

'How much does a man live, after all? Does he live a thousand days, or one only? For a week, or several centuries? How long does a man spend dying? What does it mean to say "for ever"?' - Pablo Neruda

Interview

I can't believe I'm on my way! Exotica Genoworks, the leading genetics company on Cyantia, and off, and they might be offering me a job! This is so good...

A blue fox is walking down a city street. Her fresh new clothing and clean cut head fur flap gently in the autumn breeze. She walks towards a large building, the tallest in the city. A large logo is splayed across the front of the building, with the initials E G most prominent. In front of the building is a large water fountain with many flowers and shrubs arranged around in a tasteful, business fashion. There are several female fox of blue, red and orange fur admiring the garden, some chatting to one another, some watching the water cascade down the hand carved marble figure. A few fox, the youngest, are standing awkwardly by the revolving doors of the building. The blue makes her way through the crowd towards the doors. She takes out a card and walks through the doors. Inside is a large lobby with another water feature, a waterfall with multicoloured gems embedded into it, and several chairs around small tables. There are two corridors leading out of it, with a reception desk between them. She walks up to the desk, showing the card.

"Uh, hi. I'm Larena Karask, I have an interview.."

"Third floor, room 101. Elevator down the right corridor, on you're the left." The receptionist doesn't look up.

"Uh, thanks... I think."

Larena walks down the right corridor towards the elevators. She looks at the elevators and shivers. She sees a stairwell next to them. *I'm a few minutes early, might as well take the stairs.*

"So who else are we interviewing today?"

Two golds and a blue fox are sitting at a table in a small room. On the table are two datapads and a third can be seen in the blue's hands. Outside a window behind them the courtyard can be seen.

The blue looks at a datapad and replies "Three more. A Tarks Bentzali, male; a Goul B'Leak, female; and next is a Larena Karask, also female."

"Hmpf... Why so many females? We need more males for these positions..." The shortest gold crosses his arms.

"Makkus, you can't fight natural instinct. Females have that instinct for nurturing. Males don't have it as much. If you feel like volunteering..." the blue starts waving his datapad at Makkus.

"I said nothing of the sort. I just trust males more with high security positions..."

"Well, you should have better taste in lady friends," the other gold smiles.

"Besides, Makkus, would you want **our** father acting like a mother to you?" Makkus glares at the gold.

"If you were anyone else, brother, I would hit you. Where is this Larena then?" Makkus looks at the blue.

"She should be here any minute, it's still a few minutes to her slot..." Larena opens the door.

"Uh, hi. I'm Larena Karask." She walks in, closing the door behind her.

"Ah, Miss Karask. Welcome, please be seated." The blue taps his datapad. Makkus and the gold pick up their datapads.

"Now, you are applying for the position of..." Makkus looks at Larena.

"Teacher/Guardian." Larena's tail starts twitching nervously.

"I see... What experience do you have in this field?" The gold picks up a stylus.

"I watched after my little brother since my mother died, and I have a certificate in child management from..."

"Good, good. We are aware of your qualification, Miss Karask. We meant actual experience, and am I correct that your brother is a certain Tarnik Karask?" The gold taps his stylus.

"Yes..." *What has Tarnik to do with this? Oh no, I hope this gold hasn't meet him..*

"I think then you are more than experienced." The gold smiles, and Makkus looks at his brother.

"Care to enlighten me as to why?" Makkus's ears perk with interest, while Larena's droop.

"Remember that incident with the fur dye two weeks ago?" Makkus frowns.

"You survived that terror? He's right, you are over-experienced." He marks something on his datapad.

The blue clears his throat. "Next question. What experience do you have with any of our products?"

"Well, I knew someone who had one when I was 15, I think it was a skunk... He was very nice though, even if he smelled a bit funny."

"We are working on the smell of the skunks, but that's fine." The blue marks something on his stylus.

"What is your opinion of the recent reorganisation of EG?" Makkus looks at her, his face a perfect mask.

