

The Machine Makers and the Kingdom of Coins

A fictional fairy tale about work, coins, machines, and who owns what comes after.

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I. The Rule

When Elin was small, she thought old people received coins for having lasted long enough.

Her grandfather Tomas did not.

“No,” he said. “First you work. Then you get old. And if you’re lucky, the coins remember you.”

He was sitting at the kitchen table with that month’s letter from the House of Tomorrow.

The letter was tucked under the sugar bowl because there was no room left on the table.

Mara sat opposite him, doing the bills.

By the window, a plant had been tied upright with a piece of string that had once been wrapped around a parcel. The plant had long since grown taller than the stick meant to support it.

“What does it say?” Elin asked.

“That I’m still old.”

“Tomas.”

Mara did not look up.

“What? They write every month to make sure.”

At the top of the page was the seal of the HOUSE.

Below it was a number.

Elin knew the number meant bread, tea, heat and, if Tomas lied a little about the price, tobacco.

“Why do they give you coins?”

“They don’t give them to me.”

“But you get them.”

“Because I gave them coins first.”

“When?”

“For forty-three years.”

Elin looked at him.

“That’s a long time.”

“Especially on Mondays.”

Mara put one bill on top of another.

“Grandad worked. Some of what he earned was put aside. The House looked after it and helped it grow. Now he gets a pension.”

Elin looked at the letter.

“So the House keeps tomorrow?”

“No,” said Mara.

“Yes,” said Tomas.

Mara looked at him.

“You’re not helping.”

“I’m retired. Helping is optional.”

The House of Tomorrow stood in the middle of the city, with stone columns and polished doors.

Whenever Elin passed it, she imagined rooms full of tomorrow’s bread, tomorrow’s shoes and winter coal that had not gone cold yet.

“So you work,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And you get coins.”

“Yes.”

“And save some of them.”

“Yes.”

“And when you stop working, the coins come back.”

Tomas nodded.

“If everything goes well.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

Mara stopped doing the bills.

Tomas folded the letter.

“Then you get a long letter.”

Mara still worked.

She kept the accounts at a shipping company down by the river.

On Fridays she came home late.

Friday was the day the numbers had to balance.

Elin did not really know what that meant. She only knew that she often ate dinner with Tomas while Mara's plate went cold.

“Why can't you just come home?” she asked one evening.

“Because the numbers have to agree.”

“What if they don't?”

“Then I stay until they do.”

Elin decided numbers were badly brought up.

That same year, three strangers came through the northern gate.

The first brought crates.

The second brought measuring instruments.

The third brought nothing anyone could see, which made him the least trustworthy.

“What's in the crates?” the guard asked.

“A Machine,” said the first.

“What can it do?”

“Too little.”

The guard waited.

Nothing else came.

The second stranger opened one of the crates. Inside were wires, metal frames and black boxes.

“It isn’t finished,” she said.

“Then why bring it here?”

“To finish it.”

The third stranger was looking past the gate and into the city.

The mills.

The offices.

The warehouses.

The House of Tomorrow.

“What are you staring at?” the guard asked.

“Everything that will have to change if the Machine works.”

The guard looked into the crate again.

“It doesn’t look very dangerous.”

“Neither does a seed.”

The guard decided he did not like him.

The king gave them an old military workshop outside the wall.

People began calling them the Machine Makers.

At first, not much happened.

Then came the rumours.

The Machine could translate.

Calculate.

Write.

Find diseases.

Make mistakes faster than any clerk in the kingdom.

That last one Mara believed.

At dinner, Tomas asked if the Machine could make doors.

“Maybe,” said Mara.

“Good doors?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then it hasn’t replaced me.”

“You’ve been retired for twelve years.”

“Exactly.”

Elin looked at Mara.

“Can it do your work?”

Mara laughed.

The next year she did not.

The first Machine in Mara’s office stood beside the invoice desk.

The company called it an assistant.

Mara called it the box.

At first it was terrible.

It mixed up two ports.

Put the wrong date on three letters.

Once tried to send spare parts to a fishing village that had ordered nothing.

Mara came home in a good mood.

“It’s an idiot.”

Tomas looked up from his tea.

“Then it has prospects.”

But the box improved.

It found duplicate invoices.

Wrote standard replies.

Compared figures faster than Mara could.

One Friday in October, Mara came home while there was still light between the trees.

Elin was sitting on the floor with a book.

She looked up.

“Why are you home?”

“I live here.”

“On a Friday?”

Mara hung her coat over the chair.

“The box balanced the accounts.”

“How long did it take?”

“Forty minutes.”

“How long does it take you?”

“Three hours.”

Elin jumped up.

“So it gave you Friday back.”

Mara looked towards the window.

There was still light on the wall.

“Yes,” she said. “This once.”

