

# THE MERKAN

By

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## CHAPTER

### \*\* ONE \*\*

It was late in the day and activity on the Tradestation had fallen off. Most of the Traders had called it quits and shifted their attention to more leisurely pursuits. This was the perfect time to take a nap in the park-like lounge area of the Transaction Deck. The simulated breeze wafted through the plants, lulling him into a peaceful slumber . . .

“And Just WHY Should I pay your FULL PRICE when you FAILED to deliver on your PROMISES?!” The quiet was disrupted by an angry female voice. He really didn’t want to open his eyes and look, but . . .

“If you recall, *Princess*, I made no promises *or* guarantees!” A man responded, angrily.

Reluctantly turning his head in the direction of the altercation, he saw a Tradeship Captain and an attractive woman with hair the color of flame, glaring at each other in front of the Transaction Counter.

“Nonetheless, seventy-five percent is ALL I will PAY!” The woman shot back.

“You’re gonna force me to take legal action!” The Captain threatened.

Heaving a deep sigh of regret for his lost nap, Adam got up and walked over to the window next to the quarreling pair.

“You Led me to Believe that you KNEW where one was! Legal action be damned, I have the best attorneys available, so just TRY!” The woman responded, jutting out her jaw.

“Captain Brent, what can I do for you?” The clerk asked, smiling broadly.

He smiled back. “Hi, Janice. There any cargo hauls on deck?”

“Leaving already? My shift up here is over tomorrow and I was hoping we could down-planet and have some fun.” Her disappointment was obvious.

“Sorry, but it’s time for me to get back to work. Besides, it’s getting a little too noisy around here,” he said, jerking his head to the right. “Next time, though, it’s a date.”

“Was that comment referring to ME!?” The noise in question asked.

He turned his head. Even with her face showing barely suppressed anger, she was beautiful and he could feel his own emotional response building. “Eavesdropping on private conversations isn’t very polite, you know,” he answered, while getting himself under control. “But, since you have chosen to involve me, a bit of advice, you should pay the Captain for his services per your contract . . . Princess,” he added, after taking in her attire. She glared briefly at him and turned back to her own business.

“She’s not someone to be trifled with, Captain,” Janice cautioned.

He looked back at her in mock innocence. “Me? Trifle?”

Janice laughed. “Oh no! Of course not!” Looking down at her screen she continued, “there’s a size three container going to Perenda. It’s too small for most of the other ships to bother with but, if I recall, yours is just right.”

“What are they paying?”

“Sorry to say, only twelve.”

“Twelve? That’ll just barely cover the cost of fuel.” He thought for a moment. “What’s it insured for?”

She tapped on her key pad. “Fifteen hundred.”

“Yeah. And the expiration date?”

“Three weeks.”

“Yeah. Send them a bid for one-twenty.”

“Ten times? Are you sure you *want* this job?” She asked, in surprise.

He smiled. “Let’s just see what happens.”

She nodded and transmitted the bid. Soon, an acceptance of terms came back. “I don’t believe it! They took your offer!”

“They had to,” he said, with a chuckle. “If you consider the insurance and the expiration date, it must be valuable and they really need to get it there quickly. It contains either perishables, contraband or both.” *With that level of insurance, it was probably good pickings for Pirates too*, he thought to himself. Concluding the transaction, he turned to find his way blocked by the, still angry, Princess.

“Is there something I can do for you?” He asked, politely.

“I am Her Royal Highness First Princess Aiyritha of the . . .”

“Monarchy of Fane,” he finished, smiling.

“How did you . . . ?”

“Your broach bears the Fane crest. I am Captain Adam Brent,” he replied, with a slight bow. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do,” he said, stepping around her.

“You insolent . . . how Dare You! I can have you arrested for your blatant

disrespect!”

He stopped. *If only her personality matched her looks*, he thought, sighing. Reaching back and grabbing her arm, he pulled her to an empty table in the waiting area. She gasped in stunned disbelief.

