

## Vivian Wexler, Galactic Detective

Vivian Wexler had a problem. Her stomach protested against zero grav, and here she was on the ship *Ivanhoe Cleveland* slicing through deep space toward the other arm of the galaxy to a planet where a mystery awaited to be solved by her services. The ship had its own gravity drive, but it was nearing the time to go into the Faster-than-light phase of the journey, meaning zero grav. She had been to the moon, twice to visit Disney-Luna, and once for a high school field trip. Tourist shuttles conveyed Moon passengers and she had puked every time.

Now the ship prepared to catch the beam that would take them into the FTL phase for the next twenty-eight hours. Max Werner, her mentor, the man who had gifted his detective agency to her when he retired, offered advice before she left. “If you think zero-grav is bad, FTL effects are a hundred times worse. With that stomach of yours, you’d best sleep through the FTL part of the journey.”

“Worse?” she asked.

“Yeah. Not just the weird-ass floating. The light used to illuminate the ships makes things all purple-grayish, and unfocused. The Human brain can’t function right. You see things...”

That caught her attention. “Things?”

“Yep, and some people can’t handle it. Makes them crazy.”

Vivian didn’t need crazy. Max had always given her good advice. She almost always took it...

A bell sounded in a tinkling string meaning the ship successfully caught the beam. She pushed the flashing “sleep through FTL” button on the bedside table com center. A scent of roses attempted to hide the inflow of sleeping gas. As she drifted off, with the scant information about the case and the planet waiting at the end of her journey, she wondered what she would find when she reached her destination.

More than an earth-day later, Vivian’s eyes fluttered as she came out of the long snooze. The heavy smell of lemons failed to disguise the wake-up gas shooting out the vents above her.

The same flicker of thought she had about her assignment when she glided into la-la-land returned. She’d been hired to investigate a serious problem on a planet called Soralole. But this thought lost the battle with a more pressing issue—she needed to pee.

Vivian waited for the bells that signaled the captain had engaged the gravity drive. *Ding-ding*. Good. She unlatched the straps gently holding her in the hammock of her cabin. Cabin! The designers of the ship *Ivanhoe Cleveland* had colossal nerve calling her closet-sized room a cabin. She had to give them credit, though, for their resourcefulness in the “head,” the less-than-tiny space holding the combination toilet, sink, a pull-out shower head, and efficient little drain on the floor. She could pee and shower at the same time. Not a bad idea according to her reflection in the mirror of the pocket door. Great. She could pee, shower, and watch.

Vivian grabbed the shower head and selected the temperature. She had accumulated two days’ water allotment so she let the warmth flow over her head and down her body. What streamed off her found its way into the drain. At least the towels were first class, and she massaged herself dry with the rich fabric.

After stepping from the steamy confines she rooted in her suitcase for a comfortable outfit. Some people wore the blue jump suit hanging in the laughable “closet” of the cabin, the closet being a single rod with a small shelf above and below it. The jumpsuits sported their cabin numbers over the breast pocket, and were made from a miracle cloth that stretched or decreased according to the size of the wearer, truly a one-size-fits-all.

Vivian ignored the blue jump suit. She liked clothes, high-fashion couture. Among her faults, the most prominent was her penchant for outspokenness and the speed at which she could deliver barbed words. According to Max, she had an overdeveloped sense of justice. Added to that, her love of fashion presented another weakness in a string of otherwise mild flaws. And, damn, if she didn't look good in light green. So everyone said, and the next comment would always be, because it matched her eyes. Light red hair, light green eyes. She pulled out one of her favorite outfits, a green and aqua silk pants suit, and smoothed the wrinkles. This was an expensive set she had tailored to show off her figure. She had to trust it looked good. The only mirror available was the tiny one situated in the misty atmosphere of the "bathroom." Foregoing makeup, she finger-combed her short hair and, propelled by hunger from the long sleep, headed for the dining suite.

