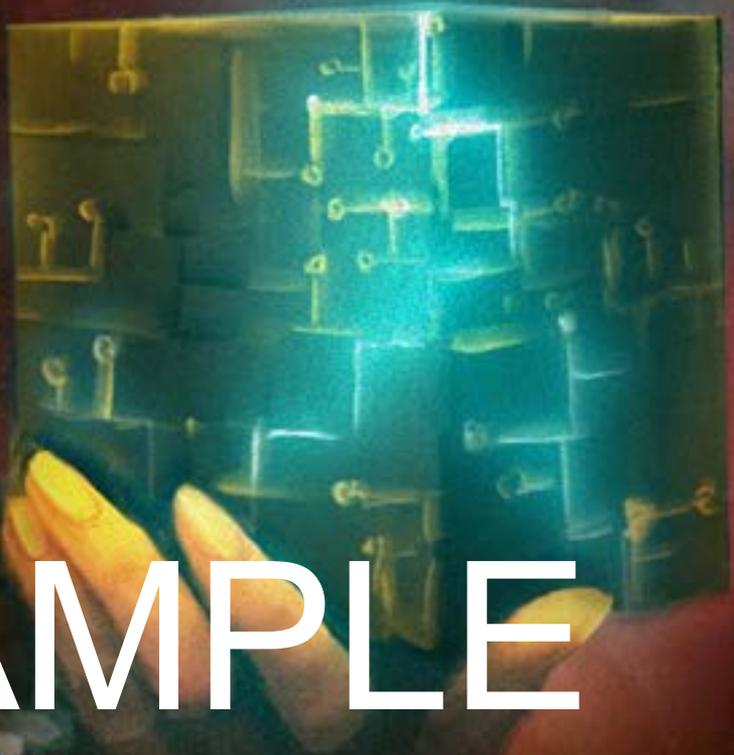


RUNICFIRE

SCI-FI • FANTASY • HORROR • ANARCHY



SAMPLE

IN THIS ISSUE:

ROSARIA OF VENICE

A RENPUNK ADVENTURE

A GLITCH IN THE TIMING

FROM THE EXPLOITS OF ESAU ALEXANDER

AND THE ROAD THROUGH GAZA

Runicfire Magazine, Vol 1

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INVOCATION

Once more, into the fray...

IT'S BEEN A LONG ROAD leading here, and I still have far to go.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the publication of my first novel, *Rosaria of Venice*. Fresh out of college, I threw myself into writing the second. Then, two years and nowhere near enough sales further, the world caught on fire.

It's still burning.

The election of the Great Orange Avatar of Azathoth compelled me to act, and my second novel ground nearly to a halt as I threw myself into progressive activism. I'm proud of the work I did, but near the end of that fetid cycle I burned out, and have struggled since then to maintain basic sanity, steady income, and even a roof above my head. In retrospect, I ought to have tended to myself and my career first, and set in-person action as a secondary goal, as opposed to the inherently political project of my writing. Ultimately, I used activism to run away from myself, to bolster my ego as I was gentrified out of the Bay Area and fell out with my less radical friends. I'm not running any longer.

My return to writing and publishing makes me no less the radical, and no less political. *Rosaria* has always been a cannon aimed at the heart of Western civilization and its absurd hierarchies. My political awakening has only served to complete the series, thematically, in

ways I've never thought possible. It's clarified the subconscious intent surrounding my other works, completed and planned, and inspired new possibilities as well.

In the first twelve issues of this zine Runicfire, you'll find the entire first edition of the novel serialized. I say "first edition" because this October I intend to launch a second Kickstarter campaign to fund a second edition, along with its sequel, *The Sin of Prometheus*, the manuscript for which I completed in 2021.

Every issue will feature at least one original short story, sometimes starring recurring characters and others offering standalone adventures, mysteries, horrors, or what have you. I can guarantee they'll all be science fiction, or occasionally fantasy, and will test the limits of your imagination.

From time to time, I'll also include essays, of a political, nerdy, philosophical or scientific bent, as it pleases me. My politics tilt unabashedly left-to-post-left, and those made queasy by the thought of handling issues of social justice, feminism, anti-racism and anti-capitalism will need to bring their own barf bags. I won't be accomodating. Moderates, liberals, and even fellow radicals looking for a journal coddling their preconceptions will walk away disappointed and even offended. I'm sick and tired of the stultifying tendency in every left-leaning milieu to reduce any and all conversation to an endless catechism of group belonging. It's insulting, childish, counterproductive, and it hasn't saved a single life, freed a single oppressed person, nor gladly converted anyone to the cause. I will protect no-one from the heat of my fury against the hypocrisies and failures of my own side, and you should thank me for that. As a writer who can expect a left-leaning audience, given his proclivities, stooping merely to criticizing the accepted enemies would represent a dereliction of duty. It is my role and my obligation to cultivate the individual, to catalyze my readers' process of self-creation, and I cannot do that while pandering to their delusions. We all have them, no matter how righteous we think we are, so enter that dim forest and begin hunting them yourself if you fear my criticism.

