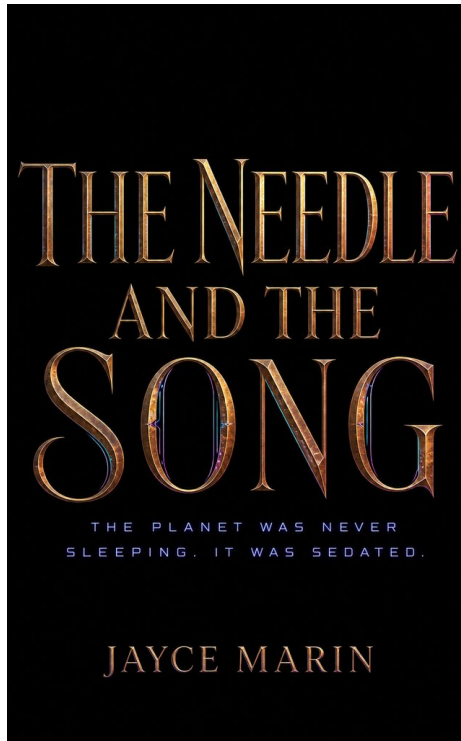




The Needle and the Song

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FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTER ONE

Chapter One: The Hum Beneath

The vibration began in the soles of my boots and climbed into my marrow, a low, tectonic thrum that never truly stopped. Down here in the Underworks, the air carried weight as much as sound. It tasted of wet rust and the sharp, ozone-tinged bite of spent capacitors. I adjusted the strap of my breather, the familiar pressure against the bridge of my nose a constant reminder of the descent. The maintenance shaft was a vertical throat of scorched iron, and I was sliding down its gullet, one ratcheting grip at a time.

I counted the rungs. One. Two. Three. My gloves, worn thin at the fingertips but reinforced with sensor-tape, hissed against the cold metal. Rhythm was everything. Without it, the industrial roar of the extraction pumps became a physical assault, a chaotic battering that threatened to loosen the seams of my mind. I needed the quiet. I needed the farm.

I closed my eyes for a fraction of a second and let the synthetic memory bloom. I could see the golden stalks of wheat swaying under a pale, infinite blue sky, nothing like the bruised, subterranean purple above me now. I could smell the dry heat of the soil and hear the distant, melodic clack of a wooden windmill. The Consortium had stitched it into my gray matter to keep me stable. It wasn't real. It worked anyway. The memory held me steady in a storm of static. The farm was peace. The farm was the reason I could function without flinching.

Forty-eight. Forty-nine. Fifty. My boots hit the lower catwalk with a muffled metallic clang. I didn't scan the area

first; I ran the check. It was a compulsion, a hardwired sequence of movements built for my survival. I touched the hilt of the first Mnemosyne Blade at my left hip, then the second at my right. I checked the seal on my thigh-pouches. I traced the silvery geometric lines of the circuit-scars on my forearms, making sure the magitech interfaces were cool to the touch. Only when the inventory was complete did I let myself look at Pump Station 4.

The station was dim, lit only by the dying glow of its own machinery. Thick, translucent conduits snaked across the ceiling, pulsing with a sickly violet radiance: Aether, the lifeblood of the city, being drawn up from the planet's depths. The pulse was erratic, stuttering the way a bad heart does. Beneath the main junction, the shadows were moving. Low to the ground, a dozen pairs of eyes reflected the violet glow with a predatory, oil-slick sheen.

Aether-rats. They were the size of small dogs, their fur matted with calcified mineral deposits, their teeth elongated into jagged needles of bone. They were chewing on the primary power conduits, small frantic bodies jerking with every spark of leaking energy. They weren't eating so much as absorbing. I could see the corruption in the way their muscles bunched and rippled with unnatural speed.

