The Traveller Adventure - XXXIII

Dramatis Personae:

**March Harrier “A Crew”**

Carl playing Captain Loyd Kitman playing cook Ooar Barclay

Jane playing Steward Fred Squeaker playing driver Frank James

Jim playing Ghazan Davidson playing engineer Arlan Schoeffler

Lily Lee the explosive administrator playing admin assistant Jane Sigmal (NPC)

Adma Lewes the darkhistory medic playing guard Dr Manda Good (NPC)

Gvoudzon the flash vargr playing valet Gvarra (NPC)

**March Harrier “B Crew”**

Tess playing Tess Davies

Kunal Dins – painting pilot with seat problems (NPC)

Phlo – a young llellewyeloly stevedore (NPC)

**Zilan NPCs**

Naomi Sarkar – female, 42, large and strong (B1B864) but a klutz, from a tribal group a long time ago, now with skills in Mechanic, Recon, Survival, Athletics, Slug Pistol etc

Christopher Milton – male, 28, mechanic (& electronics), failed athlete (END=10), failed seaman, now drifting

Bang-ching Nagda – male, 34, once an Entertainer (but little skill other than Carousing), has spent four years in gaol, now drifting

Sosen Akao, 46 – male, good with comms and with energy pistol but drifting, rather fancies Paroche despite being twice her age

Kadgeapoo Moti – male, 22, scruffy clothes, scruffy character, sneezes; happy to chat to Frank James

Paroche Sharma – female, 20, former pilot in scouts medically discharged (END=1), desperate for money to pay medical bills

Sheelaa Whiteley – female, 32, shy to the point of painful but obsessed with Ooar, blonde, good eyesight, interested in astrography, comms engineer from the Western continent of Zila

**Tukera Family NPCs**

Xberr, male, 56 + Josy, female, 56 – Master & Mistress, Xberr is youngest brother of Leonard-Bolden

Abran, male, 34 + Eve, 41 – not present

E’sta, female, 29 + Yimthee, 30 – Pauli (aged 2)

Jushon – male, 26

Cillda (died in childbirth)

Rooth – female, 21

Uncle Billton – male, 60

Cousins: Maad, female, 27 + Minni, female, 21 – Elias (7), Annoveva (5), Heari (3)

**Tukera Estate servant NPCs**

Eric Bruce – mechanic, nearing retirement

Elska Day – cook

**As Yet Unnamed NPCs**

Chambermaid

housekeeper (and/or butler)

Senior valet

Ghillie

Guard

[Hmmmm, collecting them up, that’s quite a cast. Although to be fair none of the Zilan NPCs have had more than a line except for Sheelaa and the same goes for most of the Tukera family]

And so, to the meat of Inselberg. You’ll recall last time we had just arrived on Lewis and Marilla Sen and her assistant Caz Phizen had allocated jobs to the “A Crew” of the March Harrier and a half dozen others who’d come with them from Zila. Captain Loyd Kitman, under his new Zilan pseudonym of Ooar Barclay, had been getting to know Sheelaa, a rather shy comms engineer. He and everyone else (Fred Squeaker – now Frank James, Lily – now Jane Sigmal, Gvoudzon as Gvarra and Adma as Dr Manda Good) had been practising their Zilan accents under the watchful tutelage of Ghazan Davidson, or rather Arlan Schoeffler.

(Yes, I’m already regretting three sets of names to remember: player names, character names, pseudonyms for infiltrating the Tukera Estate. All we need now is for anonymous players with online handles for my insanity to be complete.)

[Also, just for clarity, we’re still meeting virtually. While technically I think we could now be meeting in a pub – I get a bit hazy on what the law is exactly now – none of us are overly keen on it and it would rule Jim out of joining in so there’s really no question. I’m now presuming that we will continue online indefinitely whatever the covid/lockdown/legal situation brings us to. I did comment at the start that it would be hard going back to *not* having three screens of info in front of me and all my books behind me; not to mention trying to sit at a table in a pub with very little physical space and all the noise and the expense of drinks! On the upside, all my players participate with cameras on so I’m not feeling totally bereft of any visual input as to what is going on which I really struggled with at the Virtual Traveller Convention.]

