

# The Zephyr Blows In (Robert Bee)

The hologram shimmered into focus. Admiral Sligon's wrinkled head floated before the Trifid Nebula and addressed a point above Agent 231's right shoulder. His message was short but full of dire consequences for the Alliance.

231 three pointed his cha mug into the recycling receptacle, then leaned back into the pilot's seat. "Why me, Admiral?" He scratched an itch in his left ear. "You know I'm heading home on leave to heal after that Orion disaster. Send 400. He's seen Zephyr."

The admiral's image exuded disapproval at the insolence. "Once too often, it would appear. 400 was terminated. Zephyr is still out there."

231 sprang upright. "400 gone? But...he was the best."

"Now you are, Gods help us! Or at least you're the closest." Sligon's face corrugated momentarily while 231's ship passed through an ion cloud. "You must stop Zephyr from passing those plans."

"Sure, I'll consult my list of fences for Mark V Starcruiser specs. That'll narrow the search to only one hundred planets." He attacked his ear with renewed vigour and a stylus.

"Brungella IV. You know..."

"I know it." 231 inspected the end of his stylus.

"Here are the co-ordinates on the third continent. The drop will be a trader's store in Quaggel. Contact's Haag Zweller, an expatriate Terran. He runs the conduit to the Drakkon."

"Does Zweller know Zephyr?" 231 mumbled around the stylus.

"No." The admiral had a pained look in his eyes.

"And just what am I looking for, Admiral? Or is that a secret too?"

"Magno-Liquid crystal. One litre. 512 Megabyte per millilitre. This could turn the war against us." Admiral Sligon jabbed a blunt finger out of the hologram. "And will you stop that!"

"How do we know Zephyr's heading for Brungella IV?" 231 discarded his slovenly pose. He'd liked 400.

"We found a message plug in 400's ear. He must have suspected he'd been blown."

"Did you find any other messages on him? Any clues to Zephyr's current disguise?"

"We only found his ear."

*\*"We only found his ear"? Come, good Master. Thou jesteth, surely?\**

*\*Jesteth, young Francis? I am serious beyond dispute.\**

*\*But such language offends our ears these modern times. That speech is bygone. Best...\**

*\*Best you read on, ere your back bends my rod.\**

Haag Zweller was a nervous man. Since receiving the tight band signal that a guest was arriving, "like a breath of fresh air", he'd felt sick in the stomach. He'd never met Zephyr, and was happy to leave it that way.

Zweller looked out the dirt streaked window of his store towards the jagged teeth of the purple mountains. The torrential downpour had stopped as suddenly as it had started. The suns came out from behind the fragmenting clouds and the Quaggel locals returned to their basking slabs. Youths played boisterously in the overflowing gutters, using their tails to splash laughing tourists who were of two minds whether to dodge the water or vid the natives at play.

Zweller realised he would miss Quaggel. But this would be his last assignment. He was getting too old and the game was becoming too dangerous. His predecessor had been executed by the Alliance. The Drakkon paid well but were becoming over demanding. Now he had to deal with Zephyr. Time to get out.

The customer bell jangled and Zweller turned. A couple from Betelgeuse wedged their ovoid bodies through the door and approached the counter, narrowly avoiding merchandise on display shelves. The male activated his universal translator, jumped at the squeal of feedback, and adjusted the volume.

"Apologies, honourable storekeeper. You artless?"

"Pardon?" Zweller said.

"Your store without art. We must have. Shuttle arrive three hours." The male pointed at the roof and held up three fat fingers for emphasis.

"No. Store with art." Damn, thought Zweller. I'm beginning to talk like a translator. "In the next room." He pressed a buzzer on the counter. A side door opened and admitted a stooped Brungellian whose yellowing neck scales revealed the onset of old age.

"My assistant R'Gurraq will show you the gallery," Zweller smiled.

"Greatly thanking. Brungellian art all galaxy most sought."

As the tourists followed R'Gurraq, Zweller pondered the male's comment. A shuttle arriving in three hours? Maybe...

