Faith Allington (she/her) about 2,900 words

faithallington@gmail.com

The Perfect Vassal

My last chance to avoid being terminated arrives on the same day the summer temperatures go past the mercury. Sunlight drenches the topside in enough golden heat to melt through our bones, if not for the bioglass dome, and we’re all dripping sweat by the time we get to our cold warren of cubicles [in some specific place that establishes the setting]. On my desk is a holo-photo of the next Candidate I’ll be assigned to program. Limp black hair; wide blue eyes; a sharp, angular face. Mid-forties, I’d guess, with an expression somewhere between wary and lost. I’ve seen hundreds like her, faces and designations blurring together.

[Designation]: *Ashley-zx09570*

[Origin Sector]: *03933*

[Status]: *Recovered*

Her file is redacted because none of us have the kind of clearance to see why the Candidates have been brought here. I try not to pass judgment because the only thing worse than being a Programmer like me is being a Candidate. But she’s Recovered. I shiver. Whatever happened to her, it didn’t end well.

My eyes slide towards the empty cubicle a few desks down from mine. Harker’s already missed two days of work. A third and he’ll be terminated. Sent downstairs. I turn to my co-worker Maxine, their blonde hair hanging limp from the humidity outside, dressed in the same silver foil suit we all wear.

“Hey, Maxine,” I whisper, leaning forward. “Where’s Harker?”

They shake their head at me over the rim of our shared cubicle wall. “He’s gone, Will. The Minders found out he was being paid to delete Candidate names from the files.”

My throat tightens, thinking of Harker being taken downstairs. I can’t believe he would risk it, knowing the Minders are always watching. Ready to test our psychological stability and make sure we’re capable of doing our jobs. And stepping in whenever we don’t.

“Attention, Citizens,” my supervisor says, loud enough to make everyone look up. The dingy light gleams on his bald head, his face as expressionless as a rubber mask.

Nobody says anything, but we’re all thinking the same thing–whoever wants a new Vassal must be too important to ignore. The most powerful Families, the Kennets or the Gordons, are responsible for protecting the colonies. They always get the best Vassals, ones that take the longest to find and program. The less powerful Families, those who provide fuel or supplies, get Vassals suited to simple duties.

We’ve all got a Candidate already, we run at least one per week, with the high churn rates. This new order means everyone will be running two simulations at once. My eyes are gritty with exhaustion. The air crackles with tension, filling the entire floor with a burnt ozone smell.

“The Kennet Family has requested a new Vassal.” His gaze rests on me, damp as a hand to the face. “This one needs to be perfect.”

Another one, so soon? My stomach tightens. The Kennet Family is particularly demanding and a Vassal with a rating of perfect is almost impossible to get right. The Vassal must be ready for any situation with the Kennets. Lower-grade Vassals are easy–the worst they can expect is a guest getting a bit handsy or one of the Family’s kids biting them.

The room echoes with a hundred hushed, weary voices. “Yes, sir.”

But this is more than just an assignment for me. My supervisor hasn’t said it but I know this is my last chance. If I mess up a recommendation again, I will be terminated. I could end up on a slab downstairs, my body waiting on ice while they program my mind to the specifications of a Family.

I’d rather be dead than turned into a Vassal. So would any of us who see first-hand what happens to the Candidates that make it into service. Citizens who can’t seem to stay on the straight and narrow end up downstairs. Their bodies are repaired and their minds altered to suit the Family that chooses them.

“Your Candidates are available now. You need to make the right decision, choose the right Candidate, but do not waste valuable simulation time.” His glare sweeps across the whole room, then he scuttles back to his office.

I don’t have a choice. I have to do this. I push the chip into my computer and listen to the hum of the machine intensify as it accepts the authorization and downloads Ashley’s consciousness into memory. I suck in a breath, debating the best scenario to start with.

The computer simulation is hard on the Candidates. Not just the emotional energy of their consciousness being forced through tasks, but outside the simulation, their bodies are undergoing surgery. Most can only take an hour a day of simulation time.

I usually run a couple scenarios over a week or two. Maybe a few days of *Making Breakfast*, *Cleaning* or *Serving Drinks*. After that, I ease the Candidates into a *Full Working Day*. If they make it through that, I sometimes try *Party*. The most unlucky of them I eventually prod them into *Private Apartment*, a simulation only available for Kennet or Gordon Candidates.

