

THE LEADERSHIP GENE

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Happy Eaterie Three is at the end of one of those wide, almost endless corridors, with shopfronts for walls, at Globalcorp's England Region HQ,. It wasn't Julia's sort of corridor, or Julia's sort of eaterie. Leaders like her are more used to the subdued and rarefied atmosphere of the top floor.

Normally she'd invite me to meet up there. She was more comfortable, and it was a thrill for me. So when she told me to meet her in this cheap place, where computer operators and other mechanical types drink their coffee, it filled me with a sudden surge of the dread I'd nursed every day of the five months I'd known her. One day, they'd tell her she had to stop seeing me, and start a relationship with someone at her own level. And she'd have to obey.

"Paul." She'd paid extra for a corner table, affording a little privacy – exactly what leaders do when they want to fire an underling. Or in this case, a lover. Us mid-managers call those tables "waste disposal units."

She stood, and smiled, and I'd have jumped off the top of the building for her. Six generations of carefully selected leadership genes, and that's what it came down to: a warm, deep voice, full of assurance, a voice you can trust, about to break your heart.

“Thanks for coming so quickly.” Then, with that appearance of awkwardness which makes you think they’re just human: “I appreciate it.”

She appreciates it. What sort of a word is “appreciate?” But I didn’t ask the question. I just said, as flippantly as I could: “OK. So there’s a crisis. Where’s the crisis?” And she told me.

The message had come from Candia herself – the chief executive of Globalcorp’s England Section. I could have written the script myself. Great things were expected of Julia, she was headed for the top, perhaps all the way – perhaps she was a future global president, controlling the lives and destinies of hundreds of millions of people like me, in every corner of the globe.

Of course there was nothing wrong about having a fling with a lower genetic type, but it had to end sometime, if a leader was going to reach her potential.

Yes, yes, said Candia, she knew Paul was engaging. She’d heard of his clever wit, his gift for mimicry. Useful in a marketing man. That’s what he’s bred for. No harm in marketing people. Where would we be without them? But in the end. Well.

Julia must have put up some resistance, because then – and I could kill Candia for this – she told Julia about me. Have you noticed, she said, that there’s something odd about Paul, even for a marketing type?

I’d never told Julia about the stray genes. Perhaps I should have done. But I thought, it’s common enough – one in 20 of us has one. I’d been given a sense of humour, by mistake. I could never take marketing jargon as seriously as my colleagues did. Pile glowing adjectives on top of each other to describe some ordinary household implement, and I had a fatal tendency to burst out laughing. And I had a poetry gene. When no one was looking, I sat writing poetry which had no purpose, for there was not a single one of our products which it would help to sell.

I gave her what I rather hoped was a quizzical look and said casually: “Us freaks has feelings too.” And smiled, to show that the feelings didn’t run particularly deep. She said nothing, and I couldn’t read her face. So I stopped trying, and looked around to avoid meeting her eyes.

There was a table of engineers next to us – pencils and calculators peeking from every pocket, grey, quiet men and women in grey, crumpled suits on which the company’s bright pink logo perched incongruously. On another table, some of my own colleagues from marketing, whose colourful jackets risked overshadowing the logo – one of them, daringly, not even sporting the logo at all.

From both tables, occasional glances were shot our way, because a marketer and a leader drinking coffee together was not something you saw every day. And I knew that I was holding her back in her career, and had to let her go. Making this easy for her, I decided, was the last great kindness I could do her, and I put on my cod romantic voice, as heard in every romantic film you could get on your headset, and said:

“You’ve fired people before. It’s what you’re trained to do. Strategists, engineers, marketers, if they have to go, they have to go. Try and see me as a member of the team whose face doesn’t fit.”

She looked up at me then, and I couldn’t avoid her eyes. She wore a look which I’d never seen before. Astonishment? Relief? Disappointment? At last she spoke.

“Paul” she said. “I’m not going to leave you. I want you to stay with me.”

A little knot of geneticists in their white coats, twittering and fussing, walked just a little closer to our table than was strictly necessary, no doubt from professional curiosity. Generations of geneticists had made it their top priority to find the right combination to make leaders, and they seldom saw the results of their labours in the

flesh. If they could have heard what she said next, it would have had them scurrying back to their laboratories to find out what they were doing wrong.

“You know, Paul, you’re not the only oddity in this company.”

