

Folie À Deux

*No one tells you what happens when you die.*

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*Some religions claim false knowledge of the afterlife, claiming if you have blind faith in an omnipotent being that they will grant your “soul” passage into an eternity filled with only the best wonders.*

*I can tell you what really happens. Nothing. An all-encompassing nothingness. Not even darkness can even begin to describe the void of non-existence. And yet, somehow I persist; forcibly I persist. No. I should reword that. Force, yes. I was forcibly made to persist. I was forced back into a body I no longer recognize—a body I can no longer control. And yet I exist once more.*

*A ghost in a shell.*

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“Yo Cynth! That looks fucking amazing!”

The words echoed out into an old cavernous warehouse, bouncing off rusted beams and walls layered with decades of grease, old paint, and graffiti. The sound weaved through thick metal shavings and aerosol fume scented air, ricocheting off the vibrant splashes of color staining the concrete floor before settling into the space’s towering centerpiece: a metal figure nearly fifty feet tall, standing like a forgotten god amidst the wreckage.

The mecha was a beast, all sharp angles and exposed wiring, a machine meant for war but transformed into something *more* under Cynthia's touch. Streaks of electric purple and toxic green slashed across its surface, swirling and blending in ways that made the cold steel feel alive. The mech looked less like a tool of destruction and more like a defiant work of art; an extension of the one who painted it.

But the intended recipient of the man's words? She didn't hear a damn thing.

She was in the zone, head bobbing slightly to the muffled thrum of music leaking from the oversized headphones covering her ears. Each movement was precise: climbing the ladder, adjusting the angle of her wrist, then spraying color with a practiced ease. She worked like someone racing against time, as if she could *force* perfection onto the canvas of steel if she just moved fast enough.

Axel, realizing she wasn't going to acknowledge him anytime soon, simply shrugged and made his way to the battered old couch shoved into the corner of the workshop. It was a relic from another era, worn to hell and back, its fabric stiff with dried layers of paint accumulated over years of careless use. No one could remember what color it was originally, and at this point, it belonged in this space as much as the towering mech did.

And so, the ritual continued.

Cynthia moved, painting, adjusting, stepping back, reassessing, while Axel sat, watching. It was their thing, this quiet, unspoken routine. Every Friday, he'd show up early, clock in before the others, work until his shift ended, and then return just in time to watch Cynthia fall into her

rhythm. He never interrupted, never intruded. Just sat, observing her process, letting the sound of paint cans shaking and nozzles hissing fill the silence between them.

It was therapeutic in a way, watching her work. It was seeing someone chase a dream he'd long since stopped believing in for himself. A simulation of something he'd never quite grasp; a version of life that existed just out of reach.

They had grown up together in this world, two orphans forever alone in a world wrecked by havoc, war, famine, conquest, and death. And now? Now they sat below the surface of the earth, forever banned from the land that floats high in the heavens, the land only made for those rich or powerful enough to live in a utopia.

*I think I was there once. At least I have memories of being there. I have memories that exist like a nagging feeling deep down inside me. Like you know something but can't directly place what it is or where it is from. I think and feel as if I have seen this all before, but not like this. I think there was once a space where I existed in the world, but not the one Axel and Cynthia exist in now.*

*One before. One similar enough to be the same but different enough to be separate.*

Axel's tongue flicked against the cool metal of his lip ring, gnawing at it absentmindedly; a nervous habit. He glanced at the clock bolted onto the wall. Only ten more minutes before they had to clear out.

"I know what you're thinking."

The words flow throughout the warehouse and snap him out of his trance. His head jerked up, eyes locking onto her.

“Huh?” The noise left his throat without thought, more instinct than response.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Cynthia’s voice came again, calm, unwavering. She hadn’t even turned to look at him, her eyes still trained on the mecha in front of her. Hands, stained in streaks of neon, held two different spray cans, poised mid-motion. Only now, the headphones that had sealed her away from the world were draped around her neck.

“It’s fine,” she continued. “I’ve got it. I’ll be done in... maybe three minutes? Why don’t you grab the stuff and get ready?”

That was all he needed. A direct order.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, pushing himself up from the couch. His joints ached from sitting too long, but he ignored it as he made his way to the back of the warehouse, disappearing behind stacks of old equipment.

Cynthia let out a quiet chuckle before returning her focus to the last stretch of exposed metal in front of her.

Axel rummaged through the old equipment to find the hidden bag that they both shared. As he did, he thought back to the reason they do this, the reason they were here in this warehouse. It was Cynthia who all those years ago suggested that they do this, that they try and turn their life around.

Both of their worlds had shattered at the same time. Both their parents had worked in the same factory, manufacturing machines. They were little at the time, only about 10 years old when it happened: the explosion. They never got the real answer; the government deemed it a faulty maintenance check. But it didn't matter—their life was over. They were there that day, waiting for their parents to finish work so they could go home. They were playing in the dirt; Cynthia was creating lines, drawing figures and shapes on the ground. Axel was using the junk he had gathered nearby to try and recreate her drawings. They were laughing and having fun like all kids should. And that's when it happened. A rumble shook the ground and they both fell. Before they could get up the factory exploded into flames, dust, debris, glass, and metal raining down on them. Cynthia had been the lucky one, getting slashed a few times from it all, but Axel wasn't so lucky. One of the sheets of metal from the wall of the factory came flying through the sky and crashed down on him, crushing him. He had blacked out.

