



EMERALD
ARIA

K.C. SPIEGELBERG

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This novel was written by a human.

EMERALD ARIA

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For my beautiful wife,
my partner in song.



DANGRE

VELMORAS

HALWAG

ALIH

MORASITH

ELSHED-ADAR

BULC

CONARD

FRECKK

PRETH

GRENDA

MORIBO

YEWAR

BENNIC

HEARTHMERÉ

OLIBATH

THALVERIS



CLOPER

WATRO

DRAETHEUS

SLOIS

TENDISFAL

HURKEL

MORG
DELIA

ORRISFAL

CALRITHIA

UBI-MASH

CORIX

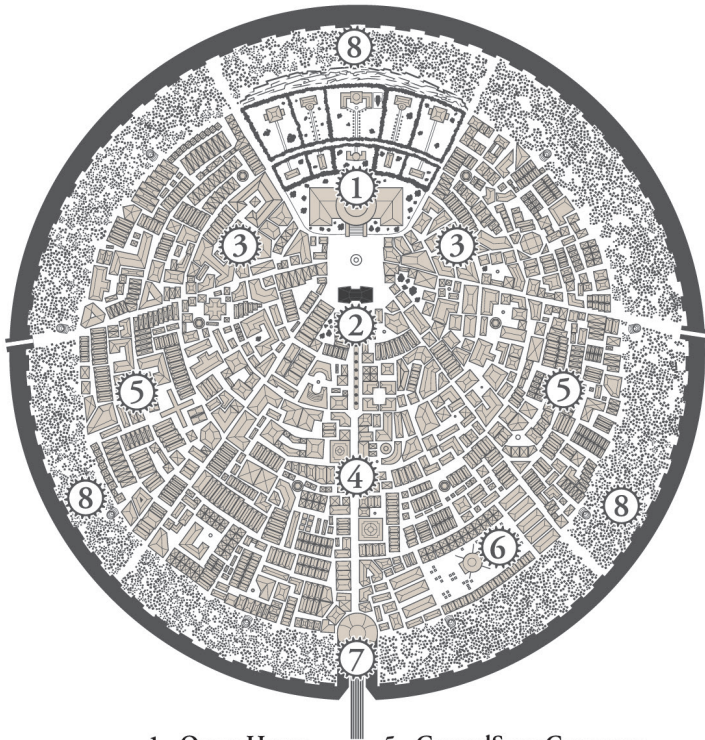
LILTO

HOAR

FURIA

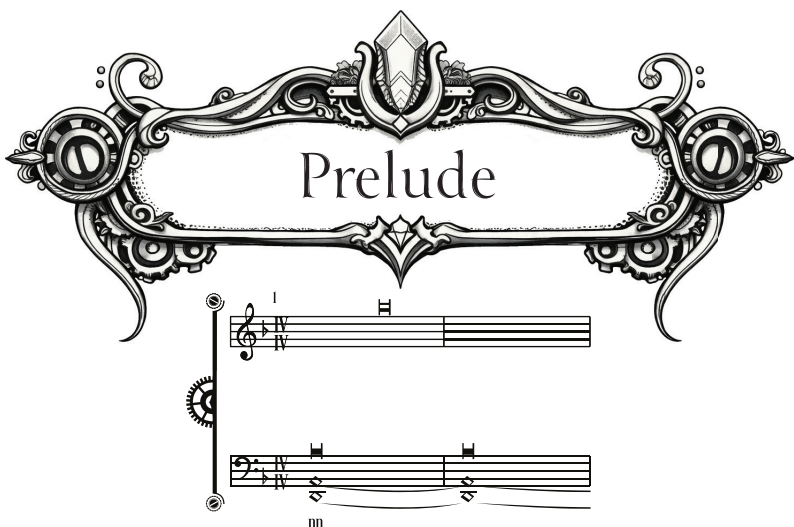


HEARTHMERÈ



- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 - Opera House | 5 - GroundSong Commons |
| 2 - The Citadel | 6 - Air Dock |
| 3 - Resonance Heights | 7 - Rail Depot |
| 4 - Cantata Row | 8 - Whisper Ward |

May my voice reflect my spirit.



Chadden had never seen a man killed with a violin before. He and a beggar had been sitting against a stone shack, knees drawn to their chests while puffs of precious heat wisped out of their mouths. Inside a city that should have been providing them all with heat, the people in the slums were shivering.

The Empire couldn't care less.

The inky darkness of night covered the agent's approach. A shrill note pierced the symphony of coughs and snuffles of the Whisper Ward, followed by streaking viridian light. Malevolent energy illuminated her pristine white uniform as it screamed through the air.

They had found him again. Faster than before.

Sonic force rippled over frozen mud and sliced through the beggar next to him, slamming into the building and showering the back of Chadden's head with shards. When he opened his eyes after recoiling, she was already towering over him.

She didn't belong in the mud and the muck. Gold buttons glinted in the dim green GlysterLight on a pristine white military coat and dark slacks. The way her eyes sparkled, malevolent and cruel beneath her short silver hair, raised his hackles.