“Sit, Your *Royal Highness*,” he said, sternly, “you seem to be lacking in some basic information and it appears the Universe has chosen me to enlighten you.” She sat, apparently in shock. He motioned to a waiter and sat across the table from her.

“What would you like?”

“What would I . . . ?”

“To eat!” He said, irritably. “I’m not doing this on an empty stomach.”

“Eat?” He keyed up a menu on the table and pointed. “Oh, yes.”

“Now, first lesson,” he lectured, wagging a finger at her. “It doesn’t matter *who* you are, you have no jurisdiction here. A Tradestation is free territory according to the Interstellar Trade Agreement and all Systems are signatories. A Tradeship may carry and offload *any* cargo, whether deemed legal or illegal by the planet around which the Tradestation orbits. Understand?” She nodded, staring at him with wide eyes. The waiter came over and they ordered. Adam cringed inwardly at her selections, thinking, *Oh well, I guess I can afford it.*

“Now, Contracts are fully binding on all parties, as written, and a dispute is a lengthy, expensive process, involving the Trade Council. Hopefully, you paid the Captain what he was owed?” She nodded, thinking, *who does this . . . this . . . Person . . . think he is?*

“Good. If you are going to enter into Contracts, make sure you understand all the details.” He paused. ***Don’t get involved!*** Passed through his mind, he ignored it. “You seemed . . . dissatisfied . . . with the conclusion of your last transaction. Perhaps if you explained the particulars, I can show you where you made your mistake.”

She was starting to regain her composure. “Mistake! I never make mistakes . . .” The food arrived just then, stopping her angry outburst.

“Perhaps mistake was a bit strong, sorry,” he apologized. *No sense in setting her off again.*

“That . . . Captain . . . implied that he knew where something I am looking for, was. After a long and very unpleasant journey, I discovered he was only trading in rumors.”

“Ah, and did he specifically say that he had first hand knowledge of this thing?”

Her fork stopped, halfway to her mouth. “Well, not exactly, I guess.”

“So, it was more of a misinterpretation that caused the problem. A Contract should be very specific. If I might ask, what are you searching for?”

She put her fork down and sat up straight, gazing across the table at him with a serious look. “I am searching for the salvation of the Monarchy. We are currently in a conflict with a neighboring System and it is not going well. Somehow, their ships seem to be able to mount an attack much quicker than ours, after a jump.”

“Are they automated?”

“No, they appear to recover faster from PING drive.”

Suddenly, his interest was piqued. PING drive aftereffects ranged from mild discomfort to severe bodily reactions. When a ship made a Jump, the effect on the human body could be extreme. Sweats, shaking, and losing your lunch, was most common. Some people got massive headaches, muscle spasms and even passed out. This tended to put a damper on space battles. Usually, an attacking force was at a severe disadvantage until their crews recovered enough to function. The smaller the ship, the more severe the reaction.

“So, you are searching for . . . what . . . a weapon of some sort?”

“No, I am searching for a . . .” she paused, looking down into her lap, “a Merkan,” she said, almost under her breath.

Adam looked at her in surprise, then burst out laughing. “You’re kidding, right?”

She raised her head, eyes glaring defiantly. “NO, I am NOT. All my life I have heard tales of the powerful Wizards called Merkans. I have read everything I could find in the Libraries on Fane and other planets in the Monarchy, with historical records. The more I discovered, the more convinced I became that the Merkan Wizards are real and could help us with their Magic!”

Her intensity impacted him like a physical force and once again he felt himself responding to her on an emotional level. If he couldn’t control his reactions, the situation could become . . . unmanageable.

He put his hands up in front of himself, palms out. “Okay, Princess, sorry.” *The information about the PING drive recovery time could be important. I know, there’s only one way.* “But, Merkans are just a myth. No one has ever found one. They’re like . . . uh . . . Unicorns. Also, calling them Wizards is proof they don’t exist. No form of magic has *ever* been proven to be real.”

“I know they exist, I can feel it, here,” she said, placing her hand over her heart. “It is my destiny to find a Merkan and help my Kingdom.”