Meanwhile, back on the March Harrier, the B Crew consisting of Tess Davies (engineering whizz), Kunal Dins (pilot and sometime confident of Tess) and Phlo (llellywyloly stevedore) have been picking up the pieces following the ship combat of Tradewar and looking to fix whatever needed repair. Tess discovered that a failed Jump regulator, a rather vital piece of kit, wasn’t available in the starport, nor in any of the small chandleries in the highport and nor in Aramanx’s shipyard. Some are on order apparently, but not expected to arrive for three or four weeks.

That last would of course be too late for the planned rendezvous on Lewis to pick up the A Crew after their hacking of the Tukera computers. Tess, however, had picked up on a rumour about Old Per’s scrapyard round at the leading Trojan point and had set off for that and explored a couple of Subsidized Merchant hulks to no avail.

[Complete aside which you may want to skip through boredom: In the previous session I’d rather blithely plucked ‘a day of travel’ out to the Trojan point and not really thought about it much more. Before this session, I’d been updating the timeline and decided to get some numbers. Which is when I learned that if you assume an orbit roughly similar to Earth’s and you’re travelling on a 3G shuttle, it’s actually a 40-hour trip. A bit more than that, actually. That’s a fair bit longer than I had imagined. Although it’s not actually a problem; the B Crew have plenty of time before they’re due at the rendezvous. But just to satisfy my curiosity I used the *next* formula in *The Traveller Book* to calculate how close Aramanx would have to be to its star in order to get a journey time of, say, twelve hours. Oh dear. Considerably closer than Mercury. That sounds rather hot unless it’s quite a dim star. No such luck. A quick check of the ever-wonderful TravellerMap and it turns out that the star is a G0v star. I nearly dug out my **MegaTraveller** books to get some numbers but was out of time (and energy) so I assumed “not too different from the Sun”. Anyone, feel free to correct me if I’ve got all this maths and science wrong. In any case, I decided there was nothing for it but to admit I was wrong and change the journey time to 40 hours. (An alternative might have been to up the Thrust rating of the shuttle but that seemed more of an adjustment and I discounted it. In actual fact, even at 6G it’s still more than a ‘day’.) Of course, I did twig that with Traveller tech you can do a straight-line trip rather than an orbit (I’d been dividing Earth’s orbit by 6 for the 60° of a Trojan point) and was rather pleased with myself when I remembered that the word for what was needed was a chord. However, it only brings the journey time down to 39.5 hours, so not a lot of saving. (For anyone who cares, this distance, I discovered, is the same as planet to sun. I’m sure there are many here on TML who know this stuff. My ignorance, as ever, knows no bounds). Suffice to say that once again I’m brought up by the fact that Space Is Big and that I’m bear of very little brain.]

We picked up where we left off. On Lewis, the A Crew were shown to their accommodation and told to report for duty first thing in the morning. In the Aramanx system, Tess headed over to a third possibility Old Pers had mentioned.

On Lewis, I began with Jim. Ghazan. Arlan. Told him how he had been fetched in the morning by air/raft and taken out to the guard station before being shown around. At which point he interjected with the very fair point he’d been assigned as a mechanic and I realized I’d been giving him Adma’s spiel. Now of course, what I *should* have done – if I were any use as a Referee – would have been just to fold this into the game and have it as the staff’s mistake and all part of Arlan’s experience. What I actually did because I can’t think quickly enough was just to ’fess up as they say, call that Adma’s experience, and start over with Arlan. Ah well. Next time. Perhaps if I ever run it at TravCon I’ll write the mistake into actual events. But more on ‘newbie’, or at least ‘still learning’ Refereeing in a moment. When Arlan *was* finally taken in hand by his supervisor he was given a quick tour, on foot and in respirator of course, of the butte the main house sits on.

He saw various things:

* The garage (I probably should have done more with describing different air/rafts and models and problems etc but it didn’t occur to me until after the event),
* the guard station (where Arlan got to see a large equipment store with spare parts as well as old family heirlooms and equipment of all kinds including climbing paraphernalia),
* the mechanical building (with its water pumping station).

One of those things might be relevant later. Finishing up in the mechanical building, it’s clear that his guide, Eric, showing him the ropes is getting on a bit in age and glad of a younger man. Maybe to pass the actual work onto while he directs, but mainly to talk to. Unfortunately, the dice are not with Jim this evening and on his first day he’s okay tagging along learning the lie of the land but once he’s actually given jobs to do, he’s less than impressive. Still, Eric is sympathetic. For the moment.

