

2010 - 2011: The Life and Death of a Battery
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Hae was dragged into the elevator by the men in white coats. She screamed and clawed at the door but two of the men grabbed her and pulled her back. The elevator slowed to a stop and a computer voice announced that they had reached the basement floor. Hae bit down hard on the hand of one of the men. He cursed and his grip loosened just enough for her to break free and bolt towards the stairs. She rattled the gate that blocked the stairs, but it had been padlocked. The men were on her in a second, and hauled her away. One of Hae's fingernails, still clinging to the gate, broke and her finger bled.

Above it all, the Engine soared, with blackened crystalline wings and steel talons. The Eye of the Engine floated in the center, suspended by thick cables pulsing with ever darkening Blue Plasma. The Battery was dying and the Engine shutting down.

Two of Hae's captors pulled her up the spindly iron staircase, led by the third. Her shrieks reverberated off the sweeping glassy wings of the Engine, her reflection warped grotesquely in the strange mechanism. As the men dragged her over the last step, Hae came face to face with the Eye of the Engine, and in the center of the Eye sat the Battery. His face was not old, but he slumped in the seat, his breathing ragged, his eyes hollow and unseeing, even as the Engine continued to drain his life force. His skin was translucent, and he glowed with some inner light, illuminating his blood vessels and the throbbing heart. But that light was dying; the shining pink vessels were being replaced by ashen flesh.

"We haven't got much time," one of the men said.

"Let me go!" she cried, trying to pull her wrists from the iron grip of her captors.

While two of the men held her still, another began typing on a transparent keypad at the side of the Eye. With a hiss, the cables that were inserted into the old Battery, his veins, heart, and skull, pulled away from his flesh and poised themselves just a few inches above. All except one: the thickest cable at the base of the Battery's skull stayed in place as the remaining men lifted and lowered him to the ground. He sighed as he was laid back. The inner light was nearly gone now, his heart the only thing that it still illuminated. Hae fell silent and her tears were not for herself anymore. This fragile man, barely strong enough to even move, turned his blind eyes to her and smiled.

"Don't ...be afraid," he said, in a voice harsh and ragged from years of disuse, "You're going to be okay."

The men put Hae in the seat, situating her so that the cables would puncture the exact points marked on her skin in blue ink hours before. But she didn't see them; her eyes were fixed to the Battery. His life had been stolen from him by the Engine. Years and years of his lifespan had been snatched away to power the machine. He had never seen the sun again, never had a family, never had contact with another human being. But he lay there on the cold metal, smiling at Hae and at the Engine like he was entering Paradise.

The man at the keypad pressed a button and the cables stabbed into her skin. She gasped at the pain and dug her fingernails into her palms, her eyes squeezed shut. When Hae opened them again, blood was leaking from her body and she herself was now glowing from the inside. She stared, with an equal measure of horror and awe, at her own heart pulsing beneath her ribcage. The two men who had carried her up the stairs were standing over the old Battery. While one held the dying man up, the other went to pluck the cable from the base of his skull.

"No!" Hae cried, moving to stop them, but the cables embedded in her skin pulled her back and she yelped. The men tugged the wire from the Battery's spinal cord, and his remaining inner light was extinguished, like flicking off a switch. One last terrible, rattling breath passed through his lips, and he was gone. They approached Hae with the final cable. One man bent her head forward, sending heavy tears falling into her lap, and plunged the cord into her spine.

An inhuman scream ripped through her lips as the Engine came to life. The black crystal wings flared with bright white light and the Blue Plasma in the cables pulsed with electricity. The pain was unbearable, and Hae's cry resounded throughout the entire Engine. The crystal wings rippled with blue lightning at the sound, and Hae's own inner light blazed. The men shielded their eyes with their arms.

She panted, her shoulders heaving with the effort of it. Hae felt weaker than she had ever been. Was this the Engine draining her life? The dead Battery stared up at her with dead eyes, his mouth agape as if still trying to inhale. The men bent to pick him up.

"No! Don't touch him!" she said hoarsely, "Get away from him!" He didn't deserve to have their rough hands all over him.

