

# Janturul

"Heart of Gold"

by  
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*(Note: This is an independent Sci-Fi story, not a Star Trek fan fiction. It does not play in the Star Trek universe, but takes place in an original universe created by the authors specifically for this story.)*

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## PROLOGUE

Some 3500 years earlier....

The muffled yells and bangs were swallowed by the silence of night. Like a blanket the darkness had settled over the forested mountainside as four pairs of legs made haste to their destination. Soon, the noise from inside the carriage ceased, and only the sound of the boots hitting the ground and the labored breathing of four lungs disturbed the nocturnal peace.

Sometime later, the men came to a halt. With trembling knees, they set the container on the ground. A shaking hand grasped around a lever. A swift pull, and the door was unlocked.

Silence.

Then the door sprung open from the powerful kick of a foot. A man in silken robes jumped out, his eyes roving over his surroundings in bewilderment. The group of soldiers he encountered eyed him warily. Each had their weapon drawn, ready to defend. They instinctively backed up when the man pulled an item from the folds of his robes.

It began to glow.

A murmur went through the group. Again, the soldiers backed up a few steps, raising their weapons and tightening their defensive stance. The man lifted his chin, straightening his posture, as a more regal expression came to his face. His eyes shifted from one side to the other, then to the archway straight ahead. With sure steps, he walked toward the entrance through the parting group of soldiers and stepped into the building.

The vaulted room was only illuminated by torches mounted on the walls. He was greeted by a dark figure standing on the far end of the room. As he stepped further into the room, the clanking behind him indicated that the entrance had just been sealed. No sign of worry was reflected in his expression. He stopped in the middle of the chamber.

"What is the meaning of this?"

The dark figure whirled around, stepped into the light of the torches, and lowered himself to one knee. "My liege," he muttered, bowing his head.

"I ask you again, what is the meaning of this, General?"

"It is for the protection of... the artifact." He pointed to the glowing item.

"It needs no protection, I assure you."

The general gave a slight nod. "So it doesn't, my liege. However... you do."

In the golden glow reflecting on his face, the lord's eyes narrowed in puzzlement, then suddenly widened in shock. He dropped to his knees. The artifact fell from his hands and clattered to the floor, its glow ceasing. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth, before he fell forward with a muted groan.

"It shall no more overthrow empires." The woman's voice was icy and hard. Her hand was still clutching the blood drenched dagger. Her cold eyes met the general's. "Carry out your orders."

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## CHAPTER 1

Consciousness returned slowly to him. The first indicator that he was indeed alive was the sound of crates being moved about by lifting equipment. The next sensation was pain, in his jaw, chest, ribs and stomach. He groaned. For a boy of only seventeen, trouble seemed to find River way too many times throughout his life.

He slowly opened his eyes to find himself pretty close to the ceiling of wherever he was. And he was chilly! Why was he chilly? He lifted his head and quickly discovered why.

He was naked!

The bastich had taken his clothes. His new clothes! Boots and everything.

Gone. Damn.

He slowly turned over to survey his surroundings, and found he was laying atop a pile of crates, inside a cargo bay. About nine meters below him a hover-lift was moving crates around. It didn't seem like they were working the stack which he was on, so he probably could stay hidden up there for now. He just wished he had something to keep himself warm.

River had hoped he would have been able to stay on the *Kniver*. He thought he had made himself useful and earned some favor with the captain, even though he had been a stow-away. He had spent three months on the ship, doing whatever menial tasks they had wanted him to do. In a short time, he had learned quite a bit about the ship and its operations. He had done everything Captain Sheng had asked of him. Apparently, that hadn't been enough.

The last thing River remembered seeing was a new young face and the freighter captain's fist coming at him. He guessed that Sheng was having a good laugh at leaving him unconscious on top of the crates as they were unloaded into the cargo bay. The worst part of this, other than being naked, was he had no idea where he was.

River lay on top of the crate for what seemed like hours. All motion in the cargo area had ceased. All voices were gone; everything was quiet. He decided now would be the time to make his move. He climbed down from the crates; a task that was not as easy as one might expect. The crates were all the same size, so climbing down was like trying to climb down a smooth wall. He had to find the hand-holds for the crate below with his foot, and having his bare skin rub against the cold side of the stack was very uncomfortable.

The floor of the cargo bay was equally cold as he touched it with his feet. He made his way towards the door, staying behind as many crates as possible for cover. Reaching the edge of the stacks, he crouched low and surveyed the room.



