System's Attributes and Skills backing me up.

If I'd just stopped holding back... stopped trying to find a way out without crossing that line... stopped worrying about killing them earlier...!

My jaw clenched so hard I thought my teeth might crack.

It was my own hesitation, my inability to embrace the reality of this fight—of this world—that had let things spiral this far out of control.

That realization burned in my chest, hotter than the pain, sharper than the regret.

But none of that mattered now. It was too late for "what ifs."

Too late for regrets.

All that mattered was the predator closing in on Jade, step by menacing step. All that mattered was the flicker of life still in her eyes—the flicker I had to protect.

No matter the cost.

I forced myself to speak, every word feeling like shards of glass ripping through my throat and chest. The pain was blinding, but I didn't care. I couldn't *afford* to care.

"H-Hey!" I rasped, my voice barely audible and cracking under the strain. Blood bubbled up in my throat, spilling over my lips in thick, coppery bursts. "Stop...!"

The effort made my head spin, my vision blurring further with each agonizing breath.

Still, I tried again, my voice hoarse and trembling.

"C-Carinola!" I coughed, choking on the blood pooling in my mouth. "Fucking S—Stop...!"

Carinola stopped mid-step, tilting her head ever so slightly in amusement, her grin widening as if I'd just told the punchline to the funniest joke she'd ever heard.

"Oh, so the little whore still has some energy left, does she?" she cooed mockingly, her voice dripping with venom. "And here I thought you'd already accepted your place in the dirt. How cute."

She turned her gaze back to Jade for a moment, almost dismissively, before looking at me again. "What's the plan, hmm? Gonna talk me to death? Gonna *beg* me to stop? Maybe try some heartfelt speech about how I'm better than this? Let me save you the trouble, *darling*—I'm *not* better than this. Not at all."

"P-Please...!" I gasped, my body trembling as I tried to prop myself up on one elbow, my entire left side screaming in protest.

Blood dripped steadily from my lips, pooling beneath me as I fought against the crushing weight of my injuries. "J-Just... leave her alone..."

Carinola's grin widened, her teeth gleaming in the light.

"Oh, you poor, deluded *thing*," she sneered.

“*Why would I* do that? I can literally just kill her first, right in front of your eyes. It won’t take me even a minute; barely even any energy at all! You’ll get to watch as her pathetic life drains away and her eyes grow dull and empty, all because of *your actions*. A fitting punishment, don’t you think?”

I coughed again, harder this time, blood splattering onto the pavement as my body convulsed with the effort.

But I couldn’t allow myself to stay silent.

“Y-you want *me*... not her...” I wheezed, my words barely a whisper.

Carinola laughed, a cold, cruel sound that sent chills down my spine. “Oh, don’t worry, darling. I’ll get to *you*. I’m going to bring you back to my son personally. He’s so eager to return the favor, you see. He wants to take his time with you... Cut off your limbs, piece by piece, and make you feel just a fraction of the humiliation you put him through. It will be a true delight!”

Her words dripped with malice, each one cutting deeper than any blade could.

“And after he’s done with you,” she continued, her voice dark and honeyed, “I’ll make sure you understand what it means to cross a Valir. Every moment of agony you’ve endured so far will feel like *mercy* compared to what’s coming, trust me on this.”

I tried to respond, to say something that might draw her attention fully to me and away from Jade, but my body betrayed me. Another violent cough wracked through me, sending fresh waves of blood splattering onto the ground.

Carinola’s eyes glittered with cruel delight as she turned her full attention back to Jade, who was still scrambling helplessly on the ground.

“You really picked a pitiful ally, little girl. And the wrong one at that,” Carinola mocked, her voice dripping with contempt. “But don’t worry—when I’m finished with you, she’ll be joining soon enough; I doubt that she’ll last long without limbs.”

I felt a surge of despair crash over me as I watched her advance on Jade, her cruel words twisting like a knife in my gut, but it wasn’t her taunts that hurt most—it was my sheer inability to *do* anything to stop her.

I struggled against my broken body, willing it to move, but pain flared with every twitch, every attempt to rise. My vision swam with tears of frustration.

I had to keep going. Try to get her attention again, *somehow*.

Then it hit me.

Inspiration struck like a flash of lightning, sudden and desperate.

Carinola reveled in her sadistic game, but even beneath all that cruelty and menace, there was something she cared about—something I could *exploit*.

The instant the thought coalesced, I knew that it wasn't a guess; [Negotiation] lit it up like a beacon, a north star guiding a desperate sailor lost at sea.

I coughed again, blood spilling from my lips, but I forced the words out, hoarse and defiant. "D-Damien's... *pathetic*. And you... know it."