Fear wasn't a variable I processed. It was inefficient, and the Overseer's design had pruned it from my profile years ago. Only the cold efficiency of the algorithm remained. The distance resolved: twelve meters. Nine targets. Fourteen seconds to optimal termination. I drew the Mnemosyne Blades. They didn't ring like steel. They slid from their

sheaths with a predatory hiss, the dull, light-absorbing alloy drinking in the ambient violet glow. The sensor-tape on the hilts interfaced with my nervous system, a prickling warmth that told me the blades were mine now, part of my hands.

I moved. Not running. Flowing. My boots made no sound on the oil-slicked grating. The first rat didn't even have time to hiss before my left blade severed its spine. It was a clinical, precise strike, no wasted energy, no theatrics. I was a tool, and a tool didn't need to be loud to be effective. The pack erupted into a frenzy of chattering and gnashing bone, but they were slow. To them I was a blur of gray cloth and violet eyes. To me they were static targets in a world that had slowed to a crawl.

I pivoted on my heel, my right blade catching a leaping rat mid-air and bisecting it with a wet crunch. I felt the resistance of its mutated hide, the way the Aether-hardened bone snapped under the light-absorbing edge. My mind lingered on the farm. The wind is soft today, I thought, ducking beneath a pair of snapping jaws and hamstringing a third creature. The harvest will be good. I stepped into a pocket of shadow, twisted, and brought both blades down in a scissoring motion. Two more rats collapsed, their chattering silenced.

Twelve seconds. Three targets remaining. They began to back away, their primitive instincts finally overriding the Aether-frenzy. They saw the violet in my eyes, the unnatural, piercing glow that marked me as something even more corrupted than them. I didn't give them the chance to flee. I launched myself forward, my blades humming as they cut

through the air. A precise thrust to the skull. A sweeping arc that took out the last two. By the time the final carcass hit the floor, I was already cleaning my blades on a rag I'd pulled from my belt.

The hum of the station hadn't improved. The rats had been a symptom, not the cause. The blockage was deeper, lodged in the primary intake valve where the heat ran hot enough to melt lead. I approached the valve, my blades still gripped tight. The air here shimmered with a thermal haze, and the smell was changing. The ozone and rust had thinned into something sweet and cloying, rotten at the edges, with a scorched, hairlike sharpness underneath it.

Then I saw it. Not a build-up of mineral salts. Not a tangle of debris. A person. Or he had been one. A maintenance worker, still wearing the tattered remains of a Consortium utility suit, was fused into the pipework. The Aether calcification had turned his lower half into a sprawling, crystalline growth anchored to the intake valve. His skin had gone translucent, stretched thin over bones that had taken on the color of amethyst. He wasn't dead. His chest moved in shallow, hitching jerks, and his one remaining eye, clouded with violet cataracts, tracked me as I approached.

I stopped. My blades stayed level, ready to strike, but the creature didn't snarl. It didn't lunge. It reached out a hand, a claw of fused bone and weeping sores, and gripped my forearm. The strength surprised me: a desperate, frantic power that got past my armor entirely. In that moment the neural blockers in my neck spiked, a warning flare of white-hot agony telling me my reality was being

compromised. The heat of the pipe stopped being a temperature and became a sound.

I heard it with my cells, not my ears. A scream, long and sustained, a note of pure, unadulterated agony vibrating through the metal, through the worker's grip, and into my own blood. The Aether wasn't fuel or energy. It was a voice, and it was begging for all of this to stop. The worker's lips moved, a dry, papery sound that barely formed words. "Please," he wheezed, the violet light in his veins pulsing in time with the scream. "End... the... song."

For the first time in my life, the memory of the farm flickered. The blue sky cracked open, revealing a dark, pulsing void beneath. The wooden windmill shattered. The dry heat of the soil turned into the searing, wet heat of a wound. I stared at the man, my breath coming in ragged, uneven bursts, and the violet in my eyes flared until it blinded me. I wasn't holding a tool anymore. I was holding a person, and I was part of his scream now, and I couldn't ignore it.

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