Directly across from River's position were two doors. They were about five meters away, so it would be a short dash to reach them. Both doors had a small window approximately face high. The one to the left showed light beyond it, the one to the right was dark. Both had door knobs and hinges, so he guessed they were manual doors that swung open towards him. He took one more look around and started for the doors.

Halfway between the crates and the doors, by sheer luck, River spotted a dark figure on the opposite side of the left door. He stopped mid-stride and turned back to the crates. Someone was coming into the cargo bay, and River was certain he would be spotted. He dove for cover, landing face down, not even having the time to tuck and roll. He hit the hard surface, and a sharp pain went shooting through his torso, but he knew he couldn't cry out. Fortunately for him, the person coming through the door was already talking and making noise.

"...ering warehouse 23, now, " the voice, definitely female, said. "I will ..." the voice stopped suddenly, as if she had heard something.

"*Shilene? Is everything okay?*" The second voice definitely sounded like it was coming from a two-way transmitter. The bay was quiet for far too long, River thought. Apparently so did the person on the other end of the two-way. "*Shilene! Answer me. Are you okay?*"

"Yeah. I'm okay," Shilene finally replied. "I just thought I heard something when I came through the door." She let out a nervous chuckle. "You know me, spooked by my own shadow sometimes. Okay, I found the stack."

"*Is the shipment from Strom there?*"

There was another long moment of silence. River could hear the rustle of the woman's clothing as she moved around. He guessed she was looking closely at the crates. He wished she would hurry. This floor was cold!

"Yes," Shilene finally said. "I found it. The packing manifest says twenty-four pieces."

"*Excellent. Okay, you can call it a day, Shilene. See you tomorrow.*"

"Tomorrow it is, boss," she replied.

River listened as the female, known only by her voice as Shilene, backed away from the crates and made her way to the door. He waited a full minute after he heard the door click shut before he even tried getting up. He peeled himself off the painted concrete floor and made his way to the edge of the crates. Moving cautiously, he tried his best to stay as silent and as hidden as possible, just in case good ole' Shilene decided to play detective and had only pretended to leave the room. Fortunately for him, she had not. In a mad dash, he ran across the open floor to the two doors.

He tried the door on the right first. Even though it was dark, it could be an office where he might find some clothing. The door was locked. Normally, these manual locks were not a problem for him, but in his current predicament, he wasn't exactly carrying anything to pick a lock.

Moving to the other door, River tried the knob. It turned. He glanced through the window and saw a brightly lit corridor. *That steking' figures. I'll probably get halfway down this corridor and ole' Shilene will come back.*

Before he pulled the door open, he scanned the high-wall and ceiling area for any security cameras. The image of a young Rastin male, running in the altogether, would certainly raise some alarms. He didn't see any type of surveillance equipment. That didn't mean there weren't any, but he was going to take his chances. He pulled the door open.

The warmth from the corridor washed over him. Oh, it felt so good. River cautiously traversed the hallway. Of course, this particular part had absolutely no doors which he would be able to duck into should someone come from the other way. Fortunately, no one did.

He reached a T-intersection, and glanced in both directions of the new corridor. It was also empty, but there were several doors along its entire length, in either direction. To his right, River saw an opening with bright light spilling out. As luck would have it, the room turned out to be a locker room for the workers. He entered.

All along the walls were lockers, some with mechanical locks, others without. Beyond the lockers lay what looked like a shower room. *Ohhh steke! A hot shower would feel so good right now, but I better get outta here.* He checked the lockers without the locks first, to see if there was anything he could utilize.

The very first locker he opened, had a set of blue coveralls hanging in them. On the floor of the locker were a pair of rubber-soled shoes. Oh, this was too good to be true. River decided to not press his luck trying to look for anything else. He took the clothes from the locker. There was a cloth name tag stitched to the front of the coverall with the name "Ambian" printed on it. *Thank you, Ambian*, River thought to himself. He pulled on the coverall. Fortunately, it was a decent fit. The shoes were as well. Time to find out where he was.

He slipped from the locker room and started down the corridor. Straight ahead of him he saw a lit sign above the door. Though it was not exactly a word he understood, he knew from past experience that buildings on a lot of worlds generally marked the exits, usually with signs similar to the one he was headed for. Just as he thought he was in the clear, a voice yelled out to him.

"Hey! You!"

River turned to look down the corridor in the direction of the voice. Despite the balding man not looking angry, he bolted out the door. No need to make things more complicated.

"Oh steke!" he said the minute the setting sun hit his face, "I'm on a steking planet!"

He briefly surveyed his surroundings. It seemed he was in some kind of business development; square buildings with signs he couldn't read all around. He quickly moved away from the depot, just in case the man would come looking for him, and wandered through the streets for a little while, finding his way to the edge of the property. Beyond that seemed to be more buildings, but that part looked like a local settlement area, with shops, restaurants, and a market.