The effect was immediate.

Carinola stopped mid-step, her body going rigid.

Slowly, her head turned toward me, her piercing eyes narrowing to deadly slits.

"What the fuck did you just say?" she asked, her voice low and venomous, the false cheer she'd been wearing moments before completely gone.

I coughed again, the metallic tang of blood filling my mouth, but I pushed on, ignoring the searing pain in my chest. "He's... *weak*. That's why... he sent you. Couldn't... handle things himself. Too *pathetic*..."

Her jaw tightened, the faintest twitch of her hand betraying her rising anger.

"How fucking *dare* you," she hissed, her voice trembling with rage.

I forced a smile through the pain, blood staining my teeth. "D-damien's a *coward*. Hides... behind his *mommy*. Probably... cried the whole time after... I took his arm and gun. B-big mommy's boy too scared... to handle things himself..."

Carinola's eyes darkened, and her sneer twisted into a full-blown snarl as my words struck a nerve. Her entire body tensed, and she took a single, furious step toward me, her towering frame radiating pure, unrestrained malice.

"You little shit-mouthed, *blank-ass whore*," she growled, her voice dripping with venom.

Her foot scraped the pavement as though she were about to charge, and for one fleeting second, I thought I'd managed to bait her into coming for me instead of Jade.

But then, just as quickly, her body stilled.

A sharp breath hissed between her teeth, and her features smoothed into an eerily composed mask, her rage simmering just below the surface.

"No," she said, almost to herself, her voice tight but calculating. "No, you're *playing* me, aren't you? You're smarter than you look... But not smart enough to know when to fucking stop!"

My heart sank like a lead weight as her expression shifted again—this time to one of cold, merciless determination.

She pointed a finger at me, her eyes blazing with a promise of retribution. “I’ll remember those words. I’ll carve them into every inch of your fucking skin once Damien gets done with you. You’ll regret ever opening that smart-ass mouth.”

Then, she turned her attention back to Jade.

“You know,” she continued, her voice taking on a mockingly pleasant tone, “I was going to be relatively nice about this. A quick death—merciful, really. But now? Now, I think I’ll rip her apart piece by piece while you watch. Let’s see if you’re still feeling clever when you’re drowning in her screams.”

Despair surged in me as she took quick steps toward Jade, her words like nails hammered into my coffin.

I racked my brain for another angle, another way to play her, but every idea that came to mind was either useless or was impossible for me to do with my current state.

I tried to push my broken body to move, to act, but nothing responded.

I could only watch in mounting horror as Carinola closed the final gap between herself and Jade, who was still trembling on the ground, too injured to get away.

*‘No, no, no! There has to be something—**anything!** System, fucking help me... **please!**’*

And then, just as Carinola stepped up towards Jade, nearly in range to touch her, she abruptly froze mid-step.

A low, sharp voice echoed through the street, slicing through the tension like a blade.

“Not *one step* closer towards her, Valir, or you’ll be breathing through your fucking forehead.”

Through sheer willpower, I forced my head to turn toward the source of the voice, the movement sending sharp, agonizing stabs through my already broken ribs.

My vision swam for a moment, but when it cleared, the sight that greeted me was nothing short of striking.

A woman emerged from the shadows of a nearby alleyway.

Her hair was a vivid, unnatural yellow that seemed to almost glow, matching the piercing golden hue of her eyes.

She was a walking fusion of flesh and chrome, and she didn't even try to hide it—her left arm, the one holding a matte-black heavy-pistol, was entirely cybernetic—not a fleck of synth-skin placed on it.

Other enhancements glinted across her frame as well: Subtle neural ports at her temple, segmented plating peeking through beneath her skin, and the sheer heft of every step she took hinted at a substantial weight belying her slender figure.

Carinola stiffened immediately, her expression flickering between rage and unease.

“*Yellow...*” she said, her voice low and laced with a combination of bitterness and annoyance. “Figures *you*’d show up here. You always did love sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

The woman—Yellow, apparently—didn’t slow her approach.

If anything, her grin widened, revealing a row of teeth far too perfect to be natural.

“I’m just cleaning up trash,” she said casually, her pistol leveled at Carinola’s head with an iron-grip that spoke volumes about her expertise. “And it looks like I found *quite a bit* of it right here.”

Carinola snarled, her hands clenching into fists. “You’ve got no business here, Yellow. Walk away before I make you fucking regret it. This is between me and these two little whores; no need to get involved.”

Yellow stopped a few paces short, her pistol unwavering. “Oh, Carinola, you’ve been making people “*regret*” things for years. How’s that working out for you?”