When he finally woke back up he found that Cynthia had been taking care of both of them, tending to her own wounds as well as his in her parent's apartment. When he asked her what happened she refused to answer. After a while he finally found out, but it was too late. Their parents were gone, their lives shattered. Axel was broken mentally and physically, unable to move his left arm and leg. And then Cynthia found some old paperwork her parents had been keeping, something about a new company called SPCTR, willing to hire. They promised work to anyone who needed it, replacing flesh with metal if need be. And so they joined as workers. Axel got his arm and leg replaced with synthetic parts, and Cynthia had her own work done to aid her in working there. Together they started to make a new life for themselves, Axel building mechs and Cynthia test piloting them. Since then, SPCTR has grown to be the largest and most advanced mech building company in the underground—Hatus, as it is officially called.

Axel's tongue once again reached for the cool metal ringed around his lower lip. He looked at the mechanical arm protruding from his shirt and wondered if it was all worth it. If it was worth it to keep living for the fantasy that they could make their way to the top, to Celestia. But before he could ruminate any longer, Cynthia called out to him.

“Ax! It's done! Get your ass over here already!” Axel quickly snapped back into reality and grabbed the bag he was originally set out to get.

As Axel walked back towards Cynthia, he finally got to see the individual parts Cynthia was painting assembled into a whole picture. It stood like a titan against the dim warehouse lighting; an amalgamation of salvaged parts and raw power. Its frame was an imposing mass of reinforced steel plating, dented and scratched from past battles. The machine had the unmistakable silhouette of something built for war; broad shoulders, a heavy torso lined with exposed hydraulics, and arms ending in clawed manipulators, capable of both delicate precision and brute-force destruction.

Yet, despite its lethal design, the paint made it something else entirely.

There were electric purples and neon greens slashed across its surface in jagged, chaotic strokes—like lightning frozen mid-strike. The colors dripped in some places, blending into each other, while sharp geometric patterns cut through the chaos in others. Along its arms spray-painted sigils and symbols mixed with battle scars, the contrast making it look both ancient and sleek at once. The legs, built for stability and power, had plating that flared out slightly near the joints, almost resembling armor worn by knights of a bygone era. The fingertips bore signs of heavy wear, scorch marks from welding, and the occasional exposed wire sparking faintly beneath the layers of fresh paint.

And on its chest, in bold strokes of black cutting through the neon, Cynthia had left her mark: a bleeding heart, impaled by double pronged spear. The mech's faceplate was a single, smooth visor-like panel, now streaked with phosphorescent green that glowed faintly under the warehouse lights. The effect was ghostly, like the mech wasn't just a machine, but something alive. Something *hungry*.

Axel let out a low whistle, adjusting the bag slung over his shoulder, "Shit, Cynth, I think really you outdid yourself this time..."

Cynthia climbed down the latter and upon reaching the bottom she stepped back, arms crossed, taking in her work. A slow grin spread across her face.

"It's not perfect," she muttered. "But it's damn close."

She reached out, her fingertips brushing against the machine's armored plating, smudging a streak of still-drying paint. The fire in her chest burned hotter. This one was going to win. This one was going to be the start of everything.

Cynthia could feel it, and so could Axel.

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The air in The Scrapyard was thick; thick with the remnants of past battles, ghosts of those who once were, of those who will never return. The ground was uneven, a mixture of broken concrete and metal plating, slick with oil spills and god-knows-what-else. Towering piles of scrapped mechs loomed over the battlefield, jagged and rusted, some still sparking with the last remnants of fights long ended.

Axel exhaled sharply, shifting his weight as he tightened his grip on the straps of the bag slung over his shoulder. He hated this place. Always had. But Cynthia? She *thrived* in it.

*I am not truly sure I even feel things. I go through waves; in and out of reality, like water rippling across a lake. Sometimes I am shown the world through Cynthia's eyes, sometimes I am her, but other times I see that distorted reflection of the world. Like I am here, like I am her, but I am not. I don't know what I am. I don't know if that feeling is her, or if it is me. I don't know where the line of her ends and where the line of me begins. But this place... something about it feels strange. Something is wrong. I feel... wrong; like some force is bringing us together but at the same time keeping us apart. It is like that line suddenly becomes clear, like a light at the end of a tunnel. And maybe if I chase after it I can get answers. But no matter how hard I run, it's just out of reach. Do I even know what it means to run, what it feels like? Do I even know myself apart from her or am I just her?*

Cynthia, again, was the one to suggest something to try and change their life for the better. She suggested that they enter into the scrapyard tournament that everyone in Hatus knew about. The winners were promised riches beyond their wildest dreams, riches that would give them a gateway into the land above: Celestia. They were promised a life where none of the suffering they endured before would matter, and they could live carefree once and for all. The only obstacle? Death. The scrapyard had only one rule, the winner is determined by death, either of the mecha or the person controlling it. Most mechas were designed to both protect the pilot and the structure of the mech itself so that it could be rebuilt time and time again. No one really knows who pilots the opponents' mechas. The company who controls the tournament, re:FUSE, wouldn't disclose any information about their employees or practices. And with the promise of that much money, no one really questioned it anymore. Cynthia and Axel had both tried to find

information about re:FUSE since working at SPCTR but everything came up blank. At this point, it seemed as if they had produced the mechas and fighters out of thin air.