Over to Jane. Fred. Frank. Actually, Jane gets points, or perhaps a +DM if we roll on how well their accents/cover stories are holding up. She consistently corrected me all evening if I didn’t use her pseudonym which I liked. Though on the whole I was getting them right, there was just a much longer pause before I addressed the player while the cogs slowly turned and I got into gear. Jane’s Fred/Frank had been assigned as a driver and you may recall (having rolled a double 1) rather bigged himself up as a hotshot at the wheel when he’d got Lily to help put a CV together. Word had got about amongst the family, and he was instantly in demand.

Oh yes, the family. As I prepared for the session, I realized that *The Traveller Adventure* is remarkably unhelpful on this score. I mean it gives you 47 bureaucrats on Zila in some detail. Some of whom you might only interact with for a few seconds. 47! And yet it can’t give you details of who is inhabiting this 40-room mansion where some of the PCs are likely to be valets and other servants in close contact with various family members and other servants for anything up to a couple of weeks! I mean it says it’s a Tukera family home but gives you no clue as to roughly where in the ‘family’ these folk sit – let’s say in relation to the Marquis of Aramis – or any idea of how many are ‘at home’. Not to mention what kind of people they might be. Nor other key servants.

Ah well, I suppose it gives the Referee a chance to be creative. Either beforehand or on the spot. There was no way I was going to try and create interactions/conversations with potentially so many relatively important people on the fly. Besides I wanted a ‘picture’ of who was around for descriptions. So, there was nothing for it but to see what clues I could garner from the book and start making stuff up wholesale. As it happened my nephew and niece were visiting for lunch so I got them on the case to help out. My nephew latched onto the 40-room mansion, well that implies maybe fifteen bedrooms perhaps each with a sitting room, the tenor of the text suggests that family presence on Inselberg is ‘diminishing’ so perhaps not fully occupied. Other rooms that are likely to exist might be at least three reception rooms, large dining room, small dining room, library (of course!), study, games room. A house kitchen is mentioned – separate from the kitchen block across the way. Meanwhile my daughter and niece were working on names and relationships. Hey presto! I had a small family tree and enough people to not quite fill the house. More importantly I had various roles and personalities (absent older brother, spoilt daughter, eccentric uncle, rambunctious kids) to feel I could handle that side of things. I was pleased with the result given the very limited time we had but I was cross with myself later when I realized I’d forgotten to think of a few key servants who the PCs would of course be interacting with. I did have to create those on the fly. They kind of grew as the evening went on but they weren’t as effective as they might have been. I still think a bit more guidance in the book would have helped. I wonder how others have run this chapter. More of which later.

So, Fred, no Frank gets taken out to the garage by a chambermaid who’s running a bit behind the time appointed. She’s coming directly from other chores and not impressed to be working outside her regular job. My idea here was to play into the ‘diminishing’ presence of the family and suggest that the staff were rather short-handed. The chambermaid complains about having to go outside the dome, complains about having to do a job that’s not hers and complains about anything else I could think of. This is not so much directed at Frank, but the universe in general and Frank makes sympathetic noises. They arrive at the garage just as Arlan (Ghazan) is leaving with the house mechanic heading south to the guard station. The maid leaves Frank to survey the air/rafts on hand and eventually Jushon, a middle son aged 25, turns up with a ghillie. He wants to go hunting and has heard Frank can handle an air/raft. Frank’s inflated CV is now on the line, but his first task is simple enough: fly out to a bit of desert Jushon indicates on a map. The next bit is somewhat harder. Jushon tells Frank/Fred that the guard pilots, thus far, haven’t been good enough for what he needs. He doesn’t want to land and hunt on foot; he wants to use the air/raft as an aerial platform and directs Frank to fly in a certain pattern over a certain area. “Think you can do that?” “I’ll do my best, sir.” Frank (Jane?) has switched to best obsequious mode. Fortunately, the dice back him/her up. Soon there are shots being fired from behind the pilot seat and every now and then they land to pick up the sand vipers the man has been hitting. He’s impressed with Frank’s flying. “Good job,” he says more to himself than anyone else.