Her gaze flicked briefly to Jade and then to me, her eyes taking in the scene with unnerving speed. “Two kids? *Really*? That’s your big play these days? Utterly pathetic, *even* for you.”

Carinola’s face twisted in fury, and she took a single, threatening step forward.

Yellow didn’t so much as blink, her voice dropping to a tone that was sharp, commanding, and utterly devoid of fear. “Try it. I *dare* you.”

The street felt like it had been vacuum-sealed, the tension suffocating every one of my laboured breaths.

For a moment, neither woman moved.

The only sounds were my ragged breathing and the faint mechanical hum of Yellow’s cybernetics.

“Not to mention,” Yellow added, her gaze flicking briefly to the lifeless enforcers sprawled on the ground, “you’ve already had your go. This was your *One*, Carinola. Back off.”

That struck a nerve.

Carinola’s expression faltered, confusion flashing across her face before she quickly masked it with anger.

Her lips curled into a sneer, but the momentary crack was telling.

“*Bullshit*,” she spat, gesturing angrily toward me and Jade. “You can’t just stroll in here and claim this nonsense. That rule applies to gangs, Yellow—not to random nobodies like them. I know you’re *soft*, but this is a step too far, even for you.”

Her glare was searing. “They’re not part of any gang; so no *One* has been used. So why don’t you step off and let me handle my business, huh? You don’t want to risk starting a war over this. Trust *me*.”

‘*A war...*?’ The word stuck in my head like a thorn.

‘*Gang rule...? A "One"...? What is even going on right now?*’ The questions kept piling up, spinning endlessly in my pain-clouded mind.

Before Yellow could respond, however, another voice chimed in, this one smooth, cultured, and exuding an air of aristocratic detachment. “That is where you are, unfortunately, quite mistaken, dearest Carinola.”

The melodic cadence of the voice sliced through the tension, drawing all eyes toward its source. Carinola’s head snapped toward the speaker so fast I half-hoped she might have just snapped her own neck.

“*Liliana*? Where did you...? And more importantly, what the *fuck* are you talking about?” Carinola barked, fury radiating from her, though now visibly restrained, as if the presence of this new player had tightened a leash around her growing rage.

“What Yellow said is entirely accurate, I’m afraid,” Liliana replied, her tone lilting, almost amused, as though the entire situation were a particularly tedious game of chess she had already won.

“While we could not locate any records for her”—she royally gestured towards me with one of her gloved hands—“I must unfortunately confirm that she”—her hand shifted to indicate Jade—“is, in fact, a member of the Clawed Beasts.”

Liliana now swept her arm with a flourish toward the bloodied corpses of the two enforcers, her expression one of pity mixed with barely veiled contempt.

“Which means this incident does, in fact, constitute your *One*. And now, dear Carinola, if I would be allowed to be so forward with my language, here you are quite flagrantly overstepping your status.”

Her voice turned frostier. “I strongly *advise* you to retreat before the High Talon is forced to involve himself in this matter. I doubt even you would relish such... *attention*... darling Carinola.”

Carinola stiffened, her fists clenching and unclenching as her gaze was fixed entirely on Liliana, Yellow and her heavy-pistol aimed directly at the back of her head seemingly completely forgotten.

“How long have you known about this?” she demanded, her voice sharp and accusatory. “Was this a setup? Did you know this *whole time* and just let me walk into this...?”

Liliana arched a perfectly sculpted brow, her expression a flawless blend of pity and condescension. “A setup? Oh, dearest Carinola, how *dramatic*. I assure you, all pertinent information has been shared with the task force, as per the High Talon’s explicit orders. I have been nothing if not wholly obedient in that regard.”

Her tone turned sharper, the polite veneer barely containing the sting beneath.

“*However*, I must admit to some confusion regarding your... *interpretation* of the High Talon’s instructions. To “*speak*” to the girls, I believe it was? This”—Liliana gestured at the corpses on the ground and then toward Jade and me—“*hardly* looks like a discussion. A misunderstanding, perhaps? Or have you simply chosen to disregard those orders entirely, dearest?”

Carinola’s jaw clenched, the sound of grinding teeth almost audible.

Liliana’s calm, pointed critique hit its mark, and the fury in Carinola’s eyes burned even brighter. Liliana, however, remained unfazed, her aristocratic poise utterly unshaken by the other woman’s display of barely restrained anger.

“I will repeat myself one final time,” Liliana continued, her voice steady and cutting. “*Back off* now, before you turn an unfortunate *misunderstanding* into a full-blown catastrophe. Your son has already embarrassed us more than enough. And *you* have clearly already made a spectacle of yourself here as well. Do not make it any worse.”