The instrument—an abomination of cogs and wires—was leveled at him like a rifle, pulsing blue-green. She trailed her bow across the strings with sadistic glee, savoring his last moments.

Dirt and grime from months of running caked his coat and dreadlocks, and his throat ached from overuse. His sleep had been haunted by the sound of instruments always behind him. Always emerging from the shadows. Always destructive.

They had made him hate music.

He screamed at himself to run, but his legs were treacherously disobedient. The brass and leather GlysterBoots fastened to his feet were heavy, and the telltale pulsing of power hinted at maybe one more jump. Whoever he had stolen them from hadn't changed the cores out.

She raised a curious eyebrow as he rose, her too-long fingers pausing before her final strike. “No last words?” Her voice dripped with venomous sarcasm.

Chadden was so tired of running.

He brought his shoulders back and puffed out his chest. Her face shifted to mirth, assuming he was taking a final stand. He wasn't a hero, just another failed singer.

He needed the correct posture to sing his last song.

Like a blacksmith at the bellows, he sucked in breath, drawing from a reservoir brimming with the anger and fear of a caged animal. Memories of the last few months welled up in his mind. A singer laughing with him after his audition for the Grand Chorus, slammed against a stone building in the alley they were stumbling down. The friendly woman at the bakery who eased his hunger, lying in a pool of her own blood. It didn't matter how involved they were. If he spoke to them, they were dead. Memories of every person who died helping him crashed down like an avalanche ripping through the mountains. Worst of all, he couldn't even send letters back home to warn his little brother Traven.

He took that sense of loss—that desperation—and allowed it to wash through him.

Skin tingled. Warmth blossomed from his chest, thawing his frozen fingers and bringing the world into focus. He knew now this was exactly what the Arcanum was testing for during his audition. This power was what had gotten him into this mess. It may as well get him out.

A rumble shook from his neck, bursting forth from his lips in a roar of desperation and rage. The air rippled like a heatwave and slammed into the woman with a screaming thud and showering ice. She caught it in the chest, somersaulting backwards into the shack behind her with a crash.

He started running before she could stand, dreadlocks swishing against his forehead as he spun. There was no time to check if it worked, hesitation would kill him. Green vapor drifted from between his clenched teeth.

The glowing boots slipped in the frosty mud and he clawed at the wall for momentum. Whatever strength he had been saving was sapped, but he couldn't die here. He needed to move.

Once clear of the alley, he shifted his ankles and crouched mid-stride. The GlysterBoots whirred and clicked as the clockwork came to life, a burst of green firelight flaring under his soles for a powered jump.

Green slashes exploded through the wooden door next to him, splintering into his face, ripping his cloak, and tossing him off-balance. The gears of his boots locked into position with a whine.

He wasn't ready.

With a dull thunderclap that rattled the metal rooftops, his boots catapulted him into the sky. He arced wildly, careening over the buildings and to the next street. The roof came too fast, and his efforts to roll saved his skull at the expense of his shoulder. He thudded into the metal with a sickening crunch.

His arm went numb, and it was hard to breathe. The coppery taste of blood coated his tongue. Pushing himself up with a shaking arm, his boots scraped against the metal rooftop with an unpleasant screech. A resident banged on the roof from underneath. They would stay quiet if they knew what was good for them. Another violin shriek ripped through the air.

“Slush,” he cursed, dropping prone as a chord ripped over his head.

Chadden tried to summon his voice again, but the blossoming pain in his throat slammed his mouth shut. He had done this too many times, and he was so bloody tired.

Again he pushed himself up, hoping his stride would create enough distance between them. Her footsteps rattled the rooftops behind, but he kept his eyes to the uneven rooftops. The boots clicked into position one last time, and an arc of power sliced under his legs as he jumped to the next set of buildings. The boots sputtered and sparked as he landed, the emerald lights fading. The damned things were out of fuel.

A deep boom rattled the rooftops, shaking his feet.

Thunder?

Unseen force slammed into him. Tin roofs and rising steam blurred in the moonlight as he crashed down with a metallic screech. The protective GlysterDome above the city shimmered peacefully and he chuckled at the irony before his view filled with a mass of muscles with a blonde mohawk. “You ain’t supposed to kill him, Veyne. She’s gonna be pissed.”

This was it. He’d never sing for anyone again.

The violinist approached, her chest heaving as blood trickled from her scalp onto her pristine uniform. She pointed the instrument at his face. “He’s clearly not dead, but he will be if I see him take another deep breath. You prepare him for extraction. I’ll handle the mess on the street.”

The hulking man cocked his head, a hint of amusement

building on his square face. The roof creaked under his weight as he knelt down, his hands gently tapping the drums fastened to his waist. Pressure forced Chadden's aching shoulder to the rooftop, waves of resonance beating him down. Each attempt he made to stand was countered with a flash of the Glycerium drums, forcing him back.

"Come, friend, the Empire needs you," the brute sneered.

Chadden's arms quivered in an attempt to rise, but his legs wouldn't move.

Why wouldn't they move?

The assassin brought his face close enough to whisper, his breath reeking of rancid meat. "The Baron has use fer you."

He raised a fist as large as his head, and darkness came crashing down.