

LCTN: 83-TAURUS-6B (Hyades cluster)  
CORD: SAO-93979.0102 (45pc from SOL)  
DATE: 2319ce-FEBRUARY-26-WEDNESDAY  
TIME: 04:35zulu (local 25:08pst)

The viral video of Piper fearlessly gunning for the monster that was slaughtering their people on the Queensland Vista, and killing him at the loss of her own life, and Victoria bagging two, to protect her as she fell, then letting the little one go free—made them both heroes in the minds of most everyone, everywhere. Piper’s witty repartee with Victoria as she laid there dying made her a superstar...

Where E-Z Wednesday is just getting started (i.e. UT8-GMT) Wednesday here on Prypiat is coming to an end. Brillig was cancelled for today, and here at Boxter’s home both friends and family are in the central ballroom watching just one of several hundred posted streams taken during the funeral procession—by the over ninety-five thousand people lining the two-kilometers between the cathedral in the upscale West Banes to a park where Boxter’s Star-Clipper was waiting.

The eight Pipe and Drum bands in the procession, locally and sent from the UK by Victoria, was an impressive sight indeed, but it was the Second Line Preservation Band, the group that befriended Boxter and Piper all those many decades ago in New Orleans, that escorted her casket from the ship into the Star-Castle.

The Star-Castle of Prypiat, a Bastion Fortress that serves as the home of Nigel Kiel, was opened for the funeral attendees for what is now being coined as *the sendoff of the century*.

Nobody knew what to make of this band when they received the body while playing the morose “Closer Walk With Thee” but it was when they switched gears into “Over In The Glory Land” followed by “When The Saints Go Marching In” that transmogrified this solemn procession into a much needed celebration.

The SLPB did make a pinky-promise to Piper that they’d play

at her funeral, a promise made just two years back, and in Boxter's mind that's the equivalency to a *yubikiri* chit. The band was surprised that she actually died but since Boxter was springing for everything, and paying them all stupid amounts of USD to play, he was relieved that his SS wouldn't have to collect their pinkies if they reneged on it.

Then again, they all loved Piper and were thrilled to be here!

Anyway, from the desert alcove that's attached to the central ballroom, Samantha slips out of the alcove with *Vorpal* strapped over her shoulder and slithers up next to Jessica who has been watching the crowd as she waits to meet with Boxter.

Samantha leans in, "He's ready for ya, love." She playfully bumps her hip against Jessica's, asking, "You gonna come see me before you turn in? I 'ave got somethin' to show you!"

Jessica was about to say something then, thinking about it, her face says *why not* as she huffs, "No need to twist my arm."

Samantha smiles big, "Feel free to twist mine!" She then pulls in close to whisper in her ear—and with her warm breath drifting down her neck, "Don't keep our Boxxy waiting."

Jessica breaths deep, and, "Okay, give me an hour."

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Boxter came around his desk and pulls out a chair for Jessica after he gives her a genuinely sweet hug, and as he steps around the desk for his chair, "Thank you for being last on my list of obligations for this eve. I'll make it up to you, *ma chérie*."

Jessica smiles as Boxter sits, "Noah need some TLC?"

Boxter visibly shudders, "That whinging *sitzpinkler*."

"Would you like to know what I picked up on?"

He touches his lip with a frown, "Think we can put that off 'till tomorrow? I don't want to keep you from Samael."

Jessica is taken aback slightly by that and puts up a defensive hand, saying, "Aaaaah, 'bout last night. I didn't mean to go there—"

Boxter cuts her off, "But Samantha did! Look, the two of you happen to be adults and, not to blatantly overindulge my youngest, but she...hasn't been able to shut up about you since you two met!" He leans towards Jessica, "Putting this in perspective, she did wheedle her way deep into your personal bubble, and you didn't put up much of a scrap so, it begs to be asked, do you enjoy her company?"

Jessica asks, "Is yes the preferred response?"

"Only if ye be honest." Claspng his hands, Boxter sits up with raised eyebrows, "A little tidbit of honesty from me in good turn? To be admittedly self-indulging, I shamelessly enjoy your company, and since the two of you are so young, we cannot blame our Samael in the slightest for desiring a more...corporeal cynosure with your time together! Someone that the both of us regard as...an equal."

