

A Wolf in Machine's Clothing

Coming to Acedia was never the “right” choice to make, but, then again, humans never seem to be able to determine right from wrong when it comes to violence.

Somewhere between the perpetual rain and the city lights that shined brighter than the hearts of its people, a beast lay inside each inhabitant. It was one of the few primal urges the amalgamation that is now known as the human race could not destroy. No matter how much metal replaced flesh, the beast still lurked deep within. And when it was ready, you went to Acedia.

Normal people hunted the streets for fugitives or joined the police force in order to put that primal urge to good use before they were too far gone. They wanted something more, something more substantial to quench their vengeance. Maybe it was that the police never seemed to set foot in Acedia, or maybe it was because no one would question who you were or why you were there. Whatever the reason, Acedia, the back alley bar, quickly became where sinners lived their darkest dreams, where the beast was free to prowl. And right at the heart of the chaos, breathing it all in, Akira sat in her usual spot; medium height and lean, her silhouette was sleek and dangerous. Her black hair, streaked with white, fell around her sharp face, and her glowing purple eyes scanned the room like a predator waiting for the next hunt.

The air was thick with a sickening stench: blood, sweat, saliva, booze, and rage mixed together; a synthesis of smells so distinct, it could only be described as Acedia. It was heavenly for Akira.

She sat at the precipice of a fight waiting to break out. One hand gripped a sweet-scented blue liqueur, the other itched to join in on the madness. Beyond the smoky, purple-blue neon haze, she sensed a predator about to strike.

Akira came here for one thing: to fight. She was designed that way, a perfect harbinger of chaos, always looking for the next person to strike and take down. Unfortunately, her thirst for blood was often hindered by her purpose: extracting valuable cybernetics; body modifications that enhance the host's body through the use of technology. She herself already had a few, her right arm being the newest model of cybernetic arm. Fully mechanical, it was compact but packed a powerful punch; able to deliver electric shocks to anyone close enough she could get her hands on. Her body was perfectly curated to her. Like a wolf drunk on the stench of blood, she was drunk on modifying herself to become the perfect killing machine, or, at least she thought she was...

Looking around the bar, she scanned for someone to attack, someone with a valuable enough cybernetic to extract, someone to appease **her**. She took the last swing of her sweet drink, putting the glass back down on the bar as she reached down to her boot to make sure the knife she always carried was still there; a habit she picked up. She wasn't sure where it came from, but it started happening after her last upgrade. Maybe something had messed with her nervous system and caused her to be anxiously attached to the knife. Nevertheless, the knife was there. The bartender, noticing her empty glass, silently refilled it with viscous blue liquid. Reaching for her drink, she spotted a crumpled note tucked under the glass.

Sandevistan. Table 52.

She cursed softly and scanned the room. Table 52 was tucked into a distant corner, far from the main crowd. There, a composed man sat, seemingly unaffected by the feverish energy around him. Data fills her vision, cold and clinical:

Name: Venom

Age: 25

Physical: Extreme

Weakness: None

Cybernetics: Sandevistan

For a moment, Akira sat in shock. Not only was a Sandevistan one of the hardest cybernetics to get, it was also among the most dangerous to have, often sending its users into cyberpsychosis: a mental illness that occurred when a person's cybernetic augmentations overloaded their body. It caused a person to lose their sense of identity and personality, leading to uncontrolled violence. Sandevistans improved user reaction speed by basically kicking the user's nervous system into extreme overdrive. It was implanted along the spine, making it stick out of most users' backs. Although it was easy to access, hypothetically speaking, in reality, catching up to someone with a Sandevistan was one hell of a feat to pull off.

For a second, a rush of fear surged through her body, but then it was gone. She knew what **she** wanted, she knew how **she** worked. This was a test, and she intended to pass with flying colors. She turned, a dark sneer on her face as she flagged down the bartender.

“Hey. Do me a favor and send my regards up to the boss. It looks like she's getting cocky today.” she said, sliding her glass and the note across the counter back to the bartender.

The bartender shivered before taking the glass off the counter.

She zeroed in on Venom, letting her mechanical fingers seamlessly connect with the bar. A small cartridge slid out, feeding into a hidden port.

Acedia had its own private network seamlessly integrated with all of the information of those who entered. Everyone was scanned, whether they noticed or not, and their information, like the intel she had just received about Venom, was fed straight into the system.