Does he mean EG's recent shift under partial management by the militia? "I have no opinion, I am not informed enough in the particulars to make one. I don't want to make an opinion on half-truths and rumour..."

"A good ideal that," the gold looks at Makkus.

"One last question, do you have any concerns with working in an isolated secured facility? We only ask this as all our production sites have to be a set distance from major settlements for safety."

"I have no concerns. I prefer open spaces to urban life, it just seems more healthy." Makkus's ears perk noticeable at this.

"Thank you. We will be in touch shortly." All stand and Larena leaves.

"Well?" the gold looks at Makkus. Makkus just stares at his datapad.

"... She just has to have the best security clearance, or I would reject her."

"Liar, you like her." The gold grins.

"Nothing of the sort, she's a blue. I just happen to recognise that we need high clearance personnel. Especially with that new batch planned."

"And the fact she's better looking than Terase..."

"I have no idea what you are talking about." Makkus gives his brother a glare.

The blue just shakes his head. "If you two are finished, I believe the next one will be arriving shortly."

The door opens.

Larena is standing in the courtyard. *Ugh... I failed, I know it. Damn Tarnik. I bet he did something to that short gold. He'll probably reject me just for my family.*

She walks over to the fountain, and notices a gold fox sitting next to it. He is reading a datapad, but his tail twitches from side to side in boredom.

"Hi Derk!"

The gold looks up at her then looks around. He then stands, putting the datapad in a bag beside him.

"Hello Larena. May I ask what you are doing here?" Derk stands formally.

"I had an interview. I thought you said you were going to one of their labs..."
Derk's left ear drops.

"I was, then they decided to hold me for some 'special' lab they've just built." He looks at the building. "They're supposed to tell me where I'm going today, but they told me I had to wait. So, how did it go?"

"... I'm not sure... The people interviewing me apparently met Tarnik," Derk's ears droop, "and I think that might go against me. They said something about a fur dye incident..."

"Fur dye?" Derk's ears pop up, and he smiles. "That must be Makkus, my brother told me about that. Tarnik put blue fur dye in several water balloons and sneaked into a militia base. He threw one at Makkus, who was under inspection." He laughs. "Clarn said it was the most hilarious scene he ever saw, Tarnik evading a full company of Elite Golds, throwing fur dye bombs."

He smiles so prettily... "So that's why Tarnik got escorted home... I wondered why he was so cocky."

"That's not all, apparently the commander was so impressed by his 'talent' that he's gonna offer him to join the covert ops division. Oh, it also helped Makkus get his promotion."

"Promotion? Sorry, I'm not in on the latest of militia happenings, I am a blue." Derk shrugs.

"I keep forgetting that. He was being appraised of his fitness to command, and the main thing holding him back was his temper. The fact he didn't gut Tarnik when he was finally caught impressed the general there." Derk's datapad beeps. "Opps, gotta go. Hope things work out for you." Derk walks in the building.

"Good luck getting to that lab." *Tarnik in the militia? I pity the drill instructors... I think I'll go home. No use hanging around here like these others. They said they would get back to me... I can cry/celebrate at home far better than here. She walks back down the street.*

Larena is sitting in a room on a large cushy chair, reading a datapad. Next to it is a small table and a settee. In front of her is a vid screen and a shelf. On the shelf are three pictures. One is of Larena with a smaller blue male fox, one is of a tall blue female, and the last is of the male fox. The male fox from the pictures enters the room.

"So where did you go?" He leans on the back of the chair.

"EG, I had a meeting to attend there. I understand you 'assaulted' the militia a few weeks ago?"

Tarnik grins. "Yep. I went, I saw, I marked my territory in an appropriate manner. Turned those stupid golds blue. Probably raised their intelligence a few points too." He walks over to the vid screen and turns it on. He then plops onto the settee. "Funny thing, the guy in charge there wasn't as mad at me as my first 'victim'." He laughs. "You should have seen his face, standing there, face straight, uniform freshly pressed. Wham! Blue dye all over his front." He cackles.