Jessica is dumbfounded by that and asks, "Really?"

"Tragically yes, because I've so few to choose from! The only people *alive* that I personally consider an equal in this world would be Samantha, you, Marshal Ramirez, your father and...well, Seth."

"Hu? He never told me he was talking to you."

"Regularly...and the lil' scamp wanted me to share something with you tonight. We'll get to that in just a minute but, first, I wanted to say that I have been struggling with *not* asking if there could have been something—anything to save *our* Piper, but the moment she decoupled herself from the neuronet, well, that alone assuaged my curiosity. What happened was the best possible outcome. To pester you further would be pointless since my...imagination has already done the heavy lifting on this issue. Again, thank you and your brother for being candid when it counted most."

"To appease my curiosity, why'd she do it?"

"When she was a teen, Piper suffered from a bout of psoriasis, but instead of being cured it lay dormant and mutated into a rare and untreatable Dallmon Psoriatic Arthritis that reappeared five years ago. Her autoimmune response led to mutilans that attacked her bones, spine and hips. We even replaced all of her phalanges just last year but little by little...her life was being whittled away. Only Sam and I knew and, as much as it breaks our hearts, we ultimately respect Piper's choice. What happens to leave me in a lurch is that she doesn't want to wake up in a hosting world until I cross over."

"Wow, she always seemed so spry and happy."

"It's amazing, given time, how well one can adapt to opiates."

"Hosting world?"

"Not yet decided. So many Stumpies opt for that Taj Mahal silliness but, little does anybody know is that their server farm is in SoCal's...City of Industry."

"No shit! And nobody knows?"

Boxter is almost laughing at that, "Not a clue! I already paid for Vegas<sup>3</sup> but the chips are transferable if I change my mind. Then considering how healthy I am...it's gonna be a long haul for me."

Jessica stares at him for a second, then shakes her head and, "Okay, what I can say is that you won't be alone for too long."

Boxter blinks repeatedly, then, "Well, I don't think I'll ever be in the odious mindset of replacing the irreplaceable."

"Okay, let's put it this way, your family will be accepting of who you replace Piper with—because you will not be replacing her. Also, she's not from here which helps. Does this make sense?"

"Strangely enough, it does. I just hope it's not a Band-Aid."

"You'll be pleasantly surprised. Trust me on this one."

"The family will be accepting of this Sheila?" Jessica nods yes, so Boxter shrugs, "Something to look forward to, I guess?" He rubs his hands together, "So, I made good on my promise by keeping my calendar open for tomorrow and, now that I look at it, it appears to be a gaping hole fraught with boredom. Have you that fix?"

"Yea, ya'll ready to become that man of peace?"

"Oh yea, the Jabbers. Must we? So soon?"

"Kinda, hav'ta, now." Jessica leans in, "Look, the Pale One."

"Wasn't that what they called Piper?"

"Bobby's daughter was named after Piper." Jessica scoots in and notices that the edge of his desk moved up when she bumps up against it, "Look, she's in a tenuous position. If we go tomorrow she'll be untouchable, there'll be peace, and another species joins the FIS."

"And if we don't?"

"Bloodshed...death on a grand scale, and so much so they will never recover." With Boxter pondering this, and waiting two seconds too long for an answer, Jessica prods him, "We're doin' this, right?"

"I'm thinking!" Jessica gives him that stern look Piper used to give him so he goes, "Okay! We'll do it, so...what do I have to do?"

"Bring a gift, and since you gave *Vorpal* to Sam, we kinda—"

Boxter points out, "We have an excess of those thingys lying about here. We'll give the Pale One, *Cletus*. That's Junior's Ninty-Five that gets no love. Pips never could stomach hunting like her mother." It's here that Boxter sets the Ruger that Piper used to kill Blue Boy on the desk, and slides it over, "On that note, this is yours."

Jessica recoils, "On that note, oh hell no!"

"Oh, hell yes! You don't get a vote. We all have one of these Ruger's, but my daughters wanted you to have Piper's! When we go tomorrow might I suggest a strong-side rig? With your ample bosom

and rounded...hips, it'll look mightily impressive while in your standard BDU trousers and t-shirt. Then, considering the task at hand, I would suggest pixilated desert with an olive-drab tee."