Carl’s turn. Loyd. Ooar. Talk about never splitting the party. Now *everyone* is doing something different. It’s perhaps a good job we only have four players for the ten person crew. No, sorry, nine. I keep forgetting Egon’s death. [Once in a while, I’ll check to see what he’s doing. Then I remember he was vapourized in Trade War. I’m sure I’m grieving. Over five years I’ve evidently come to care this for this ragtag bunch. Still, I try to keep the action quick; I try to keep it interesting. I probably fail at both.] I lean into the Ooar following Carl’s lead and introduce him to the kitchens and the workings in there. I have in mind a Mrs Patmore type from Downtown Abbey (matronly, indeterminate age, knows her stuff, brooks no nonsense). It shows what a lack of imagination I can have when put on the spot to create someone on the fly. [Note to self: for any future attempt at this chapter, I’d probably want to create at least the bare bones of a housekeeper (and/or butler), a cook, perhaps a senior valet, a random chambermaid and maybe a guard.] In any case, Cook, Elska Day, was less than certain about Ooar’s abilities until he began to demonstrate some skill. Given Loyd is relying on a Steward skill of 0, he came up with some great rolls to impress. It’s a pity he couldn’t manage that with his occasional firing of weapons. Egon is probably turning in his grave at the thought of Loyd’s ‘friendly fire’ with the SMGs way back in Wolf at the Door. Well, ok, as he doesn’t have a grave, his molecules are revolving slowly in the volume of his otherwise vacuum.

After all of that it was time to return to Tess back on Aramanx. Or at least, one of Aramanx’s Trojan points. For a second session running Tess was running spaceship graphics on a loop to entertain us which were rather gorgeous. Although I glanced up once to see what looked like a robot head with flowing golden hair… I think it was one of Elon Musk’s Dragon craft landing… see I *do* have an imagination, it’s just misplaced!

For some reason I had built a really clear image between sessions of this third Subsidized Merchant. Old Pers had described it as ‘just ribs’ and it certainly was that at the forward end. The further aft however, the more structure there was until there was pretty much the best part of the rear end of the ship still intact. Well, a hull at least, not a great deal left onboard. Tess could see all this as she approached including the two pilot couches left on the hull frame perhaps as a joke by some previous salvager. [It was perhaps unfair to expect Tess – player or character – to remember that many moons ago Kunal had had problems with her pilot’s couch and might have welcomed a replacement.] In her little workpod, Tess didn’t really have to ‘enter’ the ship it was so reduced to frame at one end, but a poor piloting roll and a couple of bounces off a strut or two and she decided to proceed in her vacc suit after tethering the ’pod. She searched one engine compartment and then another with no luck. But making an observation roll noticed a shiny patch of plating still on a bit of bulkhead that’s about waist high. Pressing here revealed a secret hatch that opened into a void space that on her ship would be a section of fuel tank. Of course, now in this bare bones of a ship it really is opening into a void space. The hatch was about a metre square and her immediate thought was ‘smuggling space’. Quite. There’s no actual need to climb through the hatch however as, up close, she can simply look over the remains of the bulkhead. There, between two hull ribs, is a large box. Perhaps 4m x 1.5m x 1.5m.

Tess is all over examining its external features and discover it’s airtight, appears to have a battery at one end, and has a small display indicating standard atmosphere and pressure and a couple of green lights. Battery has maybe 20% of life left. Now, in my head was the idea that our doughty engineer would be interested in the contents and scavenge anything useful. But I’d forgotten that Tess is perhaps more doubty than doughty. Certainly she’s risk averse. Perhaps no bad thing in a Traveller universe. She had all sorts of scenarios she was running through for us as to what the box might contain and none of them boded well for her in her opinion. Illegal things, explody things, things she didn’t want to know about. Watching from the peanut gallery Jane and Carl and Jim had ideas too. I should have taken notes. There were, of course, questions about the why and the what and the when which obviously I couldn’t answer as Tess had no one to ask, despite feeling I had reasonably carefully thought things out. [Tess has a great way of making me see the flaws in my thinking. One reason I valued the lift home she used to be able to offer after our meetings in the pub.]

We left her pondering and returned to the Tukera Estate on Lewis for Day 2 of their mission as Zilan servants. Arlan failing at a repair-the-generator job but which did given him a look around the guard station; Frank taking E’sta (older daughter) on a shopping expedition; Ooar showing off his skills in the kitchen but also learning about the family in the house. [I was so pleased I’d knocked up that small family tree! It enabled me to witter on as the cook much more easily.] Said wittering included the tragic tale of the family’s fourth child who died in infancy. I think it was at this point that I actually remembered to get everyone to roll for their ‘light workdays’. I’d already rolled for the NPCs but it was good to have the full information to see when people would be able to act together if they wanted to.