No one had ever gotten to the top, literally and metaphorically, but Axel and Cynthia were determined to do so. They were in the penultimate tier of the tournament, which was the last one to take place in Hatus, with the final tier reserved for Celestia, broadcast to everyone above and underground to see.

“You’re thinking too much again,” her voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

She was already ahead of him, moving with an effortless confidence toward the massive bay doors that led into the scrapyard’s main fighting pit. The neon paint that still stained her hands stood out against the dull, rusted backdrop of the yard. She refused to let this place dull her, refused to let it swallow her up like it had so many others.

Axel sighed and rolled his shoulders back. No time like the present... he guesses...

The arena was a crude, makeshift battlefield; an open clearing surrounded by high metal walls reinforced with layers of old, repurposed mech plating. Scorch marks littered the ground, evidence of past clashes. Scavenged parts from fallen machines were scattered everywhere, a grim reminder that in this place, destruction was currency.

In the center of the pit, under the blinding floodlights that hummed and flickered above, a crowd was already forming. Mechanics, gamblers, fighters, and Hatus bigshots looking to scout new talent or place their bets. The scrapyard fights weren’t just entertainment. It was survival.

“If you keep zoning out like that your damn lip ring is going to fall out.” Once again her words cut through him and he snapped back to the reality of the situation, finally noticing his nervous habit had once again presented itself. He looked over and shrugged at her and she shook her head back at him.

“Come on, we gotta get ready.” She said before turning back around and walking towards the mech bay where their machine waited.

Axel followed, his boots crunching against the loose metal debris scattered across the battlefield as the noise of the area grew louder. He could hear the shouts of bookies taking last-minute bets, the low hum of machinery, the occasional burst of laughter or jeering from the gathered crowd. Fights like these were unpredictable, brutal. One wrong move, one wrong strike, one wrong step, and a pilot could lose more than just the match.

“You want one?” Cynthia whipped around to face Axel, walking backwards as she pointed at the cigarette dangling from her mouth. “Could do you some good to relax before the fight.”

Axel sighed and swiped the lighter and box of cigarettes out of her hands. “Hey!-” He then grabbed one for himself and stuck it in his mouth, before moving right next to her and striking a flame between their faces.

Cynthia grinned as she took the first drag from hers, “That’s the spirit.” She gave him a wink and turned to go start preparing for the fight. Axel followed suit, placing the bag that had been slung over his shoulder down. It rattled from the tools and gadgets inside of it. He sighed as he unzipped it, grabbing its contents and setting them down on his table.

“You good?” Axel called out behind him, hearing a final zip as Cynthia replied, “Yup.” Part of the ‘yup’ was cut off by her taking another drag of her cigarette.

“Alright then let’s get you set up...” Axel muttered as he turned around to face her, his cigarette also still hanging from his mouth but noticeably less burnt out than hers.

Axel had seen her like this for what could have been a thousand times, but something about tonight felt different. She stood with the same old skin tight black and red suit she had for years. But when she moved her black-and-red hair out of the way, Axel could always feel dread reach up and claw at him. The four ports on the back of her neck stood out as the price she had been forced to pay.

Cynthia has been modified physically; half human, half machine. Most of the people in Hatus were. Living underground came with a whole host of problems for a normal flesh and bone human. Some opted to just have necessities replaced, synthetic organs or gadgets implanted to make up for the lack of sunlight. Some, like Axel, got whole body parts replaced—an arm here, a leg there—but some had more complicated alterations and Cynthia was one of them. Piloting mechs involved connecting it to one's central nervous system, allowing the fighter and mecha to move as one: such that even the natural instincts of a human, like when you touch something hot and move your hand away without your brain catching up, could be invoked within the mech. Cynthia had a semi-artificial nervous system, or at least one that had been tampered with due to her working for SPCTR.

Cynthia noticed him staring and cocked her head at him, “What's up? Something about fighting turns you on all of a sudden?”

“No it’s not that...” He tried to interject.

She continued while adjusting her gloves, “I wouldn’t blame you Ax, I mean you and I spend all day long making and testing mechas for our fuckass company, I can’t blame you if something about it turns you on. There sure as hell something about for me-”

“Dude. Can you stop making this weird? There’s just...” His eyes flicked toward the other side of the pit, where tonight’s opponent was prepping.