Jessica, debating on what to say, points at him while trying not to laugh, then chuckling as she quietly says, "asshole."

Boxter mouths the words, *thank you*, he then scrunches up, "So, Red Love, I'm all atwitter as to how we're going to go about this?"

"Michelle Kiel is flying us up there. You declare peace and give 'em the olive branch."

"A fifty-cal olive branch."

"Can you think of a better one?"

"No...no, I can't."

"The Pale One, like most the Jabbers, already know they don't stand a chance against us. Her father wouldn't listen to her."

"A common failing amongst parents." He thinks about it and, "You have droids up there now I take it?"

"Yea, and also a squad from Mook."

He wonders aloud, "With my granddaughter?"

Jessica huffs slightly, "I wanted that to be a surprise. Sheron and Clint are on recon up there and, tomorrow afternoon, they will be coming home to visit until the eighth." She then says with a little excitement, "Oh, and just so you know, we figured out that those things can see our troops while cloaked in their JACCs."

Boxter realizes, "But, not the droids."

"Exactly, it's probably their heartbeats or a thermal something or other, like with the Xhemal. We'll find out soon enough." Jessica throws out, "So you, the mate of their nemesis, will be doing all the talking and Michelle will bring Glados as our interpreter. She already has a working knowledge of their language and she can mimic it, and surprisingly well. Then again, she has always wanted to meet you!"

"Well now, wishes do come true! Piper spoke highly of her."

"Glados will be a baritone compared to them, but they'll be able to understand her. And, if she fumbles the ball I'll run with it."

"Via your puppet-master neuro-connectivity, correct?"

"I'm already linked up to the Pale One's mind."

"Let me guess, when you brought the wedding party and left by way of the Vista." Jessica's eyebrows rise, not knowing what to say, so Boxter smirks, "Remember, I see all...mostly."

Jessica does a quick double take and, "By the way, I gotta know, 83-T Jabberwockus Samantha?" She huffs a laugh, "Really?"

Boxter throws his hands up slightly, and tries not to laugh, "Well, when binomial nomenclature was to be enforced by the scientific community, of the species that Piper discovered and named, she used our daughter's names as the binomial." He now laughs while saying, "Speaking of which, I had a stoat named after me which...was apropos since that cutest little of things was found out to be a murderous little beast. Anyway, when Piper blundered into the jabbers up north while hunting banders, Samantha was in utero...but I got a stoat."

"Let me guess, Boxiter?"

"Close, Boxxyter, with two x's and a y. Pips has become a bit of a rabid naturalist herself. That and cooking is where her mother and she connected. Right now, she has a beautiful crane like creature up for naming and she has opted for Victoria as the binomial yet, if you promise to act surprised, there is a small eagle sized Jabber she found that blindsided everyone! Pips has the green light to name it and, with its roseate scales, I believe she's considering you for the honor!"

"There any nice way I can push back on that?"

Boxter points out, "No, not a chance, and by the way it flaps its little leathery wings, it's sooo you..." As Jessica wonders where she's heard *leathery wings* before, he asks, "Also, if by happenstance, you are going to be around us more often than not, I was wondering if I may impose upon you...on the by-n-by?"

Jessica nods, yes, "You are my friend, Box."

"And confidant?" Boxter points out, "There is a difference." Jessica thinks deeply about this, and after a pregnant pause, he asks, "Have I ever given you reason to distrust me?" She shakes her head, *no*, so he asks, "What say you, then?"

Jessica nods slightly, saying, "Yea, I'm game."

Boxter nods in like then, "Speaking of game!" He holds out his hands along the edge of his desk, gesturing her to do the same, and they lift the edge of the desk creating an inch-high lip around the entire desktop, "I know you were wondering what this was about."

"Yea...a bumper?"

"Ding-ding, and a fine segue towards, well, like in cinema, here is where I'm supposed to give you my...tragic backstory. I'm not sure if this is to avoid something that he sees over the horizon, or to enrich our future to come? He remains mute on the topic."