As she passed through the corridors the smell of coffee slammed her. Although the small craft had accommodations for three hundred travelers, only a third of the cabins housed beings. The rest of the compartments housed the habits of Humankind, mainly coffee beans, chocolate, chewing gum, candy bars, and other necessities that colonizing men and women demanded. And now that the Soralole folk had been introduced and become addicted to some of Earth's goodies, the shipments brought more revenue and less hassle than passengers. Vivian knew all about the cargo. Not just from the smell, although that was difficult to miss. Nor did she know it because she was a crack private investigator, which she was. She knew it because her father owned a coffee plantation in Brazil and sold to the many planets Humans had colonized, including the distant planet Soralole.

Of the few ships traveling from Earth to that quadrant of the galaxy, only Hubble Shipping Lines shipped goods directly to Soralole. Vivian needed to be on this flight in order to arrive on the planet to meet with the Prime Minister about her mission.

By the time she reached the dining area, her pursuit for the morning brew had increased from want to require. And if the captain knew what was good for him...Ah! The smell of fresh coffee led her to the dining room's shiny urn. Many things had changed since the discovery of the delectable beans in approximately 1000 AD Earth dating, but the method remained the same. The process "boiled" down to steam and hot water rushing through the grounds to pick up the delightful compounds that created the drink often known as "Joe." Her hand almost shook as she snagged a mug and placed it under the spigot of the coffee urn.

Letting the first sip roll about on her tongue, the pick-me-up liquid began its magic. *Life as we know it*. Rejuvenation. Electricity for the bloodstream. Brainwave stimulation. Muscle awakening. She sipped, sharpening her sensory receptors from the steaming stuff and looked around the room. Having an eye for details, she counted fifteen passengers. Five Soralole males, easy to recognize from their undersized stature, sat in a corner. The Soraloles looked pretty much Human. The males were shorter than average-height Earth men and, although it was rude to use the word, she could think of no other description but *puny*. These particular males wore the common robes of maturity, the loose white garment with a gray panel over the chest, tied at the waist with a silky rope. Two Soralole females, known as Sories, sat separately. Ironically, in contrast to the undersized males, the females were Amazons. Large and voluptuous with exotic, beautifully proportioned round faces, the women embraced the habit of wearing makeup and Human clothing, especially garments that showed their ample cleavage. Earth males went ga-ga for them.

A clot of Grum-rupts sat in a far corner. She had seen them before purchasing coffee shipments from her father, who referred to them, behind their backs of course, as Grim Reapers.

Their purple-gray skin hung loosely on long bones. The dark hooded robes they wore made them resemble the legendary grim reapers. Humans hadn't warmed up to this species, and probably never would because Grum-rupts talked with screechy whispers and, lacking eyelids, their dark eyes stared constantly. Plus, according to her dad, they weren't nice folk. Vivian shuddered at the sight. They looked...sneaky. She averted her eyes but the glint of gold captured her attention. As planetary trade from all over the galaxy became popular, the Grum-rupts developed a love of gold jewelry, especially designs from Earth. Drawing on her love for fashion, she noticed one Grum-rupt sported an ornate gold watch. She could spot a Rolex fifty feet away. This piece from Earth's twentieth century had a sparkling diamond bezel that sent tiny flashes from his bony wrist.

Peppered around the room sitting in lounge chairs and at individual tables, beings from assorted worlds occupied themselves or engaged in conversations, most of which Vivian didn't understand. She'd spent the first twelve hours before the FTL phase in her cabin studying Soralore's language, called Sore. And sore she was, never being particularly fond of learning languages. French had not come easily when she was in school, but when her mother said she had to use it to ask their cook for her meals, Vivian grudgingly learned. In college when she passed the equivalency exam to satisfy her language component, she was glad she knew French. Skipping the language classes gave her the opportunity for electives. Classes in Logic steered her toward her profession—investigator-- much to her father's disappointment. He'd wanted her to join the business, more so when her fool brother had tried, and failed, to make it in coffee sales.

Of the Humans in the dining room, she, another woman, and three men comprised the rest of the occupants. Halfway through her first cup she noticed one man looked familiar, and after they made eye contact, she knew he had the same notion. She smiled and he returned the gesture.