I screwed up my face, ready to do my troubled-geneticist voice which usually had her laughing helplessly, but she just held up her hand with a gentle smile. “Not now. Listen.

“No, I’m not like you. I’m not aware there was a misplaced gene. But I don’t believe the things leaders believe. I don’t believe in leadership. The people we lead know better than we do. I can’t take any of it seriously.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. None of my humourous party turns seemed quite adequate to deal with a revelation like that, so I chose one that emphasised its own inadequacy: a sort of high-pitched growl which you heard from the muscular men and women who wore the uniforms of Securityforce and enforced the company’s code. “Lady you want your bottom smacked” I said through the corner of my mouth, and she told me to shut up and listen.

And this woman who was so full of surprises had another one for me.

“Paul, I know your secret now, so it’s only fair to tell you mine. I wasn’t bred in this company. I didn’t come here till I left leaders school.”

Of course I’d heard of Globalcorp poaching top leadership talent from one of the other two big global companies, but it was the stuff of rumour – generally, I suspected, wild and exaggerated rumour, because to get from one company to another you had to cross miles of nomansland.

She told me the story. She’d been created and bred in Intercontinentalco.

“I was headed up the tree there” she said. “Bred for leadership, one of the successes of the programme. But I knew I wasn’t happy, and didn’t know why. One

day I met a talent spy from Globalcorp. Of course I didn't know who he was, he was working under cover as a strategist. It's dangerous work, spying out talent in another company – they only let someone do it for a few weeks, then they hand their notes over to someone else. He reported back that I was top leadership material, and Globalcorp made me a very attractive offer. I'd be groomed for the very top. Global president. And I wanted that, oh, Paul, I wanted it.”

So she crossed nomansland, a woman in her twenties who had already made a life for herself in one company, to come to another where she knew no one. That was a horrifyingly dangerous thing to do. If you want to go to any of your own company's offices, anywhere in the world, from any other one, it's easy – just go to the roof and get a plane. But to go to another company's office – that's another matter.

Intercontinentalco's England headquarters occupies most of what was once a huge county called Yorkshire, and it's only a few hundred miles from there to Globalcorp's headquarters, known as London. But you can't get a plane. You have to go outside, rent an old fashioned car, and drive, pretending you want a day in the countryside. (The countryside was in a place called North Norfolk.)

Then you drive the roads, in constant terror lest the securityforcers who amuse themselves by racing other up and down the motorways might force you off the road for fun, or get out of their cars and beat you to a pulp for wearing the wrong company's logo.

Even worse, you might meet securityforcers from your own company who suspected you might be a defector – a “disloyaler”. They'd kill you, slowly and sadistically. Loyalty to the brand was the only morality Securityforcers were ever taught.

She had travelled through all that to get to this company. It was bravery beyond my imagining.

Then she told me what we were going to do.

* * * * *

We've all heard of the place which no company's power had reached. But the idea of going there was absurd. Without the company, who would look after law and order? You'd be at the mercy of securityforcers from other companies.

Securityforcers were the same whatever company you worked for. They were bred like fighting cocks. Generations of geneticists had produced the toughest, bravest and most obedient humans the earth had ever known. In the corridors of your own company's buildings – your office, your home, your shops - their fearsome skills ensure your safety. But they need action, and a securityforce patrol on its break often prowls nomansland for victims. It was best not to be there. The wild is the only place they can do as they like.

So we tend not to set foot outside the company's vast building, stretching over square mile after square mile, from the River Thames at Richmond to the River Crouch in Essex. And now she was proposing, not just that we step outside, but that we travel hundreds of miles to look for a fabled place where things are better.

“Paul.” She held out her hand to me. “Paul, we're both sick of this life. Don't pretend, I hear it in the way you laugh about your work. Maybe the marketing department thinks, oho, Pauly, bit of a card is Paul. But I know it's not a laugh, it's a cry of pain.”

“Mm” I said. Even now I couldn’t let her know, by a word or gesture or intonation, that I was taking her seriously. I suppose a part of me still thought she’d burst out laughing, she’d say “Oho, fooled you that time”, and I’d be back where I started, only stupider. I had to make her say it. It wasn’t real until she said it.

“So where do we go?” Say it, say it.

“We’re going to find the underground” said Julia at last. “Paul, you’ve talked so much about it, you’ve told me the history, you want it so badly you can’t get it out of your mind. And now I want it.”