They ate together.

No plate went cold.

The next month, there were coins missing from Mara’s payslip.

Not many.

Enough.

Tomas read it.

“You’re missing hours.”

“I know.”

“Where are they?”

Mara looked at him.

“The box.”

Elin frowned.

“Did the box take your hours?”

“No.”

“But you came home.”

“Yes.”

“So you have the hours.”

“Yes.”

“Then why don’t you have the coins?”

Mara opened her mouth.

Closed it again.

Tomas looked at the payslip.

Nobody said anything.

A few weeks later, one of the Machine Makers visited Elin’s school.

Every child had to bring a question.

Emil wanted to know whether the Machine could become king.

Another wanted to know if it could do maths homework.

A girl in the front wanted it to make her cat talk.

Then the teacher read Elin’s question aloud.

The room became quieter than it had been for the cat.

The Machine Maker looked at the paper.

Then at Elin.

It said:

If the Machine does the work, who gets the coins?

He smiled.

Not because the question was funny.

It was the sort of smile adults sometimes used when they needed a little more time.

“That’s a question for the economists.”

Elin looked at him.

“You made the Machine.”

“Yes.”

“Do the economists make the coins?”

A few children laughed.

The Machine Maker did not.

“No.”

“Then why is it their question?”

The teacher stepped forward.

“Elin.”

The Machine Maker raised a hand.

He looked out of the window.

The city was there as it always had been.

Carts.

Workers.

Smoke.

Coins changing hands.

Far away stood the House of Tomorrow.

“I don’t know,” he said.

It was the first answer from him Elin trusted.

She kept the paper.

For many years.

II. The Box

For a long time, the box was the least interesting thing in Mara’s office.

People talked about it when it was wrong.

When it was right, they did not.

Mara sat beside Liv.

Liv could read a smudged invoice from three metres away and knew which captains were lying about delays before they had finished the sentence.

The box could not do that.

Not yet.

One morning, it flagged a payment from Old Jensen, who had supplied rope to the shipping company for twenty-six years.

“He isn’t suspicious,” Liv said.

The box disagreed.

Mara checked the invoice.

One digit in the account number was wrong.

Liv called Jensen.

His clerk had mistyped it.

She put down the phone and looked at the box.

“Don’t encourage it.”

The following week, the box missed a duplicate invoice.

Mara found it.

“Balance restored,” Liv said.

Then the box found three Mara had missed.

After that, they stopped keeping score.

The first real change came without a meeting.

A young clerk named Peter left for another city to marry a baker.

Normally, someone new would have arrived.

This time the owner said:

“We can absorb the work.”

Mara looked at Peter’s empty desk.

“Who is we?”

The owner gestured across the office.

Apparently that included Mara.

Liv.

The box.

Possibly the furniture.

No one new came.

The work still got done.

When Mara told them at home, Elin asked:

“Did the box fire him?”

“No. He got married.”

“Oh.”

Elin thought about that.

“Then that’s good.”

“It is.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“They aren’t hiring anyone new.”

“So the box gets his chair?”

“No.”

“Who gets it?”

“Nobody.”

For a few weeks, coats lay on the chair.

Then folders.

One Monday, it was gone.

The box got better.

Mara wrote less and checked more.

She came home more often before dinner had time to become sad.

Then Liv made a mistake.

The box had warned her about a booking.

Liv overruled it.

The ship waited for six hours.

The owner called her in.

When she came back, Mara asked:

“What did he say?”

“That I should trust the system more.”

Two weeks later, the box sent a medical shipment towards the wrong port.

Mara caught it in time.

The medicine arrived.

“Good catch,” said the owner.

Mara stayed where she was.

“The box was wrong.”

“Yes.”

“Liv was wrong too.”

“Yes.”

“And you called her in.”

The owner looked at her.

“Mara.”

“I’m only asking.”

“People are responsible for using the tools properly.”

“And the tools?”

He looked at the screen.

“They get better.”

Tomas chewed slowly when Mara told them at dinner.

“So when Liv is wrong, Liv is wrong.”

“Yes.”

“And when the box is wrong, it’s learning.”

“Yes.”

“That sounds relaxing.”

“For the box.”

Elin looked at Mara.

“Did you say that to him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d like to keep my job.”

There were answers that were difficult to understand.

This was not one of them.

The shipping company grew.

Mara became the person people went to when the box could not make the world fit.

Missing cargo.

Customers who had already received three polite standard replies and were now even angrier.

Captains who still had not learned to write down the truth.

She was paid a little more.

She also had fewer paid hours than before.

One Friday, she came home with a payslip and a small cake.

“What’s the cake for?” Elin asked.

“We’ve had our best quarter.”

“Did you get a bonus?”

“No.”

“Then why is there cake?”

“The owner bought it.”