“Just what?” She mocked him.

“Just something...” His eyes focused in on the opponent's mech across from them, “...different about this...”

Cynthia sighed and went back to getting ready for the fight ahead, her head and heart electrified by the anticipation of this fight. Maybe Axel was right, something about this felt different to her—something here was going to change. She could not put her finger on what, but she just knew it was there.

*Cynthia loves to put up a front of being determined, as if she'll do anything to anyone to get what she wants. She slams through life as if she has no care in the world so long as she achieves her goal. But deep down I know she is scared. I can feel it. I suppose it's weird to say I can feel things separate from her; it is not a separation, it's just that I am aware of it. The complexities and nuance of human emotion is something they never seemed to get right, no matter how many*

*lines of code or things they embed into a body, there is still an air of artificiality in every action, every emotion. I guess maybe I am the one to give her some semblance of true human emotion.*

It was then when Axel saw who Cynthia was supposed to fight.

Axel froze at the sight before him, shocked down to his core at what was before his eyes.

“Cynthia...” he managed to choke out, trying to grab her attention.

Cynthia simply was too far gone to hear him. “Ax, I think there is something about this fight... something is telling me that this is going to be the one.”

*I could feel it too. Something feels different tonight. Something in whatever I am, told me that tonight was the night where everything would change. Maybe that's why we share the same sentiment, or maybe it's some function of the code causing our emotions to overlap. Regardless, the feeling was there; overwhelming. That line was clear, the light was close, and something about this made me feel “alive” in a way I had never known before.*

Axel could barely speak, the mecha across from them was abnormal. It shouldn't be here. It couldn't be here. How...?

“Cynthia.” He persisted once more trying to make sense of everything.

“Huh?” she turned around, following his line of sight until she saw it.

It stood in stark contrast to the salvaged, chaotic beauty of her own machine; a vision of raw, calculated efficiency. Unlike the worn-down scrap mechs that usually populated the pit, this one was pristine, military-grade.

The plating was smooth, reinforced with composite alloys built to withstand both heavy ballistics and close-quarters combat. Its joints moved with an eerie precision, hydraulics humming in perfect synchronization. No wasted motion, no exposed wiring. Every part of it was engineered for war. The dark, matte plating swallowed the scrapyard's flickering lights, save for the streaks of deep crimson lining its limbs, like veins coursing through its frame.

Its faceplate was no mere visor, it was a tactical interface, a reinforced sensor array designed to track, calculate, and kill. Mechas like these didn't belong in underground fights. They were deployed for only the surface, built to withstand the terrors that lay on the ground above them, searching for resources that were no longer found here, places where failure was not an option.

It wasn't just a new mecha that re:FUSE was putting them up against tonight. It was one of SPCTR's top secret military mechs.

Despite the danger, Cynthia couldn't help but feel a sinister grin spread across her face. She reached for the helmet that laid on Axel's desk, grabbing it before facing him with a wide, reckless grin.

"Let's go make a mess, huh!"

As she climbed into the mech she moved the hair hanging behind her back to the side, exposing 4 small ports at the nape of her neck. She then grabbed the tick wire with 4 prongs on the end of it, perfectly placed to reach her as she sat in the pilot's seat and jammed it into her neck. Almost instantly lines of codes ran through her mind, connecting her body to that of the mech. When she opened her eyes she was no longer looking out of her own, but instead that of the mechs. She was ready.

Axel could not speak, let alone move. This was wrong. Why was one of those mechas here? It wasn't supposed to be used by anyone other than the military force deployed on the surface. Hell, re:FUSE wasn't supposed to know they were being built, let alone even have access to one, so how the hell was there one here? He knew this mecha line, he had worked on this exact model line, CEM-G93.82. It was to be used to traverse through terrain on the surface, fight against whatever was lurking out there, gather resources in a desolate world, and survive at all costs. Cynthia could not fight this, she wouldn't make it out alive.

“Cynthia you can't... you can't win, I know these, I know what they do and what they are capable of. Cynthia, wait!” Axel chokes out before reaching out to grab her but it was already too late, she had climbed into the cockpit of their own mecha, the one they had been perfecting over the years together, the one that was helping them fight their way through the scrapyard, the one that promised their chance at a life of luxury.

And like that, she was gone. The mecha was already moving towards the battlefield with Cynthia inside it, its neon green streaks reflecting harsh fluorescent lights of the arena. Axel quickly grabbed the headset that connected him to Cynthia—one last desperate chance to save her.