A piercing shriek, not unlike an elephant trumpeting, punctured his thoughts. The female Betelguesian lumbered from the gallery, her pudgy digits covering her eyes. Her blind passage sent numerous valuable souvenirs crashing, while the translator vainly fought to cope with the hysterical torrent. "Great Bete...horror...untranslatable expletive ...grievous fault... mutilation..."

Her mate approached, holding a long green object at arms length. Zweller's eyebrows rose. The male stood before Zweller, trembling, R'Gurraq's limp tail in his hands. "Apologies, profusely. Assistant tailless."

Zweller's cheekbones ached from barely controlled laughter. R'Gurraq's semi-annual tail shedding had occurred at an undiplomatic moment. He took the tail. "Did you fancy any work, Bete-mahir?"

"Yours standard up to. Regret inferior but regards artisan Quull," the pedantic translator intoned from the retreating tourists.

Quull, thought Zwell, puzzled. That was the third time that day he'd heard the name. He determined to find out more. "R' Gurraq, I have something here of yours."

*\*Trust not a dropping or drooping tail, I pray. It avails you not to drop if thou already droops.\**

*\*Thou have more to contribute to the class, Francis? Or doth your bell sound hollowly from brains long forfeit?\**

*\*Good Master...(wise title, witless holder none the less)... I beseech your patience - for mine hath run dry. Consent once more, to explain the purpose of this torture.\**

*\*In truth, your ignorance is torture enough. Persist, rascalion, and allow enlightenment to be your salvation.\**

Artisan Quull Quillah was doing a brisk business. Since mid-day basking, he had sold four pieces. The Betelgeuse tourists had returned to his quarquam, agitated. Further inspection of Quull's display restored their normal tourist equilibrium.

"Quull artful," the male enthused. "Six days Quaggel search. Quull's quarquam then here not. Now is." He pointed to an exhibit in the corner. "That will take."

Oscillating liquids of gorgeous colours intertwined like mating snakes in mid-air. Though no walls contained them, they didn't mix. Their ever changing shapes exuded sensuality across planetary cultures. The magnetic field generator orchestrating the liquid ballet was artfully concealed.

"Regret not selling," Quull's translator hissed. "Special."

"Apologies, surely..." the male began to protest, then stopped as Quull stepped between him and the exhibit.

"Choose other." Quull's tail slowly swept the dirt floor.

Behind Quull, the female quietly approached the sculpture. Her hand reached out to touch a fluorescent green column of undulating liquid but was met by the tip of Quull's tail. She screamed, then rushed for the quarquam's flap. Her mate emitted a Betelgeuse curse and quickly followed. Artless!

*\*Artless fartless!\**

*WHACKKK!*

*\*Zounds, thou truckless ingrate. My prize rod asunder from thy back. How now to discipline thy unbridled disrespect?\**

*\*My respect would boundless be, if modern texts we were to study. What gain we in delving this ancient space opera? How doth it befit us? 'The Zephyr Blows In'. Blows out, more's truth.\**

*\*Such youthful wisdom who knoweth all. Continue thy reading, I pray, that thou should'st know more. Ancient to thee, classical to others. This work bringeth riches beyond price to our stagnating language.\**

*\*Fie on...\**

*\*Continue, I advise, lest my erstwhile rod be displaced by yon laser lance.\**

The shuttle detached from Brungella IV Interplanetary Terminus, falling towards the atmosphere, destination Quaggel, centre of the Brungellian art world. There was a full complement of passengers, mostly tourists who had travelled across the galactic sector to see, and hopefully buy, the most prized of souvenirs.

"Though Brungella IV is a civilised and technological world," the hostess's translator recited, "the natives of Quaggel lead a much simpler, less affected life. Feel free to barter. Drink only in your hotel. And don't step on their tails."

Brant Prinz wasn't listening. Through his dark glasses, he scanned the other passengers, seeking any signs of recognition. He met the gaze of a middle aged matron who had been staring at him since drop-off. She whispered to her husband, then floated the three rows down the aisle.

"Brant? My gosh...it is you!" she squealed. "Would you sign my glove?" She pushed her plump hand under Prinz's nose.

"Of course. Who should I...?"

"Thelma! Oh, I loved you in Sunset over Bootes," she gushed.