Jessica rolls her eyes, "The little bastard."

Boxter smiles big, "But a convincing little bastard!"

Jessica watches as he reaches over to a gold-trimmed ebony box that has always been on the desk, and she has wondered what it was for, and as he opens it, she blinks and asks, "Jenga?"

"This is how Piper and I would...noddle over things! Through the decades many a proscription and plot and conspiracy has been formulated and hatched over these fifty-four blocks of Alder and, considering what mischief I've been up to over this vast sum of years, it's been—the perfect metaphor. Care to play?"

Jessica is surprised, "Sure, set 'em up!"

Boxter lifts the elaborately engraved and gold-damascened loading tray from the box, stands it up between them and, pulling the tray away—it reveals a stack of old and heavily stained wooden bricks cross-stacked in eighteen layers, "When I was five I saw the stumpy children playing this game, with much bigger blocks than these, but I had to have it. I found this littler-original design and managed to put this very one on layaway...but I'm getting ahead of myself."

"It's your story!"

"It's your move." He gestures towards the Jenga stack, and as Jessica inspects the bricks, looking for a loose one, Boxter starts with, "I was born a garbo, to a family of pickers, and we agro-pickers were considered the lowest of the low. Pickers were compensated by a sliding-scale, a percentage of the return on the harvest, but what hurt us so was how the crops were always sold far below the going market rates. Obviously, the growers were being paid the difference under the table but...prove it. The practice was shockingly prevalent but nobody cared about their thievery simply because every stumpy is a grower! Undercutting the pickers when I was a child was so bad that my father, on his own initiative, decided to push for a pickers union."

Jessica pulls a brick, saying, "That didn't go over to well, hu?"

"To say the least..." Boxter continues the story while looking for a brick to pull, "Now, back then, at five, I was a cado-monkey. I was a swift and wiry little monkey at that. We chillin's would climb up into the trees and pick fruit not readily accessible to the adults, but we were so poorly paid that all of my earnings went to the family coffers. Then again, if I hustled my little monkey tail off my father and uncles would find a way to slip me a few spare-pee so—"

As Jessica looks for a block, she says, "Hence the layaway."

"Exactly! So, here we are on a Thursday and I was to go up into all the trees we worked over on Muldje and Wagyl days to find the avos we missed while pruning in the dark. At that point all I needed

was fifty-two pence...I was so close. Now, I always set up the bushel baskets with my father before my uncles, cousins and the rest were to show, but five minutes into the stacking, six men slip out from the trees and grab my father. One holds me down and forces me to watch as the others slit...his...throat."

Jessica stacks a brick on top while saying, "Jesus."

"But not every trauma is what it seems!" As Boaxter looks for a loose brick, "My father was a tough man, and he was real hard on us children but, as his only son, he was exceedingly cruel towards me. My father would beat us all, but if I cried out he would beat me harder. By the time I was five you could have ripped my arm off and I wouldn't make so much as a peep!" He stacks a brick on top, and with Jessica now taking her turn, "So, on my knees, watching the gurgling bubbles and blood pour out from the slit in my father's throat, I shed only a single tear that rolled down my cheek...and you couldn't have framed that better on a Hollywood set! What I did not do was cry out, and looking into my father's eyes, what seemed like an eternity, Samuel Allan gave me a little smile, and with a nod...expired."

Jessica asks, "So, that's what happened."

"Not quite, we're just getting started."

She nods then asks, "Did you finger these guys?"

Boaxter huffs a little laugh, then adds, "Well, I was five, and as I said to the authorities when they questioned me, in my broken garbo tongue I say, *'Oi no see notin' gova'na!*' and you could say that was because they threatened my mother and sisters, they did, but I was silent mostly because they did me a solid."

"That was a favor?"

"Considering how much I hated my father, yes, very much so but, if put to the question I'll deny it. So, with me uncles and cousins nancing about over my father's murder, I got a layaway to pay for, so that afternoon I traipse back out to the Kiel's orchard to pick some fruit! After four hours I had ten bushels filled to the gills, and I wasn't going to stop however, it's spring break and a gaggle of young men, all stumpies destined to be heads of their own households, they were walking past and, seeing this monkey in a tree they decide to get some target practice in—on guess who?"