Tomas picked up the knife.

“Then I support growth.”

Elin looked at the payslip.

“Did the company make more?”

“Yes.”

“Did you work less?”

“Yes.”

“Did you get more?”

“A little.”

“Who got the rest?”

Mara looked at the cake.

Tomas raised his plate.

“Apparently I got some of it.”

That autumn, the shipping company moved into a larger building.

The accounts office was smaller.

Six screens.

Four desks.

There had once been nine.

Mara rested a hand on the back of a chair.

“Where does Liv sit?”

The owner looked away.

Liv had been offered fewer hours.

She had said no.

Friday was her last day.

That evening Mara came home late.

Not because of the accounts.

She and Liv had gone for coffee.

Elin was waiting in the kitchen.

“Is Liv coming back?”

“No.”

“Did the box take her job?”

Mara looked down at the table.

“No.”

Elin waited.

Mara drew a breath.

“It did the work.”

The next morning, Elin walked with Mara down towards the river.

The road north had grown wider.

Carts carried metal frames towards the land beyond the wall.

New power lines cut across the fields.

Behind them stood the cranes.

Elin stopped.

“When did all that happen?”

Mara followed her eyes.

For years, the Machine had been something that sat on a desk.

Now people were building houses for it.

Roads.

Power.

Room.

“At first I thought it was just a box,” Mara said.

She looked at the cranes.

“Now the box has a skyline.”

They walked on.

Behind them, Liv’s chair was already gone.

III. Skyline

At first there were three cranes.

Then seven.

Then so many that Tomas stopped counting and began complaining that someone had privatised the horizon.

Roads cut across the fields north of the city.

Power lines followed.

Then pipes.

Fences.

Windowless halls.

At night they glowed.

The king opened one of the new Machine halls in spring.

There were flags.

Music.

Speeches about prosperity.

Mara watched on a screen at the office while correcting a damaged-cargo case.

The king stood in front of the new hall beside the first Machine Maker.

“This,” said the king, “is an investment in tomorrow.”

Mara looked at the screen.

Then at the box.

“Tomorrow is noisy.”

That same month another letter arrived from the House of Tomorrow.

This one was happier than most letters from the House.

Tomas found that suspicious.

“My pension payment has gone up.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” said Mara.

“It sounds expensive.”

The letter had little pictures on it.

A lightning bolt.

A factory.

A bank.

Arrows pointing upward.

Mara read the small print.

“Energy. Infrastructure. Industry. Growth companies.”

Tomas nodded north.

“So the Machine.”

“It doesn’t say that.”

“It doesn’t need to.”

Elin took the letter.

“Does the House own the Machine?”

“No,” said Mara.

“A little,” said Tomas.

Mara looked at him.

“What?”

“If it owns companies that own pieces of it, then that sounds like a little.”

Elin looked towards the cranes.

For the first time, she imagined tomorrow itself had bought a share.

The shipping company grew with it.

More cargo.

More customers.

More screens.

Not more clerks.

Then Sanna arrived.

She was twenty.

Mara did not teach her to add columns.

The box did that.

She taught her to hear when a customer was frightened underneath a polite message.

To call a captain who never wrote the truth down.

To become suspicious when an answer looked too perfect.

One afternoon Sanna asked:

“What did new clerks used to do?”

Mara looked around the office.

“Everything you no longer have to learn first.”

Sanna smiled.

“So I’m lucky.”

Mara smiled too.

Then stopped.

Elin began walking out to the district north of the wall by herself.

There was no longer one Machine to find.

There were Machine halls.

Offices.

Workshops.

Transformers.

Canteens.

Gates.

People with cards hanging from their necks.

Machines making parts for other Machines.

Across the road stood a large billboard.

A family smiled beneath a blue sky.

WE ARE BUILDING ABUNDANCE

No one in the picture seemed to have a job.

No one held a bill.

No one appeared to need anything.

At the end of the shift, workers came through the gate.

One had mud up his legs.

Another was arguing about overtime on the phone.

The family on the billboard remained abundant.

That winter the shipping company had its best year ever.

The owner gave a speech.

He thanked the staff.

The customers.

The Machine.

He did not thank the missing chairs.

Mara noticed.

The next day Tomas received another letter from the House.

The number had gone up again.

“If the Machine keeps making the House richer,” he said, “I may have to apologise to it.”

“For what?” asked Mara.

“For calling it a box.”

Elin looked at the letter.

“Does the Machine pay into the House?”

“No.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Does the box?”

“No.”

Tomas folded the letter.

“That’s an excellent arrangement for the box.”

The years passed in small shifts.

Sanna learned the difficult work.

Another clerk retired.

No one new came.

Three night guards became two.

Tomas’s pension grew.

So did the cranes.

One summer evening, Elin and Mara walked home along the river.