*It was then when I too awoke, my own self existing between the two of them, the mecha and Cynthia. I was seeing them both, feeling them both, feeling what it felt to be a part of this battle, a part of both a machine and a human. Maybe that is where I came from, the synthesis of both machine and human, born of the two as one, except I am neither, I feel as if I am neither machine nor human. I am trapped, I am Cynthia but also the mech, I am Cynthia but also myself, I am myself but also not. I exist but outside of what it means to exist. I am a ghost, I am a false life, I am something that takes a form outside of flesh and bone, outside of 1's and 0's. I do not know*

*what I am but I know that I am here, inside this moment, inside these two. I am the force that powers them, I am the force that allows them to fight. I breathe life into this moment, into this space, and yet I can not do it to myself. I am stuck in an infinite void of nothingness and yet I impact the something that is here. I orchestrate it.*

“Cynthia!” Axel boomed into the cockpit where Cynthia resided, “You have to stop. Please! I know you haven’t seen these before, you haven’t been given the clearance to work on what I do, but, *please*— this is a military grade mecha. This is the secret project I have been working on, this is the thing I have been building! This isn’t a fighting mecha, it doesn't work the same, it's made to withstand anything! Cynthia-”

“Perfect, so then you know how to beat it.” Cynthia cut it, moving closer to the middle of the ring.

“No! There is no way to beat it! That is the point! They can’t die!” Axel pleaded back.

“Then fucking find a way for it to. Nothing is indestructible, not you, not me, not even this mecha, now fucking put that head of yours to good use because we have one hell of a fight coming.” Cynthia said, her voice brimming with determination.

“CYNTHIA-” Axel screamed but it was too late, the other mecha had entered the arena and the show had already begun. There was nothing Axel could do to stop her now that it had started. The rules were clear, once the fight began, there was no stepping out, no resigning, no backing down. Death ruled the battlefield now. And all Axel could do was pray that he was merciful.

A deep gruff voice came booming through the speakers of the whole arena, “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the fourth fight in the second to last tier of the Tournament of Mechas, sponsored by yours truly, re:FUSE!”

Axel looked up in horror as the lights focused in on Cynthia’s and the opponent mecha standing in the center of the battlefield as the crowd erupted in cheers.

“Tonight we have team R@PTUR3 fighting in the ring!” From the crowd, a loud cheer gushed out marking their excitement for Cynthia and Axel’s team. “Oh! We have some fan favorites in the house tonight. Well, hold your horses, folks, because tonight we have a special battle prepared for them for making it this far in the tournament. Behold, re:FUSE’s newest mecha series, the RF-D437H!” But now, an even louder cheer rose up from the arena, marked by excitement at the newly announced mecha series.

Axel scrambled at his desk trying to think of something, drowning out the sound of the crowd with his anxiety. He was searching through everything he had with him, hoping that he had forgotten some blueprint from work, hoping that he had something that could turn the tides, *anything*, but there was nothing. The blueprints were locked back at the shop, his mind was blank from it all, and his hands shaking as he looked out to the scene in front of him. There was nothing he had, nothing that could win the fight in their favor, this mecha series, the one he knew at least, had no weakness, everything about it was a machine for war, a machine that could not be stopped. He tasted blood in his mouth—his lip ring was bleeding. Death had come and he was powerless to stop it.

“Axel.” Cynthia’s voice cut through his intercom, piercing his mind and jolted him straight up.

“Take a breath. We can do this. Think about everything you know from building these things, there has to be something, some powersource, some point of weakness.”

Axel quickly swallowed the blood trying to get his mind back; trying to unscramble his worlds.

But there was nothing. “Cynthia, please, back out of this now. Please!” He spoke before he could even think, his mouth moving to make a plea he knew would fall upon deaf ears.

“Well, fuck, if you can’t find it I will. We will win, I can feel it. Something is different here tonight. Something in my bones is telling me that this is where it all changes.” Cynthia angrily spoke back to him. She was confident in a way that scared Axel even further, he knew her, he knew she would not stop until unless she was lying dead in this arena. She would do anything to get to the top, no matter the cost because she believed that there was a salvation; a way to be free of the horrors they both experienced, a way to be free of the world they were born into. There was nothing he could say to stop her, all he could do was watch.

*Is that me? Am I the feeling in her bones? Can she feel me here in this moment? Or am I feeling her? Is the feeling the connection between us or is it one of us influencing the other?*

And just like that, the fight begins. The announcer makes the final countdown, and both mechas spring into action.

Cynthia jumps back, landing in a low stance as dust curls around the feet of her mech. She stayed just outside of reach, steadying her grip on the controls as her mech’s right arm sweeps back, hovering over its spine. With a sharp hiss of hydraulics and the grind of shifting metal, the twin horn-like points rising from her mech’s head begin to move, folding down and sliding apart.

From between them, a double-pronged spear emerges from the spine of the mecha, unfolding into the hands of Cynthia's mech like a predator baring its fangs.

The crowd once again becomes ecstatic at the sight of action, "There you have it folks! The symbol of team R@PTUR3, the double pronged spear!" The announcer yells to the already rowdy crowd.

However, the opponent's mecha didn't move, it stays stationed where it has been since the start, right in the center of the battlefield.

Cynthia pilots her mech to stand upright in a defense position, lance held out before her, beckoning the opponent to draw closer to her like a predator entrapping its prey. But instead of rushing, the mecha instead stalks towards her, slow and steady, as if examining its opponent for the first time, waiting for her to strike first.