A waiter interrupted the near-flirtation. "Would you like to order breakfast, Miss Wexler?"

Boy, did she want breakfast! She ordered the Earth Special, over easy eggs, bacon, hash browns, and toast. Some things never changed, even in space. Vivian took great pains not to see the Sprinozan sitting at the next table, looking like a corrugated amber Humpty-Dumpty, who relished his dish of dark, wriggly things in a glass bowl of blue fluid.

"Everyone has to eat breakfast, I suppose," she whispered to herself.

Peeking across the room, her gaze landed on the familiar face. She admired his clothing, the latest fashion. He looked up and smiled again. He nodded to acknowledge her and then broadening his smile he returned to the reading device in his hand.

The waiter brought her breakfast and she almost smacked her lips at the toast made from the fabulous Orotoson wheat that Earth folk paid dearly to get. Earth wheat paled in comparison to the nutty rich taste of the Red Orotoson. Buttered, it provided a simple feast. Coupled with a traditional breakfast, all of the other non-luxuries of the space liner melted away.

The server returned with a carafe and refilled her coffee. "Waiter," she said *sotto voce*, "Who is the man wearing the tan cable knit sweater and brown cords?"

The Thalburnian waiter squinted his multiple eyes; obviously he hadn't availed himself of the ocular services of Earth's doctors. "His name is Douglas Dunbar."

Douglas Dunbar! "Dee Dee, Little Dougie-Dunny," she whispered. The nice boy from her middle school days! At that time he'd been a scrawny fellow, had taken her to her first dance, and introduced her to kissing. He had grown into a man, and a strapping, nice looking one at that. Dee had been one of the few boys in school who tolerated her sharp tongue and acid wit.

Her first love, it broke her heart when his family moved away in eighth grade. She admired his style now, a good dresser. He looked up and caught her staring. She quickly glanced to her plate and attempted to eat slowly and with dignity. Okay, she wolfed down the delectable toast.

When the waiter removed the empty plate she cast her gaze across the room to find Dee no longer sat in his chair. She sighed and pulled the linen napkin from her lap. There was plenty to do and not having a distraction helped her. She dreaded going back to the tiny cabin, but she needed to study the dossier before they landed at Soralole. She stood.

“Excuse me,” a mellow baritone said behind her.

She turned. “Oh, hello. You’re Douglas Dunbar. Do you remember me?”

He pulled at his chin, a well-proportioned and masculine feature. “You *are* familiar, but, give me a minute to remember your name?” The last word ended with a slightly higher pitch posing a question.

“I’m Vivian Wexler, from Riverside Middle.”

His face brightened; his lips, fine ones, opened into a small “oh” and then he smiled. “I remember you. We called you Vivacious Viv. You were the nice girl my mother liked.”

Vivian laughed. “Obviously ill-informed, your mom. I got complaints sent home at least once a week.”

Dee’s eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled. She liked crinkles. Near-handsome at rest, with a smile, his face crossed the line to full-out fetching when the crinkles appeared. “Right. I never told Mom you were full of vinegar.”

“Only vinegar?” Vivian chuckled. Her father said she was full of piss and vinegar, and outshined her older brother in her spirited personality.

“I was being polite,” Dee said. There went those crinkles again.

She swallowed away her thoughts about how attractive Dougie-Dunny had become and blanked her face. “So, what a coincidence that we are on the same ship.”

“Imagine that,” Dee said. “I’ve been hired as a translator for some important meetings, and my employer wanted me right away. I’d prefer a larger liner, but this was the first passage I could get going directly to Soralole.”

“A translator? For meetings. Interesting.” She couldn’t tell him that the Prime Minister of that planet had hired her to investigate a series of suicides that occurred in a species who didn’t kill—themselves or others. They lived quiet peaceful, artistic lives, not eating meat. But Dee said why he traveled and he waited for her response, obviously wanting to know her story. “Coffee,” she said. “My father exports coffee. Earth colonies are big customers and now some of the aliens have developed a taste for it.” *Implying is not lying.*

“Ah, supplying the needs of Humans. Worthy work,” he said, and didn’t sound mocking. Did he have the coffee addiction, too?