Jessica protests, "You were five!"

Boaxter thumbs back at himself, "Garbo!"

"Really, seriously? You were just a little kid!"

"Caste system, *comprende?* Welcome to Bribie Eyot!"

"That's fucked up!"

"Still is, darlin'." Boxter points towards her hand, "You gonna stack that block?" She does, so he continues while taking his turn, "After about thirty avos were thrown at me, Shephard Wanganui finally lands one between my eyes and I came tumbling out of the tree but, instead of bouncing off the ground in this low gravity, my shin and wrist hit an irrigation pipe and both snap in half." Putting his brick on top of the stack, Boxter smiles, "So, there I was and I was a sight! Spitting gravel with blood running down my face, a broken wrist and a compound break in my shin, and all these fine-young gentlemen were laughing but, what unnerved them is that I didn't cry out or whimper in the slightest. I just stared at them, and their discomfort made them laugh even more as they sauntered away."

Jessica, feeling for a loose block, wonders, "That's not the end of it, there's more to this, right?"

"How perceptive!" He gives a little chuckle, then, "What was surprising is that the EMTs were there inside a few quick minutes. They carted this little-broken monkey off to hospital but, instead of being housed in a commoners ward, I was put up in a private room! My oldest uncle came to see me the next morning, before the surgery on my shin, and he informed me that my mother, now a single woman of poverty with three children in tow, ended her own life...and took my two sisters along for the ride."

Jessica is shocked by this, "That's horrible!"

Boxter nods, "Yes, but what followed was not so much. The coward then told me that I was now a ward of the state—an orphan. Now, in all honesty, that was the best thing that ever happened to me but, what brought true clarity, putting this whole ugly affair into proper perspective, was that when I came too after the surgery, sitting on the side table next to the bed was...my layaway."

"Your uncle?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"There was one young man who did not throw, who did not laugh, and when the others jolly well toddled off he just stood there scowling at me...with contempt...radiant with unabashed disgust."

Jessica blinks and instantly realizes, "But not for you."

"Ding...ding for one Nigel Kiel, and I didn't lay eyes upon him again until I married his niece. Don't rightly know what he saw in me laying there, but from the shadows he...he didn't open doors per se, what he did was clear away caste imposed obstacles."

"I have to ask, is...what we're doing now, with the war and everything, is this part of your plan, or plans coming to fruition?"

"Since you are in my confidence, the answer is, yes. What I didn't expect was to discover unwitting allies from within the ranks of our adversaries. This was a surprise, indeed! Then add the reflective shock in realizing that the preservation of my life, and the origin of this journey, all spirals in around the gravity well of...a toy."

With sad eyes, Jessica quietly says, "Jenga."

"Ding-ding-ding." Now in deep thought, Boxter adds, "While little monkey me was lying there in hospital, taking stock in a toy that he was not sure how it got there, some revelations crept into his five year old mind. I always viewed my mother as comfort and a sanctuary from a father I loathed so completely, yet my mother exhibited the worst forms of fragility and cowardice. She extinguished my sisters and the hatred I always had for my father was instantly leveled onto her. This one-eighty flip was from the realization that my father was trying to harden me, toughen me, and in those last seconds before his consciousness lapsed I...garnered my father's approval."

"Wow, this is all so very fucked up."

"Don't quote me on this, but it had an impact."

Jessica is trying not to nervous-laugh, "You could say that."

"If one were to take the time to think on it, it is kind of poetic how a subtle smile, and a single tear, can impart an odd wrinkle onto the bruised psyche of a damaged child. Point is, as an orphan I was now school bound, so I dove into it with a vengeance...in mind."

With wide-eyed amazement, Jessica nods, "And here we are."

Boxter gestures towards the Jenga tower, "In the future, as we commune over...Jenga, and I spin more yarns, we'll need to make a point to stay on top of who's turn it is. Sound like a plan?"

Jessica blinks, "Yea, I don't know whose it is?"

"Well then, love." With a finger, Boxter tips the tower over and it crashes on his desk. He then gives Jessica a warm smile while asking, "Don't you have some toes to curl?"

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