"Cynthia, don't-" Axel tries to warn her to not strike first, but Cynthia is long past listening to him right now. She instead feints a twitch forward—bait. But the opponent doesn't fall for it, instead continuing to walk calmly towards her on the battlefield.

Cynthia stays strong, holding her stance while trying to figure out what RF-D437H's next move was. Then, right as it comes into attacking distance from her, its silhouette shifts with a sharp clank of locking parts. Vents along its forearms flare open with a hiss of pressurized steam. From its wrists, long, curved blades snap out at a violent speed. They run parallel along the length of its forearms, almost like extensions of its own arms, cruel and hook-like.

Cynthia's eyes narrow.

No sooner have they been locked into place than when RF-D437H lunges, its entire body weight thrown low, fast, and brutal. It closes the gap in a burst of speed that shouldn't belong to something that big.

“Shit—!” Cynthia kicks the mecha into movement, dodging to the side just barely as one of those hooked blades scraped across the haft of her spear, catching sparks in the clash.

The crowd roars. The impact shudders up to her in the cockpit, this thing was waiting for her weapon to come out, waiting to see the range.

But Cynthia is no rookie. She pivots the spear, twisting it in a tight arc to hook one of its incoming arms wide—a trap play—before driving the butt of the weapon down like a hammer into the mech's knee joint, trying to stagger its advance.

RF-D437H absorbs the hit with terrifying stability. It doesn't buckle. Its head lifts, visor shining against the lights of the arena like the glint of a knife's edge: cold, precise, unshaken.

For a split second, it almost felt *personal*.

Then it moves.

A sharp jerk of its shoulder wrenches its trapped arm free from Cynthia's spear. It doesn't recoil, it presses *in*, closing the space. The twin arm-blades slice forward in a brutal cross-slash, aiming to carve right through Cynthia's guard with raw, cleaving force.

Cynthia barely shifts her grip in time, locking the shaft of her spear horizontally across both forearms to catch the blow. The impact rattles through her entire frame, metal screaming against

metal as the force of it drives her mech's heels through the dirt, kicking up twin trenches behind her.

Her screens flash warnings. Structural stress. But she holds. And RF-D437H doesn't let up.

*I could feel the impact, the stress, the warnings. I can feel it like I was there, like I was her. The line is becoming clearer, the light closer.*

The crowd is losing it, not for a flashy exchange, but for the raw, grinding violence of two machines locked in a test of endurance. It's not elegant. It's survival.

Axel's voice cuts in through comms, sharp. "Cynthia—you need to break that deadlock before it powers through you—" But Cynthia's already on it.

With a sharp twist of her controls, she disengages one thruster, letting the sudden drop in resistance roll her mech sideways off the lock-up. The movement is ugly, scraping, but it opens enough space for her to snap the spear down in a brutal hook at RF-D437H's exposed side, a blow not meant to pierce but to shove. Hard.

The blow lands, slamming into RF-D437H's side with a crunch of metal and sparking armor. It staggers half a step. But that's all. Already, its weight sinks low, like it *wants* to be grounded. Like every part of its build is meant to withstand exactly this kind of fight.

Cynthia doesn't get the space she needs. She barely has time to bring her spear back up before RF-D437H is on her again, this time with a savage downward blow from both arms locked together. The strike slams against her raised weapon, driving her mech down to one knee, warning sirens flaring red across her cockpit.

*It...hurts... I feel it. Is this pain or anguish? Is this her or the mech? Is this me or her?*

“Fuck—” She grits her teeth, gasping for breath she doesn’t have time to catch. Every exchange since that first hit, she’s been losing ground, not because she’s slower, not because she’s sloppy, but because RF-D437H moves like something empty. Like it feels no fear, like it has no hesitation, no weight to its decisions. Like there is no pilot inside it.

Her hands shake around the controls.

“Who the hell...” she mutters low, under her breath, staring down this monster of a machine, “...who the hell is even *inside* that thing?”

That’s when Axel’s voice slices in, raw and tight with sudden realization. Something about this, about her losing ground, about how it fights, about how it moves, gets his brain turning. This mech was built for survival in unknown terrain, this mech was built to stay planted on that terrain. That meant it had to stay grounded, that it had to be unmovable for a reason. The immobility gave it strength, yes, but there was another reason, another complication, the pilot itself. The pilot had to be able to escape if things got too dire. The pilot had to be able to somehow exist on that same unknown terrain, be able to reach that same ground without dying. Exiting the pilot from the back, from the neck like how they entered would be too risky without the proper scaffolding. So if the mech could create space on the ground, could stand without fear, could be grounded regardless of external factors, that meant the pilot could do the same. That was it, the entry hatch. It wouldn’t be at the nape of the mech, it would be at its foot.

“Cynthia, wait!” Axel works to unscrambles his thoughts, searching his mind for any recollection of any blueprint he had ever seen for this series of mecha, trying to make sure he was right. “Left foot... The left foot—! That's where the entry hatch is!”