For Day 1 I’d had each of the players present on Lewis roll, as directed, for observing a family member working at a computer terminal and being “able to pick up useful words employed by the system”. We could do that again as it’s a daily roll and as it’s only a 7+ roll on 2D6 with six active characters it’s not long before the observations begin stacking up. It’s a good job I’d thought of a few beforehand to add some variety. Being in a position to see a password typed, overhearing a password incautiously spoken a couple of times, finding one on a note on a screen, finding a list of random looking words with some crossed out. The usual kind of thing. Given it’s supposed to be TL D (13) I’d managed to come up with one of the family waving her wrist at pad suggesting she had an implanted chip or some such. I must admit my imagination of TL13 computers is probably lacking.

But there’s a bigger problem really. Well two actually. Firstly, the whole TL13 thing for Inselberg when *The Traveller Adventure* was written, or at least published, in 1983. Surely the computer systems would be hugely proofed against exactly the kind of thing the PCs are trying to do? Not to mention wouldn’t there be security cameras, electronic locks, electronic sensors and all sorts of other hi-tech goodies making the mission virtually impossible? Or even just dual factor authentication? I don’t really have an answer for this but I suppose you could posit the family not being keen on having *their* privacy spied on, Alternatively, or additionally you could have a ‘well, it might not be the exact things described above for spotting codes but there’d be some kind of TL13 equivalent and we’re-just-putting-it-in-terms-we-can-understand’. It’s *The Traveller Adventure*. It’s not perfect but I aim to run it relatively closely to the book (although we definitely add bits) so I decided just to run with it. The players graciously went with it but it seemed less than ideal.

The other problem is with the book blithely saying that the chances to observe the code words are a daily roll. Now this is where I demonstrate my ‘not a very good Referee’ once again. It seemed to me there were two of doing this. A fairly rapid, just make the rolls and see what comes up and then play with that and elide over the ten-day (or so) orientation period suggested. But this would be fairly dull roll playing and given the number of rolls made (6 PCs x 10 days) why not just assume that they find out a certain number of code clues. [My maths makes that about 35 clues on average. 60 \* 58.34%.]

So, my approach, perhaps typical for similar things across previous sessions, is to play out the days and come up with activities or interactions for each of the PC servants for each of the days and ‘bury’ their rolls in the middle of that. Role playing instead of roll playing, as it were. From my perspective, and perhaps I should poll the players on it, this is more fun and can be quite interesting and can also provide that Rich Decision Making Environment so the players can utilise their knowledge of the Estate and its inhabitants for their later shenanigans. The snag with this is however that it’s very time consuming and I looked up to realize just how late it was getting very, very quickly. Maybe other Referees would handle it differently – I’d certainly love to know how. I had imagined this chapter would take an evening but I was rapidly realizing how mistaken I was.

We jumped back to Tess, and I’d assumed this bit would be relatively quick but hadn’t really bargained on all the thinking and discussion about the box. [I don’t mind the peanut gallery of other players thinking out loud – in fact I rather enjoy it, but I was clear there could be no actual character interaction.] Tess seemed minded to just leave the box and report it to Old Pers but she perhaps changed her mind as a character or maybe relented as a player. She decided not to open it but to cut it away from the frames and tow it back to Old Pers. No point in Old Pers just having to drag out to the ship’s carcass and start from scratch. I must be getting used to things going off piste and my heart didn’t sink so much as, for once, I was absolutely happy for her to make her choice and go from there. I *think* I didn’t even let my face fall over the whole thing which I’ve done previously when plans have gone out the window, but perhaps she’s used to me sufficiently that she could work this out with no clues!

Back to Lewis and we ran through a third day. Frank now being told to drive for Jushon once again. Although this time he’s offered a rifle and invited to join in for a slightly different hunt on the ground. Either sandviper shooting is much easier than it looks, or Fred’s old army training is kicking in, but Frank is a natural at this apparently. Jushon is well impressed and asks about Frank’s background. Fred keeps to Frank’s cover story but admits to having spent time in the PBI. An infantry unit that was new to me! This gave me an excuse to have them visit the armoury in the guard station on return to the estate so that Fred could see inside it and also that the ghillie seemed to just use two digits on the entry keypad. Jushon took the opportunity to show off a couple of his other rifles as well and we established that although there were weapons for family and guards in there, including some explosives from the mine, we were talking more hunting than military gear. Loyd meanwhile, in the guise of Ooar was facing messages from the housekeeper informing him that spoil brat Rooth was complaining about her food and could something special be knocked up. With a large haul of freshly shot sandviper having just arrived in the kitchens, Ooar comes up with a stir fry to knock her socks off. Apparently, it goes down a treat.