"I didn't have to. I meet your 'victim' today. If I lose that job because of you.... Well, Dad will never have to worry about your antics again." Tarnik stops laughing.

"Aw, come on sis. If anything, it probably helped you. He knows you have to put up with me, and if you can put up with me, you can put up with anything." He sits up.

"Oh, just a warning. A friend of mine said that the 'guy in charge' is interested in you. You might want to re-think what you did and prey that he loses that interest. Unless you *want* to join the militia..."

Tarnik's face drops. A beeping is heard outside the room. Larena gets up and walks through the door.

She walks into a corridor with a small vid screen on one wall, one of the buttons on it blinking. She presses it and a message is displayed on the screen.

Dear Larena Karask. After careful review... pleased to inform you that we are prepared to offer you a position at one of our facilities, effective immediately...

"Yes!"

Induction

A large wheeled transport is heading down a dirt road through a forest. Larena sits near the front.

...A new facility with full amenities, bi-weekly transports to the nearest city and free postal service. What a job...

The transport breaks through the forest revealing a group of buildings surrounded by a tall wire fence. There are two large buildings, a hanger and a small guardhouse beside a gate in the fence.

Not much here, but so what?... Those buildings are awfully small... The must go below the ground as well. Why else would they need so many people?

The transport pulls in front of the hanger, and Makkus walks onboard.

"Good morning. Welcome to your new home, for as long as you work here. I hope you had a pleasant journey, and if you will follow me, we will begin the process of getting you situated."

He steps of the transport and the other fox follow him.

Well, that was formal. I wonder what he's doing here... He's militia, must be here to 'mind' us and make sure we 'behave'. Typical...

Larena stands up and follows.

The group is now inside the largest building, in a foyer. There are two doors and a corridor that leads to the left.

"Please wait here. You will all need to be given passcards. Your passcards will be both an identity card and access card for you while here. Do not lose it. When you are called, go in there," he points at a door with a frosted glass window, "and you will be processed." He walks through the door next to the one he indicated.

Well, can't get anymore boring... Identity cards, I hope they aren't photo ID, I hate those. My picture always comes out squishy...

An orange fox walks out of the glass-windowed door holding a datapad. He looks up from it.

"Right. I am Commander Jolnas. If you need anything while here, whether it's pixie stix or a map of the facilities, I am the one you need to talk to. Don't bother Commander Makkus on the latter, he couldn't find his way out of a wet paper bag. He sure couldn't find his way out of his first orienteering course." He smiles. "Anyway, when I call your name, come on in and I'll sort your passcards out. Don't loose them, they're the hardest item to get ahold of, and I hate to run out of anything. First, Anomie Falis?" A red fox walks forward and they both walk through the door.

Interesting... Jolnas must not like Makkus... I wonder why? Hmm...

A few minutes latter, they walk back out and Jolnas looks at his datapad again.

"Ok. Curtic Jung?" A blue male walks in the room and Jolnas follows him. *That was quick.. He must not be taking photos, that usually takes longer..*

A few minutes later they come out again.

"Larena Karask?"

My turn! She walks up to the door and they both enter. Inside is a small camera on a tripod, a small computer terminal and a retinal scanner.

"Right. First let's get your eye's scanned." He walks over to the scanner and inserts a small card into a slot in the terminal. Larena walks up to the scanner and stands very still. Jolnas adjust the scanner and a faint crimson light shines in Larena's eyes.

"There. Next, your photo. Please stand on the X," he points at an X marked on the floor. She blinks twice and walks over to it. *Ugh.. I hate retina scans...* Jolnas taps a button.

"There. All done." He takes out the card and hands it to here. There is no pictures on it at all. Larena looks at it in confusion. *Huh?..*

"All your information is stored on the card. If you are challenged by someone, just hand them the card and they can insert it in any terminal or vid screen in the complex. Your details will show on the screen. Nifty, huh?" He smiles. They walk out.