It scared the life out of me, and I told her so. And she said, so gently that I didn’t realise until much, much later that she was helping me to make up my mind to the dangers ahead: “Talk to me about it. Tell me what the company histories don’t tell us.”

So I did. Somewhere out there, in the vast wilderness beyond nomansland, there is a place which, even now, no company controls. A place where writers like me could write words that are not designed to sell anything. And as I told her what I’d heard, I knew that I wanted to be anywhere except where I was: in these great buildings designed like fortresses, these bomb-proof aircraft-proof concrete and steel prisons where, like bees in huge beehives, we rush about our business, sell things to each other, watch the company’s films, and live in comfort on the company’s products.

So the underground was my dream. And I’m not sure I was entirely happy to have someone suddenly offering to fulfil my dream. Left to myself, I’d have dreamed till I died. But Julia wasn’t a dreamer. I said:

“We don’t know where to find them.”

“No, we don’t” said Julia. “But Candia does – she’s done a briefing for Securityforce. There’s to be another attack on the underground in a few weeks, to try

and wipe out their settlements. The briefing is in a file on Candia's pocket computer. I can get it."

So now she was suggesting we go to the underground just as it's about to be attacked. I said yes, and went to bed that night and wept with terror.

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I'd never been outside before. It wasn't illegal exactly, you just didn't do it, not if you had any regard for your own safety. It was strange and frightening to be driving a little, noisy, old-fashioned car, when you're used to being whisked soundlessly through miles of corridor, from shopping precinct to desk. Julia would have made a better job of driving it – she had done it before – but she insisted she needed to concentrate on the directions.

We drove past huge factories where all the things we'd buy in a normal day were made. In the gaps between were little huddles of tents and wooden huts where the derelicts live – the men and women who couldn't get on in the big corporates, and had been thrown out, who sometimes got a day's menial work at one of the factories. Apart from that, they lived on scraps thrown to them by passing securityforcers, and sometimes died at the hands of those same securityforcers when it had been a frustrating day in the company's corridors.

I learned quickly to stay right at the edge of the fifteen lane road, for the racers tended to take the middle lanes. It was just ten minutes in that I saw my first crash. A car travelling at about 200 kilometres an hour suddenly spun round and brought six or seven others skidding to the side of the road in flames.

“Put your foot down” Julia shouted suddenly. She was just in time. I was able to get past the crash a split second before a racing securityforcer hit another car and ricocheted across the road inches behind me, smashing into other cars as it went. We sped out of the way and I looked behind me to see a huge pall of smoke.

Anyone in any of those half dozen cars was going to burn to death in the next few seconds, but Julia shouted sharply: “Don’t stop.” “Will anyone come and help them?” I asked.

“No. They’ll fry. In a few days, one of the Securityforces will send out a sweeper to get all that steel off the road.”

“Why? To collect the ashes?” I said grimly. One securityforce car, bearing a company livery I didn’t recognise, managed to skid out of the way of the rest and avoid the inferno. I thought it would stop and try to get some of the others out. But it didn’t; it just settled quietly into the lane behind us and carried on as though nothing had happened.

“Sooner or later one of the companies will have a convoy of top executives needing to get past. Then it’ll get cleared away. You want the next exit.”

“But I thought...”

“Do it.” And suddenly her voice contained a sort of urgency and command that had me turning off onto another motorway without question, even though I was sure we wanted to go west towards Cornwall, not north towards Norfolk. In my mirror, I saw the securityforce car jerk violently into the turnoff to follow me. They just made it. I heard Julia curse, softly.

“Take it quite slowly” she said “and try to look interested in what I’m saying. The Securityforcers in that car are Intercontinentalco people. That’s the company that bred me to be a leader. They are trying to get a good look at my face and compare it

with a picture on their screens. Underneath the picture it says: Disloyaler. Don't try to outrun them, we can't. Just keep driving like this and if we have to stop, get out of the car and get out of the way. It's me they want."

The securityforce car was right on our tail now, travelling fast, and the man and woman in the two front seats were looking at us.

"What do they want you for?" Ridiculously, I was speaking in a hushed whisper, as though they might be able to hear if I spoke loudly.

Julia said calmly: "They want to break my legs, then kill me, quite slowly. They'd enjoy it, and there's a bonus in it for them."

