

Excerpt from the science fiction novella

CLASS-M EXILE

Raven Oak



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PRAISE FOR *CLASS-M EXILE*

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A FISH WITHOUT A BICYCLE

Bay-zar. Class-M planet in the middle of no-where. Dust, dust, and more dust. Unless ya circled 'round to the more habitable region, you'd be stuck without a ship to anywhere. 'Round the corner though, you could find everything from ship parts and dried food packs, to roast dog and the rare *bi*-cycle. Hell, you could even buy yerself a *gen-u-ine* religion if you were so inclined.

I wasn't sure why I'd come here; touristin' weren't my thing. Only that I'd never been to Bay-zar, and everyone said ya hafta visit at least once. It wasn't the humidity that left my noses crinklin' in the bright sun, but the smell of manure and too many beings as hundreds of heads bobbed up and down in a sea of booths, goods, and tourists.

The ultimate tourist trap. And here I'd taken the bait.

Sweat pooled inside my heavy ship boots. Other tourists from the ship bumped ma elbows as they disembarked *The Marzipan* (don't ask, the captain has weird taste in food, or so I heard). This little squirt elbowed his way past me and half-a-dozen folks crowded 'round a blazin' red booth promisin' trinkets made of *gen-u-ine* gold, fresh from the mines of *Miral*.

I cringed when he hollered 'bout his silly ideas for usin' dead folks for energy. I weren't but three steps away from this fool when a white-hooded figure shoved its way through the crowd.

She skidded to a stop just inside my personal space. "Ever been to Bay-zar?" she asked with a quick glance over her shoulder. Two beefy men carryin' scowls were comin' in fast 'nough to knock over a stand of leafy green somethin's. Girl leaned close to me like we was kin, and my frame hid her as them military beefcakes passed.

Every race, religion, creed, gender, species, and nationality in over a hundred worlds traveled through Bay-zar, or so I'd heard, but never before had I seen her kind outside a book. Hell, I didn't think they even existed no-more.

A departin' shuttle sent a cloud of dust skitterin' 'cross us, and her hood fell back. Whispers moved 'cross the market like rain—first as tiny droplets, mostly ignored 'til the downpour caught everyone off guard. Then all motion stopped. The market's chatterin' and clankin' died as all focus shifted to her. One of them fancy gentleman tumbled over a child in his attempt to flee. Some three-eyed creature let loose a half-cough, half-scream as it raced up the ramp of *The Marzipan*.

"What?" I asked. "She's just a *bu*-man."

"B-but look at her! She's only got two eyes!" a voice cried out.

"Yeah, and two legs. Who uses two legs anymore?"

The cries from them tourists continued, but the female *bu*-man stood there in cargo pants and a tee-shirt that read, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle."

To them, she was the plague. She was a one-way trip into the flames of a dyin' sun.

And she was awesome.

I didn't know what a fish was, and I'd never seen a real *bi*-cycle, but by golly, I was gonna find out.

"The name's Eerl." Somewhere in all my readin', I recalled somethin' 'bout hands bein' important to *hu*-mans. I held a slightly damp hand palm-up in front of her face. When she exposed two rows of lightly yellowed teeth, someone behind us growled as they passed. But she kept on a-smilin' and flashin' those weapons like they weren't nothin' at all.

"Mel." She seized my hand and pumped it up and down. "You've never been to Bay-zar?"

I shook my head. "Nope. First time. You?"

"I live here. Sort of." Another growl as a *Rbarstian* passed, his tentacled eyes dartin' back and forth. 'Round us, tourists settled back into their hagglin' over knick-knacks and patti-macks, whatever *they* were. I ain't sayin' folks huddled near or nothin'; in fact, a nice empty circle settled 'round us.

"I ain't never heard of *hu*-mans livin' here. Once upon a time maybe, but—"

Her laughter cut like them hydraulics on the *The Marzipan* when they went belly up, but I pretended not to notice. "Where do you think that phrase came from?" she asked, and I shrugged. More laughter from her sent a whiff of moldy bread my way.

With breath like that, no wonder them folks were scared, but I reckoned it were more 'n that. A quick look-see showed her body to be little more than bones and whipcord. She went on like she never noticed my frown. "From humans. More than half of your Common vocabulary came from Earth. Hell, your accent would put you right at home in the southern United States...."

More words I ain't never heard. What were *states* and how'd they get all united? I mean, there was a war goin' on. As far as I knew, Earth was dead, long destroyed by them damned *ryddarl*—nothin' more than bottom feeders from Ryddar with enough

firepower to blow up a sun and then some. When she said *home*, I lost what little there was to my river of thought.

“...But I figure it’s somewhere out there.”

“What is?” I asked.