Behind them were the yellow lights of the old city.

Ahead were the white lights of the Machine halls.

The water took both.

“Do you remember when there was only the box?” Elin asked.

“Yes.”

“Did anyone know it would turn into all that?”

“The people building it probably hoped.”

“That isn’t the same.”

“No.”

“Did you know?”

Mara shook her head.

“I only hoped it could handle Friday.”

“Was that enough?”

Mara looked at her.

“It was plenty.”

Elin looked back towards the House of Tomorrow.

Then north.

The old promise on one side.

The new halls on the other.

Mara followed her eyes.

“What?”

Elin shook her head.

“Don’t know.”

A week later the newspaper printed a special edition.

On the front was a photograph of the Machine district.

The headline read:

THE FUTURE IS HERE

Further inside was a small article about office work.

Fewer people were needed.

The newspaper called it a transition.

Elin cut out the article.

Then the picture of the skyline.

She placed both beside the old school paper.

If the Machine does the work, who gets the coins?

Three pieces of paper.

One question.

Still no answer.

IV. The Winter

The first sign was not cold.

It was a Machine hall that stopped growing halfway up.

For weeks the cranes stood still above it.

No one took them down.

That made it worse.

A finished building belonged to the city.

An unfinished one belonged to doubt.

The newspapers said the pause was temporary.

Then they said investors had become cautious.

Tomas read the word twice.

“Cautious is what fear calls itself when it puts on a tie.”

At the shipping company, the Machine kept working.

Ships still arrived.

Invoices still had to be paid.

Then the owner called everyone together.

He smiled too much.

“We need to tighten things up.”

No new hires.

No overtime without approval.

Repairs would have to wait.

The Machine contract stayed in place.

Mara looked at Sanna.

Sanna looked at the place where Liv used to sit.

That Friday Mara came home early.

She put her payslip on the table.

It was smaller again.

“How much smaller?” Elin asked.

“Enough.”

Elin hated that answer.

It always meant more than the number.

The next month another letter came from the House of Tomorrow.

This time the little pictures were gone.

“What does it say?” Elin asked.

“That my pension is still safe.”

“What else does it say?”

“That they are adjusting the assumptions.”

“What are assumptions?”

Tomas thought about it.

“What adults call facts until they change.”

Mara read the small print.

Future returns.

Contributions.

State guarantee.

“So is the pension safe?” Elin asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why do you look like that?”

Tomas folded the letter.

“Because safe is an expensive word.”

In December, the lights went out in the unfinished hall.

A supplier closed.

A bank stopped lending to some of the new projects.

The newspapers called it a correction.

Then a healthy correction.

Tomas began cutting the adjectives out and dropping them into a jam jar.

“What are you saving them for?” Elin asked.

“Winter.”

The strange thing was that the Machine itself did not seem to be in trouble.

It was better than before.

Cheaper too.

In January, the shipping company bought an upgrade.

Mara looked at the invoice.

“You cut our hours.”

“Yes.”

“You delayed the repairs.”

“Yes.”

“And now you’re buying more Machine.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

The owner looked almost surprised.

“Because it saves money.”

Mara nodded.

Not because she agreed.

There was simply nothing unclear about the answer.

Sanna lost one workday.

Then Mara did too.

At home, Elin sat with the household money.

She moved one coin from food to heat.

Then moved it back.

Tomas watched.

“Freeze or starve?”

“I’m deciding.”

“That’s economics before anyone draws a graph.”

Elin looked at him.

“You made that up.”

“Yes.”

“You sound like the third Machine Maker.”

Tomas looked offended.

“Then I withdraw it.”

A week later the king appeared on every screen.

“No pensioner will lose what was promised. The state stands behind the House of Tomorrow.”

Tomas listened.

Then he asked:

“And who stands behind the state?”

The speech continued.

Two weeks later a letter arrived from the tax office.

TEMPORARY CONTRIBUTION

Mara put it beside Tomas's pension letter.

One envelope promised coins.

The other asked for them.

Tomas tapped the tax letter.

"My pension is safe."

Mara looked at him.

"Apparently at your house."

She laughed.

Once.

Spring came.

The Winter did not leave.

One of the companies behind the Machine collapsed.

Its systems kept running.

Another company bought them cheaply.

In Mara's office, almost no one noticed the difference.

The box did not know it had a new owner.

One morning Sanna came over to Mara.

"They cut me."

"When?"

"Friday."

"Why?"

Sanna laughed, but there was nothing funny in it.

"They say the work can be absorbed."

Mara looked across the office.

Four desks.

Six screens.

The same sentence as when Peter left.

On Friday Sanna packed a mug, a photograph, two pens and a scarf.

At the door she turned.

“Do you think they’ll hire someone new?”

Mara said nothing.