It’s not just Loyd’s pretence as Ooar the assistant cook that is going well. It’s also his social life. At one point, over supper, he’s chatting with Sheelaa who seeks him out at every opportunity to sit beside him in the dining hall, and he suggests on a day off they go out to the park at The Retreat. She’s over the moon. He asks how she’s getting on with Uncle Billton for whom she is valeting. She goes all coy and can’t bring herself to say anything beyond the fact that he’s treating her well and very easy to work for. Ooar presses her on what she’s clearly too embarrassed to say and she sidles closer and lowers her voice. [I do this on camera by shifting my chair so I’m on one side of the picture and whispering. It must have been reasonably effective as Carl rather breaks my immersion as an NPC and suggests I should have been on the stage!] [Actually, I have been.] Finally, she gets out that Uncle Billton sometimes wanders around his rooms, ummm, undressed. “I mean I don’t see a lot of him as a general rule, but when I do see him, I see rather too much of him.” Ooar does his sympathetic noises, but I can’t help wondering if the players were expecting some greater revelation after all my theatrics. Meanwhile, Arlan was failing at some air conditioning repair job in the offices [the dice *really* weren’t falling for him]. Eric came to check up on him and was able to tweak something and get the air con unit running again fairly swiftly. He shows Arlan a schematic on a handcomp which gives Arlan the idea of asking for more such under the guise of studying how things link together and might be repaired more easily. A great reaction roll from Eric has him all too happy to help out in this way. Little does he know that Arlan is really Ghazan who is something of a whizz on computers and has the idea that he might be able to test the computer system’s vulnerabilities this way. Great idea.

Back in the Aramanx system, Old Pers and Tess are about to open the box. They too have had a discussion about what it might contain. Old Pers has no idea what’s in it and wasn’t aware that the box was even there. She can only assume that someone who was salvaging parts or metal from the ship either put it there or found it and decided to make use of it. She’s as curious as Tess. Perhaps more so as the latter is still a little reticent about opening it. Rather ungallantly, Tess steps back and leaves it to the elderly scrapyard merchant to actually open the lid once they’ve disabled the electronic lock and cut the physical lock off. Inside, the box is divided into two compartments with inner lids. They start with the left side and it’s full of shrink-wrapped engineering parts. With a 1D roll of 6 they can determine the parts look new. Tess lays aside the only one that would fit the size of the part she’s after. They gingerly open the right hand inside box. It’s empty. Apart from a satchel. In the satchel is a padded box and removing the padding reveals a first aid type box, including a red cross. Inside the box are 24 ampules. No. There are no markings or information leaflets. Which of course Tess takes to be more than suspicious. Old Pers can hardly disagree.

She’s straight with Tess. Usually, the scrap that people take away is simply charged for by mass (or volume in a short sidetrack) rather than any innate ‘value’. Tess works out she might as well take all the shrink-wrapped parts (plus the part she found on the first ship) as the price is virtually negligible for the whole lot and there’s a chance they are all for a Subsidized Merchant. The pair of them deliberate about what to do with the ampoules. “I could take them to Oberlindes for analysis. He’d know what to do with them.” Tess is utterly convinced that whatever they are, they are highly illegal and even this much responsibility for them is at her limits. This results in a discussion about who Oberlindes is.

“How about, if there is any money to be made from them, we split that 50/50?” suggests Old Per; ever an eye for the main chance. Tess is up for this, and they shake on it. [A bit of me wondered if this was a tad risky, or perhaps naïve, from Old Pers point of view. But she doesn’t get out much.]