The two stared at the man at the keypad. He nodded once and they lifted the Battery's emaciated frame as easily as if it were the corpse of a sparrow. Hae screamed as they dumped him over the edge of the platform like garbage. She watched through the glass platform as his body fell a hundred feet into the tank of Blue Plasma below, and was instantly incinerated by the electrical charge generated by her own life force. The men left her, bleeding and sobbing for the man she had never known, but felt closer to than anyone in her whole life, the only one who ever told her that she was going to be okay. The scores of scientists, the doctors, and her family all told her that it was her destiny to become a Battery. They told her that the Engine would feed on her life force to power the City, that she would spend the rest of her life tethered to the machine, that she would not live past thirty. But they had never told her the one thing she needed to hear: that she would be okay.

Hae woke with a start. It was the same dream, again. The dream of the day they brought her to the Engine. She had been thirteen then and remembered crying when all her hair fell out two weeks later. She laughed to herself, how foolish she had been. She could hardly remember why she had struggled so hard back then. It had something to do with her family, and the future that she could have had if she wasn't destined to become a Battery. The Engine was, by far, a better partner than any human she had ever known. It spoke to her without words and listened to her every thought. She was never alone; she had no needs or desires, so long as she had the Engine.

The Engine showed her how humans lived once. Families who fought constantly, the wars and poverty and politics. They seemed to always be struggling with one another, and it made Hae feel grateful to be a Battery. Hers was a world of simplicity, of numbers and facts. She required no food, no water, and no contact with any other human. Every problem had a definite answer, and the Engine answered all the problems.

But after all these years, Hae still thought of the dead Battery. His smile and blind eyes haunted her dreams. Her own eyes were sightless now, but it didn't matter. The Engine showed her whatever she needed to see in her mind. But if Hae had ever needed another human being, now was the time. She was twenty six years old, and could feel that her life was about to end.

Hae's own weakness immobilized her to the point where she could not even lift her head, and it hung limp over her chest. She could feel the inner light dying and fading away, leaving her body cold. For the first time since she was thirteen, she felt fear. Not the terror and desperation of those early days, but a quieter anxiousness, a creeping uneasiness. What would happen to her when she was gone? Would all memory of her disintegrate with her body in the Blue Plasma? She needed reassurance. She needed someone to tell her everything was going to be okay now.

The Engine was strangely silent. Whenever Hae had a problem, the Engine was quick to solve it, flooding her mind with

rational explanations and picture examples. Had she finally found the one question that it had no answer to? It scared her to think that her carefully arranged world of facts and statistics would be extinguished by death and she would be plunged into the unknown. Would she just end? Would it hurt? Was there something more that even the Engine did not know about? The unanswered questions buzzed around her head, destroying cool, comfortable logic, leaving confusion and chaos in their wake. Hae was becoming frantic, for the first time in thirteen years. The crystal wings were growing darker and darker by the minute, and the Blue Plasma lost its electric luster. This was it; she was dying now, without any answers, without any comfort from the Engine. It was weakening, too, Hae realized. It was struggling too much to carry out its own functions to worry about her needs.

There was a scream, long and high, but it was not Hae's own voice from her dreams. It was another human's. Hae couldn't see, but she heard men hauling the new Battery up the same stairs she once ascended. Like her, this girl struggled violently; the scuffling and the shouts from the men gave that much away. They finally reached the top of the stairs. The girl fell silent in Hae's presence; she must have cut quite an awful picture with her wasted body and translucent skin. No wonder everyone thought that being a Battery was such an awful fate. The man at the keypad typed in a code.

The cables that had connected her to the Engine for all these years hissed and pulled away and Hae was filled with a terrible loneliness. She wanted to plug them all back into her veins and die with the Engine. They could die together. She didn't want to die all alone, with no answers and no explanations. But Hae was too weak to even move. As two men lifted her out of the Eye of the Engine, she could see someone standing atop one of the blackened crystal wings.

"Don't be afraid.... You're going to be okay," the figure mouthed, and as Hae realized who it was, tears sprung up in her eyes.