For a moment, silence reigned.

Then, with a guttural growl, Carinola slammed her fist into the ground.

The pavement beneath her exploded into dust and debris, spiderweb cracks radiating outward as her frustration tore through the street.

The sheer force of the display sent a tremor through the ground, and I winced instinctively, though my body was too broken to react further.

Carinola straightened, shaking dust from her hand as her eyes flicked between Liliana and Yellow, hatred etched into every line of her face.

"This isn't over," she spat, her voice venomous. "I *won't* forget this... Liliana. Or you," she added, her glare shifting briefly to Yellow.

With that, she spun on her heel and strode away, her steps brisk and radiating fury as she disappeared down the street.

Liliana watched her leave with a serene, detached expression, as though Carinola's tantrum were nothing more than an inconvenient storm passing through.

"How *uncivilized*," she remarked softly, her tone almost amused as she gently shook her head and turned her gaze back towards Yellow, Jade and me.

"Thank you, Yellow," she said. "Your intervention prevented Carinola from making mistakes that would have been regrettably... *difficult* to clean up."

Yellow gave a short nod as she holstered her heavy-pistol. "Figured *someone* needed to keep her in check. She's been running hot for a while now. I'd prefer not having to step in to keep your people in line, Liliana. I trust that this will be properly addressed by the High Talon."

Liliana sighed softly as she nodded, the weight of the situation pressing into her composed expression as she turned her attention to me.

"This is truly unfortunate," she began, her tone carrying the barest hint of regret. "Carinola seemingly *misunderstood* her instructions. She was meant to speak with you and your companion, not enact some personal vendetta... But I must admit, I am positively surprised that you have come out the other end of this alive. Well done, young lady."

She paused, her gaze flickering briefly to Jade, who was still trembling on the ground but alive, thanks to Yellow's timely intervention.

With another sigh, Liliana continued, "But I fear that attempting to talk *now* would be fruitless. You are likely—and justifiably, mind you—angry with the Golden Phoenix as a whole, regardless of any involvement or lack thereof of anyone but the Valir family."

She tilted her head. "It seems there is regrettably little to salvage here, but should you find yourself in need of clarity or wish to discuss this further, I am not difficult to reach. Once things have been cleared up, I will contact you for an actual, proper conversation, *without* any uncivilized individuals, of course."

Her eyes glowed a soft yellow for an instant, and a notification pinged in my cerebral interface.

Her contact ID had been transmitted directly to me, I guessed, but I lacked the mental strength to check it, much less acknowledge it.

Liliana seemed utterly unbothered by my silence, however.

"The Guards are on their way," she said, turning back to Yellow. "I suggest you make yourself scarce before they arrive. Explaining the presence of any high-ranking gang members will not go over well, I imagine."

Yellow gave her a small smirk, already crouched beside Jade and securing a bandage around one of her more serious wounds. "Fair point. Thanks for the backup, Liliana. No need for this to turn more ugly than it already did."

Liliana waved the thanks away with a dismissive flick of her hand. "*You* were the one to act decisively and stop an unnecessary mistake. I merely played my role."

With that, she turned, her deliberate steps echoing faintly as she made her way to the nearest alley. Without so much as a glance back, she disappeared into the shadows, leaving behind only the faint scent of an expensive perfume lingering in her wake.

Yellow finished tying off the bandage and gave Jade a reassuring pat on the shoulder before standing.

"Well," Yellow muttered, glancing over at me with an unreadable look. "Looks like the cavalry's on its way. Let's hope you two can hold it together long enough to explain all this."

She turned to Jade, her tone softening just a touch. "Jade, stay out of trouble, alright? I'll catch you later. Take care of your friend."

"Thanks, Citrina... Seriously," Jade replied, her voice trembling slightly under the weight of everything that had happened.

The name hit me like a bolt of clarity cutting through the haze.

'That's one of her sisters?!'

I had completely forgotten about the fact that Citrina had supposedly been shadowing Jade for today's excursion, or that she had been the one to warn us of the Golden Phoenix's approach, but now that Jade mentioned her name it all came flooding back to me.

‘Why the fuck did she take so long...’ My thoughts blurred again, like static overtaking a failing signal, until I gave up entirely and let them fade.

Just in time, too, because my body couldn’t hold out any longer.

The last shred of energy slipped away, and I let my eyes close...

—

“Let’s get you up, Ela,” Jade’s voice cut through the darkness, hazy and muffled like it was coming from underwater.

I forced my eyes open, which proved to be a herculean task, and found myself staring up at the gray-coloured ceiling of the floor.