He leaned back, looking at her. “Destiny is a big word, Princess, not one to be bandied about lightly.” He continued to gaze at her. “What are you willing to pay for information?”

“Whatever it takes! Do you know something?”

“Perhaps . . . or maybe all I have heard are rumors.”

“Oh,” she sighed, slumping down in her seat. “More rumors.”

“I *have* heard that a possible Merkan sighting occurred on Perenda, not too long ago.”

“Perenda? Are you not going there?” She asked, perking up.

“Eavesdropping is a bad habit to get into, Princess,” he admonished.

She waved, in an offhand manner, dismissing his comment. “What will you charge to transport me there and locate the place of this sighting?”

He needed information and she was his path to getting it. Unfortunately, that path had many pitfalls. “All right, I will transport you to Perenda for . . . two hundred.” ***You should rethink this, Captain. I know what I'm doing, Sara. Yes sir.***

“Two hundred?! You’re only getting one-twenty for that cargo container!”

“Wow!” He exclaimed, raising his eyebrows. “You *really* should get that habit looked into,” he said, with feigned concern. “The container won’t be consuming life support resources. You’re getting a bargain.”

“It is a Contract then.” They finished eating and returned to the Transaction Counter.

“Janice, a standard Transport contract please,” Adam said.

She looked from him to the Princess and back. “Trifling?”

“Nah, just makin’ a buck.”

“Sure, just remember, I warned you,” she said.

“Your concern for my well being, warms my heart,” he said, with a smile.

She smiled back. “Just don’t forget our date.”

“Perish the thought.”

After the formalities were concluded and her luggage sent ahead, Adam and the Princess made their way to his ship. At the first sight of it, her face reflected despair.

“Is that a shuttle pod?” She asked, hopefully.

“Nope, that’s the whole thing,” he answered, proudly.

“Wonderful. What is its PING time?”

“Three minutes, why?”

“Oh, nothing.” *This was going to be horrible*, she thought.

The PING drive or technically the Position Integral Nonlinear Graviton drive, was an almost instantaneous jump between star systems. The bad effects were triggered during the actual transit time and the severity of the reaction was proportional to it.

*Just horrible. Three minutes is an eternity.* She gestured at her luggage stacked by the access ramp. “We will go now. Bring those aboard.”

He watched her stride up the ramp with a scowl. *This is gonna be a horrible trip. You should have asked my advice. Yeah, yeah, just let her in.* Adam gathered up the luggage which, for a spoiled Princess, was a surprisingly small pile.

Inside, he unceremoniously dumped the bags in the middle of the entry deck. “Your cabin is at the end of that corridor,” he said, pointing, then made his way to the Bridge. Her irate screech brought a small smile of satisfaction to his face.

“Sara, has the cargo been loaded?”

“Yes. Do you really think this is a good idea, Boss?”

“The Princess? Don’t know yet. That PING info could be important, though.”

“Obviously. What I meant was, why bring her along? It can only complicate things.”

“I’m . . . not sure. Something . . .” He shook his head. “Never mind, I’ve made my decision and I can’t go back on it now.” He spent the next few minutes getting things ready for departure.

“I better make sure she’s settling in okay,” he said as he left the Bridge. “Get clearance and head to the Perenda Jump point.”

“Okay, transit time is about five days.”

He leaned against the spare cabin’s hatch frame, taking a moment to enjoy the view. The Princess was moving gracefully around the room, her mane of bright red hair swinging in the air. She was opening drawers and closets, making small noises of disapproval. She slapped the bed and watched the cloud of dust rise toward the ventilator grill.

“Good lord! This place is a mess. I wonder when it was last cleaned?”

“Don’t remember,” he answered, making his presence known. “But, there’s cleaning stuff in the bathroom if you want to tidy it up a bit.”

She spun around, putting her hands on her hips. “Captain Brent, have you NO manners at ALL? It is customary to KNOCK before entering a Lady’s

room!”

“Manners? This is *my* ship, Princess, the hatch was open and I haven’t actually entered, technically,” he replied, testily.