Sanna nodded.

“Thought so.”

On Monday, the chair was gone.

That evening Mara came home without cake.

“Did the company lose money?” Elin asked.

“Yes.”

“Did the Machine stop working?”

“No.”

“But Sanna did?”

Mara looked at her.

“The Machine is still doing the work.”

On the table lay Mara’s payslip.

Tomas’s pension letter.

The tax letter.

Winter had arrived in three envelopes.

A few days later Elin walked north.

The unfinished hall stood dark.

Across the road, a new sign had appeared on a smaller building.

MACHINE SERVICE — LOWER PRICES

There were lights on inside.

People were working.

The future had become cheaper.

Elin looked from the dark hall to the bright one.

The big construction project could stop.

The Machine did not have to.

That evening she placed the three envelopes beside her old school paper.

Then she wrote:

Who pays when the work still gets done, but the coins move?

V. The Doors

By summer, the arguments had moved inside the palace.

This was unfortunate.

Outside, people could walk away.

Inside, there were chairs.

The king called a council.

Not because he wanted to.

One of the kingdom's largest banks had begun losing deposits, the House of Tomorrow wanted another guarantee, and three ministers had used the word urgent before breakfast.

The council chamber had three doors.

Someone had written on them in chalk.

RESTORE

SHARE

STOP

The king ordered a servant to wash the words off.

By lunchtime they were back.

He left them there.

The people by RESTORE wanted to save the bank.

“If the bank closes,” said the banker, “wages may not be paid tomorrow.”

Mara sat at the back.

She looked at the owner of the shipping company.

He nodded.

That was true.

The people by SHARE wanted an extra charge on the largest gains from the Machine.

“People lost hours,” said a woman from the union. “The gain did not disappear. It just landed somewhere else.”

Mara thought of her payslip.

That was true too.

The people by STOP wanted to freeze new Machine halls.

“You built dependence and called it progress,” said their spokesman.

Mara thought of the medical shipment the box had once sent towards the wrong port.

Then of all the times it had sent something to the right one.

That truth did not fit neatly through one door.

It annoyed her.

Elin had brought Mara with her.

Mara had objected.

“I’m not an economist.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m not a minister either.”

“Also useful.”

“I have work.”

“Four days.”

Mara looked at her.

“That was low.”

“Yes.”

“Fine.”

The first Machine Maker sat closest to RESTORE.

The second had chosen a chair between SHARE and STOP.

The third was standing because nobody had given him a chair and he had not asked for one.

The king looked around.

“I want one answer.”

Everyone started talking.

The king closed his eyes.

“There was my mistake.”

The banker spoke first.

“If the bank fails tonight, wages could disappear tomorrow.”

The union woman leaned forward.

“Then protect the wages.”

“That is why we protect the bank.”

“And the owners?”

The banker paused.

“We do not have to protect them.”

The room went quiet for a moment.

“Say that again,” she said.

He did not.

At noon, a messenger came in.

The bank would close a line of credit at midnight unless the state guaranteed it.

One of the companies on that line supplied equipment to hospitals.

The king looked at the three doors.

“Good.”

Nobody understood him.

“Now we have run out of time to be pure.”

The banker wanted the guarantee.

The union wanted the workers protected.

STOP wanted less dependence on foreign systems.

The Machine Makers wanted access to power and infrastructure.

The finance minister wanted to spend fewer coins than everyone else had just promised.

The king wanted lunch.

Mara wanted to go home.

Then the king pointed at her.

“You.”

Mara looked behind her.

There was nobody there.

“Yes, you. What do you want?”

“For the kingdom?”

“For yourself.”

“That’s easier.”

She held up one finger.

“I want Tomas’s pension paid.”

One.

“I want my job to still exist.”

Two.

“I want the Machine when it actually helps.”

Three.

“I don’t want people like Sanna thrown out just because the Machine is useful.”

Four.

“And I don’t want all your promises coming home to me afterwards as a tax letter.”

Five.

The finance minister looked personally wounded.

Mara sat down.

The king looked at her hand.

“That was five things.”

“Yes.”

“Can we afford all five?”

Mara shrugged.

“You asked what I wanted.”

After that, the meeting became less pure.

The banker accepted that the bank’s owners could lose money if depositors were protected.

The union accepted that only some of the gain would be sent back.

STOP accepted that there would be no general freeze on new halls.

The Machine Makers accepted new conditions for the most important systems.

By four, there was no agreement.

By five, there were three.

By six, they contradicted one another.

At seven, the banker threatened to leave.

At ten past seven, he was still there.

Mara began to understand politics.

The hardest part was the coins.

The union wanted part of the gain returned to the people whose paid hours had disappeared.

The banker called it punishment.

Mara raised her hand.

Nobody noticed.

She raised it higher.

The king noticed.