Her smile sorta fell gentle-like. Poor girl weren’t nothin’ more than a youngin’ standin’ two footed on the dirt of Bay-zar. Poor and alone. My heart sank.

“My home. Earth,” she said and fingered the stone slung ’round her neck with a frayin’ rope.

“That’s it!” The shout from behind weren’t nothin’ compared to the shove that came next as a beefy, red-skinned man with a taser grabbed her tee-shirt. “You aren’t welcome here! You’ve been told that before, human. Now get gone.” He glared and twirled the taser by the wrist strap with one finger.

“But she lives here,” I muttered, and the muscles of his four arms thickened.

Before I had a chance of findin’ out exactly what that meant, a deep rumble set the booths to tremblin’ and the market’s chatter returned to silence. Mel’s blue eyes widened, and she whispered, “Oh, damn.” She didn’t laugh no-more, didn’t smile neither. Just stood transfixed. Mel stared at the sky like the heavens were fallin’, even when the red-skinned enforcer jabbed her shoulder with his meaty fingers. I followed her gaze, as did the rest of them folks in the market. And when the shadow fell ’cross us, blottin’ out the sun, even the enforcer fell silent.

It was *big*.

Well, big didn’t do it justice, but I’m a simple *Tersic*—words weren’t ever my strength. Damned *ryddarl* ship blackened that sky and then groaned under the weight of its own size. I ain’t never seen a ship like that. *The Marzipan* coulda fit in that ship’s pocket, and ya would’ve never seen it in all the coils and loops and doo-dads hangin’ from the engines of that behemoth.

If you’ve seen a herd of cattle escapin’ a cyber-lion, you’ve seen Bay-zar in that moment. Feet kickin’ up dust as people ran in every direction, though none was the right one. Didn’t matter if they

went left or right, that ship was everywhere. Mel trembled beside me. Those eyes—only two of 'em, yet I'd swear she seen more than me when she done looked at the underbelly of that ship.

One moment she was still. The next, she gave me a shove that done sent me outta the street and behind some flimsy curtain. I had just enough time to recognize it as a street vendor's booth before Mel barreled in. "Keep moving!" she shouted.

I didn't know where we was goin', but I reckoned I didn't need to. The screams and groans outside hurt my ears, and Mel gave my hand a desperate tug. The youngin' led me through a maze of booths and back alleys that smelled of piss and shit. So strong was the smell, bile rose in my throat. That ship landed somewhere behind us, and silence descended. We musta run circles 'cause I saw *The Marzipan* as we ducked behind an empty wooden crate.

Several smaller ships burned. Somethin' struck *The Marzipan* with a muffled thud, but the shields held. I'll admit, I didn't do much thinkin'. My brain spun 'round in all that chaos while bodies dropped to the dust below. As Mel tried to catch her wind, I hauled her over to *The Marzipan* and pushed her through the open hatch. "What are you doing?" she hissed, but I shushed her. No need to call attention to her or nothin'. I tossed her jacket's hood over her head to cover them dark-brown curls and placed a finger to her lips.

"Don't say nothin'."

The hatch closed behind us, cuttin' off the sun. All them practice drills paid off as I pulled Mel toward the cargo hold's front. Slightly muted sobs dead ahead corrected my path when I turned wrong, and soon after, the beam from a flashlight hit my front eyes. The light shifted to Mel's hood-covered face before it clicked off, strandin' us in darkness.

"Why are the lights out?" someone whispered.

"The shields are taking too much power, I suppose."

The speaker was hushed by one of *The Marzipan*'s guards who asked, "Everyone here?"

"Everyone except Rhiohl. He's dead."

I didn't know which one of the passengers said it. Didn't rightly recall who Rhiohl was either. Guess it didn't matter no-more.

When a crew-member ordered us strapped into the racks, I took care of Mel. Weren't no reason to alert anyone—not yet anyway. She stayed quiet-like as she leaned against the cushioned wall-rack. When the belt clicked 'cross her scraggly frame and locked her into place, I seen the fear in her eyes just the once before she blinked it away. Sharpness stared back as I belted myself in. She took holda my hand and squeezed.

The Marzipan's thrusters sent a vibration through my feet. We were leavin' Bay-zar.

If we were lucky, we'd make it off world alive. And if we were luckier, no one would notice the *hu*-man stowaway.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Raven Oak is the author of the epic fantasy novel *Amaskan's Blood* and the upcoming science fiction space opera *The Eldest Silence*. She spent most of her K-12 education doodling stories and 500 page monstrosities that are forever locked away in a filing cabinet.

When she's not writing, she's getting her game on with tabletop and console games, indulging in cartography, or staring at the ocean. She lives in Seattle, WA with her husband, and their three kitties who enjoy lounging across the keyboard when writing deadlines approach.

Raven is currently at work on *Amaskan's War* and *The Eldest Traitor*.

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