Food! River definitely was hungry.

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Veronica raised the fruit to her nose. It smelled wonderfully aromatic, just ripe enough to be used for dinner. "How much for three?"

The elderly woman at the stand smiled. "Two tazar."

"Hmm. that's a bit steep," the girl pondered, weighing the fruit in her hand. "I can give you one."

"Fine fine," the woman conceded. "Just for you."

With a broad smile, Veronica added the fruit to her almost full basket and paid the woman. She sauntered off, proud of haggling the price down. She knew the fruit was worth a lot in a good and ripe state, but she had a budget and yet wanted to provide a memorable meal for her father tonight. Tomorrow, he was leaving to meet with colleagues on the site of their newest project, and who knew how long he would be gone this time.

One more stop and she would be ready to head home. The vendor at the stand held out a large flat bread to her. "Njurani?"

"No no." She shook her head adamantly. "Just a loaf of white bread... sourdough preferably."

"Human staple, hm?" The man grinned, a few of his teeth missing, as he handed her a long, braided bread.

Veronica paid him. She took a few moments to go over the list she had in her head. Satisfied that she had everything for the meal, she headed through the diminishing crowd and out of the market place. The sun was beginning to hang low, and people all around were returning to their homes.

The settlement looked a bit .... tiny to River. Kind of back galaxy. Still, it could be a good place to get some food. Finding a place to sleep would be more difficult. The smaller the settlements, the more people noticed you.

He walked down the street, looking at the shops. It suddenly dawned on him that he should be a little more cautious. It would be just his luck to run into Ambian, who certainly wouldn't be happy to see River wearing his work suit. He thought about ripping off the name tag and had even started to tug on it, when he saw a girl exit the market.

He watched her, sizing her up. Slender. Long, dark hair. Probably no older than himself. How



nice. She was carrying a large basket of food. Loose stuff, too. This was just too perfect. All he had to do was get ahead of her and set her up.

Veronica glanced at her digital pocket watch. Dang, it was already later than she had thought. She hastened her step. There were still a ton of preparations she had to make before the meal. She mentally kicked herself for dawdling and turned the corner into a small side street.

*Steke!* River thought. *She's moving quicker. Did she see me?* He continued to follow her. She never looked back, so maybe she was just in a hurry. He ducked down the next alley, got to the back of the buildings, and ran as fast as he could to get himself ahead of her. When he thought he was far enough ahead he turned back towards the street she was on.

River approached the corner very cautiously. He peered around it, just enough to see that she was still headed his way. Her expression made it look like her mind was off on another world.

*Perfect.*

This was a maneuver River had been taught back on the streets of Zadar City. The way she was moving and not really paying attention, this would work like a charm. He waited for just the right moment, then stepped right out in front of her, purposely bumping into her.

The collision snapped Veronica out of her thoughts. She bounced off him and stumbled back. The basket slipped from her grip and landed on the paved road, spilling half its contents over the smooth rocks.

"Oh no!" She scrambled to gather her ingredients.

"Oh! I am so sorry," River said in his best apologetic voice. "Here. Let me help you." He started to help her pick up her groceries. Occasionally, he would pocket a piece of fruit, or another small item that was edible and did not require some kind of mechanical opener. "I am really sorry. I just wasn't paying attention."

"Look what you've done," Veronica complained, feeling discontent over his blunder. She righted the basket and returned the items to it. "I hope the gulla-gulla fruit didn't get bruised." She cradled one in her hands.

"I know," River commented. "It was totally clumsy of me. And there is nothing worse than bruised gulla."

She stood, grabbing the basket by its handle, and regarded him. Her gaze drifted from the worn out running shoes over the blue coverall to his face. Her eyes met his. Momentarily, they flicked to the pointed end of his ear that was sticking out from under his black hair, then back to his dark brown eyes. *Rastin*, she thought briefly. "And how would you know that?"

River held the gulla-gulla fruit in his hand, turning it slightly. "I've been around. I know what a good piece of fruit is, and what happens when you bruise it." He held it out to her, staring just a little. *My, but she is pretty.*

Veronica eyed the fruit, then peered at him again. "You can keep that one. I have two others."

"Oh. Okay," River said, looking at the fruit, a sort of half-smile on his face. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Her lips drew up into a light smile. "I'm not that fragile."

"So you're not," River agreed. "Well then.... thanks. I apologize once again and shall be on my way."