“So, Viv, you speak Sore?”

“Uhm, no,” she said and a light flicked on inside her mind. “It would help me greatly if I did. I brought a micro-disc so I can learn enough to negotiate.”

The crinkles formed. “I could teach you.”

“Would you?” Vivacious Viv tried her best to sound vulnerable and shy, in need of his services.

“Of course. We have three days before entering Soralole’s atmosphere. We can get a lot done in that time.”

*Oh, yes we can.* “Thank you. That would be great.”

“I think we could work in the library. It’s small but better than the entertainment salon, or this dining area,” he said.

“Right. To the library, then.”

He put his hand on her waist gently escorting her out of the room. His touch felt good. Her thoughts went back in time when they were in middle school. His touch back then sent her adolescent hormones raging, generating images of her future including the velvet-sounding name, Vivian Dunbar, and visions of their children enjoying ideal family life together. In her young imaginings, he was handsome, strong, and clever. How silly she’d been, wanting that as her life’s goal. Maturity had fixed those notions. Now she had a career and managed perfect control of her resources and progress. She’d had lovers and relationships, but no man came close to what her mind had visualized with Dee. And here he stood next to her, even better than her pubescent psyche had pictured. Pausing as Dee held the door to the library, she let out a tiny sigh. Time to be serious.

For the next few hours Dee gave Vivian vocabulary lessons, testing her after every ten words. When she could repeat one hundred words from memory, he started conjugation techniques.

“Lunch time,” Dee said. He put away the work and they walked toward the dining salon. “You are a fast learner.”

*Fast learner.* She stifled a witty comeback. “Only because of my excellent teacher.”

He smiled. “Thanks.”

Vivian, ever vigilant for details, had an eye for nuance and wondered about his smile from her compliment. Did she detect a hint of regret? She’d have to explore that, use subtle probing. “What kind of special meetings do the Soraloles plan that they need an interpreter? What other languages do you speak?” *Subtle enough.*

“Most of the main ones—Denebian, Ionian, Plarin, and a few of the newer planets that Earth deals with, like,” he paused as Humans sometimes did when referring to unpleasant species, “Grum-rupt.” He paused but didn’t shudder. “I hadn’t planned on learning Sore, it just kind of happened when I made the acquaintance of a...Sorie...”

He didn’t have to say it; the person who taught him the language was a lady friend. Maybe Vivian didn’t want to know more about that regretful smile.

He continued. “And the language form is so much like English, I just took to it, and now I’m pretty much an expert.”

*What else did that Sorie lady teach you?* Vivian clenched her jaw and unclenched it before he could see. Why did she care? She wasn’t sure, but the clench was real and she didn’t like it that a Sorie taught him her language.

So, would he seek the female out when he landed? Vivian watched his face as he spoke hoping to pick up some small tell about what his plans were on Soralo. Maybe the meetings had something to do with the strange suicides. Pretty far-fetched, but one never knew. She couldn’t ask outright because it would give her mission away.

## Chapter Two

For the next three days Dee, the name he preferred, worked tirelessly to expand Vivian's language skills. She picked up the proper inflections and since there were few irregular verbs, her conjugation exercises gave her a light grasp on communication in Sore. Dee said most of Sores who worked in commerce could speak English, the business language of Earth.

"I didn't know there were a lot of businessmen on the planet," Vivian said. "From what I heard the Sores spend most of their study and pastimes on the arts, like architecture, music, and sculpture."

Dee nodded. "They still enjoy the arts, but after twenty years living with Humans, they've picked up more of our ways besides drinking coffee and eating chocolate bars."

"If you don't mind, Dee, tell me more about these meetings. If the businessmen speak English, why do they need you?"

Crinkles appeared. "Have you ever heard of Moot Ticano?"

"Of course. He's an up and coming rock star from Soralole. Wonderful voice."