Well, I guess it beats another squished picture on a card...

"I fail to see why I have to be their guide on today, I am not some private, I am the official liaison to this facility.." Makkus is arguing with a vid screen.

"Which is exactly why you should be the one. They will need to familiarise themselves with their surroundings and associate you as a key member of the personnel here. You never know, one of them might need to work with you with one of the projects." The gold fox on the vid screen frowns at him.

"None of the projects here are that sensitive. None of them."

"There you are wrong. The PSYRAC project has been moved to your facility." Makkus's ears perk at this. "I assumed that you were aware of this, but you clearly aren't. I expect you to monitor this project closely. It was hard enough regaining the data lost from the incident..."

"Understood. Sir, have you already chosen the personnel for that project?"

"Yes, actually. It is included in the report. It should be on your desk. You better familiarise yourself with it ASAP. Now go do your duty, or I'll send you somewhere far less hospitable." The screen goes blank.

"Didn't know this place was so important..." Makkus stands straighter. "He must trust me more than I thought!" He smiles and walks back.

Larena is sitting on one of the chairs, twirling her hair with one finger. *Bored bored bored... How much longer?! She stands up. The last fox and Jolnas walk out.*

"Right, that's the lot of you. Well, good luck here and hope you enjoy the rest of the day." Makkus walks back into the foyer. "Remember what I told you, and don't loose those cards! Bye!" He waves and then walks back through the door.

He's so friendly... But he's in the militia. Maybe Tarnik won't do to bad there after all...

Makkus watches Jolnas leave, and glares at the door for a few seconds. He then straightens up and looks at the group.

"Now that you are all processed, we can begin. For those who don't know me, I am Commander Makkus. I am the military liaison to this facility. Now follow me and we will begin with the living quarters."

It is now early afternoon. The group walks into the smaller building and is standing in a small room. Two blue fox step out a door and look up from their datapads in confusion. One of them speaks up.

"Who are you lot? This is a secured building, are you authorised to be here?" He notices Makkus then stops.

"This is the new group of employees, Gord. They are here for the tour.."

"Oh yes, the 'tour'. A waste of our valuable time, the 'tour'. They can't possibly understand what goes on..." The other blue shakes his head and continues on his way. Makkus looks back at the group.

"This is Doctor Gord Maclar. He is the chief geneticist here. Although you will not personally be working in this building, it is thought that you might benefit from seeing where your future charges are being made." He looks back to Gord, who has continued babbling on. Makkus clears his throat.

"Yes, that's all well and good, but we will actually be out of your fur faster if we get this over with."

Gord stops and looks thoughtful for a second. "I suppose you are correct. Well, come on then."

The group follows Gord through the door.

"Now this is the actual room where the genetic matrices are programmed. It is a clean room, so we won't be actually going in it, but there is a large window in the control room that looks into it. It is a bit small, but we should all fit in." They walk past a secured door and enter another one, marked 'CNTRL CNTR 314'. Inside are a gold and two blues, both wearing protective garments. The gold gets up and walks around the group, then sees Larena.

"Larena!"

"Derk! Looks like you got to that lab after all." She smiles.

"It's nice to see you too. I see you got the job then? Well, I'll make 'em and you raise 'em then. Gotta go, I'm needed in the clean room. Catch you later?"

"Sure." The group just stares at her. Gord looks at Larena in puzzlement.

"My father helped him get into genetics... We're just friends. Honest!" Makkus clears his throat.

"Please continue Doctor."

"Oh, right. Well, the sequencer is powered by an EPS conduit directly connected to a micro-fusion generator. This is because it is a very inefficient machine, and it is a very finicky at the best of times. We wouldn't want to affect the rest of the facility every time we ran it." He smiles at the group. "Now if you look through that window, you should see the genetic sequencer. That is the machine that does most the work. The green vats next to it contain the four basic DNA base pairs, and it combines them to make the right gene structure..."