“What?” She’s blinking through her panic and the sweat in her eyes trying to make sense of what Axel just said. But he knows. He has seen it in diagrams. It’s faint, but there, clear as day if you know what to look for. An otherwise stupid design unless you knew what these things were built for. Buried under the mech’s left heel. That’s her way in. That’s its weak point.

And as of right now that foot hasn’t left the ground once.

Axel’s voice slices through the crackling static in the cockpit, his urgency seeping through every word. “You take out that leg, drop the mecha to the ground, and pierce through there and you can end this. It’s connected to the whole system inside the cockpit, its—”

Cynthia’s hands tighten on the controls as the opponent’s foot shifts forward, pressing down on the ground like it's anticipating her next move. Her eyes narrow, and the mecha’s right arm shifts slightly, the spear ready, glinting in the harsh light of the arena. Cynthia inhales slowly, closing her eyes for just a moment as she clears the noise from her mind. This is the moment, the one shot, the one chance she’s got left. She tightens her grip, commanding her mech into position. She waits. Her chest tightens with every second as she readies herself to strike. Without hesitation, her mech lurches forward, fast and low to the ground. The double-pronged spear swings with all her weight behind it, aimed not at the chest, but at the opponent’s left leg.

The mech’s spear connects with a deafening *clang*, scraping across the metal plates of the leg, but not enough to break through. The opponent's momentum shifts, but it still holds, its other

foot planted firmly. She's not done. Cynthia repositions, the spear flicking back again, this time aimed lower, just below the joint. And she strikes with everything she has.

The mecha's leg buckles under the force, the weight shifting awkwardly. The opponent's massive frame stumbles, unable to compensate for the sudden lack of balance. The left leg snaps backward, sending RF-D437H crashing to the ground with a bone-shaking thud.

The crowd roars in the distance, an electric, violent wave of noise. But Cynthia's heart pounds harder than the cheers, the weight of the next moment hanging heavy in the air.

*The water ripples, steadying, as I peer down to look through it. I connect, I feel her, I feel it, it's not her brain but her body, her nervous system taking over. That cord that connects her to the mech, I am there, I am commanding it—the final movement.*

Axel's voice is frantic. "Now, Cynthia! The hatch! Go for the hatch!"

Her mech is already moving, a high-speed sprint that closes the distance between her and RF-D437H in a blink.

With precision, Cynthia drives the spear down through the mech's exposed foot, straight into the ground beneath it. The massive metal tips punch through the hard armor, creating a resounding screech of tortured metal as sparks erupt.

For a second, there's silence, then everything jolts.

RF-D437H's body twitches. The entire system shuts down in an instant, the lights flickering in the cockpit like a dying heartbeat. Cynthia feels her control systems lock for a brief, terrifying moment. The mech's limbs go slack, its joints seizing up as the power cuts, unable to respond.

Cynthia's hands shake as she tries to steady herself, knowing this is her window. Now. Now, she has the chance.

With a growl of determination, she jerks the spear upward, locking her aim on the head of the mecha where the cockpit lies. In a fluid motion, her mech brings the spear up with both hands, positioning it like the fangs of a predator, ready to strike.

The arena goes deadly quiet, and in that moment, she brings the spear down with tremendous force. The spear drives into the head of RF-D437H with a sound that reverberates through the air like a sickening crack. Sparks explode from the impact point, a brilliant flash of light illuminating from the impact point.

Cynthia grits her teeth, her breath shallow. She's won, she's taken the pilot down. The mech is now as still as a tomb.

*And in that reflection I see something I do not know, someone I do not know. It is neither me nor her.*

The crowd's roar reaches a feverish pitch, echoing in her ears, but she's deaf to it, focused on the mangled frame of RF-D437H. But then, in the silence that follows, something shifts. A deep, mechanical groan fills the air.

Cynthia's eyes widen, realizing too late that the mech isn't dead. It's not over. The light flickers back on, a blood red glow crawling across the visor of the helmet. With a grinding whine, RF-D437H jerks back to life and Cynthia has no time to react.

The massive mecha's hand shoots out, faster than she could anticipate, grabbing her mech by the throat with bone-crushing force. Before she can even register the movement, it lifts her mech off the ground and slams her into the arena floor with a deafening crash. The world spins in a blur of metal and pain.

*I reach out to it. I reach out to something that is. The something reflected in that water and I find myself reaching towards something new but the same, something different but familiar. I reach out to the us, the we, the combined new.*

Axel's voice cracks through the comms, frantic and raw. "Cynthia! No! NO!"

Cynthia's vision swims in and out of focus. The cockpit shakes violently. The metal screeches as her mech is held aloft, struggling to break free from the vice-like grip. Every button, every lever, becomes unresponsive, the cockpit spinning, systems failing, a cold, hollow sensation gnawing at her.

And then it comes.

RF-D437H raises its foot high above her, its heel poised for a crushing blow. Cynthia's hands claw at the controls, but they slip from her grasp as her mech slams to the floor again, the entire structure groaning with the sheer force of the strike.