"Not upcoming, already there. He sings, but also writes his songs. An orchestra conductor from Earth who visited the mining colony a few years ago discovered Moot and brought his talent to light. After the first few recordings, an Earth music company signed him to a contract and for this past year his work has no rivals. He'll be going on a galaxy-wide tour."

"Galaxy? He's that good?"

"Have you heard his work lately? Incredible. He confers with translators to make sure the words of his songs maintain the meaning throughout the worlds. No, not me. I'm no writer; I translate for business. Moot sings his songs in the language of the worlds he'll visit. I predict within a year or so he'll be the biggest name in the musical galaxy."

"And you'll be there for...?"

"The tour manager is Human. I work for him to make sure the business minutiae are understood on both sides."

"It sounds exciting."

"It does. I'm looking forward to the meetings. And you will be..."

*What should I say?* "I'll be mingling with coffee lovers." *Wow, who knew half-lying could be so easy.*

"Well," Dee said. "I hope you make a lot of money."

"Thanks," Vivian said, disappointed he didn't ask if they could meet when they landed, less than twenty-four hours away.

Their time together ended at breakfast the next morning. Vivian watched the landing from a porthole in the dining salon. The Earth-like planet, with its blue oceans, tan deserts, green landmasses, and swirls of white clouds, couldn't have been duplicated in the finest painting. The rocket turned in an arc so it could dock on its bottom. A green landmass whizzed closer until details of a city showed the elegant, curvilinear architecture of the Soralole artisans. The rocket slowed accompanied by the soft grinding of gears as spindly legs emerged from their slots

alongside the bullet-shaped fuselage. Like a metallic ballet, the stilts deployed and the captain deftly set the craft down on the pad at the rocket port with a gentle bump.

"I guess this is goodbye," Dee said, showing no smile and an undeniable smidge of sadness.

She relished that smidge. "I guess." What else could she say?

Dee gathered his coat and picked up his briefcase.

By the time they reached the gangplank, the captain, in full navy blue uniform with gold stripes, bid them farewell. Dee expressed his admiration on the smooth landing.

Dee waved to her. "Good luck on your coffee contracts."

"Thanks. Uhm, good luck on your business venture." What she really wanted to say was "I hope your Soralole girlfriend isn't home." Wow. Vivian never thought she could feel jealousy. That had to stop and right now. "Ta ta," she said, hoping her adieu sounded nonchalant.

In the parking area outside the port, a man with the business attire of the planet, a pleated robe in white and yellow, held a sign that said "V. Wexler." Her luggage sat in the trunk of the shiny black ground flier.

"Good morning, Miss Wexler," the man said in passable English. "I am Trune Goolcorrel."

The name sounded so Irish she was tempted to say, "Top 'O the mornin' to ya," but she responded in Sore with their usual greeting, which translated into, "May the muse of your chosen art shine upon you this day."

Trune smiled, showing even, white teeth. They really did resemble humans, even if the males were puny. The image of Dee, sturdy and appealing, flashed in her mind and she bid it away. She had work to do.

"The Prime Minister requested you come right away. I will take your luggage to your hotel after I deliver you to the Castle."

*Castle?* She remembered Dee saying that sometimes the words didn't translate. Trune meant to say the equivalent of the capitol building. *Dee.*

From the window of the ground flier she admired the clean streets and buildings sporting bas relief carvings rendered on the stone facades. The city glowed in the morning sun. Open air markets displayed luxuriant fruits and vegetables so rich and multihued they looked unreal, like items from a staged exhibit. Vivian waved her finger over the sensor that rolled down the window. Cool, fresh air blew in along with the muted sounds of the streets. Placid. The word came to her describing these people, art lovers, pacifists, gentle. Perhaps their interaction with Humans hadn't been to their advantage. Earth folk wanted Soralole's natural bounties, bauxite, magnesium, tashurite, and more, but did giving these mild beings technology, like the ground fliers, computers, and foods, help them? Did we also introduce some of our less attractive attributes? Could a species touch another and not change? Vivian didn't think so.