Akira tapped into the network, her body going stiff as her mind dove into the digital sea. Lines of 1's and 0's flooded her vision as she swam deeper into Acedia's database, sifting through files, searching for what she needed.

She didn't have much time. Soon her body would overheat and her circuits would fry. She pressed on. Heat built under her skin the deeper she went. Then, finally, she found it: the schematics of Venom's Sandevistan. It was her best shot, but she needed to move fast. Akira drilled into the schematics, looking for a vulnerable point where she could plant a bug. Her

mechanical fingers uploaded a virus into the network, designed to target Venom's cybernetics. If the virus worked, it'd disable the Sandevistan long enough for her to extract it. If not, she was as good as dead.

She cast a last glance at Venom who remained oblivious, staring into his drink. A bead of sweat trickled down her face. Time to move. She rose, weaving through the crowd toward Table 52, her pulse syncing to the club's pounding bass. As she neared, she pretended to stumble, sending a signal through her hidden port to trigger the virus. Venom's eyes flickered as the Sandevistan's exposed segment at the back of his neck glowed red. He glanced up just as Akira went in for the strike. Her hand, lined with small electrical outlets, aimed for his neck. Just before she made contact, Venom regained control, his Sandevistan flaring to life as he vanished and reappeared behind her, forcing her hand against her own torso. Akira's breath left her chest as she was electrocuted by her own arm, her body going into a stake of shock. Venom sneered at her as she stood there, but his sneer quickly gave way to confusion as he realized she was grinning at him, letting out a small chuckle as the grooves connecting the platinum panels that made up her arm and torso glowed a bright purple. "Thought you were smart, didn't ya.." she choked out before sending a punch right into his chest. Her body was constructed to be able to conduct and redirect electricity into energy and although it hurt, she was immune to being electrocuted fully.

Venom staggered back as Akira shook off the pain, her whole body glowing purple as she approached him, eyes locked into his. She raised her leg to kick him back into the wall, just as she was about to strike, he grabbed her leg and swung her down to the ground. She winced at the pain upon the impact of the cold hard floor, she could feel blood starting to enter her mouth.

“Nice try, sweetheart.” Venom gloated, leaning in close to her face down on the floor. His breath smelled faintly metallic, a reminder of just how much flesh he scrapped for machine.

As he raised his boot to crush her head, Akira rolled away, gripping a nearby table leg. She braced herself between the booth and the table, kicking it toward him with all her strength. Instead of colliding, he caught it, hurling the table back at her. She barely dodged before leaping to her feet, only to catch his fist with her face. His punch sent her flying into the back wall as Venom’s laughter echoed.

“They said to be careful coming to Acedia, but I expected more than this. You’re a pathetic excuse for a mercenary.” Venom hissed at her.

Warnings flashed in Akira’s vision as she struggled to regain her footing. This was a tougher fight than she thought. She needed to act quickly. She reached for the wall behind her to brace herself, while spitting out a chunk of blood and saliva from her mouth.

Venom laughed at his prey, his voice echoing throughout all of Acedia. “Get a load of this, boys.”

Akira looked up to see another man standing behind Venom this time. He was skinny, his face covered by an elaborate mechanical mask, and in his hand was a gun. She was cornered with a gun to her head, literally. The new man peered down at her. She tried to power up her eyes to see who he was, but he smacked her head to the side with the barrel of the gun. “None of that.” The man said, his voice robotic.

“Now that I have you where I want you, let's talk. I know who you work for, I'm sure you realized who I am by now.” Venom said from behind the man, greed plastered all across his face.

Akira gathered the blood from her mouth again and spat it at him, hitting him right on his chest.

Venom chuckled before wiping it away. “Yeah ok. I see how it is. Focus, get her.” He said before turning away.

The man with the gun, Focus, turned to her and cocked the gun he had. Akira only had seconds to react before being shot dead. She gripped the wall behind her, bushing a hidden port and jamming her finger in it once again, sending electrical energy throughout Acadia's network, causing it to lose all power. Focus moved one of his hands away from his gun towards his head, and Akira used this to strike. She kicked him in the chest, causing him to fall to the ground, before grabbing his gun and running behind the bar.

