



QUESTIONS FOR A SOLDIER

JOHN SCALZI

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Capt. Perry meets with citizens of village of New Goa on Huckleberry Colony; answers questions about life of CDF servicepersons and other queries.

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Capt. Perry, New Goa administrator Rohit Kulkarni,
seven New Goa villagers

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ROHIT KULKARNI:

Please, please, everyone. I see Naren Bhatia setting down his dessert, so I truly know that it is time to move on to the next portion of the evening. (laughter) You *have* licked that bowl clean, Naren. (laughter) My Anjali will be pleased to know her contribution to the evening met with such success.

It is not often that our simple village receives a visitor of such esteem as the man I have the honor of presenting to you this evening. As with all of the colonies in the Union, Huckleberry and New Georgia, we remember with horror of the Rraey invasion of Coral, one of the oldest and most precious of our colonies. The Rraey slaughtered all of the colonists there, more than 100,000 lives ended. It was one of the darkest hours in the history of the Union.

But the Rraey did not hold Coral for long, thanks in part to the efforts of our guest, whose courageous actions in battle caused him to be awarded the Silver Star and the Distinguished Service Cross, as well as the first Order of Coral award. He is here tonight to share some of his experiences as part of the Colonial Defense Forces that keep all of the colonies safe, including our own. With great honor, I present to you Captain John Perry.

(applause)

CAPT. PERRY:

Thank you, and thank you, Administrator Kulkarni. It was your wife who made tonight's dessert? No wonder you look so happy. (laughter) The whole dinner was wonderful, really. I don't think I've eaten this well in years.

KULKARNI:

I don't doubt you say that everywhere you go.

PERRY:

Well, I do, but this time I mean it. (laughter) And I've been having a wonderful visit here in New Go. I have to warn you all that in addition to doing this goodwill tour of the Colonies for the CDF, I also have an ulterior motive: I'm checking out colonies for when I retire. So get a good look at this fact you might have to get used to it one day. (laughter)

KULKARNI:

We would welcome you, Captain.

PERRY:

You say that *now*, Administrator. (laughter) I do have to say that one advantage of settling in New Go is that although I come from a different culture than you back on Earth, we do share a common language, or at least share *one* common language. Before I came to Huckleberry, I was on Sha Colony, which was settled by Norwegians. I had to use an interpreter while I was there. I think I accidentally declared war on them at least once. (laughter) There is much less of a chance of that here.

Now, my understanding is that I'm supposed to stand up here and lecture you all on how the Colonial Defense Forces are working to protect you from the rest of the universe, but I have to say that I did that a couple of times and then I got really bored of hearing my own voice. And everywhere I go, people have questions that they want to ask. So if it's all right with you, I'm going to suggest we skip whatever bad speech I would give you and go right to the questions. (pause) Since I see about two dozen hands, I'm guessing that means it's okay with you. (laughter) Yes, ma'am. You here in the front.

VILLAGER #1:

Are you married? (Uproarious laughter) Not for me! For my niece. She is about your age.

PERRY:

Well, thank you. I'm deeply flattered, although I'm sure your niece would be surprised to find out you're trying to get her hitched.

VILLAGER #1:

Not at all! She's here in the room! Aparna! Stand up! (more laughter)

PERRY:

Hello, Aparna. Please, sit. You're safe from me. (laughter) To answer the question, I'm not married. But it's also against CDF policy for soldiers to be married. We ship all over this part of the universe and it would be very difficult to maintain a marriage. In fact, when we sign up for service back on Earth, we're legally declared dead, which ends any marriage we were in. Some of the people I served with were thankful for that, (laughter) but I don't think it would have made me happy. I was married before I signed up, but my wife passed away before I left. We had been married for over 40 years.

Ah, *that* look. I get that every time I mention something relating to my age. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm 77 years old. So, ma'am, not only am I too old for Aparna, I'm too old for *you*. (laughter) One of the advantages of joining the CDF is that they give you a new body. I'm older than I look. Yes, sir.

VILLAGER #2:

Why are you green?