Trune stopped the car and hopped out. He opened the door. Sweeping his arm outward he said, "Welcome to the Castle. The Prime Minister will see you immediately. I'll accompany you to the receptionist." He gave the quick Soralole head bow that meant he had performed his mission and would speak no more. Vivian returned the bow. Dee had told her about that. She sighed. *Dee.*

Vivian followed Trune down a stone path lined with elegant slender trees. After the second graceful turn of the path she saw the Executive Building, the Castle. She caught her breath. The design reminded her of Earth's Art Deco period, well-balanced with curves, straight

lines, and fan shaped carvings subtly rendered into pinkish stone. Trune held the door and allowed Vivian to enter.

A man wearing the usual robe, white pleated shoulders but brown chest panel, smiled. “You must be Miss Wexler. Welcome. Please follow me to the Prime Minister’s office. I am Conflik Setee. It is my pleasure to accompany you.” Vivian followed Conflik to a grand staircase elegantly twisted so it ended halfway around the atrium. As they climbed she had a view of the expansive bottom floor, empty of desks or anything business like. Huge planters with topiary plants dotted the lobby. When they reached the second floor, they passed large rooms each holding at least a dozen men working at graceful desks, many inlaid with different woods. Each man wore a robe with a blue chest panel.

*Hmmm. Color coded. Good idea.*

“Our secretaries,” Conflik said, “who carry out the affairs of state. I believe your Earth has many nations. We have but one and one language. Our Prime Minister, Noogdoosha Preem, makes decisions for our entire planet.”

Vivian had studied the dossier about Noogdoosha’s capabilities. That had impressed her.

“Quite a responsibility. Noogdoosha must be an exceptional person.”

“Very much the exceptional person, but you will see for yourself.” He opened an ornate door into a room with a single large carved desk attended by a small man wearing a robe with a purple panel.

“Miss Wexler.” The man in the purple paneled robe stood and bowed to Conflik, dismissing the receptionist. “I am Brito Clipsinee.”

“Thank you, Conflik,” Vivian said to her guide and dropped her head per tradition.

When she returned her gaze to Brito, his expressive face showed pleasure. “Well done, Miss Wexler. I think you will get on well with our top executive. Please follow me.”

Vivian wondered what Noogdoosha’s robe panel color would be? Stripes of all colors?

### **Chapter Three**

During their lessons, Dee told Vivian that the Soralole people preferred to be called by their first names. No Sore had the same first name, but families shared the last name. At the time she thought how difficult it must be to have an original first name.

The naming tradition had taken over her focus for a moment, but she snapped out of her thoughts when she entered a large office and saw the Prime Minister, who didn’t wear a robe, but a dark velvet low cut, V-neck cleavage-flaunter. Prime Minister Noogdoosha Preem had the XX chromosomes—a woman, and what a babe. Nothing in the dossier had prepared Vivian for the fact that the head executive would be female. And looked like a living statue of Venus.

Noogdoosha stood and extended her hand to Vivian. Then the Prime Minister bowed her head in the dismissal gesture to Brito.

Once again, Vivian dipped her head and thanked Brito.

Noogdoosha smiled. Somehow that dipping made them happy, Vivian thought, *I can dip all day.*

“I’m so glad to meet you, Miss Wexler. Thank you for coming so quickly.”



“You are most welcome, Prime Minister.”

“Just call me Noog. A few of us on Soralole enjoy nicknames.”

“You speak excellent English, Noog.”

“Thank you. I had an excellent teacher.”

A shiver ran through Vivian. Come on. The coincidental meeting with Dee on the liner couldn't coincide more, could it? Dee, the Prime Minister's teacher? No.

“Won't you sit down, Miss Wexler?” Noog touched the back of a chair, no ordinary chair, one smoothly carved from a single tree, highly polished and showing the whorls and swirls of wood grain.

“Thanks. And since I'm calling you Noog, I'd like you to call me...” *what, Viv? Like best friends?* “Vivian.”

Noog's face became serious. “Meet and greet is over. We have a terrible problem on our planet. You read the dossier, but I didn't want all of the information written in case someone else read it. The theft is bad enough, but, Vivian, our people are *dying*. And I need to know how and why. I've been in this office for twenty-five years, our time being similar to Earth's. And up until the last few years our people lived long, non-violent lives.”