Do not mistake my fervor for pretensions of perfection. I'm a Jewish atheist and have no use for those. I leave that game to the cultural puritans across the political spectrum.

Don't ask me about Palestine. Read about it later in this issue.

For now, however, despite the dismal era, I hope you will enjoy the tales on offer in this first volume. In this issue's opening yarn, you'll meet the future, extrastellar private detective Esau Alexander, faced with the challenging decision of whether to risk a pro-bono, Good Samaritan case or prudently await something that can cover the costs. Rounding out this first zine are the first two chapters of Rosaria of Venice, introducing respectively the zealous villain Serafino and the heroine of the hour: scientist, swashbuckler and noblewoman Rosaria Adalberto.

As you lose yourself in their worlds, let the journey refresh you, delight you, and upon return to your ordinary life offer the perspective to face the cosmos in ways you could not before.

A GLITCH IN THE TIMING

In the far future, on another world,
private detective Esau Alexander
confronts an offer he must refuse.

E XCUSE ME, MA'AM?"

Words could not describe the expression on Esau Alexander's face. His normally placid visage had contorted itself into a Japanese theatre mask, of old Earth fame. His brow rippled in waves and his mouth twisted in a shape that only abject disbelief could effect. He fixed his obsidian eyes on the delicate old lady on the other end of the desk. She stared back, knobby chin up, from underneath a purple hat with a mangy faux-peacock feather attached. Her bespectacled green orbs met his almost casually.

"There's no need for alarm," said the lady, measuring her words in her sweet, tremoring voice, "I'm certain finding my Marvin will be a doozy. Lively little sweetheart, you'll know him right away. Cinnamon-in-black hair, emerald eyes... here's a picture for you."

The lady took a slip of glossy paper from a battered brown handbag and slid it toward Esau. Its surface gave way to a three-dimensional scene of a young man in a white shirt and trousers, standing by a Magrail train car. He was deeply tanned, much like his thick, suspended trousers, but almost red from sunburn. His eyes were overshadowed by his brow, and his mouth was bent into a scowl. He held tight to the tiny, dingy box-luggage he carried with

him. Esau looked blankly at the holograph, then at the lady again. He opened his mouth to say something, but he closed it instead.

“He moved in three months ago, after his father died.” continued the old lady, “He just fell down and stopped moving one day. Left nothing behind but an old Magellan watch. Maya was beside herself, so I said ‘Why not send him up here?’ Oh, he’s so young! And he doesn’t know how to live in the city. He probably just got stuck on the Mezzogrande loop train and...”

“Ma’am, I appreciate your helpfulness,” blurted Esau, “But what’s the payment?”

“Why, my eternal gratitude and thanks.” said the lady. She tilted her head and pursed her lips sympathetically. “Oh, I know it isn’t much. But a human life is worth so much more than money, and it just wouldn’t feel right to put a price on him.”

Esau blinked, several times. “Ma’am,” he said, in the deepest register his baritone voice could muster, “do you know what I am?”

“You are a private detective.” said the old lady.

“Right. But do you know what that means?”

“You find people, solve mysteries...”

“For a price,” said Esau, his expression turning stern, “A lot of people have come through that door, ma’am. Different people every time, but they all tend to be decked in velvet and lace. Folk like you...” Esau paused, looking at the old lady’s battered hat and dusty blue coat. “They don’t come here. And if they did, it’d take all they had to buy me for a day. My expenses run high, ma’am. I don’t look at the small jobs.”

The old lady’s head wobbled a little as she gave Esau a chiding look. Esau sighed, stood up from his chair and took the old lady’s hands.

“This,” he said as he helped the lady out of her seat, “is a job for the city guard. They’re just across the way.”

“She said to get a private detective,” protested the old lady, her voice quavering even more, “A private detective’ll get the job done, that’s what she said.”

“There’ll be detectives at the guard station,” Esau assured her as he escorted her to the gilded glasteel door, “Just as good as me.”

Esau opened the door and led the lady outside. A wind picked up in the arched corridor, blowing Esau's stiff, sable hair and the old lady's cotton skirt. The lady stared blankly at the other side of the hall, where full-wall windows looked in on dingy cubicles in the smoke-filled office of the Starfall City Guard.

