

## Fate's Engine

The Man Engine was at fault, they say: while bearing human freight,  
Though very near the surface smashed - and sent them to their fate.

- K. A

*Daughter of three daughters, beating heart of Nyx, Clotho, counting by the points on your coronet – thirty-three spools of string, from distaff to roll. Taut between such hands and cupped, like scales; the cold weight of Hector's breath.*

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Levant Mine, October 1919

In the dry room, Thomas folds his pasty into his trouser pocket, 'Red sky over the headland this morning.'

'I noticed that, pretty to look at - made the morning walk here more bearable.'

'No, well, you know what they say.' Thomas mutters, boots strike the ground as he speaks.

'Aye Shepherd's Warning it is Thomas. If you reminded me every time the sky was red...' His brother, Freston, sighs.

Uneasy, Thomas gazes down the tunnel to the mine shaft, where men are already welding clay to their helmets. 'They've patched up that leak in 40 backs with bits of wood and cement, the seabed rattles away above my head, it's close to flooding – I can hear it.'

'I'm sure you can, my Thomas, I'm sure. Fear changes nothing, though, you're still going down.' Says Richards, only a teenager, who grasps his shoulder before striding into the tunnel, chuckling. His voice echoes as he reaches the end, 'Just be glad you don't have to take the ladders.'

The man engine creaks at another pair of boots, candles like so many third eyes, gathered at the heart of the tunnel. The flames watch Thomas where he sits.

'Hurry now, Tom, or if you want to be a Bal Maiden, just say so!' Freston jeers, mimicking bringing down a small hammer, crushing larger pieces of sten into smaller ones, as the women did.

Thomas stands and as he walks, wrings his hands in step, in prayer. Christianity felt foolish in the mines. God doesn't exist under the craggy cliffs of St Just, in the pitch - men and ore disgust him. Their descent begins with a hymn, the Almighty watches them go down and prays at the mercy of something else entirely.

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*Lachesis with the measuring staff; rings of wood and timely blood. She winds all thirty-three with practised breath, measuring portions – Patroclus you are no saint, these strings don't*

*stretch past Lachesis' stick. A hexad of working white, with six soft arms and Plato's song – they watch the men inside the earth.*

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At the end of song and croust and scraping ore, Thomas leaves the 40 backs tunnel. The wood-cement overhead had held strong, his fear of doom subsides like a dead leg.

The men around him begin to make their way to the man engine, Thomas joins this train. With boots filled with sweat and candlewax he steps onto the platform next to the shaft. He imagines rising, past the count house and the Wesleyan church, into a sky that was another sort of red, under a sun like a treacle tin, pierced with holes. He thinks of this as the engine churns, and of Freston in the dry room, *Did your Shepherd's Warning come true, Thomas?* Or as they begin their walk over the headland, *See any other omens of death Thomas?* Laughing. Thomas would laugh too, out of relief.

He notices Richards on the sollor below, who looks up at him, 'Nice to see you smile Thomas'. They move upwards still, some men sing.

The engine drops like a breath; the singing pauses.

Immediately, Thomas looks down at Richards, who replies, 'It's fine', the engine resumes its upward motion, 'see', smiling reassuringly. Thomas dares to look up, fathoms and fathoms to the top of the spine. He rubs his dusty brow, hears Richards join the song that resounds the length of the engine.

Then, the engine rod shakes violently. Something gives way, a dark and sickening drop. Debris and men and bits of each fly back down to the heart of the mine, arms pinned between platforms and helmets swinging upside down, hard-boiled survivors and black-wick victims.

Thomas is thrown to the sollor, chest down with dirt between his teeth. Something dull strikes his calf, a leg of timber. He lies there as the cries mount, as the men turn into bodies. Eventually, He lifts the wood, an eye of the engine, and crawls to his feet. He hears a horrible sobbing, nearing the edge of the sollor; he glances down the shaft to see Richards.

He swings, feet caught between where he had been standing and the side platform below. Swinging and sobbing. Thomas wrings his hands, though he feels nothing in them. Not a person, but a heart that was beating so loud it became the walls of the mine. Dragging Richards through a manhole, who is shouting with panic, Thomas brings him up to his sollor, which was strangely empty and hot.

Richards looks at him in terror, his round face studded with cuts, before fainting.

Thomas notices the ladders by the pumping engine shaft, used long before the man engine was introduced, rungs like bone, unsteady as death - sees a path to an escape. He looks down at Richards, breathing still. He could not leave his friend down the mine, he who was a brother and son and knew all the songs, a kid who loved to sing them poorly at the end of the day shift and irritate them all.

He grapples with Richards' body, resting it on his, slim build yet such a huge and impossible weight for his sloped shoulders. Approaching the ladders, rung after rung, there were so many cries, coins of wax, sweat and blood, Thomas passes timber-people with boots for arms and unblinking eyes, who could see in the dark.

People often died from falling. Men dropped from the ladders at the changing of shifts, the merciless ladders. Thank heavens for the man engine!

Thomas was nearing the 150-level shaft, had somehow reached it, carrying this boy. He waits to fall, he waits to die, yet still edges up like some hellish beast, from the depths of a thick grey hell. A pit of monsters hatching from the seed of the buried engine.

Several snakes of rope fall, in front of Thomas, men shout from above. Richards is prized from him, still hanging unconscious, and rises to the pin of light. He is next, his whole body one pulse of adrenaline, a thick rope wound about his torso. His world is grim, grey turning white like the insides of an eye, the blank scroll of rebirth. Is he dead?

The men, his rescuers, lay him down next to Richards, 'A brave one', they say.

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*Atropos, the inevitable Moirai, spins thirty-three threads from nail to thumb and braces silver shears. Sarpedon lines up on the blood fields. They shine like milk and cut as silk, discarded in the pit. Once and twice, thirty-one threads lie under the earth. The engine of inner life pulled gently, gutted with one snip. The two threads spared, lying neatly side by side on the outer surface of fate.*