“You've been Prime Minister for twenty-five years? I'm only slightly older than that and you look my age.”

“We have little disease, low stress, and no wars. We last a long time. If one of us dies before the age of one hundred and twenty it's usually from an accident. Because we enjoy low crime we don't know about ....” Noog paused, her face suggesting she was searching for words.

“You mean arson, extortion, assault, graft, corruption, rape, and murder?” Vivian shrugged. “And that's just off the top of my head.”

“Yes. We don't even have terms for some of those things.” Noog closed her eyes and shuddered.

Without vocabulary Vivian wondered how the translation teacher explained crimes to this hottie. “And you're having those crimes now?”

“I'm not sure about all of those, but we are seeing theft, and... suicide. But because we don't usually experience those events we don't know how to investigate them. Earth, now, the Humans--.”

“I get you. Earth is a cesspool compared to this place. We know about crime, all right.”

“What is a cesspool?”

*I guess the teacher didn't cover sewage and the comparison to crime.* “Sorry. It's an idiom for filth and degradation, something we correlate to severe crimes.”

Vivian pulled a note pad from her purse. “Let me ask you some questions. When you say suicide, how do you know the death was self-inflicted?”

Noog's shoulders sagged. “A few of the people left notes. So sad! They said they couldn't go on, that life wasn't worth living which is odd because some of them had become famous in their fields.”

“What do you mean fields?”

“One was a sculptor who donated his work to museums all over the planet. At the end of his life he had been selling them. Many off-worlders wanted his art. He could have been wealthy selling all over the galaxy. An architect commissioned for an opera theater jumped from the balcony on opening night. I could give more examples, if you need them. Some of the suicides didn't leave notes. And others did the deed in front of loved ones.” A tear rolled down Noog's face. “I don't know what to do.”

Vivian debated on whether she should be bold and touch the Prime Minister, but the woman suffered. Vivian left her seat and patted Noog's shoulder. "I'm sorry. Grief is grief, and you are unaccustomed to pain from crime. It's not something one gets used to."

Noog wiped her tears. "Thank you, Vivian. This is an example of why we like Humans so much. Some of the other-worlders, well, they... just aren't as nice."

"You think we're nice? Didn't we bring crime to your planet?"

"I don't think so," Noog said. "Your people brought us wondrous things, like technology, transportation, not to mention coffee, chewing gum," her eyes went all dreamy, "chocolate... and," her smile embellished the dreamy look, "and," she giggled, "very spirited men."

*Yes, a spirited man could erase the memory of a boatload of unpleasantness.*

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said that, but we Sores are rather direct."

"Right. Honest to a fault."

"What does that mean?" Noog said in earnest.

*She needs to spend some more time with her teacher... unless he's Dougie Dunny.* "Oh, just another idiom meaning the truth can get you in trouble."

"It can?"

"Look, Noog, I'd better get started with my investigation, and I will keep it close to the chest—uhm, I'll try to keep my inquiries quiet."

"Thank you." She handed Vivian a paper. "Here is the nearest person we have to an investigator, a bright fellow who works for the Roads and Transportation Office."

Vivian read the name aloud. "Fartafall Loomyeffy. Fartafall! Poor guy. I'd change my name to something else for sure."

"Really? Why?"

Maybe she'd never get out of there if she kept explaining English sayings. "Later, Gator. Uhm, excuse me. I'll return when I have something to report."

"Very well. I'll summon Brito."

"Why don't you wait on that? I'll find my way out if it's not against the rules."

"Of course not. Be at ease. Make yourself to home, I believe is the saying."

"Perfect. And thanks." Vivian felt comfortable. She liked Prime Minister Noog.

Vivian took her time exploring the second floor. After a quarter hour, by her watch, she approached the lovely staircase. Looking down before she took the first step she saw someone she knew crossing the expansive lobby. The grown up Little Dougie-Dunny headed for the stairs.