“Regardless, do not sneak up on me again,” she stated, imperiously. “Inform me when you plan to depart. I will be taking my meals in here.”

“Yeah. We’re already on our way and I’ll be sure to let the Steward know you’ll be requiring room service,” he growled, turning and stomping off toward the Bridge. “Ya know, a please and thank you, once in a while, would be a nice touch,” he yelled back along the corridor. The sound of the hatch slamming shut served to punctuate his mood.

“Sara, you get to keep Her Highness happy!” He growled.

“Me?” The ship whined. “I don’t want to!”

“Just do it!” Adam ordered. It seemed like the Princess was able to hit all of his buttons at once. Considering how he was reacting, Sara had probably been right but complicated may be too mild a word.

After missing a meal and throwing a temper tantrum, the Princess finally came to the understanding that the Captain wasn’t her personal servant. Meals started out very tense but after a few days, Adam was able to coax a little more information out of her. She was the younger sister of the next in line for the Crown. As such, it was unlikely she would become Queen, so she had taken up this Quest to do her part for the Kingdom. Not being directly connected to the Military, she didn’t have much more information about the PING mystery.

Adam was actually beginning to enjoy her company. The Princess wasn’t that bad when she was . . . calm. He noticed that as Jump time got closer, the more subdued she seemed to get.

“Something wrong, Princess?” He asked.

“Er, no. Are we Jumping soon?”

“Sara?”

“Two hours from now, Captain.”

“Oh, thank you. Captain, would you pass the bread . . . please?” The Princess asked.

“Here.” Adam passed it, at which point she put the whole basket on her plate and started devouring it.

“Need some butter with that?” he asked, looking on in amusement.

“Yes,” she replied between bites. He passed it to her. “Thank you.”

“Must be pretty tasty.”

She swallowed. “Not really. You should find a different brand, this is one notch below average.”

“So, why torture your taste buds?”

“Need something in my stomach for . . . after. Bread is less messy to clean up.”

“Good idea,” he commented, grabbing a hunk for himself.

After the meal, she retired to her cabin with the request to be notified five minutes before Jump. Adam went to the Bridge and spent the next hour working out his plan of action.

“Sara, full enhanced sensor sweep when we arrive in Perenda System. If Pirates are looking for our cargo, that’s when they’ll hit us. Normalize the PING drive. Oh, and inform the Princess.”

“I have been doing this for a long time, Captain, no need to state the obvious. Drive detuned to three minutes. She is ready.” Because of the aftereffects, most travelers found it convenient to be in the bathroom during and immediately after, Jump. “In 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . Jump!”

Adam’s intestines briefly cramped before he got them under control. He watched the three minutes count down. Outside the ship, the Universe had vanished, to be replaced with a . . . nothingness. When the counter reached zero, the stars returned.

“Captain, I’ve detected a ship approaching. Are you able to function?”

“A second,” he replied tersely. The unpleasant sensations passed. “Got them targeted?”

“Yes, on screen.” The main view monitor was displaying battle data and targeting crosshairs. No communication response was showing.

“Not friendlies, apparently.”

“Thermal signature indicates heavy armor at the front. Use the Particle Beam?”

Adam pondered for a few seconds. “Any other ships nearby?”

“No.”

“We don’t have the time and I don’t have the inclination, to fool around with them. Close at maximum acceleration and use the ERG, N shell load.”

“But . . . okay.”

When they got within range, a thump traveled through the ship as the Electromagnetic Rail Gun fired. On the screen a small silver projectile impacted the approaching ship. The immediate effect was undetectable. Twenty-five seconds later, the Pirate ship began disintegrating from the point

of impact, outward. Within a few minutes, there was only an expanding cloud of dust where it had been.

“Neutralize the cloud, Sara.”

“Firing EMP. Cloud neutralized, no residual emissions detected.”

“Set course for Perenda. How’s the Princess?”

“I have been calling her since we arrived, there has been no response. That was reckless, Captain.”

“Yeah, I know! If it had been just you and me I would have used conventional weapons, but we have an important passenger.”

“I see, she’s now . . . important?”