Ninety-nine out of a hundred don’t qualify for more than an average rating and there’s no sense pushing the poor bastards into something tough if they can’t hack the little stuff. But the threat of being terminated makes my fingers tremble and I start with *Full Working Day.*

I know this scenario well, it’ll take the Candidate through a day in the life of a Vassal. Starts out with a dawn wake-up call, making breakfast, seeing the kids to school, back in time to clean the house and make dinner, then be available for whatever the parents want after the kids go to sleep.

I fill out paperwork and check in on my other Candidate while the computer spits out real-time responses. After a few hours, there’s a whine of electronics when the computer hands out the final determination–*the Candidate is within parameters.*

That’s a good sign. I check the numbers—her response times are unusually fast. She’s just gone through a full day in simulation time and her heart rate is barely up. The computer has flagged that she’s also more assertive than average, but with the Kennet Family, that’s not a bad thing.

I don’t want to be pleased about sending one of my Candidates to those bastards, but if it’s not her, it’ll be me in service. Me getting my mind altered until I’ll do whatever the Kennets want without complaining.

With the working day over, I head downstairs. Maxine and the others ignore me. They know my rating has dropped. I don’t blame them, not after Harker. It’s hard to remember that I used to hang out with people instead of crawling home to the windowless beige container where I live. Maybe I could use a drink, just this once.

The exit doorway scans my body and logs my outgoing time as I leave the office behind. The damp heat, though dulled by nightfall, coats my skin. Beyond the dome, the night sky is deep indigo, speckled with copper stars. The horizon is blotted out by metallic skyscrapers and housing stacks.

The bar is as drab and functional as my container, filled with low booths and hazy with cigarette smoke. The low murmur of other people getting slowly and thoroughly drunk. The only attraction of this place lies in the cheap bottles of beer, served with no alcoholic limiter.

“Hi,” a woman says, easing into the seat across from me. She’s faded but pretty with dark hair and a wry smile. The patched jeans and a flannel shirt that’s too big make her look almost young again.

I should tell her to get lost, but in the dimming light, she looks a lot like the holo-photo of Ashley. Maybe it’s just the fact that I’m four beers in on an empty stomach. How long has it been since I’ve talked to another human being outside of work?

“You come here often?” I wince. I down the rest of my beer and nod at the bartender for another.

She laughs, her eyes crinkling. “That the best you can do?”

My cheeks burn, but her tone’s light and teasing. “Sometimes I’m amazed I’m capable of talking at all.”

She nods her head, smiling. “Yeah. I feel like that sometimes. My job is a real killer.”

“Mine too,” I say, but it’s the last thing I want to talk about.

The bartender arrives with two bottles of beer and the woman’s shirt slips off one shoulder as she reaches for them. I imagine the feather-light brush of her lips if she kissed me. A fantasy, I know, but it can’t hurt to pretend.

She pushes a bottle towards me, our fingers touching for the briefest of nanoseconds. Like the light of two stars meeting, already long dead or imploded, cosmos apart.

She downs half her beer. “You ever think we’re the center of the universe and if we let go, even for a second, everything will go up in flames?”

I blink. “What?”

“Oh, just me then.” She laughs again, eyes lowered. She scrapes at the label on the bottle. When she senses me watching, she blushes. “Sorry, nervous habit.”

“It’s okay.” I don’t know what to do next. It’s like I’ve lost my lines. How do people interact? What do they say? I catch sight of a poster on the wall, another spacer drama. “Seen the latest vid, *Station Bliss*?”

“Umm, not really into holograms and vids,” she says. Her tongue glides across her upper lip and she leans closer to me. “Tell me something about you that no one else knows. Tell me a secret.”

My pulse rises and I want to impress her. I have a secret—I deliberately failed the last Candidate because I didn’t want him to end up working for the Kennet Family. The kind of thing you get terminated for, if they find out. My beer-drenched brain wants to tell her everything.

“I was born in the forest colony, came here when I was a kid,” I say instead. I haven’t thought about my childhood in years, long since taken over and home to the Kennet Family now. “The ecosystem there is incredible—so many plants you’re practically breathing green.”

She frowns. “I meant something now.”

“Oh, uh–I’m here with you? Pretty sure nobody knows that.”

“Hmm.” She inches closer, citrus perfume wafting my way. “What color is the sky when you dream?”

“Not sure the last time I dreamed.” I finish the last of my beer, catch myself peeling the label. She’s weird, but maybe this is how people flirt these days. “What about you? You dream a lot?”

“I’m boring, trust me!” Her chin rests on one hand and her other hand rests near my knee. “You ever been off-planet?”

I shake my head. It costs too much to go off-planet, even to the nearest moon. With the kind of money I’m paid, I’ll be dead before I could even manage a visit out of the city. Is this why Harker took money to erase Candidates from the list, because he wanted to see something more than housing stacks and vids?