Prinz flourished his stylus. "There you are, Thelma." He looked around, then whispered. "Don't tell anyone else who I am. I'm on holidays. You know." He lowered his glasses and winked.

Thelma fainted. The hostess floated her back to her seat and administered salts. The surrounding passengers smiled knowingly. It must be hard having a quiet holiday when your classically sculptured face is known in every cine-room across the Allied Sector.

Gilmog Fenn did not smile. Despite the zero-gee, he was engrossed in his accounts.

The Antarian beside him burped politely. "Not everyone's a tourist, it seems."

Fenn looked up with a start. His small filmy eyes stared at the Antarian from beneath impossibly shaggy eyebrows. "What..?"

The Antarian pointed at the books.

"Some of us have to earn a living," Fenn said. He looked resentfully across at Prinz.

"Selling what?"

Fenn opened his sample bag and produced a container of golden liquid. He held it up to the light, where it coruscated like bottled fireworks.

The Antarian stared at it in awe and tried, without success, to read the exotic label. "What is it?" he finally asked.

From the corner of his eye, Fenn saw Brant Prinz glance in his direction. He quickly returned the bottle to his bag. "Booze."

*\*Master, me thinks...\**

*\*Thou thinks at last. Forsooth, our cause, once giddy from starvation, may be fed yet.\**

*\*Shall I read on?\**

*\*Great Andronicus!. The reins are loosed.. Ride on, my hero.\**

231 stood opposite Zweller's store and watched, waiting. The trading post was in the centre of Quaggel. Eventually, all native artists came there to sell their major works. Similarly, all tourists came, either to buy, or savour what they couldn't afford.

231 had no idea how Zephyr would look or intended to pass the plans. But 231 had his own plan. He scratched an ear. It was time to act.

The bell jangled. R'Gurraq greeted Fenn, his incisors exuding cordiality. "Welcomes. Help I may?"

"On the contrary. I can help you." Fenn launched into his sales routine.

R'Gurraq, his tail stump waving patiently, listened politely, then suggested he fetch Haag Zweller. Fenn's reply caused a temporary short in R'Gurraq's translator.

Fenn repeated his presentation to Zweller. From a variety of miniature sample bottles, Zweller took a sip of an iridescent blue liqueur. His eyes bulged as he gasped for breath.

"Tends to put the wind up you, eh?" Fenn said.

Zweller paused mid-cough. He looked intently at Fenn. "Do you have anything else?"

Fenn reached into the depths of his bag. The golden fireworks were in his hand when the door bell rang. Zweller cursed and Fenn turned to see the source of the interruption.

"I must with you speak, Master Zweller," Quull Quillah said.

"Return later. I have business." Zweller allowed his irritation to translate.

"Wait it cannot," Quull insisted.

Fenn hesitated, returned the container to his bag, then headed for the door. "Keep the samples. I'll come later with the real thing."

As the door jangled shut, Zweller turned to Quull impatiently.

"My fiery intestines sell you will?" Quull asked.

Quull Quillah basked on his slab outside his quarquam. It was mid-day and Brungella's red dwarf mate was kissing the mountains. Quull was feeling satisfied. His major work was safely located in Zweller's store, its field active.

With one eye, Quull looked across the muddy street to the opposite walkway. Fenn, sample bag firmly grasped, was weaving through a throng of tourists who were viding basking Brungellians. He almost tripped over a discarded tail, recovered quickly and hurried on.

A furtive movement caught Quull's other eye. A man was progressing from window to window, a half block behind Fenn. He pretended to examine the stores' contents, but regularly checked Fenn's whereabouts. Quull's eye telescoped. Despite the gaudy tourist apparel, Quull immediately recognised Brant Prinz. He puzzled the matter a moment. The cine-star was covertly stalking Fenn. But why? As he followed each man's progress, he reached a conclusion. Smiling, he decided to pay Gilmog Fenn a visit that evening.