The securityforce car suddenly moved over to the lane beside us and cruised alongside, inches away, while the woman in the passenger seat stared quickly, then, switching on her sound system, filled the air with her voice.

"Get the car over onto the grass." Her voice was harsh, high and metallic. "Do it now." And within two seconds, her voice louder and filled with menace, she shouted: "I said now. You hear me?"

The car drifted towards mine until I thought we must collide. I tried braking hard and then going outside them, but the securityforce car braked fast and kept outside mine.

Julia said: "You'll have to stop. They'll just bump us into the verge otherwise. Those things are made of special steel, you can't make a dent on them." And there was a crash which sounded to me like two great airliners colliding, but was really only their bonnet hitting mine a bit more directly than before, and my car skidded out of control.

The two cars ploughed into the field together, and I jumped out to meet the Securityforcers, with the vague idea that I might be able to stall them. The man got out of the driving seat, and then, instead of doing any of the things I'd expected, just leaned

on the car, as though getting ready to watch an entertaining spectacle, and said: “OK, Myra. I did the last one. Your treat.”

“You bet.” And the woman came out of the passenger seat. Tall, with long fair hair tied back, she had a fresh, pale face and a figure that looked good even in a Securityforcers uniform, but you could see there were muscles on the arms and menace in the way she moved, and you knew you didn’t want to get the wrong side of her.

“My treat, Bart.” She stood in front of me, her hands on her hips. “Where’s the leader lady?”

“Look” I said “You won’t know this – it’s all been done on a need to know basis but she’s a high-ranking leader from Intercontinentalco...”

“We know that” said Myra. “We don’t like disloyalers, me and Bart.”

“No, you don’t understand. She was seconded to spy on Globalcorp...”

“Get out of my way.”

“You’ll make a big mistake. You’ll regret it. There’ll be trouble.” That’s when she hit me, hard, in the stomach, and I went down on one knee. Bart laughed.

“How often you bin beaten up by a girlie, marketing man?” He settled himself a bit more comfortably against his car to watch the rest.

“Wait.” I struggled to my feet. For a moment Myra turned to look at me, and I aimed a punch at her jaw. It might have given us time to run if it had connected, but she simply rocked back on her heels so that I missed her, then as my fist sailed harmlessly past, she kicked me hard in the upper shin, and I went down, clutching the affected limb, while she walked towards the car. I tried to get up, but my leg wouldn’t bear my weight. Julia got out of the car, calmly, and said:

“You should listen to him. You’re making the sort of mistake that ruins careers.”

“Sure” said Myra, smiling and not slowing her pace at all. My spirits rose as Julia went into a karate position, but from the Securityforce car came a low, mocking laugh, and Bart called out: “You better watch yerself, Myra baby, this lady’s been on a leader’s self-defence weekend.”

Myra walked easily towards Julia. Julia struck, a scything blow with the side of her hand. Or at least, she tried to. The Securityforcer blocked the blow with one hand and hit Julia, hard, with the other. Julia shouted with sudden pain and went down on one knee. Myra stood over her and stared at her, speculatively.

Julia rolled away and got up; Myra ran towards her, and kicked her, twice, so that she fell to the ground again. Myra stood, her legs slightly apart and a sadistic half-smile on her face. Julia was trying to rise, trying to breathe, and sobbing with pain and effort. I hobbled across to help, and was rewarded with a swift and agonising kick in the stomach. Myra watched as Julia struggled to her feet again. Bart cupped his hands over his mouth and called: “Time to break something, Myra baby.”

Julia stood, and circled, limping. As Myra closed with her, Julia tried to hit her, and Myra grabbed her hand, threw her against the car, then twisted her arm up her back. Julia let out a cry of pain, and I knew her arm was about to be broken. I have never been so pleased to see one of our own Securityforce cars in my life.

It skidded to a halt, and a man and woman got out, both carrying guns. The woman called to Myra:

“Thanks for stopping them. We’ve been after these two for some time.”

“You get the hell out” shouted Myra. “This one’s our disloyaler. We found her. We’re gonna break her. You go find your own.”

“This ain’t just a disloyaler” shouted the woman. “These two are aiming to get to the underground. We need them in for questioning.”

I stared at her in horror. God knows what our Securityforcers did, in the deep caverns underneath the building, to people who wanted to defect to the underground, but I was pretty sure they'd think it a worse crime than defecting to the opposition.