“Would you go, if you could? If someone offered you a trip?”

It’s a dangerous question given I obviously don’t make enough money to go. If I made real money, I wouldn’t be in this bar. “Sure, I guess. You?”

“Same.” She smiles, her dark eyes fixed on me. “What about your job, it must be exciting?”

Disappointment floods my mouth, tasting of plastic. Damn, I should’ve guessed. She must be a Minder checking up on my psychological stability. Which means my asshole of a supervisor reported me upstairs. Which means they suspect that I didn’t just make a mistake with Tyler, my last Candidate.

They would be right–I failed him on purpose. I know how fast the Kennet Family goes through Vassals and I couldn’t send him there. And I’m paying for that now. I step out of the booth and walk away, ignoring her when she calls after me. She doesn’t follow but I feel eyes on my back the whole way home.

I spend the weekend at work, running Ashley through the scenarios in the simulation. By Monday morning before dawn she’s gotten through everything I’ve thrown at her. Each time, her response rate has been stellar. She really is a remarkable Candidate.

My head is pounding as I contemplate the possibility that this is my last day here. If they’re sending a Minder after me, they must believe that I’m broken. My last chance is to find the right Candidate before anyone else.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as I configure the simulation for *Private Apartment*. This will push Ashley to her breaking point and then we’ll find out if she’s truly capable of enduring the Kennet Family.

I don’t want to do it, but I’ve got no choice now. I let the simulation run for a bit, trying to decide how hands-on I'm going to get. We’re supposed to just wait until it ends and then look at the scores, but if we need a closer look, we’re allowed to go in. I glance around the room, but no one will be here for hours.

I pull on my headset and look into the simulation.

Ashley is standing quietly in one of the Kennet Family apartments, a luxurious expanse of ice blue carpet, cream walls and glass windows overlooking a city. There’s a piano on an actual dais. She’s shorter than I expected, dressed in a mottled purple sheath, but her feet are bare.

There’s no one else in the room, though there are two cocktail glasses on the low coffee table. The air smells of musky perfume and something sour. My eyes sweep across the room, then I spot a man’s foot protruding from behind the long sofa. That’s when it registers that Ashley’s dress is mottled with blood and her knuckles are swollen and raw.

I’ve heard of this before, a Candidate snapping during the parameters of the simulation. But when Ashley’s head lifts and her eyes narrow, fear spikes through me. Does she know she’s in a simulation?

“Whoever’s watching this, you’re next,” she yells, her voice ragged. She bends down to pick up a marble statue and then lobs at the window. The glass shatters and the statue smashes through the balcony railing. Then she launches herself towards me, mouth wide open, fingers splayed.

I yank off the headset, clapping a hand over my mouth as it fills with copper. My heart is thundering so hard I’m afraid I’ll pass out. My hands are shaking and my fingers stumble over the keys. What the actual hell was that?

The computer spits out Ashley’s assessment. *The Candidate is within parameters*. I stare at the output, my mind too hazed with adrenaline to interpret what’s happening. There’s no way Ashley passed the scenario.

I breathe out through my mouth until my heart rate evens out. The salt taste of my blood fades. I must’ve bitten my tongue in the simulation. But this result has to be a mistake.

I pull up her individual scores. Responsiveness, skills and intelligence are wildly above average, while the score for attitude is abysmal. I scan it over and over, trying to make sense of it. Then it hits me.

The computer has simply added the scores together and arrived at an acceptable number. And with a mind wipe, Ashley will forget that she was in a simulation, no matter how many times she’s been Recovered after service.

Ashley is spectacularly unsuited to become a Vassal. Paranoid and violent–exactly what we’re trained to discontinue. To place her would be lethal for the Family involved. Especially if the mind wipe fails, which has happened before.

The elevator beeps and my coworkers fill the windowless hive like so many silver bees. I’m officially out of time. My supervisor comes to me first, his eyes locking onto my face. Ready to terminate me, send me downstairs to become a Candidate.

“You have a recommendation, Citizen?” His voice is challenging, dismissive. He already knows I’m going to fail.

“Of course, sir,” I say, crisp and efficient. Zero doubt. “I recommend this Candidate for the Kennet Family.”

His head jerks back, his eyes narrowing. He wasn’t expecting that from me. He looks over my shoulder and sees Ashley’s high score. “Hmm. I guess you’re right, Citizen.”

I initiate Ashley’s placement with the Family and override the suggested mind wipe. Her score is good enough that the computer agrees, no need to waste resources. She’s already perfect.