“You know what I mean. I better go make sure she’s all right,” he said, leaving the Bridge.

“Princess, is everything okay in there?” Adam yelled, knocking on the closed hatch. There was no answer. He opened the hatch. “Princess?” She wasn’t in sight, but the bathroom door was closed. He entered the cabin and knocked on it.

“Princess? Are you all right?” Still, no answer. Opening the door, he found her in the tub, unconscious, naked and covered in a horrible mess of half-digested bread. Stripping down to his shorts, he lifted her to a standing position and turned on the shower, washing the mess off her and down the drain. He dried her off and got her into the bunk. When she was safely covered with a sheet and blanket, he was able to release his emotional control. The Princess was breathing normally and didn’t seem to be injured.

“Sara, keep an eye on her. I have to go take a shower.”

“You just took one.”

“Yeah, now I need a cold one.”

Aiyriitha woke, feeling just awful. She didn’t remember cleaning up and getting into the bunk. In fact, she was sure she hadn’t. “Sara? What . . . where?”

“We are in the Perenda system and presently on course for the planet.”

“Who . . . ?”

“The Captain found you unconscious and . . . rendered assistance.”

“Assistance? You mean he . . . ?”

“Yes, but you can rest assured he was a perfect gentleman. I kept an eye on him. How do you feel?”

“Horrid. I haven’t *ever* been on a ship this small. Three minutes was way

over my limit, I'm afraid."

"There is a red bottle in the medicine cabinet, drink it. It should help."

"Thanks, Sara. Where is he?"

"Sleeping. While he has gotten somewhat used to Jump, it does take a toll on his body. He will probably be out for three or four more hours."

Aiyritha rose and got dressed. Whatever was in the red bottle worked very well and she soon felt well enough to begin cleaning up the bathroom. All the time wondering why she wasn't incredibly angry at the Captain for what he had done.

Adam woke feeling rested, but inwardly cringing at the coming encounter with the Princess. Royal types tended to be very tightly wound when it came to their Royal Persons. Some of them considered it the death penalty if you accidentally saw a little too much skin. What he did to get her cleaned up and into bed . . . well. He clamped down on that train of thought as images started popping up in his brain. She was *really* beautiful. *Better change the subject before I have to take another cold shower.*

"Sara, what's our status?"

"Good morning, Captain. All ship functions are nominal. We have encountered no other ships and our present arrival time is five days ten hours and fifty-seven minutes."

"The Princess?"

"She is awake and in surprisingly good spirits. She wishes me to inform you that breakfast is ready."

"Breakfast? She cooked . . . breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Did you make sure it isn't poisoned?"

"You're joking?"

"No."

"Don't worry, I'm sure she would not do that. Although, the seasoning may be unusual."

"If that's all, then I suppose I'll live." He cleaned up and went to the Galley.

"So, Princess, I'm glad to see you are feeling better."

She looked up as he sat and their eyes briefly met. Quickly looking down she said, "yes, thank you for . . . your help."

"No need to thank me, Princess, the pleas . . . I mean, consider it a part of my contractual obligation."

“Sure,” she replied, quietly. “Since we are to be together in this ship for a while, it would be acceptable if you called me Aiyritha.”

“This is quite a spread, I should be thanking you, Aiyritha,” he commented, taking in the plates of omelets, bacon, toast etc.

“After the . . . er . . . joys of PING, I need to eat.”

He smiled. “Perfectly normal. Let’s dig in before it gets cold.” *Nice breakfast. The only thing missing is honey . . . oh, wait, your conversation was just dripping with it! Sara, shut up and let me eat in peace.*

During the meal, Adam told her about the Pirate encounter, leaving off a few . . . details. She showed a moment of panic, but after assuring her that they had not been in any danger, the meal continued with small talk about Interstellar Trading and Palace Life. All in all, a pleasant time, both of them studiously avoiding any mention of Adam’s ‘assistance’. During the transit to Perenda, the awkward atmosphere slowly gave way to a more relaxed one.