Just as she nodded, the sound of a horn penetrated the air. She looked up at the darkening sky. "Shields are going up," she noted, then looked back at him. "You should find your quarters."

River looked to the sky. "Hmmm... 'spose I should. Well then, good night."

The street lights, which had just begun to come on, intermittently flashed red to signify the alert status of the outpost. River moved back into the commercial district, looking for a place to find shelter. He wasn't quite sure what danger the alert was sounding, but the girl's words seemed to signify the urgency getting to quarters.

His mind was half on looking for a place to spend the night, and half on the girl. Her face, those stormy-blue eyes specifically, kept coming back to him. She had also been generous. River did feel a bit of regret for stealing from her. It was because he was thinking about her that he made a stupid mistake he normally wouldn't.

While moving along the street, he remained close to the fronts of the stores and shops, and completely missed seeing the man who had just stepped out. Bam! It was like running into a brick wall. River backed up and had to look up to see the man's face. He was in some sort of uniform and had a commanding air about him.

"Why aren't you in your quarters...." the man inquired, looking at the name tag, "... Ambian?" River could literally feel the man scrutinizing him.

"I uh.... well.... uh....," he stammered. *Steke! Why can't I think?* He was usually quick witted with the answers, very good on his feet. He didn't like being surprised like this, though.

"New around here, eh," the man more stated than questioned. Then, totally surprising River, he reached out a strong hand and forcefully turned the boy's head to the left, revealing the blue and gold tattoo just below his right ear. "Straight brows, pointed ears. Rastin, I would say. And a street rat, to boot. Hmmm..." He studied the tattoo a moment. River wanted to get out from under his grasp, but the man was strong and River felt he would only get hurt more by resisting. "Zadar City, I would say." The man let go of River's head and grasped the front of the coverall. "But you aren't Ambian. I know Ambian, and you aren't him."

River swallowed hard. He was caught. His eyes quickly looked over this new adversary, trying to find a weak point he could lash out at and free himself. The unfortunate part was, the man seemed prepared and had a stance preventing any offensive moves by the boy. Who was this guy? River looked again and saw the firearm at the man's side. Crud! Now he would probably spend the night in a holding cell.

"Talk to me, boy!" the man demanded. "Here is where you beg me not to toss you in a cell."

"I beg for nothing," River retorted. He held his head defiantly, his eyes met the man's eyes. "Those days are over."

"Yes," the man replied. "I can see you won't." His free hand started to roam over the outside of River's coverall, looking for a weapon. When it found one of the lumps where River had hidden away the stolen food, the man freely explored the shape, then moved on. "How long have you been here..... Ambian?" He continued the search for a weapon.

The Rastin endured the probing of his coverall without protest. The man obviously wanted to make clear he was in charge. River could handle that. In fact, he suddenly sensed there would be a way he could avoid spending the night in a cell. All he had to do was play it cool. "I arrived just today."

"Where did you steal the food from?"

"I didn't steal it all," River told him. "The gulla-gulla was given to me by the girl I.... procured the rest from."

"Procured," the man repeated with amusement. "In your case, stealing would be a better word. What's to stop me from locking you up right now?"

"Nothing, sir," River answered honestly. His eyes still held the man's. He tried to keep the anger he was feeling from showing. "I am sure you have already made up your mind."

"Think so, do you?" There was no mistaking the man's confidence. He knew he had the Rastin. "If you aren't going to plead, give me a reason why I should not charge you."

"Because it is not my fault I am here," River told him. "And I do what I must to survive..... whatever I must."

"I bet you would," the man noted. A slight smile came to his face. "I will offer you a place to sleep tonight. In our facility." He released his hold on River's coverall, but quickly put his hand on the back of the boy's neck. "This way."

River moved along under the man's not-so-subtle guidance. They entered what looked like the local jail. The man escorted him to the back where the cells were. They were simple cubicles with openings that had no bars or doors. River guessed they used a force-field to keep prisoners in.

"You can sleep in here," the man told him, pointing to the first cell. "And relax, I will not put the force-field up..... unless you give me a reason to."

River eyed him curiously. "Thank you... for your kindness."

"Oh, I am not being kind..... Ambian." A smile again came to the man's face. "You *will* earn your keep."



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"Why the gloomy face, my dear?" Edward Fowler wiped his mouth with a napkin. He sat his fork down and studied his daughter's expression for a moment, as she poked around in her meal. "You're dissatisfied with your own cooking?"

"No, just dissatisfied with the lack of some of my ingredients." Veronica wrinkled her nose.

He raised his brow, waiting. She would eventually tell him without him having to pry, he knew.

