

Hasan Muzafer  
2nd Place Winner

## **The Machines**

What if I told you that if there was a machine – a contraption of steel and light – that could determine your future?

My future.

Everyone's future.

I didn't believe it at first when my Mother first told me. She had been young then, and so was I. Holding her hands up to the heavens, the starlight shimmering in her hazel eyes and setting her dark hair aglow, she told me how they – the machines – were created:

A sturdy frame of metal had to be built. Born in the mightiest forges, the fiery breath of a hundred thousand dragons washed over the ore dug up from the earth, giving it a skeleton to stand upright; intricately etched plates, crafted by Elvish artisans, channel electricity through its body, animating it, just like nerves to muscles; all culminating together to create its face, bright and elegant, offering itself up to be touched by us mere humans....

That was only when I was a child when my head had been full of hopes and dreams. Now, the thought of interacting with this device makes my pulse quicken, my palms wet, my gut ache... Surely, I am unworthy to hold such power?

But this is the Cycle. It has been for the past two centuries. It was decided by our ancestors that it is every man and woman's sacred charge to uphold it. And for the first time, I am travelling to the nearest community gathering place to fulfill my duty to the Cycle.

I can't bear the stress.

I close my eyes as I walk down the path of blackened stone. I take a deep breath, and can't help but think of the wars, the blood, the pain and suffering that was shed so every man and woman had the right to alter his or her future through the machines.

I open my eyes. I feel a surge of bravery. It fills my blood with fire and determination, anxiety fleeing faster than a shadow from light. "Today, millions of us will make pilgrimage to see these machines, and together we will determine who lives and dies, who gets to stay and who is banished, whether times will be prosperous or scarce....

I arrive at the dilapidated school. Perhaps the Cycle will see this school renovated? Who knew? The black stone road led my feet to the structure built from red bricks and steel beams. The whole place seemed to emanate ancientness. I see other pilgrims enter in through two large doors that have been painted red. Two guards in black give me a pointed look as I step through

the doors. An acolyte, a woman wearing denim leggings and a simple white shirt, speaks to me in a grave whisper. "Are you here to take part?"

I nod. She returns my nod and takes me inside the old school.

"It's time for me to face my destiny," I say to myself, steeling my nerves. A room opens before me. It's dark and only the light emanating from the faces of the machines can be seen. I see faces of other pilgrims illuminated before them. The reflection of words, images, dancing across their eyes. The machines were speaking to them.

They were lined up row by row, and I am led to one of the devices.

I see a pilgrim standing next to a machine with such a look of despair in his eyes that it makes my soul wither at the sight. He rushes up to me and grabs my hand. "We're doomed, man! Doomed!"

I wring my hand away and watch as the man collapses to the floor. "No, no, no!" he shouts, perhaps driven mad from the machine's influence. An acolyte and a guard come to restrain the man as terror causes him to writhe like a snake. "The end is neigh!" he shouts, being dragged out of the center. "The end is neigh!"

I am taken to my machine, but now all my willpower is gone. It takes me a moment to realize I'm trembling. The machine's bright face lit up before me, as if it had been waiting for me. I touch its soft face, a bright window where our fates are decided. It's warm to the touch, comforting, soft, but there is now fear in my soul. The man's horror has reawakened all my doubts.

The machine's face suddenly reveals two names. Visions assail me, burning into my mind! I resist the urge to scream, clutching my head, wanting to rip the hair from my scalp. On one hand, one fate, one path that I can decide, there is a world of darkness. An era ravaged by corruption unlike anything I'd ever seen. Corporations now have taken over everything and even though the people on the sidewalks can't see it, heavy metal chains are encircling their limbs. I scream for them to wake up and realize what's going on. But they have been blinded. They don't know what is true and what isn't anymore. "The e-mails," I hear a woman's voice whisper in my ears. "She lied to us. She lied to us all...." These people are lost. They are now slaves to the system.

On the other track I can choose for our future, I feel a tidal wave of heat. An era marked by rage. A scorched wasteland lies before me. The constant tick of a Geiger counter buzzes in my ear painfully. The sun shines brightly in my eyes. "What has happened here?" I wonder aloud, and the memories of the dead emerge on the irradiated plains. "Anger," they whisper. "Our allies abandoned us. We forced them to pay us, and they abandoned us... some even turned against us. Our enemies swallowed us whole."

With the sensation of lurching through time and space, I am brought back to reality. My calf muscles ache from standing so rigidly. There are tears in my eyes. How could two such horrible future lie before us?

The names! The cursed names! They are repeated over and over again in my head, screaming. And they suddenly fall to a whisper. The first name. The very first name on the bright face of the machine. The choice that would lead us to a dystopia. I shudder as I say it aloud, every syllable tumbling from my lips like a curse. "Hillary Clinton."

The next, the one who would turn our lands into a nuclear wasteland. I am choking now. I barely manage to squeak out the other name. "Donald Trump."

There are tears in my eyes. I can't take it anymore! I grip the edges of the polling machine and bellow on the top of my lungs. "Why!? Why!?"

I fall to the ground and a guard seizes me. "Enough! You have to decide!" he shouts in my ear, but despair has overwhelmed my senses.

"I can't!" I cry. "Villains! Both of them!"

An acolyte helps the guard carry me out as I thrash and scream.

"That's the fifth one today," she says more annoyed than concerned. "Is this election cycle that bad?"