PERRY:

The food was so good, I ate too much. (laughter) The real answer is that these bodies we're given are engineered to use chlorophyll to give us an extra energy boost, which we need to help maintain other improvements in this body, like more and denser muscles, faster reflexes and other things. We can also go longer without food than most people, although we don't like it any more than anyone else.

I can see some of you wish that you could have an improved body, but I want to make you aware of the tradeoffs. First, this body is so modified that it can't reproduce. That's definitely not an advantage on a colony. Second, the only way to get a body like this is join the CDF, where you'll have to serve for ten years. In those ten years eight out of ten of the people you joined with will have died in service. I know for myself that of the people I met and became friends with when I joined up, only two are still alive. Look around you in this room and imagine that sort of mortality rate among the people you love and care for. So you have to ask yourself if the new body is really worth it. Yes, sir. Yes, you.

VILLAGER #3:

I am sure you have encountered many alien species. Is there one encounter that is more vivid than the others?

PERRY:

Well, there was the time I was eaten. (audible muttering)

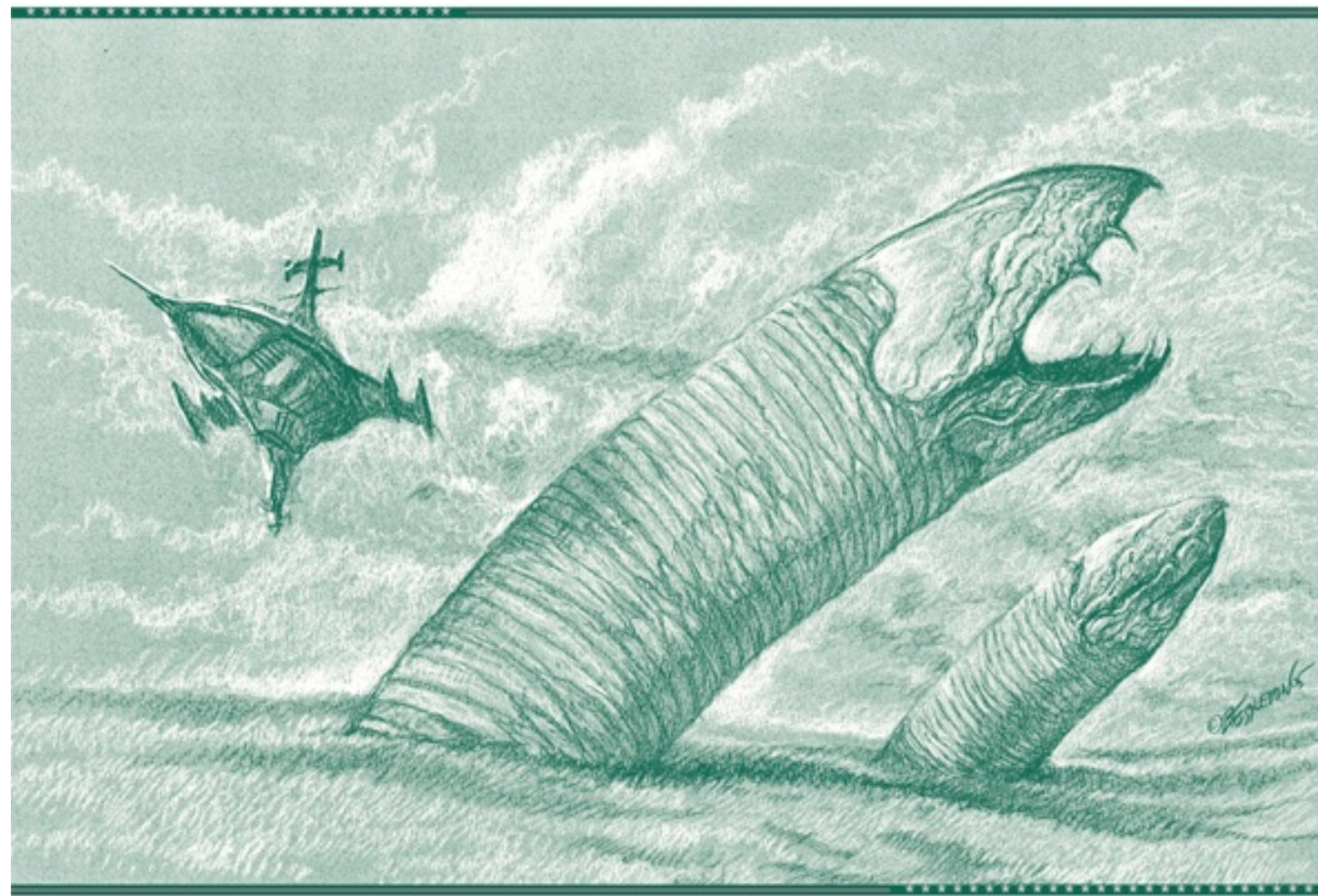
VILLAGER #3:

I believe we would all like to hear about that.

PERRY:

All right. It was about a month before the Battle of Coral, and I and my platoon were sent to an unexplored planet to find a colonial survey team that had disappeared. The first tip-off that something was strange about the planet should have been that it looked gorgeous — perfect for human habitation — but it was completely uninhabited. That's strange because if a planet is perfect for us, it's perfect for a couple hundred other intelligent species, too. And that means it should have been colonized by then. It's like that old joke: A doctor and economist are walking down the street when the doctor looks down and says "there's a \$20 bill on the sidewalk." And the economist says "Impossible! If it were a \$20 bill, someone would have picked it up by now!" This planet was a \$20 bill on the street if there ever was one. It was impossible that it would be uninhabited. And yet it seemed to be. So they sent out a survey team, and after a couple of days they disappeared.

We landed at the coordinates where the survey team had been, and there was no sign the survey team had ever been there — I mean, nothing: No portable buildings, no vehicle tracks or hover pressure damage, no litter. And no bodies. It was as if they simply hadn't landed. All we saw was a long, rolling plain of what looked like some form of grass. It was very pretty, actually. It was like the universe's biggest front lawn. It was very peaceful, at least until the worms came out of it.



Have any of you ever seen a blue whale? You've seen pictures at least. Imagine something of that size coming up out of the ground right underneath you. We felt a rumbling before they breached the surface — but not as much as you might expect — and then these huge things were all around us. I remember feeling the ground rumbling and then looking over to see one of my platoonmates fall. *Al* she was trying to stand up, the ground lifted up under her. One of those worms had tunneled under her and had opened its mouth just as it was coming up, so about two or three meters of ground on every side of her was already in the thing's mouth. She was reaching up as the mouth shut on her. I saw her arm and hand dangling out as the worm slid back into the ground, waving like a parody of *Moby Dick*.

I and some of my squadmates started running back for the landing craft when one of the worms surfaced behind us and literally jumped into the air to come down on where we were. My friend *Alan Rosenthal* was directly in front of me, so I shoved him forward as hard as I could. It worked, because the thing missed Alan. But it got me. It was like a big fleshy wall came down on top of my head, and then I was tumbling ass over head — excuse the language — in this thing's mouth, along with about

ton of dirt. After a minute of this I felt the dirt clearing behind me. The worm was starting to swallow what was in its mouth, dragging me down its throat.

My Empee — that's the rifle we use — was somewhere in the worm's mouth with me, but I didn't keep a grip on it and it was pitch black in there, so it was useless to me. I tried grabbing onto the sides of the mouth to keep from sliding back but I had no traction. Finally I took the combat knife from my belt and jammed it into what I guessed was its lower jaw. That kept me from sliding long enough for me to get out my multi-purpose tool. I don't know if any of you know about this; it's a block of nanobots that can take the form of just about any sort of thing you need. It's like the Swiss army knife of the gods. I ordered it into a barbed hook and jammed it in right next to the combat knife just as the worm jostled the knife free. The knife slipped out of my hand and down the worm's throat, and I hoped the worm would choke on it. No such luck, though.