"All the apologizing and helping me pick up the groceries... it was all a scheme just to steal from me," she huffed. "And to think I gave him one of the gulla-gulla as a thanks."

Her father's eyes lit up in understanding. "You've been bested, hm?"

She shot him a look.

"Perhaps he was simply hungry," Edward offered before he dug into his meal again.

"He probably was. That's why I gave him the fruit. I figured he could use the nourishment. You should have seen him, dad, he looked so scrawny."

"Then you shouldn't be so upset over him trying to wrangle up something to eat," her father chuckled.

"It's not really that," Veronica replied with growing indignation. "I can't believe Captain Albren would let any of his men get so undernourished that they would feel the need to steal."

Again, her father halted his eating. He swallowed down the food already in his mouth. "You mean, he was one of the troops?"

"No. He wore the blue coverall of the maintenance department."

"I see." Edward sat back. He noted the umbrage in her eyes. "Why do I suddenly feel sorry for the Captain?" He grinned, knowing his daughter's feelings about the socially disadvantaged.

"Because you know I will march myself down to the depot tomorrow and let him have a piece of my mind." She flashed him an impish smile, and finally put a forkful of food in her mouth. "He's got a fairly small battalion to feed, including the maintenance crew. There is no reason why anyone would have to resort to stealing," she ranted on with mouth full, "and then, I will look for that guy and treat him to a nice meal." She swallowed. "He won't be hard to find."

"Oh?"

Veronica put her fork down and took a drink. "He's Rastin."

"Rastin? Are you sure? In this part of the galaxy?"

She nodded emphatically. "I know... I was just as surprised. But I'm certain, dad."

"It's unusual, but not unheard of," Edward pondered.

"Hmhmhm." She tasted a piece of the gulla-gulla. "So delicious," she said with delight, wiping a trickle of juice from her chin. "But you know, that wasn't the thing that surprised me the most. The Captain employing an 'off-worlder'... *that* was the big surprise. I mean, we all know of his prejudice..."

"Oh, come now, Ronnie," her father interjected, frowning lightly, "he's not that bad."

"Not that bad?" She stood abruptly and began clearing the table. "That's like saying a Murangi snake is nothing more than a Pheto worm with a bad stomach ache," she scowled. "The man has no tolerance for any race that has 'unhuman' features. That's exactly the reason why his troops are all made of Humans, Booril, and Tempares. And I can tell you, he only puts up with the latter two because they have Human ancestry."

"You just know it all, don't you?" Edward chuckled. He loved his daughter's personality. Despite her passion for certain matters, she usually had a mild and loving spirit that reached out to everyone. "I always thought you'd make a good 'Human' rights advocate."

She frowned at him. "Don't patronize me, dad."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He threw his hands up in surrender.

Veronica peered at him in mock annoyance. "You're just trying to get me all riled up to distract me, so I won't be upset about you leaving tomorrow."

Again, her father chuckled. He picked up his plate and utensils and took them to the sink. "You got me all figured out, don't you?" He flicked his finger across her nose before he pulled her into a

warm embrace. "Thank you for the wonderful meal. You rival your mother in your skills."

She sighed. "I still don't understand why I can't come with you this time?"

"Because... I told you it was too dangerous, sweetheart." He kissed the top of her head. "Markson has emphasized to me over and over how treacherous the terrain and unpredictable the weather is. I trust his assessment. He's been there for months now. I'm only going because both him and Phyriss keep bothering me about coming. They asked me last night again when I'm scheduled to arrive. In all honesty, I have the suspicion that they found something Markson doesn't want to tell me about until I get there." He pulled back slightly and met her eyes. "We talked about this already, Ronnie. Please understand. Besides... I really can't say if I'll be gone three days or three weeks."

"All the more reason for you to take me along," she argued.

He sighed. "No."

She pushed her lip out in a pout. "Yeah... you just rather leave me alone here."

"That's the beauty of knowing people here on the outpost," he brushed a strand of hair from her face and lifted her chin, "you won't be alone."

"Hmph." She pulled away from him with a groan. "If you're talking about Sawyer... no thank you."

Edward couldn't hide the grin. "Amongst others, yes."

"He's just as bad as his father... stubborn and prejudiced," she grumbled. "Ever since we got to this place, he's been hanging on my heel like a leech." She bristled.

"I think he fancies you," her father winked.

"Please, dad, I'd like to keep my food down for a while."

"Now now," his grin widened, "where is that loving spirit of yours, my dear? If ever there was a creature needing that impartial affection you give out so freely to those in dire need of it... it would be him."

"Creature is the right word." She rolled her eyes.

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