Seemingly, only a few minutes had passed.

Citrina was gone, replaced by a squad of five heavily armed Rockefeller Inc. guards, each one combing through the scene with military-like precision.

A grunt of effort escaped me as I felt myself being hoisted upright. Strong hands steadied my shoulders—Jade’s on my right, and someone unfamiliar on my left.

“Misha’s Emporium is the only place we’re authorized to bring you two,” the man on my left said firmly, addressing Jade.

His voice was steady, authoritative. “You’re aware of this?”

Jade nodded, still holding onto me. “Yes, that’s fine. Thank you.”

“Very well,” the man replied. He turned to the rest of the guards. “I’ll escort the two ladies back to the store. Secure the area and continue your investigation until I return.”

“Yes, Captain,” came the crisp acknowledgements from the guards.

As the captain and Jade began to guide me away, practically carrying me between them, a stray thought clawed its way to the surface of my muddled mind.

Struggling against their grip, I tried to free myself, letting out a hoarse grunt.

“Ela? What’s wrong?” Jade asked, her voice tight with worry.

I weakly gestured toward the second enforcer’s corpse.

The effort made my vision blur, but I kept pointing, fixating on one thing.

My knife.

It was absurd—laughable even—considering the state I was in, but the only thought that managed to break through the fog of exhaustion and pain was: *‘I need my knife back. It cost too much to lose it like this...’*

Jade exchanged a confused look with the captain, who seemed equally perplexed.

“What’s she doing?” Jade asked, her tone frantic.

The captain furrowed his brow, then nodded as understanding seemed to dawn on him. “Let’s check it out. Hold her steady.”

They helped me stagger toward the corpse. I felt like a ragdoll, barely able to stay upright as we approached the enforcer’s crumpled body.

‘Knife... Knife... Knife...’

I feebly tried to retrieve the knife lodged in the base of the enforcer’s skull, but my hands were far too weak to manage. It probably looked more like I was swatting at air than trying to grab anything.

The captain, clearly accustomed to situations like this, leaned down and removed the knife with practiced ease. He wiped the blade clean on the dead enforcer’s clothes before handing it back to me.

“Here,” he said simply, placing it into my trembling hand.

“Tha...mny,” I slurred out, the words barely audible as I fumbled the knife into the nearest pocket of my gear.

Jade and the Guard Captain lingered, their eyes on me as though waiting for another erratic outburst, but when I didn’t move, they began helping me back to my feet.

Then, something shimmered faintly in the corner of my vision. It was subtle, almost imperceptible, but in my hazy, blood-loss-addled state, it stood out like a beacon.

‘What the...?’

Without thinking—or perhaps trying to think too much and blowing something out that shouldn’t be—some instinct kicked in, and I surged forward.

Or at least, I tried to.

My body didn’t have the energy for anything resembling grace, so what should’ve been a leap was more like a barely-controlled collapse onto the enforcer’s corpse.

“Ela!” Jade’s voice rang out, sharp with panic as she scrambled to steady me. Her hands gripped my shoulders, trying to lift me gently while the Guard Captain quickly moved in to help.

But I didn't resist. I didn't need to.

My hand was already clutching what I'd seen.

The item was small, smooth, and unassuming, yet it sent a ripple of unease and intrigue through my foggy mind.

My fingers closed tightly around it, and as Jade and the Captain pulled me upright again, I let it disappear into the nearest available pocket without a word.

*'How the fuck is this here? How is this even **possible**?' The thought pounded in my skull like a relentless drumbeat, drowning out everything else. I couldn't make sense of it, couldn't connect the dots, but the implications were... *unnerving* to say the least.*

Resigning myself to the haze of exhaustion, I let my body go slack, allowing them to carry me toward Misha's Emporium. While they dragged me along, I did something I hadn't had the time for since this whole mess had started: I opened my System Interface.

It took effort—more than I thought it would—to access the relevant entry in the deluge of Notifications, but when I finally found it, my heart thudded once before my mind struggled to process what I was seeing.

[System]: *Human (Gang Enforcer) drops 1x (Uncommon) Data-Shard.*

[System]: *1x (Uncommon) Data-Shard acquired. Identified as (Uncommon) Data-Shard #143. Decrypt Loot? Y/N*

I mentally stared at the entry as if I'd just stumbled upon a cryptid in the flesh—because, for all intents and purposes, that's exactly what it was.

'How the fuck is there a loot drop... in the real world?'

The thought echoed in my mind, loud and unrelenting, even as the edges of my mind blurred and the hazy fog inside my mind consumed everything, slipping into unconsciousness once more...