“What?”

“If the Machine saves the company money, and then the company needs fewer of our hours, why is it punishment to send some of it back?”

The banker looked at her.

“Investment has to be rewarded.”

“Then reward it.”

Mara waited a moment.

“Just not with all of it.”

The third Machine Maker smiled.

Mara pointed at him.

“Don’t.”

He almost stopped.

By evening they had made something ugly enough to survive.

Deposits would be protected.

The bank’s owners would not automatically be rescued.

The House of Tomorrow would receive support.

The largest gains from the Machine would carry an extra charge for a while.

Some of that would go to people whose paid hours had disappeared.

The most important systems would have to keep working if one supplier failed.

No general stop.

No general rescue.

No final solution.

Everyone hated something in the agreement.

The king took that as a good sign.

Mara took it as a sign that it was late.

When they left, the words were still on the doors.

RESTORE.

SHARE.

STOP.

Someone had written a fourth word on the wall between them.

LIVE

Elin stopped.

“Which door did we choose?”

Mara looked back at the council chamber.

“None.”

“What did we choose then?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Elin smiled.

“That isn’t a political theory.”

“Good.”

The next morning the wages arrived.

Tomas got his pension.

The bank opened.

The Machine worked.

Mara went to work.

There were four desks in the office.

One was empty.

She put her coat on the chair.

This time, nobody removed it.

VI. The Author

After the council, Elin began looking for the person who had written the story.

She called it research.

It sounded healthier.

Sanna was still looking for work.

Mara still read every letter from the tax office twice.

Tomas still made jokes about the House of Tomorrow, but Elin had seen him reread the guarantee when he thought nobody was watching.

Someone ought to be responsible for that.

Preferably someone with a name.

The first Machine Maker had an archive that could make a librarian nervous.

Elin started there because he had moved fastest.

It seemed reasonable.

It also seemed suspicious.

Forecasts.

Warnings.

Plans.

Plans for what to do when the plans failed.

One paper said the Machine would spread slowly.

Wrong.

Another said electricity would become the main constraint.

Not quite.

A third warned that the companies around the Machine could lose value even if the Machine itself became cheaper and more useful.

Elin took the paper home.

Mara looked at the date.

“They knew?”

“They had thought about it.”

“That isn’t the same.”

“No.”

“Do you want it to be the same?”

Elin thought of Sanna at the door with the mug, the photograph, the pens and the scarf.

“Yes.”

Mara said nothing.

The next morning Elin went back.

In the first Machine Maker’s archive she found a letter from the second.

YOU TALK ABOUT COMPETITION AS IF IT WERE WEATHER. IT IS ALSO SOMETHING WE HELP
CREATE.

A reply was stapled behind it.

AND YOU TALK ABOUT WAITING AS IF IT ONLY COSTS US.

The folder was labelled:

COOPERATION — UNRESOLVED

Elin read both letters twice.

It was less satisfying than blame.

She found the first Machine Maker.

“Did you know the Winter could happen?”

“Yes.”

“And you carried on.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought stopping would cost more.”

“For whom?”

He looked at her.

“That is the right question.”

Elin disliked him for saying it.

Not because he was avoiding the answer.

Because Sanna had already paid part of the cost of carrying on.

The second Machine Maker’s own archive was disappointing.

Test results.

Meeting notes.

Broken parts.

Lists of limits nobody outside the workshop would care about.

Elin looked for the clean sentence she was certain must be there.

It was not.

The useful letter was still in the first Maker’s archive.

Instead she found the failed agreement in a government box.

At the top it said:

NO WORKSHOP SHOULD CROSS THIS LINE ALONE

Underneath, in another hand:

Then define the line.

Below that:

Define alone.

And finally:

Define should.

Elin laughed.

Later she asked the second Machine Maker:

“Did the race force you to continue?”

“No.”

“Then why did you?”

“Because if we stopped alone, the race would not stop.”

“That sounds like force.”

“It sounds like a bad choice becoming more expensive.”

“You could still choose.”

“Yes.”

Elin would have preferred an excuse she could reject.

Instead she got a choice.

That was worse.

After three weeks, her room was full of paper.

She sorted it into three piles.

FIRST MACHINE MAKER.

SECOND MACHINE MAKER.

THIRD MACHINE MAKER.

Then she placed a government memo in the first pile because it supported his argument.

A banker’s warning in the second because it sounded cautious.

An investor letter in the third because it talked about long time horizons.

She stopped.

None of the three had written those papers.

She had made the piles.

Elin sat on the floor between them.

Maybe she was not only finding the story.

Maybe she was arranging it.

She went back to the third Machine Maker because his boxes were the least organised.

Some held maps.

One held restaurant bills.

Another held two screws, a cracked lens and a menu.

“This is useless,” Elin said.