As soon as the door closed behind them Esau knew he'd forgotten something. "Oh, we forgot your picture ma'am," he said, turning back to his office.

"No." said the old lady suddenly. She regarded Esau, looking him up and down. "Keep the picture. I expect you'll need it to find my grandson."

Esau couldn't help a baffled grin. "Ma'am, what reason do I have to find your grandson?"

"You'll help find my grandson," said the old lady, her voice surprisingly steady, "because it's always nice to help old grannies in need. *And because it's what you do.*"

Esau shook his head. Before he could protest the old grandmother waved and left, heading into the afternoon gale, her dress flapping against a mouth of overcast sky at the corridor's end.

At 13:00 Prima Centauri Standard time, under the archway of Heath Plaza on the Southern Bloc, a glasteel door swung open and Esau Alexander stepped out into the hall. He placed his left hand next to the door, locking it, and started down the arched hallway. He was dressed in a trenchcoat with a golden cord coiling down the sable right sleeve, meeting a sable-gloved hand. Normally his obsidian-black eyes were sharp and alive, dissecting everything in sight. But today they were distant, less of dark glass and more of ebony.

Esau emerged from the hallway into the light of an overcast afternoon. The air was cold and nibbling, and the stiff wind from earlier had not abated. Fearing a case of vertigo, Esau made a sincere effort not to look over the railing into the copper canyons of architecture below.

Esau mulled over the day in his head. Nothing of note had happened, except, of course, for the meeting with the old lady, which had gone nowhere. "Why don't you set up an office on the

Mezzogrande?” Elfried had said, “It would be a lovely chance to expand your clientelle. I have just the place picked out for you.” What a move that had been! No one of note ever came by, except for one confused messenger of a small-time merchant. That nearly ended in disaster.

Esau came to a flight of rickety iron stairs. As he took them down the view opened up before him and he could not help but look. The canyons of tenements, high-rises and abandoned towers stretched all the way to the horizon, where they became a sea of bronze. In the distance needles pierced the sky and domes loomed in the haze. Large platforms, islands of metal, rose out of the sea of buildings, covered with gold, steel and glass skyscrapers. There were many such platforms, and together they made the Mezzogrande: the Great Between where the castes of Starfall met and mingled.

But Esau’s thoughts stayed with Elfried’s admonition. No, thought Esau, he was content to receive his commissions online, as was protocol for a working detective. He wondered why he even listened to Elfried at all. But there was an imperiousness in the gaunt old man’s speech, one that inclined Esau’s mind to take notice. That imperiousness had led him into this dirty business, three years ago...

The stairs led to a scaffolding. There was a door there, brown paint peeling off of it. Esau went through. A white hallway later and the scene opened up to the marble gallery of Heath Plaza Station, flooded with people as it always was.

As Esau made his way past salarymen in brown suits and coats he mulled over what to do when he reached his home in the northern end of the city. He would check the Olympus network for any commissions, even though he knew there were none. Then he’d sit down with a whiskey or two, which would taste horrible. The store was out of Piscett, so he had to resort to synthetics, and they always had that sulfuric quality to them. The buzz, at least, would last him until morning. Esau had a few vials of stronger stuff if that did not work.

Esau was at the edge of the scaffolding, next to the tracks. A female voice chimed in and announced that the train was about to arrive. There was a tug at Esau’s shirtsleeve. Startled, he turned to find a mousy man in dusty clothes pressing a trinket to his face.

“Fifty Ducats, sir, for the finest watch you’ll ever see! Take a gander! Excellent workmanship!” crowed the man, “You won’t find this in any shop in Starfall! Are you not astounded at...”

Esau shook his head and waved his hand at the man, who disappeared obligingly. When his eyes returned to the tracks the train was arriving. It was an ornate, almost baroque, golden bullet sliding into the station, followed by another, and then another. It stopped, and bronze doors along the side slid open. The crowd stirred as people picked up their luggage and boarded the train.

Esau went to join them, but for some reason he looked back. Through an opening in the throng he saw the mouse-man that had bothered him, hawking his wares on an unsuspecting yet enthralled pole of a young man in a suit a size too large for him. The merchandise turned out to be more impressive than Esau expected. The watch was a palm-sized pocket model, gold with a chain. Just now the dealer was showing the young man a holographic display couched inside the cover.