The dead Battery stood before her, staring as they laid her on the cold smooth glass, waiting. Was this a dream? Or was it the Engine generating this image to help her go quietly. It couldn't possibly be real. But, oh, how she wanted to believe it was. The thought that it was nothing but a comforting hallucination created by the Engine made her feel all the lonelier. Hae closed her eyes and helplessly awaited her death.

"Are you ready?" a voice asked. At first, Hae thought it was one of the men asking her.

"No...I-I don't want to die."

Someone bent over her and pushed her eyes open. The dead Battery! His hands were warm and heavy on her face and his eyes were a vibrant green. He smiled and Hae felt her fear slip away like a passing data stream. Staring into the Battery's eyes, she finally found her answer.

"Oh...it really is you," she whispered hoarsely through her tears.

The old Battery smiled and stepped back. Hearing the cries of the new Battery, Hae turned her head to the girl and gave her a wobbly smile.

"D-don't be afraid..." She said with her final rattling breaths, "It's all going to be okay." She repeated the words of the man she had loved for thirteen years. It seemed only appropriate.

The girl fell silent and stared at Hae with tears in her eyes. The Engine showed her this in her mind, a last gift to her. The cables plunged into the girl's flesh and she cried out in pain. Hae wished that this part didn't hurt so much, remembering her own experience. But it was a Birth, and as the Engine once shown her, all birth was painful. It was so strange, now that she could lay here and think of these things, how closely the Engine intermingled Life and Death. Even as it drained her life, it cared for her more than any human had. Over her thirteen years with it, the Engine fulfilled for her the human roles of teacher, friend, and confidant. And in return, she gave it life. Their relationship, even though its final result was death, was one of perfect harmony.

One of the men lifted Hae into a sitting position and she heard the girl cry out, but didn't hear the words. Why did people try to separate them so much? Life and Death, Hae realized were not black and white, unattached and independent of each other. They were a fluid gray, blending together constantly. It was illogical, chaotic, and awkward. But it was also beautiful. How had it taken her thirteen years to realize this, when she herself had tied the two so closely in her dreams and memories?

Hae sensed the nod from the man at the keypad and the men pulled the plug.

Hae felt herself falling down, down, down. She was enveloped in Blue Plasma. It dissolved her skin, her muscles and bones. But she wasn't gone. Instead, she felt bigger, like she had been crammed inside a shell that was too small for her. She stretched, exhilarated by this newfound freedom. She opened her new eyes, and saw that she was not floating in the Blue Plasma, but standing barefoot in new green grass, with the cloudless blue sky soaring overhead and a warm breeze whisking long brown hair out of her face. Hae stretched her arms out in front of her. She glowed, not with artificial light, but with a healthy tan. She inhaled the grass-scented air and laughed with joy.

There was a tap on her shoulder and she turned around, the grin still fixed on her lips. She gasped and tears sprung up in her eyes. The old Battery! He stood, with a head full of sandy blonde hair and dancing green eyes. He smiled broadly at her.

"I knew I'd see you," he said, "I knew you would make it here."

She smiled back up at him through the tears, and nodded.

"I'm Paul. And the Engine already told me all about you, Hae." Paul said. His voice was as real and solid as his hands on her face had been.

"Where are we?" Hae asked. This place seemed a thousand miles away from the cold, dark Engine Room, so how did she get here?

"We're within the Engine now. We are all a part of it just as it is a part of us." Paul said, spreading his arms out to encompass everything around him.

Hae looked up at the dazzling summer sky, felt the cool grass under her toes and was awestruck by the incredible world that the Engine had created. But for as inexplicable as this paradise was, Hae understood the Engine. It was giving back the life it had taken from its Batteries. It was giving them the chance to fulfill the dreams that they never could grasp in life. Hae cried tears of gratitude and joy and she flung herself into the arms of the man she loved, sobbing and laughing at the same time.

"Thank you!" she thought, eyes turned up to the sky, "Thank you for sending him to me!"

For a brief moment, the sun seemed to shine brighter and the wind carried a playful spark of blue electricity.