Larena leans to the side, trying to look past Amonie. One of the group shuffles and bumps her accidentally. She loses her balance and lands on the control panel.

BEEP *BEEP* *BEEP BEEP BEEP*

"WARNING: CRITICAL ERROR! POWER INTERRUPT ENGAGED"

Gord looks around in horror. Larena stands up, her hands raised off the panel. "What's happening!? Power interrupt? Oh no..." He runs to the panel and starts hitting buttons.

"No no no nononono..." Makkus watches Gord, and then heads out the door, grabbing a clean suit on the way.

"COMMAND OVERRIDE IN EFFECT. WARNING: POWER SURGE DETECTED. WARNING: SURGE PROTECTION DISABLED."

"Squid!"

Makkus seals up the suit and slides his passcard in the secured door. He rushes past the door as soon as it opens and hits the airlock cycle button. As soon as the airlock cycles he runs into the room. He sees Derk and grabs him.

"You! There is a situation at the moment. What's in the sequencer right now?" Derk looks at him puzzled for a moment, then looks at the sequencer board.

"Batch PR. Uh, it's at PR-27 right now... What kind of situation?" He starts to tap a comm unit next to the sequencer, when it sparks to life.

"Derk, Power surge incoming! Secure the current unit, or we'll lose the whole batch!"

"Squid!" He starts tapping lots of controls. Then he turns to Makkus.

"You see that lever by the vats? The red one. When I say so, pull it down. That should shunt the surge to the vats, away from the machine. Hurry!"

Makkus runs over to the vats and grabs the lever.

Oh squid! What have I done?! Oh squid...

Gord hits a few more buttons. "Squid! It's no use..." He turns to Larena and notices her ears are flat.

"So it was you then? Don't worry. It's not your fault entirely. It's a bug with this system, and now they'll finally listen to use and get it fixed. Don't worry about the current batch. Derk should save most of them and we can just restart where we were..." He looks out the window. "The surge should hit any second now..."

A power conduit running up to the sequencer burst.

"NOW!"

Makkus pulls the lever, and Derk hits one last button. The conduit disconnects to the sequencer and the surge flows into the vats. Sparks start flying from the connectors, and two of the vats start changing colours. Another of the vats burst, spewing green gunk onto Makkus. Derk hits one of the buttons, and walks over to Makkus.

"You alright? Don't worry about the gunk, the suit should protect you." A beeping noise is heard and they both look back at the machine.

Blinking on the sequencer's display, a message is displayed: 'PR-27 Complete. Warning: Genetic Sequence Corruption Error'.

Aftermath

Two gold, three blue and a red fox walk into a conference room. They sit down and the vid screen in front glows into life, displaying the General.

"I want to know right know what happened, and no techno-babel."
Makkus stands up. He looks briefly to Gord and Derk, then speaks.

"There was an accident involving one of the new employees during the Induction Tour. An incorrect function was called, and the system initiated a power interrupt. This in turn caused a power surplus in the MTK-58 micro-fusion reactor..."

"A surge hit the machine, and nearly fried all of the PR batch." Derk scowls at Makkus.

"We were able to contain the surge in the vats, saving PR-13 to PR-26, but PR-27's gene-struct was corrupted."

The General looks at Derk. "And you are..."

"I am Derk Holt, General."
The General's eyes widen.

"Ah, yes. Good work saving what you could of the batch. You say PR-27 was corrupted? Well, destroy the remains and continue with production..."

Derk closes his eyes and growls, "General, PR-27 is still alive. What's more, its genetic structure is impossible." The General stares at Derk.

"Just what are you saying?"

Gord stands up and taps a command into a panel on the wall. Two helix patterns shimmer into existence above the table.

"The top pattern is what PR-27 should be. The bottom is what PR-27 is." He taps another command, and four areas on each pattern are highlighted green.