Docking at Perenda Tradestation was routine and Adam transferred his cargo to the receiving party. He and Aiyritha prepared to go down to the planet’s surface. Some worlds had Orbital Elevators, but Perenda wasn’t one of them. That was fine with Adam, he didn’t think they were a good idea. Too much chance of a planet wide disaster.

The one thing that Adam *wasn’t* prepared for was traveling in public with a Princess. Perenda was part of the Monarchy so she was recognized instantly. Fortunately, the Shuttle was almost empty but he could see a problem developing when they landed. Entering the Spaceport, it took no time at all for a crowd to begin forming. Everyone wanted to see the Princess. He was about to start pushing people out of the way when she stopped him.

“Captain, that will not do. A few more minutes and Spaceport Security will deal with the crowd. They will be gently moved away in front of us so we may pass.”

Soon, just as she had said, the crowd magically parted before them. Aiyritha strode forward, smiling and waving with Adam trailing closely behind. Eventually, they entered a secure reception area, specifically meant for members of the Aristocracy. *Gee, Captain, you were on the Vid! Can I have your autograph? Sara, you should be working, not watching TV. Have you accessed the University records for any info on the war? Just doing that now, Boss.*

“Captain? Captain? Hey, are you IGNORING Me?!” Aiyritha’s voice

interrupted, angrily.

“Uh, no. Just lost in thought.”

“Lost, huh? I have secured a vehicle so we may track down your Merkan incident.”

He looked around the immediate area and spotted a clothing outlet. “Come on, Princess, we have a problem to fix,” he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her into the store. The proprietor was happy to see the Princess but was appalled by Adam’s . . . familiarity . . . with her. This man was clearly not in her Class.

“Your Royal Highness, your presence graces my lowly establishment. Is there anything I may be of assistance with?”

“Yeah, we need . . . let’s see . . . that cloak and that dress, in the Princess’s size,” Adam interrupted, pointing at the items.

The clerk leveled a glare of intense loathing at him, then turned back to Aiyriitha. “Please feel free to examine my wares, Your Highness. You may have whatever you desire.”

Adam’s patience was wearing thin. “I already told you what we want, that and that.”

The clerk angrily faced him. “Sir, your insolence and lack of manners are inexcusable. I will summon security now, Your Highness,” he said, reaching under the counter.

Aiyriitha put out a hand and stopped him. “Good sir, your devotion to the Crown is commendable, but I will deal with my servant . . . most severely, you can be sure. Though he is crude in his manner, I will take the items he has requested.”

The touch of the Princess’ hand on his brought visible joy to the shopkeeper’s face. “Of course, Your Highness, I will retrieve them immediately.” He hurried into the back of the shop.

*From Vid Star to servant in fifty feet! That’s a record for you. Sara, you have been awfully snippy lately, what’s the problem? She’s the problem. I think you are getting too close! I see a bad situation developing. You take care of the ship, Sara, I’ll deal with the Princess, okay?*

“Lost in thought again? I don’t see how, there can’t be many of them up there,” he heard Aiyriitha say.

“Huh? Just what do you mean by that?”

“Why don’t you let me handle interactions with the people from now on? You seem to have very little tact. Why are we buying clothes?”

He let the tact dig slide. Monarchies and their over-the-top manners

made his head hurt. “If we’re going to be searching around the planet for a Merkan, we can’t be constantly dealing with your celebrity. Change into the dress and put on the cloak. It has a hood. It’s a flimsy disguise but, short of changing your hair color, it should be enough.”

“I see. You may be correct, Captain.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Does that mean I won’t be severely punished?” He asked, sarcastically.

“We’ll see,” she answered, cryptically.

The clerk returned and Aiyriha insisted on paying twice what the clothes cost as a reward for his devotion. While she was changing, Adam and the clerk were exchanging glares. When she returned, Adam’s breath caught in his throat. He had chosen the plainest dress and cloak he saw, but on her they seemed to transform. He clamped down on his emotions again. This wasn’t the time. They got into the waiting Limo and Adam gave the driver an address. Now the real work began.