I wasn't in danger of being digested at that minute, but it didn't mean I wasn't in trouble. If the worm opened its mouth, there would be a new avalanche of dirt coming in on me, and that could knock me off my hook and down its throat. No matter what, every second I was in the worm was another second I was moving away from my platoonmates. If the worm went deep into the ground, even if I managed to kill it, I would be buried alive. So I had to kill the thing, and kill it fast. I had two grenades on me, so after I got as secure a grip on my hook as I could with my left hand, I activated the grenades and threw them behind me, down the worm's gullet.

They didn't go down as far as I hoped — I was struck in the foot with shrapnel as they detonated — but they did the job, because the worm's mouth immediately started filling with blood, and the thing stopped moving forward and began twitching. After a few minutes of this the worm stopped moving altogether. I waited a few more minutes to make sure it really was dead, and then I endured the worst part of the whole ordeal: I had to actually force myself down the worm's throat to get my Empee. Because you don't leave your rifle behind if you can help it.

KULKARNI:

How did you eventually get out of the creature's mouth?

PERRY:

It involved a lot of digging. (laughter) But my experience explained why this world, which seemed so suitable for intelligent life, was in fact entirely clear of any species we'd met before. Any creature who landed on its surface were turned into worm food in a matter of hours or even minutes. Those vast plains were the worm's roaming grounds — and not only that, they seemed *designed* that way.

Remember the “grass” I told you about? Within an hour of our worm attacks, that “grass” had completely covered where the worms had come out of the ground. Visually, it was like the attack had never happened. We did sonic tests — unmanned tests — and the ground underneath the plains was hardly packed at all, even hundreds of feet down. It was like topsoil. Which made it easy for the worms. It was like they were swimming in the earth. And these plains covered almost all of the landmass of the planet. Which our scientists said didn’t make sense, because the planet was tectonically active. It should have had mountains and rock formations like any other planet.

VILLAGER #3:

Could the worms have changed the entire planet to their liking?

PERRY:

See, that’s just it, isn’t it? Did the worms make the planet the way it is, or do the worms exist because the planet is the way it is? And if it’s the first of these, does that mean the worms did it *intentionally* and that they’re intelligent? You don’t have to be an intelligent animal to completely change an ecosystem. Back on Earth, animals like sheep or goats could completely strip an area of vegetation, changing the character of the land. Now, they were managed by humans, which means somewhere along the line there was an intelligence at work. But deer, which were not domesticated, could do the same thing: by eating certain young plants, they’d help create forests with only a few plant species and them.

But even then, we’re talking a forest, or part of a grassland. Here, it’s an entire planet, and the ecosystem isn’t being damaged; it’s being *managed*. The more we looked at it, the more it seems like conscious engineering.

KULKARNI:

Perhaps someone should go back and try to talk to them.

PERRY:

Maybe someone should. Just not me. I’d hate to think what would happen if they carried grudges. Yeah, ma’am.



VILLAGER #4:

Yes, Captain Perry, how would you respond if I told you that the current political structure of the Colonial Union was one of imperial colonialism and totalitarianism, and that you yourself represent the racist, colonial impulses of that system of control? (audible groans)

PERRY:

Nice to meet you, too.

KULKARNI:

You'll have to excuse Savitri, Captain Perry. Her parents were political exiles to this colony after the Subcontinental War. Rightly or wrongly. But they indoctrinated their daughter well, even though she was born a colonist. She enjoys rabble rousing, although the rabble here isn't often roused. Most of us chose to be here.

VILLAGER #4:

I don't need you to excuse me, Administrator. And I don't need *you* to patronize me, Captain Perry. All we have to do is look at the reality. The colonists, the people who the Colonial Union is built on are all from poor countries on Earth, most of which are outside the Western sphere of countries. Only Norway regularly sends colonists from Europe, and we all know of that country's ecological disaster. But the Colonial Defense Forces are exclusively taken from rich, affluent countries back on earth, most especially your own United States. Americans practically run the CDF as far as we can tell. And the Colonial Union administration is taken from old-line Colonial stock, which is to say Western countries, before the Colonial Union decided only to take colonists from third-world countries. So Western administration, American military, poor brown people as colonists and pawns. What about this set-up *doesn't* stink of colonial imperialism?