"Here are the areas where they differ."

He taps another command and the four areas on each pattern are enlarged and shown. He points to the first.

"Here is the first obvious difference. On the original, PR-27's sex chromosome is female, but this is obviously male. An easy error, it happens about once every million units. Usually means we need to change the filters. The second error," He points at it. "We have not seen anything like this pattern anywhere. We didn't even know it could work."

Makkus looks at it closely. "What does it do?"

"That part of the gene struct is responsible for the PSYRAC psionic powers. We don't know what this combination will result in, could be nothing or could lead to stronger or longer in range psionic skills." He points to the next area.

"Now this area corresponds to the growth rates that PR-27 will go through. It appears to be majorly intact, except for this small part here. We are not sure what this will do, but he should have a normal growth rate.."

"Normal for what though?" The General leans forward, as if trying to come off the screen.

"Normal for our creations here. This last corruption is easy though. It is just the genes responsible for physical appearance. PR-27 will be tall and lean, perhaps a bit more than normal for a PSYRAC, but that shouldn't affect anything." He sits down.

The General sits back and scratches his chin.

"... Very well. Integrate PR-27 with the rest of the batch, and continue the production run. Now, what caused the accident and how can it be prevented?"

Gord smiles.

"Now that is easy to explain. General, as you know we use a MTK-58 micro-fusion reactor..."

Larena is hauling several bags into the main foyer. Derk walks down the corridor and sees her.

"What are you doing?" He runs up to her and takes one of the bags.

"I'm getting ready to leave. They gonna fire me, so I might as well get my stuff on the transport before it leaves.." She starts crying.

"They aren't gonna fire you. Gord explained it to the bosses and you weren't even mentioned. No thanks to that gold..." He puts the bag down. "If anything, Gord is glad you came. He's been preaching at the higher ups for years warning about what happened today. Now they're finally listening to him, and he got some more funding to boot. Gord is having a little celebration just for that! If you leave now, you'll miss the party! I hear that there will be skunk cookies..."

Skunk cookies?!.. Larena stops crying and looks up.

"Come on, let's get these back to your quarters. Then you need to see Gord. He wants to thank you personally."

Why does he want to thank me for messing up?

Makkus walks into an office. Inside is a desk with a stack of datapads and a shelf with several trophies. On one wall is a large vid screen. He sits down and starts to read the datapads. Someone knocks on the door.

"Enter." He continues to read the pad.

The door opens and Jolnas enters. "Here, this arrived for you today." He hands Makkus a small package and leaves.

Makkus opens it and pulls out a small pistol, the initials TPS inscribed on one side.

"Hmpf. Fat lot of use this will get." He looks at the address on the side of the package.

"Well, Father, you sure know what to give for birthdays. Three weeks late, but at least you know what to give." He puts the pistol down on his desk and returns to reading the pad.

Two months later

Larena walks into a large darkened room with two rows of beds in it. On each bed is a sleeping cub, each looking about 14 months old.

My charges, all asleep... Well, they have to sleep some time. They look so peaceful... Batch PR. Wonder what PR stands for... They said that they are all Siracs. Never heard of Siracs, must be a new product. PR... That sounds so familiar... She walks up to one of the beds. They said I could name them. Well, might as well get started. Let's see... You sort-of look like Tarnik, I'll call you Tarn. She pulls out a datapad and a stylus and starts marking on it, walking beside the beds. ...PR-25, Lena; PR-26, Herto; PR-27.. "PR-27.."
She looks at the cub closely, and notices a bridged mask around his eyes.

"So your the one I almost killed... Sorry. You look so peaceful... I'll call you Ryalto. Yes, Ryalto." She marks the pad again and walks to the next bed. *PR-27a, so your what Ryalto should have been.* She looks closely at this cubs face as well, and notices only two small black patches below each eye. "I'll call you Kari. Kari and Ryalto. Yes, that works." She walks on.