As it’s a 40-hour trip back to Aramanx highport of course (although just to be pedantic following our discussion before we got going for the evening, Tess points out that as it was a leading Trojan point you actually gain a half hour going back), we left Tess to Petr’s tales of piloting. I kind of wish I’d written some to deliver in character but a) it’s difficult, b) it’s time consuming to do the writing, c) it’s time consuming in the game to deliver them and d) it’s a bit of a performance on my part that I’m not convinced is great for the players. Just so Tess wasn’t left out of the fact that the A Crew received various news items and adverts on arrival at Zila and then Lewis, I had some news and an advert for her. The advert was recycled from last time as I liked the seedspitter reference. The news played off something from her character background which I’d reread for the first time in *ages* between sessions. [Seeing as how we’re on the penultimate chapter of *The Traveller Adventure*, I’m naively assuming we might actually finish in a session or three. Hah! Some hope. But just in case, and just in case we do continue (but I’m not promising and I’m most likely to take a break), I thought it might be an idea to seed some ongoing hooks or goals. Judging from Tess’ reaction to hearing about an old nemesis in the Discord channel chat – she posted daggers and skulls and all sorts! – this may have worked too well. I’m now worried we won’t actually get to the last chapter of *TTA* if we chase off after that. Ah well; that’s players for you and would play nicely into my wanting it to be more player driven than Referee led as *TTA* has been.]

Back on Lewis we were hitting some of the character’s days off. Or more strictly “light work duty” days. Gvoudzon, sorry Gvarra, I had to look the name up because I’d not used it all evening, was back from The Retreat on his light duty day. He was absolutely full of his week and his news about Gharukh. But he looked rather cautiously at Sheelaa sitting, as ever, right next to Loyd/Ooar and The Captain gets the message and takes Sheelaa on the outing he promised. The pair get a guard to pilot them over to the park at The Retreat. They have a romantic walk in the woods with glimpses of the striated gas giant in the sky above them, they look out from the cliff tops to the desert and watch the sun set. As twilight gathered, we faded to black; literally and metaphorically. [Though now I *actually* think about it, I’m not sure how kissing works in a respirator mask or two…] Meanwhile, Gvoudzon is filling in his shipmates about Gharukh and the brooch and his idea that she might be able to read any message in it, and Gharukh, and the cryptography lab, and Gharukh and the fact that she’s being held prisoner and we really ought to get her out of there, and, oh, did I mention Gharukh? Jim/Ghazan/Arlan wasn’t slow in picking up that maybe she’d caught the vargr’s eye!

Back on Aramanx, I mean back with that story line as well as literally having just arrived back on Aramanx highport, Tess is met by Kunal. There’s some kind of emergency drill taking place which has shut down the usual corridors and the pilot has come to meet the engineer to show her another route back to the ship. [Note to self: bigger notes would help – I completely forgot the description of Kunal smelling of paint and having a fleck of the stuff on her temple. I blame being on an electronic Word document of several pages rather than a nice print out physically in front of me. It wasn’t critical, but it was supposed to build towards…] As they approach the area of berths where the March Harrier is, Kunal thinks she sees Gvoudzon ahead and nudges Tess only to then kick herself mentally because of course he’s in a different system. As they get closer, they see it’s another vargr entirely. The women the vargr is speaking to shakes her head and hurries off. The vargr turns to Tess and Kunal and hurries over. [Although I think Tess wanted to avoid her and go a different way I rather forced the encounter on them. I never quite know where the bounds of that kind of thing lie. I suppose I can rationalize it as that at some point, close to the berth airlock, there isn’t going to be ‘another way’.]

Anyway, the vargr introduces herself in broken Galanglic. I’d scripted this as I wasn’t sure I could do it on the fly.

///quote

Getting closer you can see it’s a female; she’s gaunt and even in an alien visage you can see she has the hollow cheeks of someone who’s not been eating well. Her clothes are neat but threadbare and she tries to hide this with a shawl drawn round her shoulders.

She sees you and hurries towards you. “I Vuzuege,” she says. “Please to help?” “I from Jes’peer and varg camp. Ummm, refuge camp. Need food, medicals, closing. Camp is dis-as-ter. Scent of fear is in air. Scouts can’t help. But Tor-en-lee Foundation has helped and give food. But ship broken. Please help transport to Jes’peer. No money; but varg thanks.” She pleads with them.

Kunal looks to Tess for a lead but you can see considerable sympathy in her eyes. “Sounds like things are getting worse in the refugee camp on Jesedipere since I last heard news.”

Vuzuege nods. “Starport worker tell me you have varg crew. Maybe help take food? Please to help?”

///endquote

No prizes for spotting that Kunal’s line at that point was to try and help clarify the vargr’s little speech and link up with Library Data for the planet. No prizes for spotting that I don’t mind hinting as I play an NPC, but I do try hard not to drive events or PC choices with in character voices.