KULKARNI:

You can ignore her question if you would like, Captain.

VILLAGER #4:

That would be entirely in character for the Colonial Union.

PERRY:

Why would I ignore her? Maybe she's right.

VILLAGER #4:

Excuse me?

PERRY:

Well, aren't you? Colonists *are* from third world countries, or except for those from the earliest colonies, come from populations that were. CDF personnel are from the first world, particularly from the U.S., although not always, since I've served with people from Argentina, the UK and Japan as well as various parts of Europe. And while no one wants to talk about it, from time to time the CDF has had to step in with colonial issues. One of my dear friends lost her life during a labor uprising on Elysium; some petroleum drillers blew her up and then fed her to a fish while she was still alive, so you can imagine the CDF did not tread lightly when it retaliated. Now, as it happens, Elysium is one of the first generation colonies. I think it's mostly Greeks there; the name would fit, anyway. But the larger point stands.

I have to tell you that while I think your point of view makes some sense, those of us in the CDF look at it a little bit differently. Here *we* are, members of the richest countries on Earth — and we're told by the Colonial Union we can't colonize. We're not given a reason, other than that the Colonial Union simply chooses not to recruit colonists from the US or other rich countries. There's no appeal, since the Colonial Union enforces its monopoly on space travel. And so we see the citizens of India, of Pakistan, of Ethiopia, of Guatemala and New Guinea filling up the universe while we're stuck on planet Earth. The only way *we* get to go is if we agree to fight, and we have to wait until we're old men and women before they'll take us. *Then* we have to wait, and survive, for another ten years before we're given permission to colonize. Not many of us make it that long.

So I can understand why you feel that the Western countries are trying to keep the third world in line even out in the universe. But I can promise you that if most of us had been given the *choice* between colonizing and fighting, we would have gladly chosen colonizing, and equally gladly would have let others have the military responsibilities we've had to take on. Those of us in the CDF are just as much pawns in whatever master plan the Colonial Union has as you are.

VILLAGER #4:

Except that *you* have the guns.

PERRY:

Well, there *is* that. The only thing I can say to that is that at some point in the future, if I live that long, I'll be putting my weapon down and colonizing myself. Then you and I will be in the same boat. I'd rather colonize than fight, personally. But this was how I was allowed to get out in the univers

For better or worse, I agreed to the terms. If I could change the terms, believe me, I would. But wasn't up to me.

VILLAGER #5:

Why doesn't the CDF let colonists sign up to fight, too?

PERRY:

You know, I wish they did! (laughter) My understanding of it is that very early on in the Colonial Union, the Union decided that it would be better if the colonists were allowed to focus on building the colonies while the CDF chose recruits who weren't tied to one colony or another. I'm sure — and here you see me nodding in the direction of my former questioner here — that there are several levels of Machiavellian *realpolitik* I'm skating over here, and that the true reason for this is more complex than I just gave it. But on the surface this reason makes good sense to me. I've been touring the colonies for the last few months. From what I can see, colonizing seems like incredibly hard work, and in many colonies, especially the newer ones, there hardly seem to be enough people to do the work that's needed. Huckleberry has been colonized for a while now — how long, Administrator?

KULKARNI:

We will be celebrating our fifty-eighth anniversary in another two months.

PERRY:

Right. Okay, Huckleberry's been colonized for almost sixty years, which is time enough for the planetary population to fill out some, both from immigration and natural birth rates. That's enough time for several million people to be here. But some of these new colonies have just a couple thousand people as part of the "seeding" colony; that's the people who work to prepare things for a second wave of colonists. Those people never stop working. Three stops before I was here, I was on Orton, which was only in its first year. I got tired just *watching* them work. They certainly can't afford to ship any of their people off to fight. And to be honest, I don't see why anyone who is already a colonist would want to sign up for the CDF.

VILLAGER #4:

To have control of our own collective destinies, that's why.