The bar was in complete chaos. Without power, the neon lights flickered in short bursts, casting shadows that twisted and writhed with every movement. Patrons scrambled, shouting over the rising din, desperate to understand what had just happened. Akira, catching her breath, crouched low behind the bar, her breath steady but her pulse hammering in her chest.

Focus, still shaking off the impact of Akira's kick, scanned the room, the mechanical mask glowing faintly as he searched for her. His hand hovered over his other gun in its holster, as if ready to draw it at a moment's notice, but Akira could tell he was already on edge. He was dangerous, but not as dangerous as Venom.

She needed to move quickly.

Her mind raced through the options. Venom was still somewhere out there—probably recalibrating, waiting for his moment. Akira's eyes narrowed as she mentally mapped out the layout of the bar. There wasn't a good place to get to, staying hidden was her best shot at a surprise attack.

Her purple eyes flickered to the power generator panel hidden behind the bar, now dead and still. She'd overloaded the system; it would take them a while to reset. That gave her a small advantage, but not much.

Focus turned abruptly, stepping toward the shadows where she had disappeared, his second gun now fully in hand, his finger hovering over the trigger. The sound of a safety clicking off was all the warning she got before he lunged, aiming for her head.

With the barest shift of her foot, Akira darted forward. Focus's shot missed, the bullet tearing through the empty space she'd occupied a split second ago. She was in front of him in an instant, gun to his head as she fired. His body spasmed, electricity coming off of his body as he fell. She threw the gun to the bartender behind the counter before grabbing his body with her arm, feeding it with the electricity.

Her arm glowed with that same purple once again as she searched the crowd for Venom. He was here moments ago, but now he was missing. As she turned to change her position, something flashed before her again and a fist met her face once more.

She went flying back towards the bar once more. Her eyes slowly opened to see Venom once again in front of her. He went in for another strike. She grabbed his arm to send another electrical surge through him and suddenly they were both gone. Before she could even blink they had

appeared at the other end of the bar. Venom's other arm outstretched. Her eyes followed to see someone on the floor in front of her, his head bashed in.

"CYBERPSYCHO!" someone yelled from behind them.

The crowd screamed as chaos exploded in all directions. People scrambled to flee, pushing and shoving past each other, desperate to escape the carnage that was unfolding in Acedia. Akira rushed away from Venom before finding the bar once more. She gripped it, trying to steady herself, her mind reeling from the sudden shift in the fight. Venom wasn't just a threat anymore. He had crossed the line into full-blown cyberpsychosis. His eyes were wild, his movements erratic, and the air crackled with electricity as his Sandevistan worked its terrifying magic on his already unstable mind.

A powerful surge of energy rippled through the air as Venom lifted a table with ease, throwing it across the room with a ferocity that sent patrons diving for cover. The impact was deafening. Akira's pulse quickened as she assessed the situation. Venom was losing control. His Sandevistan had pushed him too far, amplifying his aggression and speed to uncontrollable levels. She had to end this now, before everything in Acedia became collateral damage.

The purple glow of her cybernetic eyes scanned the room, locking onto Venom as he stalked the space like a predator, his movements a blur as he tore through the remaining furniture. His back arched unnaturally as the Sandevistan overloaded, the exposed implant glowing like a red-hot beacon in the dim, flickering light.

Akira's body ached from the impact of the last blow, but she wasn't about to let Venom take the upper hand. Her fingers twitched, the electrical hum of her cybernetic arm starting to charge up again. This time, she couldn't just fight him head-on: she needed to exploit his instability.

The bartender, still behind the counter, managed to swipe a bottle of something flammable from the shelf, tossing it to Akira with a quick, nervous gesture. She caught it without missing a beat, her mind working quickly as she processed the move. She had one shot.

Venom was already upon her, too fast for a typical reaction. But Akira wasn't going to meet him head-on. Instead, she sidestepped at the last second, catching his wild punch with her arm and using the momentum to swing her body behind him. As Venom spun to strike again, Akira cracked the bottle across the back of his head with a sharp, satisfying shatter. The alcohol exploded in a fiery burst, the flames licking at his skin.

For a moment, the world seemed to slow as Venom staggered back, smoke curling from his cybernetic enhancements. His wild eyes locked onto hers with fury.