*\*Enough, young Francis. A surfeit of wisdom is unwise lest easily digested. Else thou vomit it forth, wasting all.\**

*\*But Master, now I understand...\**

*\*I rejoice. But the present is ended. Master Orlando awaits, more quarking tensors to bore you with, no doubt. The ultimate chapter of this classic will wait for the morrow. Begone.\**

Zweller watched the 'fiery intestines', mesmerised. The bizarre image given by his translator had stuck in his mind. The writhing columns of magnetically suspended liquids were an artistic masterpiece. He had convinced Quull to leave his magno-sculpture in the store. It would gain greater exposure to tourists there than in Quull's quarquam.

Or had Quull convinced him?

Momentarily, the sculpture took the shape of lanyards blowing in a breeze. Zephyr! Where was he? When would he pass the plans?

The door announced a customer. Zweller instantly identified the cine-star Brant Prinz. Good, a wealthy customer without taste.

"Something for Prinz-town, sir?"

"Great gods, am I that easily recognised in these backwoods?"

"Do Drakkons have four eyes?" Zweller laughed.

Prinz's reply was cut off by the door bell as Quull Quillah entered.

"Permission to browse?" Prinz asked.

Zweller absently nodded and pointed towards the gallery. "My assistant R'Gurraq will help you." Then he turned to Quull who had approached his sculpture and exposed the field generator. What's he up to?

"Intrusion to pardon. Adjustment may I?"

Reassured, Zweller shrugged indifference and began tidying shelves, waiting for Prinz's return with a purchase.

A sudden downpour made the roof drum and the air filled with rich Quaggel smells. Scurrying footsteps approached, then passed the store. Ponderous silence hung from the ceiling. Zweller's hackles rose with a premonition that events were about to unfold. He discreetly checked the charge on the weapon beneath the counter. Footsteps stopped outside.

The door opened and Gilmog Fenn entered, drenched from the tropical rain. His squinting eyes took in Quull bent over his sculpture, Zweller at the counter, and the otherwise empty store.

"I promised the real thing. Here it is." He strode past Quull while removing the flask of golden liquid from his bag. He placed it on the counter.

Zweller looked intently at Fenn, then at the flask. Relief passed over him. He almost laughed. As simple as that, he thought. His relief quickly turned to puzzlement as the contents of the bottle began to swirl, then churn violently. Energy scintillated within the liquid, ricocheting off invisible barriers, threatening to shatter the container.

"What...?" Zweller looked at Fenn who was staring aghast at the bottle, his eyes popping from their bushy sockets.

"Move nobody!" R'Gurraq stood proudly erect inside the gallery door, his hand blaster pointed unerringly between Fenn and

Zweller. He glanced briefly at Quull, who was standing motionless beside his sculpture.

Zweller blustered. "R'Gurraq, what in twin suns are you..?"

"Traitor," R'Gurraq hissed. "You are more than a tail about to lose ." He stepped forward and picked up the bottle. Its contents continued to swarm like tortured fireflies.

Fenn snapped out of his shock. "Who are you?" he asked R'Gurraq. He turned on Zweller. "What's going on? What happened to my Golden Aurora?"

"Don't play me for a fool, Zephyr." Zweller spat. He knew his trial and execution were imminent. "You blew it...and me."

Fenn turned sharply towards R'Gurraq, his hands open, pleading. "What's this madman talking about. Who's this Zeph...?"

Fenn's head dissolved in a pink spray.

Zweller looked at his faintly glowing blaster, then at Fenn's crumpled remains. "Frankly, Zephyr, I expected something more subtle from you." He glanced at R'Gurraq. "Mind the store, won't you?" Then Zweller embraced his weapon and blew a hole in his chest.

*\*What say you, Francis? Do not ancient pages and dormant speech enlighten us in these modern days? Though generations by hundreds mould in their graves since these words were penned, they have a hoary lesson to tell.\**

*\*I can but defer to your wisdom, Master; and pray your forgiveness for my early folly.\**

*\*All is forgiven, while all will be revealed as you read the final pages.\**

R'Gurraq shook his head. So this was how it ends. The anonymous tip about the resonating bottle had been right. His long assignment spying on Zweller was over. Pity he couldn't have taken Zephyr in. Back to processing signals at the local Brungellian bureau.

"Artisan Quull." R'Gurraq remembered the other Brungellian. No need to get an innocent local involved. "Your exhibit, take and go."