“It was a good lunch.”

She pulled out a folder only because it was under the menu.

Inside was a notebook.

Not answers.

Questions.

What happens if people get time back but lose pay?

What happens if the Machine becomes cheap before ownership becomes broad?

What happens if no one can stop alone?

Then came one sentence.

A hard winter can make impossible reforms possible.

Elin’s hands went cold.

There it was.

The sentence she had been looking for.

The third Machine Maker read the page.

“Who wrote this?”

“I did.”

“So you knew.”

“I thought about it.”

“You wrote that a crisis could make reforms possible.”

“Yes.”

“And then you carried on.”

“Yes.”

“Did you want the Winter?”

“No.”

“It made some of the things you wanted possible.”

“Yes.”

“Then how is that different?”

“Very.”

“Convenient.”

“Yes.”

Elin waited.

He did not help himself.

“Explain.”

He looked towards the Machine halls.

“If a storm makes people repair the roof, it does not necessarily mean the carpenter wanted the storm.”

“You were not the carpenter.”

“No.”

“You helped build the weather.”

For once, he did not have a good sentence ready.

“Sometimes,” he said.

Elin took the notebook home.

She put the page beside Mara’s payslip and the tax letter.

She thought of Sanna carrying her things out of the office.

It all fit.

Too well.

She began to write.

They had imagined the Winter.

The Winter made reforms possible.

They continued anyway.

Therefore—

She stopped.

Did they want it?

Plan it?

Accept it?

Cause it?

Control it?

She looked at her three piles.

She had even arranged the pages neatly inside each one.

The story was becoming beautiful.

That was when she began to distrust it.

The next morning she went back and looked for everything that did not fit.

There was plenty.

A forecast of twenty more years of growth.

Wrong.

A safety agreement.

Failed.

A letter from one Machine Maker accusing another of moving too slowly.

A reply accusing the first of moving too fast.

A government memo warning against dependence on the Machine.

Three months later, the government paid for another hall.

An investor letter promising enormous returns.

Six weeks later, half of them were gone.

Elin began taking the three piles apart.

Some papers belonged in two.

Some in none.

Some contradicted the person whose name she had put them under.

The story became uglier.

Elin felt better.

She read the sentence in the notebook again.

A hard winter can make impossible reforms possible.

Underneath it:

That is not a reason to want the winter.

Then:

No. But it can change how long we think we can wait.

In another hand:

Dangerous thought.

And underneath:

Yes. Leave it in.

Not a confession.

Not innocence.

Mara read the page.

“They imagined it,” Elin said.

“Yes.”

“They carried on.”

“Yes.”

“I thought I had found the author.”

“Did you?”

“No.”

Elin remembered Sanna with the scarf over her arm.

“I wanted to.”

Mara looked at her.

“I know.”

“Someone has to be responsible.”

“People are.”

“That isn’t the same as one person.”

“No.”

Mara handed the page back.

“You’ve spent years asking who gets all the coins.”

“Yes.”

“Now you want one person to get all the blame.”

Elin looked down.

Mara put the kettle on.

“That isn’t the same,” Elin said.

“No.”

A little time passed.

“But it rhymes,” Elin said.

Mara nodded.

Elin kept going.

Bankers talked about duties.

Ministers about competition.

Engineers about deadlines.

Investors about prices.

Everyone had touched the story.

No one had held all of it.

When Elin published her investigation, she called it:

WHO WROTE THE WINTER?

Mara read the title.

“You’ve just spent a year proving nobody did.”

“It’s a question.”

“It’s a dramatic question.”

“That’s allowed.”

“Barely.”

In the end Elin wrote only:

No one wrote the whole story.

That does not mean no one held a pen.

Tomas fell asleep before page six.

When Elin complained, he said:

“I lived the middle.”

That evening Elin found her old school paper.

On the front:

If the Machine does the work, who gets the coins?

Below it:

Who pays when the work still gets done, but the coins move?

She turned it over.

On the back she wrote:

Who owns the Machine?

Tomas looked over her shoulder.

“That one is shorter.”

“Do you approve?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It will be expensive.”

VII. The Bridge

Years passed.

The Machine halls became ordinary.

Children were born who had never seen the northern fields without them.

They did not call them the future.

They called them buildings.

Tomas died in spring.

His final pension payment arrived three days later.

Mara stood holding the letter.

“So they finally paid him for a day he didn’t survive.”

Elin laughed.

Then she started crying.

A week later, the House of Tomorrow asked for the money back.

Mara was furious.

It helped.

Tomas’s chair stayed at the kitchen table.

No one talked about removing it.

Years later, Mara retired.

Not completely.

The shipping company still called whenever the Machine produced a problem nobody understood.

“They can’t decide whether I’m obsolete or necessary.”