She ducked as low as she could go, dodging his strike. Her hand instinctively went to the knife in her boot and suddenly she had an idea. She whipped around the bar and grabbed the bartender by the shirt, hurling him with her to the other side.

Venom was gone once again, his mind only searching for where to strike next, and since Akira wasn't in his line of sight anymore, he had gone somewhere else to strike a new victim.

Akira looked at the bartender, his face covered in blood, his eyes in pure shock, but he held onto the gun she had given him before close to chest like it was the only thing keeping him alive. "I need you to shoot him." She said to him, before peering around to see where Venom had gone to.

“I...” the man stammered out before Akira pointed to where Venom was. The bartender’s eyes followed her finger. “I’m going to get up to the second floor and jump on him. Shoot him right as I land on him. Got it?” She said, getting ready to run towards the stairs.

The bartender couldn't speak, his whole body in shock. “Do I need to fucking kill you too? Fucking do it!” She growled at him before taking off.

She ran as fast as her legs could take her.

Behind her, the cacophony of Acedia had reached a fever pitch. The screams of terrified patrons mixed with the sound of glass shattering and furniture splintering. A stampede of bodies surged toward the exits, desperate to escape the chaos. The neon lights flickered erratically, casting shadows that twisted across the walls like ghosts. Sparks rained down from broken light fixtures, illuminating the sheer madness of the scene below.

Venom’s guttural roar cut through the chaos, chilling Akira to her core. He was relentless, tearing through anyone in his path. The Sandevistan was no longer enhancing him, it was consuming him. He moved like a blur, his fists smashing through tables and walls alike, sending debris flying in all directions.

“Get out of my way!” Akira yelled, shoving past a panicked group of bystanders who were too slow to move aside. She hit the base of the stairs and grabbed the railing, pulling herself upward two steps at a time. The narrow staircase swayed slightly under the weight of the fleeing crowd, but she didn’t stop.

Halfway up, she glanced over her shoulder. Venom was on the move again, his burning silhouette cutting through the haze like a demon unleashed. He wasn’t chasing her. Not yet. Instead, he

turned his attention to a man cowering near the bar, lifting him effortlessly by the throat. The poor soul's screams were short-lived as Venom hurled him across the room like a ragdoll, his body crashing into a cluster of patrons.

The violence spurred Akira onward, her legs pumping faster despite the growing ache. As she ascended, she saw the chaos unfolding below her in bursts of flickering neon light: overturned tables, shattered bottles spilling their contents across the floor, and bodies scrambling over each other in their bid for survival.

One unlucky patron, too slow to react, was caught by Venom's outstretched hand. The man's cybernetic arm sparked violently as Venom ripped it clean off, tossing it aside with no more regard than a piece of trash. Venom's laugh, a guttural, distorted sound, echoed through the bar once more, sending chills down Akira's spine.

Reaching the top of the staircase, she stumbled into the upper level, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The room above was quieter, eerily so, the sounds of the carnage below muffled by the floor beneath her feet. But she knew it wouldn't stay that way for long.

Pausing only long enough to pull her knife from her boot, she pressed her back against the wall beside the staircase, waiting. Her hand trembled slightly as she tightened her grip on the hilt, her glowing purple eyes fixed on the top step.

The roaring chaos below didn't let up. She could hear the dull thuds of bodies hitting walls, the sharp cracks of breaking bones, and the relentless, metallic stomp of Venom's boots as he tore through anyone foolish enough to remain in his path.

She locked eyes with the bartender, his arms outstretched with the gun in his hand; his face, a mixture of fear and determination, but she knew this was her only chance. She gave him a small nod before hurling herself from the second floor aiming for Venom's back.

With a loud bang and a flash of light, a bullet went racing past Venom's head. The fucking bartender missed. Venom whipped around to see who had shot him, right as Akira came crashing down onto his back, knife in hand as it plunged into the exposed slats of the Sandevistan in his back. As the knife bit the metal, a low and guttural scream was sent from Venom's core. Akira held on, wedging the blade deeper and deeper into his back.

Venom whipped violently around, trying to shake her off but she held on for dear life, her legs wrapped around his torso. The Sandevistan glowed once more and suddenly she felt the impact of the wall on her back. She loses her grip on him, watching him flicker in and out, his body appearing and disappearing in different locations, before she slides down to the floor, her arms and legs unable to move. Venom's Sandevistan was going ballistic, the red glow even stronger now. She was unable to keep track of him.