That was enough for Bart and Myra. They'd fight other securityforcers for ordinary defectors, but when it came to people defecting to the underground – well, every right-minded securityforcer knew that was the worst crime of all, a threat to everyone's way of life.

“See that crash back there?” called Bart with a grin as he climbed back into his car.

“You bet.” The young Securityforcer, her gun now firmly pointed at me and Julia, grinned. “You were on his tail?”

“Damn fool thought he could outrun us” said Bart. “He learned better. Only he didn't live long enough to appreciate it.” They drove off, and that was the last we saw of Bart and Myra. And Julia said: “OK, Candia. What gets you dressing up like a Securityforcer?”

“It wasn't bad, was it?” said Candia. “I've got the height. I'm not really broad enough, but I put in lots of padding.”

Julia said – and even I thought it was a pretty desperate throw: “Look. I'm really grateful to you for getting us out of that. It looked nasty for a while. We'd better get our car off the grass, and I'll see you in the morning.”

Candia looked at her, and, rather disconcertingly, smiled. Then she turned her short gun onto our car, aimed, and a second later the little car was a ball of flame. She looked at us and said: “You didn't think you could take information off my computer without me finding out, do you? Get in the car.”

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I'd seen the sea before. I had had the usual low flights over it, where we could marvel at its breathtaking vastness and even see little white tops of waves. But this was different. We were standing on a small, deserted beach between two low rocky cliffs, our feet actually touching the wet sand, and we could see the waves not 10 metres from us. Right up close like that, they looked cold and grey and threatening, and the unheated sand sent a chill right through my shoes. Two small, low, old-fashioned cottages against the beach looked lonely and cramped, but we could hear voices from inside them.

They had left us alone. I wanted to talk, but Julia seemed lost in her own thoughts. I suggested running away, but she told me we would be dead of cold in the countryside within hours.

"Are those interrogators?" I said, pointing to two strange faces, strangely red and lined, which looked at us curiously through the cottage windows. Julia just shook her head slowly. She did not seem afraid. But Julia never seemed afraid.

"I hate strong, silent types" I said, as flippantly as I could manage.

The tiny front door opened. Candia came out first, now dressed very strangely in a long woollen skirt and a jersey, both of which seemed to be made of some sort of rough home-made material. They contained several colours which seemed to run into each other, following no overall plan. It would have horrified my colleagues in the marketing department.

She was followed by a tall man, whose face was like a derelict's: red and brown from daily exposure to the outside air, the wind, the rain and the sun. It was only when

they came close that I realised he was the same man who had been in the car with her. Without his Securityforce uniform, and his Securityforce swagger, he seemed like a man I had never met before. I looked at Julia, but she just put a finger to her lips, and I stayed silent.

“You know who we are now, don’t you?” said Candia to Julia, and Julia said nothing for a long time. At last, she nodded.

“I’m an insider” said Candia. “We have to have a few people inside the big corporations, otherwise they’d have wiped us out long ago. I come here as often as I can. Soon I’ll come for good. Insiders don’t last for ever, and it’s best not to stay until you’re found out. But Gregory here is an outsider. This is where he lives, in this settlement, with a few others. We have dozens of settlements like these, all over the country. This is where you’ll stay, for the moment.”

“You knew I’d come, didn’t you” said Julia “as soon as you saw I’d taken the file...”

“I knew earlier than that.” Candia looked at Julia. “I’ve known from pretty well the day I met you. And I’ve looked at your file, Paul. I knew you were ready, too. How do you like our home?”

“Well” I said “It’s cosy, I expect. In a cramped sort of way.”

And Gregory laughed, a rumbling, happy sort of laugh, and said: “We’re going to like having you around. The breeding didn’t quite take with you.”

“And what about you?” I looked at him, and said, for the first time since I was a child, exactly what was in my mind, without worrying about how it sounded. “You don’t look to me as though you were bred at all.”

“I wasn’t” said Gregory. “I was born out here, in a completely unregulated way, to two people who happened to like each other. My mother was an outsider, and

my father was like you and Julia, he escaped to us. He'd been a geneticist inside, so he was very valuable to us. But now, you see, I'm a leader. They elected me. Every five years, all the outsiders get a vote about who governs them. They can get rid of me, too."

I said: "Isn't that pretty hit or miss? You might get someone hopeless."

"You might" said Gregory, and smiled.