“How often do they call?”

“Twice a month.”

“That sounds like a decision.”

Mara ignored her.

Along with her pension came a smaller payment from a fund created after the Winter.

The fund owned part of two Machine halls, part of a power plant, and shares in some of the companies that used them.

Mara looked at the number.

“It isn’t much.”

“You own a little bit of the future.”

“I’d rather own a little bit of the electricity bill.”

The old military workshop became a museum.

Outside stood a sign:

THE FIRST MACHINE WAS BUILT HERE

That was not quite true.

The first parts had come from several places.

So had some of the ideas.

Elin considered writing to the museum.

Then she imagined Tomas.

Let the tourists have one sentence.

She left the sign alone.

Farther down stood the old bridge.

During the Winter, engineers had found cracks in it.

For several months, politicians used the bridge in speeches.

The kingdom had to cross it.

The kingdom must not rush.

The bridge had to be rebuilt.

The bridge had to be protected.

Eventually, the engineers asked them to stop standing on it while they talked.

Then it was repaired.

No one gave a speech about that.

One afternoon Elin walked there alone.

By the river sat a child with chocolate cake wrapped in paper.

The child looked at her.

“You can have some.”

Elin sat a little closer.

“You don’t know me.”

“I know the cake.”

“Is that enough?”

“Yes.”

The child broke off a piece.

It was good.

For a few minutes, neither of them said anything important.

It was pleasant.

A small maintenance machine rolled onto the bridge.

Halfway across, it stopped.

A technician came out of a shed, opened a hatch and hit something with a tool.

The Machine started again.

The child frowned.

“I thought they could repair themselves.”

“Sometimes.”

“Then why is he there?”

“Because sometimes is not always.”

The child nodded.

Apparently that was enough.

Across the river, the Machine district hummed.

The child pointed.

“My dad works there.”

“What does he do?”

“Three days.”

Elin laughed.

“I meant, what does he do for work?”

“I don’t know.”

The child took another bite.

“My mum works five.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s a nurse.”

“Ah.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“She says that too.”

A school class came towards the bridge.

The teacher stopped by the museum and pointed north.

“This is where the age of the Machine began.”

A girl raised her hand.

“Who decided that?”

“The Machine Makers began the work.”

“Only them?”

“No.”

“The king?”

“He helped.”

“The people with the coins?”

“Yes.”

“The workers?”

“Yes.”

“The other kingdoms?”

“Yes.”

The girl frowned.

“Then who decided it?”

The teacher looked at the museum sign as if it might help.

It did not.

“No one alone.”

The child beside Elin leaned closer.

“So no one?”

“That isn’t what she said.”

“It sounded like it.”

Elin looked at the bridge.

People were walking both ways.

Workers.

Tourists.

A cart carrying goods.

A Machine.

“No,” she said. “Not no one.”

“Who then?”

Elin thought of the Machine Makers.

The king.

The banker.

The union woman.

Mara.

Liv.

Sanna.

Tomas.

Herself.

“Many people.”

The child looked dissatisfied.

“That’s too many.”

“Yes.”

The child unfolded the paper a little farther.

One piece of cake was left.

“Do you want it?”

“Yes.”

“You already had some.”

“Yes.”

“Then why should you get the last piece?”

Elin looked at the cake.

“I don’t know.”

The child thought about it.

Then ate it.

Elin took the old school paper from her pocket.

The folds were almost white with age.

The child leaned in.

On the front:

If the Machine does the work, who gets the coins?

Below it:

Who pays when the work still gets done, but the coins move?

On the back:

Who owns the Machine?

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know the answers?”

“Some of them.”

“Then why do you keep asking?”

Elin looked at the empty cake wrapper.

“Because the answers move.”

It began to rain.

The child stood up.

The child looked at the first question again.

“If the Machine does the work, who gets the coins?”

“Yes.”

The child looked towards the Machine halls.

Then back towards the city.

“Maybe that depends on who owns it.”

“Partly.”

The child looked at her.

“What else?”

Elin looked at the empty cake wrapper.

The child waited.

Then someone called from the other side of the bridge.

The child ran off before Elin could answer.

Elin stayed by the river.

Behind her were the old city and the House of Tomorrow.

Ahead stood the Machine halls.

Their lights came on one by one as evening fell.

For once, Elin did not write anything down.

Rain struck the river.

The river carried both skylines away.

RELATION MEMORY

SIBLING EDITION [Maskinmagerne og Mønternes Rige](#) · Danish sibling literary edition. It shares the story and causal boundaries, but is not presented as a literal translation.

COMPANION [The Fairy Tale Failed Its Own Test](#) · A reader-facing account of how the literary editions were rebuilt under a stricter test.

METHOD [Why Composite Stories?](#) · The public method statement for constructed narrative and its limits.