Quull reached down and switched off the field generator. The liquids collapsed into the containing bund and lay still. He picked up the device, looked at the leaking corpses, and without a word, walked towards the door. Quull stopped at the threshold as Brant Prinz spoke from inside the gallery.

"Agent R'Gurraq, a word with you please," Prinz said.

R'Gurraq pocketed his blaster and entered the gallery, the now dormant bottle in his hand. He noted the cine-star's bearing had altered. In place of egotistical shallowness, there was a calmness, a self assurance. Confidence of command.

"Regretted violence, Mr Prinz. Matters of Alliance security."

Prinz waved away the apology. "When dealing with slime, hands get dirty." He produced a slate and stylus, keyed a combination, then showed R'Gurraq the display. "Admiral Sligon's Alpha Unit. Old Iron Pants will hear of your action." Prinz held out his hand. "When I return the plans."

Quull had moved silently from the front door to stand outside the gallery entrance. He listened to Prinz, hatred curling his lips back from saurian teeth. Barely breathing, he placed his artwork on the floor.

"Certainly, colleague. Too hot this one." R'Gurraq hesitated. "Understanding, surely. But...password?"

Prinz grinned. "Just as well, or you'd be on report. After you?"

"From Aries to Pisces..." R'Gurraq intoned.

Prinz caught a glimpse of Quull through the doorway. "Here, I'll write it," he said. "Artists have ears." He took the stylus from the slate and twisted its top.

In a blur of motion, Quull darted his tail into the control box and triggered the field generator. Prinz gave a start as the magno-liquids sprang into life. With a grim smile, he thumbed the stylus. R'Gurraq, confused by the sudden charge in the air, reached for his blaster.

Quull's foot gave the bund a powerful shove and the writhing columns slid along the floor to stop between R'Gurraq and Prinz.

The bottle in R'Gurraq's hand repeated its earlier display of energetic convulsions, while Prinz's long hair stood up as if electrified. A hum slid painfully upwards through five octaves. Over the ringing in his ears, R'Gurraq heard a cry from his boot camp training days. "Incoming!"

R'Gurraq hit the floor a millisecond before the disrupter stylus Prinz had aimed at his heart resonated beyond its design tolerance and disintegrated with a stunning detonation.

A minute of ringing silence passed. R'Gurraq slowly regained his senses. He shook his head, trying to focus. Everything before him was a red blur. Then he realised his vision wasn't at fault. It was Prinz.

The bottle lay on the floor, amazingly undamaged. R'Gurraq, still in shock, stood unsteadily and picked it up. Suddenly remembering Quull, he turned and fumbled to draw his blaster.

Quull grinned humourlessly, displayed his empty hands and walked to where the only recognisable part of Prinz lay. He reached down and carefully removed the flesh mask from the head, revealing two extra eyes. Drakkon!

"I regret Zephyr was a better actor than the real...late Brant Prinz."

"And Fenn..?" R'Gurraq glanced at the salesman's corpse.

"Wrong place...wrong time...wrong bottle." Quull reached out to take the plans. "Admiral Sligon presents his compliments."

"From Aries to Pisces..." R'Gurraq insisted.

"...there's no place like home," Quull completed.

R'Gurraq handed 231 the bottle. "It was done well."

"It had to be. For 400."

*\*As oft as I read it, still he dies.\**

*\*And so it shall ever remain, young Francis. But not, I say, in vain.\**

*\*The base Zephyr-killers...\**

*\*...shall suffer still, as their conquered ancestors since the treachery of Quull Quillah 231. Peace and acceptance shall be refused them. Perpetual persecution their prize. Outcasts forever marked with the curse of the Fiery Intestines.\**

*\*The skulking Zephyr virus, Master, incursed and incubating in the Golden Aurora, restored to the Alliance...\**  
*\*...a veritable flotilla of Starcruisers...\**  
*\*...Mark V...\**  
*\*...scuttling to glorious defeat.\**  
*\*And we will continue to study this ancient account...\**  
*\*...a testimony to Man's treachery...\**  
*\*...and Zephyr's sacrifice.\**  
*\*I aver it, Francis, on my dam's four eyes.\**

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