The last few passengers were boarding the train car. The female voice announced that it would be leaving soon. Esau looked nervously at the magrail, to make sure it didn’t move suddenly, but in the end the watch caught his attention once again. He’d seen watches like that. They weren’t so much watches as miniature computers and GPS devices packaged as watches. The Magellan Timepiece Company made a version which combined impeccable analog workings with digital technology. They were indeed something you wouldn’t find in any shop in Starfall: they were ordered directly by the corporate Aristocracy, the only ones who could afford such a piece of equipment. Common folk, city or country, could go their entire lives without setting eyes on one. To a biofarm worker, salaryman or merchant such a device would be a treasure, cherished from one generation to the next.

Left nothing behind but an old Magellan watch.

The last passenger stepped into the magrail car. Esau had less than a second before the doors closed. He looked the other way. The mouse-man dealer was grinning widely as the excited office boy reached for his wallet.

Damn it.

Moments later, the bullet train slid out of the station and sped into the distance. Before it passed under the station's arch Esau bounded over to the dealer and snatched the watch out of his outstretched hand.

"Hey!" cried the dealer, his eyes flaring, "I was just makin' a transaction here!"

Esau ignored him and quickly examined the watch. It was old: the gold had developed a deep patina. Etched on the front cover was the image of a compass, the symbol of the Magellan Timepiece Company.

"Where did you get this?" he asked the dealer.

"Nowhere! That's where I found it, you..." The dealer reached to grab the watch, but Esau pulled it away from him.

"Where?" repeated Esau.

"It's none of your business," snarled the dealer, "Now, I was about to get fifty Ducats for that thing, so unless you're gonna pay more—hey!" The customer had taken back the wad of bills he had paid and was running out of the station. "Come back here! We have business to settle, kid!"

The dealer started after his customer, but Esau pulled him back. "You're dealing with me now," growled Esau, "And I want to know where you got this watch."

"What're you gonna give me for that?"

"My eternal thanks and gratitude."

"You expect me to tell you for *that*?"

"I expect you to tell me," Esau said, slowly, "Because you know I'm someone who's used to getting his way. Because you know I'll make you very, very uncomfortable if you don't tell me. And because my gratitude is worth its weight in gold. You got that?"

"Fine!" yelled the dealer, trying to push himself away from Esau. He failed. "I filched it off a jacketeer in Lokisville. That enough for you?"

Esau pulled the holograph the old lady gave him out of his pocket. "Did that gangster look like this?"

The dealer strained his eyes to see. He shook his head. “Nah. Wasn’t him. But...” He pursed his lips. “It looks an awful lot like this other guy who was with him.”

Esau looked the dealer in the eye. The man met his gaze and didn’t look away. There was nothing challenging in or defiant in that stare. It was the look of a man who was, for once, being honest.

Esau let the man go and put the holograph away. “Thank you,” he said as he turned to leave.

“You forgot to give me back that watch,” said the dealer.

Esau twirled the watch by its chain. “It’s not yours,” he said as he put it away.

The dealer couldn’t do anything but stand in his boots as Esau left the station. “Fine then!” he yelled after Esau, “Be like that! But you’ll burn in hell one of these days, and when you do, I’ll be laughing!”

Esau smiled a Cheshire smile. Poor, clueless man. Didn’t he know he was already in hell?

The city of Starfall was divvied up into a number of estates, each owned and operated by their feudal lords, inheritors all of mega-corporations. Within these estates, and on the Mezzogrande, the Aristocracy maintained a veneer of order.

Lokisville had no such pleasant face.

Off the platforms on which the newer developments were built were vast expanses of abandoned tenements, highrises and skyscrapers welded together haphazardly. These were the Canyons, and they were the great wilderness of Starfall. Many who set eyes upon this ocean of copper and bronze believed they could divine patterns in the patchwork of lines and geometry that spanned to the horizon. It was easy to imagine that some message was etched into its architecture, or that its criss-crossing fissures were arranged according to some Old Earth Feng Shui principles. Even wilder stories were told of what lay in the depths: for most people on the plates it was an abode of bogeymen and hobgoblins, haunted by shadows awaiting mortal prey. Common sense dictated that somewhere, deep down, the buildings of Starfall met the ground, however it was speculated that the city

AARON M. MINER wanted to visit the stars since he was a child. But humans didn't invent warp drive fast enough, so he became a science fiction author instead. He published the first edition of his premiere novel, *Rosaria of Venice*, in 2014 after a successful Kickstarter campaign. A second edition and a sequel, *The Sin of Prometheus*, are forthcoming, and he is now working on the first draft of the fourth *Rosaria* novel. As a student he produced and directed an animated music video for indie rapper Murs Carter, and hopes to return to the animation scene in the near future. He still harbors dreams of adopting a Bengal cat.

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