Just when she had given up all hope of winning, Venom crashed into the wall next to her. His spine hit the jagged remains of a metal beam protruding from the wall, the force driving the sharp edge directly into the implant.

Time seemed to stop. Venom's body went rigid, his eyes wide with a mix of fury and shock. The Sandevistan let out one final, ear-splitting whine before shorting out completely. Smoke poured from his back as his body slumped forward, sliding slowly down the wall. He landed heavily at Akira's feet, the faint glow of his cybernetics fading into darkness.

Everything was silent for a beat, blood and oil pooling at Akira's feet, her chest rising and falling heavily with each breath. The bar was still in chaos, everyone still fighting or vying to escape, but Akira slowly rose. She knelt beside him in shock. She had done it.

She did it. She fucking did it.

She reached for the blade wedged into his back, pulling it free, the Sandevistan coming along with it, wrenching from its moorings in his back with a sharp crack. The weight of the device settled into her hand, slick with blood.

She sat there for a moment, still in shock of what had just happened, adrenaline still pumping through her veins causing her to ignore the pain.

"Well done." A voice said from behind her. She turned to greet piercing amber eyes staring down at her. It was the boss.

Akira couldn't speak, she was too tired, her body slowly going in and out of consciousness. And before she knew it, everything went black.

When Akira awoke, she was slumped back in a chair in the Boss' office. In front of her stood the boss at her desk. The boss gave Akira a light smile before turning to look down at the Sandevistan on her table. Akira watched as the boss picked up the Sandevistan, turning it over in her slender, gloved hands. The device gleamed in the dimly lit office: a trophy of yet another successful hunt.

The boss's lips slowly curled into a smile that sent a familiar shiver down Akira's spine. Her piercing eyes, as amber as the streetlights outside, met Akira's, a silent understanding passing

between them. She set the Sandevistan on the desk and crossed the room, heels tapping against the metal floor.

“You’ve outdone yourself again, Akira,” Her voice was a velvet purr.

Akira moved to try and reposition herself, but found no strength left in her body. She was worn out. “Almost killed me back there... boss..” She was able to purr out, teasing out the title of “boss”.

“I knew you had it.” The boss knelt beside her, brushing a strand of Akira’s hair from her face, trailing her fingers over the fresh bruises along her jaw. “You are too good for your own good. Too hungry.”

“Please, you know the reason I fight. The reason I’m hungry. You like it- no love it. I hope I didn’t disappoint you.” Akira’s smirk softened as she leaned into the touch, welcoming the warmth as a remedy to her lingering pain.

Her boss’s expression shifted, a dangerous glint dancing in her eyes. “Disappoint? Never. Watching you out there, taking him down... It’s like watching a beautiful dance.” Her fingers tightened slightly on Akira’s chin, drawing her closer. “You’re my finest instrument, Akira, and you play your part so beautifully.”

Akira laughed, low and breathless. “Well, if I’m the instrument, then you’re the conductor, right? You set the tempo, I just keep up.”

Her soft, cold lips brushed against Akira's ear, a whispered promise laced with something darker:

“And you do love to keep up, don't you? Always hungry for the next hunt, the next thrill.”

“I live for it,” Akira replied, her voice almost a growl. “This city, the blood, the chaos... it's everything I was made for. Everything you made me for.”

The boss pulled back just enough to look into her eyes, a knowing smirk on her lips. “You belong here, Akira. By my side, running this place. Acedia would be nothing without you.” She leaned in, capturing Akira's mouth in a searing kiss, tasting the iron tang of blood and the pain that still thrummed through Akira's body.

For a moment, the world outside, the flickering lights, the endless rain, fell away, leaving just the two of them in the quiet, electric darkness of the office. When the kiss broke, the boss's gaze lingered on Akira's with a fierce pride.

“And now,” she whispered, pressing her lips against the fresh bruise on Akira's jaw, “Let's get you fixed up, huh?” she said with a smirk before heading towards her room.

Akira grinned, the pain of the fight now a distant memory and the taste of blood a reminder of the life she'd chosen. She wouldn't trade this for anything. She'd take on every challenge Acedia threw her way, so long as it meant feeling this alive, this needed, this wanted. As long as the boss kept watching, she'd dance until the city burned.