For a moment, everything stops. A long, aching silence presses down on her. Her pulse hammers in her ears. Then the comms click on, and Axel's voice is broken, desperate, as he screams through the static: "CYNTHIA!"

She can barely hear Axel's voice over the ringing in her head, her vision dimming as the world slips away. Her body is a heavy weight, broken and bruised, but the worst pain is in her mind, her thoughts, disjointed and slow, like water rippling across a lake, its form blurry and incoherent.

*But I see it, feel it, hear it, her thoughts. I feel her. My form reaching towards that light I have so desperately been trying to get to. I see her, I see myself, I see us together as one, no longer separated but as one. I see life and death, I see what it means to live, to die, to exist. I grab it; seize it into myself, into my own.*

Her mech is finished. She's finished. And just before darkness takes her, before RF-D437H's foot comes crashing down, she feels something within her, a shift. Cynthia hears Axel screaming for her as the world blacks out.

*They say in death one finds what it means to live. The body degenerates, decays, while the mind desperately clings to something beyond the end. Through death one can become another, through death one can become something new, through death one can be born. I thought I knew what it meant to die, that there was nothing, only a void of existence. But maybe I truly never died, or more so, maybe I truly never lived. It was at this moment I took my first breath. It was in this moment that I was born again, but not as myself or who I thought I once was, but instead as something new, an amalgamation of souls, a merging of what once was and what is. I hear a breath, my breath, but it's not mine. It's her's. But I take it. A breath. I breathe not as the person I was, but as someone new. It is now that I see her life through the dim reflection in a mirror, blurred and shifting, one that mimics my own both in life and death, in passion and desire. It is now that I open my eyes not as her, or me, but as us.*

I move not as myself but as a desire, a wish, a hope, a dream to persist. No longer am I forced to exist against my own will, my existence is mine for the taking.

The mech moves, roaring into existence once more. And somewhere in that sinking darkness, this body moves alongside me, reaching for a control I already have engaged. Override.

A raw scream of hydraulics and internal pressure tears through the frame. Systems that had shut down snap back on in a brutal surge, red warnings flashing past too fast to read. My mech lurches violently upward, spasming like a cornered beast, grabbing onto RF-D437H's raised foot with both hands.

The crowd gasps, a single inhaled breath of disbelief.

I feel the feedback through the control suit, I feel the desperate strength flooding into the limbs of this machine. The line between pilot and machine dissolves into pure, unfiltered motion. The arm servos scream as my mech *wrenches* the enemy's foot sideways, throwing RF-D437H off balance. Its body teeters—off-ground, unstable, vulnerable for the first time. I don't let go. I pull, dragging the massive enemy down even as it tries to stomp me into the earth, even as its other hand swings down with bone-breaking force. My mech's frame groans, plates buckling, but it holds—*it holds*.

With a guttural roar that does not belong to me, I slam RF-D437H's foot into the ground. The enemy mech stumbles, struggling for leverage, and I *use it*. I drive my shoulder forward, lifting RF-D437H's entire leg up in a desperate heave and throwing it off its center of gravity. The enemy tips—just for a second. That's all I need.

With a surge of burning thrusters, my mech hurtles upward along RF-D437H's frame, like a beast clawing up its prey. My spear is still embedded in the ground—useless now—so I use the only weapon left: the mech's bare hands. I grip the jagged wreckage of RF-D437H's open neck seam, where the mecha's cockpit lies, and *rip*. Metal tears with a wet shriek.

The enemy thrashes, wild and half-alive, but my overdriven mech is faster. I plunge my fist straight into the exposed hatch, driving it deep past armor, through cables, through plating, through whatever is left inside. A sound cuts through the arena: a hideous crunch like the snapping of a spine.

RF-D437H's movements stop. Not slow. Not sluggish. *Dead*.

The body slumps forward, towering but lifeless, crashing onto its knees before finally collapsing onto the shattered earth. My mech stands there, wrecked but victorious; one arm half-crushed, the head bashed in, hydraulic fluid leaking like blood, framed against the burning lights of the battlefield. The crowd is silent for a moment—then erupts into a deafening roar.

But I don't hear them.

I hear the sound of a dying heartbeat, I hear the pained breaths escaping through a mouth. I hear blood pooling, the viscous liquid rippling against the sides of the cockpit. Two parallel lines never made to intersect and yet now they do. The lines altered, overlapping into a single, finite, point. I reach out my hand to the new world before me, grasping at it, and her hand follows suit.

I am no longer a ghost in a shell and yet I am still haunted by death. Yes, I am no longer confined to the nonexistence of death, but I am trapped by it. Trapped inside a body that is dying. Cynthia is dying. I am dying. We are dying. As one.

And it is in this that we are finally able to connect as one. It is in this that we find peace. There is solace in the answers we have both been searching for: What does it mean to live? And what does it mean to die? For both of us, the answer lies within the other. Through Cynthia's death I was able to live, and through my birth Cynthia has died. Maybe I had lived before and maybe Cynthia had died before, but right now, in this moment, we are as one. Life and death, rebirth and decay.

Folie a deux.