Now the alert, or at least those familiar with *TTA* may recognize this. It’s from Exotic Encounters and is transplanted from Junidy where it’s supposed to happen. Having completely failed to remember that it existed and to run it when the players were at Junidy, but not wanting to lose the synergy it offers for the final chapter of *TTA*, it occurred to me that I could insert it here with the revisions you see above and kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, giving the opportunity to help or not as Tess saw fit and secondly, giving some actions for Tess while the others are doing stuff on Lewis. [Yes, I was quite pleased with this idea, if you must ask :-) Perhaps it’s blindingly obvious to Referees of more experience.]

Tess is initially dubious but Kunal is keen to help until they really look at what’s being asked. There’s no way they can transport Vuzeuge and her cargo to Jesedipere and get to Lewis in time for their rendezvous. Fortunately, Tess hadn’t missed the line about the broken ship and enquires further. This is right up her street. Making sure she’s opened a comm link to Kunal for safety, she gets the pilot to take her cargo pallet of parts back to the March Harrier – noting an odd smell of paint from the airlock when Kunal disappears – while Tess goes with Vuzeuge, now tugging at her sleeve in any case, to a nearby berth to check out her ship. Now I don’t think we ever established the fact but I have Vuzeuge down as the medic on her 200-ton vargr trader so she takes Tess to the engine room and introduces her, poorly, to a male vargr who is presumably the engineer. He speaks no Galanglic so we have some fun getting to the point where he’s attempting to explain the problem to Tess. Although eventually, of course, just looking is a solution. A Jump drive part – even better – this is Tess’ speciality. Tess gathers that this crew too are waiting on a part but of course the refugees are desperate and need the food and supplies soonest. A three or four weeks of additional delay is really not going to help them. Tess is only too aware of the delay in parts deliveries. She takes the broken part back to her ship. The analysis doesn’t take long and no, the March Harrier does *not* carry such a spare. The first thing she notices, entering the berth, is that the venerable Subsidized Merchant had its “generous amounts of fresh paint” applied by Kunal and Phlo while Tess has been out gallivanting. *TTA* says, if you recall, that this paint job and the fake transponder are sufficient, along with some forged papers, to get the ship into the Lewis Red Zone to collect some lanthanum ore as a cover for rounding up the A Crew. I wasn’t quite sure whether such a major thing was fair to spring on the engineer, but she seemed happy enough providing they hadn’t been painting *inside* as well.

She reckons it will take maybe thirty hours to fix the vargr ship. Not helped by noticing on her return to the vargr trader that the space where the part goes is very poorly designed and awkward to access which won’t help matters. She mulls it over and agrees to help. There’s still plenty of time before the rendezvous on Lewis. I refrain from pointing out that yes, while that’s true, the B Crew are burning through it quite nicely! [Which for the slow of reading all my verbiage, is kind of the point.]

Now at this point it really is getting late although for once I’m not feeling too bad so I return to Lewis having left Ghazan/Arlan on the verge of trying to hack past his schematic access into the Tukera computer systems. I hated leaving him on tenterhooks but with at least one player feeling they’d reached the end of the evening it only seemed fair to make that our dun-dun-durr moment and call it a night. So much for tackling Inselberg in one evening. It almost feels as if we’ve barely got started but in fact, we’d laid some useful groundwork and let’s suppose I ever get to run this chapter as one of my ‘scenes from *The Traveller Adventure*’ at TravCon, I’ll have a much better idea of pacing. [Were I to stick to the book however, the next ‘scene’ up for running at the convention would be Zilan Wine which had been amongst my plans for last March until we were cancelled due to the pandemic. But can I face running that? Would anyone want to play if I did?!]

Stopping meant we didn’t revisit Gvoudzon’s desire to rescue his damsel in distress so I got no clues about anyone’s thinking on whether that was likely to happen and how it might happen if it did, but we can tackle that next time. [It does occur to me, however, that I’d better be well up on the next – and final! – chapter in case we *don’t* do a rescue and the hacking doesn’t take long. Hmmmm, who’d be a Referee?]

We fixed a date for next time. I was dying to get on to the next bit but I was also aware that I’ve been really struggling with energy levels and pressure of various kinds these last weeks and it seemed wiser, once we’d ruled out a lot of dates and were left with two, to go with the evening in six weeks’ time rather than the evening in one month’s time. I felt bad about that but need to manage my own physical and mental health regarding this. I’m sure other, healthier, better Referees would eat our pace of games for breakfast. But there it is.