PERRY:

She's back! (laughter) That's not a bad reason, but I don't know if the reality of CDF life matches that. Your vision of what it means to be in the CDF — and I mean no disrespect — is romanticized.

On a day-to-day basis, you wouldn't be fighting for your colony, other than in the most generalized sense. You'd be fighting to keep some alien creature from killing you or killing one of your squadmates. You'd be fighting not to die, and to stop other people — some you know and some you don't — from dying. Destiny gets compressed, you know, into just that small fraction of a second you have right in front of you at any one time. And there's nothing romantic about keeping your head down to avoid getting shot, or trying to save a friend who's been injured, or coming face to face with a creature who is as smart and mean and as terrified of dying as you are, and who wants to make sure that if someone is left on the ground there, it's you and not it.

I mean, let me say it again, just to make it clear: Eight out of ten CDF members die in ten years service. Most of those in the first couple of years. It's one thing to say you're willing to die to be in control of your own destiny, whether it's personal or political. But it's another thing to actually die dead, light-years away from everyone you ever knew, by the hand or paw or claw or *whatever* of some thing whose motivations for fighting you can hardly begin to understand.

VILLAGER #5:

And yet *you* chose to serve.

PERRY:

I did. Although when I look back on it now, if I had known then what I know now, I might have chosen to stay in Ohio and die in my own bed. I would be lying if I didn't say that when I signed up I had my own romantic notions of what military life would be like. I guess I thought I would be, oh, I don't know, swashbuckling around and fighting Ming the Merciless and kissing green-skinned maidens. Although, come to think of it, I *have* kissed green-skinned maidens. (laughter) So maybe it hasn't been so bad. But to be more serious again, the reality of life in the CDF is far different and far more difficult than I could have imagined.

Knowing what I know now, I *would* do it again, if only because I wouldn't choose not to meet the people I have, and to have missed the opportunity to love them, even if only briefly. But I do wish I had the opportunity to have gone into this with open eyes. Maybe the CDF wouldn't get as many recruits if they knew what they were getting into, but the ones they would get might be better prepared. And I suppose to come back around to Miss Savitri again, that would be an advantage having colonials in the CDF. They would know what they're getting into. Yes, sir.

VILLAGER #6:

You were saying earlier that this body you have is improved beyond the normal human limits.

PERRY:

That's right. Improved senses, improved reflexes, improved physical agility. I even smell better
(laughter) You laugh, people, but it's true.

VILLAGER #6:

I am curious, how strong are you?

PERRY:

I've never really tested it.

VILLAGER #6:

Could you break that table behind you? With your hands?

PERRY:

I probably *could*. But I *won't*. Because that would *hurt*. (laughter) They've made me stronger, not
impervious to pain.

VILLAGER #6:

Still, it must be nice to be that strong.

PERRY:

It's useful, is what it is. I don't notice being stronger or enhanced all that much, to tell you the truth.
Most of the people I spend time with are enhanced just as much as I am, so I have no competitive
advantage. I lose a lot at arm wrestling. (laughter) The other thing is that the reason we have the
physical improvements is that they put us on an equal footing with the aliens we have to go up against.
I remember my drill instructor telling us that these new bodies were the bare minimum we'd need to
fight, which if you think about it is kind of a terrifying thought. All those alien species out there, each
of them with native abilities that are better than our own. Some are faster, some are stronger, some are
smarter. Some just plain have more limbs, which is really a problem in hand-to-hand combat. We're
just keeping up. The one real advantage that humans have is that on a pound-for-pound basis, we're
meaner. (laughter) Now, I said that to get a laugh, so I'm glad I got one. But when it gets right down
to it, it's also usually true. I imagine it's kept our species alive more than once. Should I be wrapping
things up now?

KULKARNI:

I think we have time for one last question. And if I may be so bold, I see that my Anjali has come into the room, and has a question.

PERRY:

So you're the woman who made dessert.

VILLAGER #7:

I am.

PERRY:

I love you. (very loud laughter) And I want the recipe before I go. *And* I will be happy to answer your question.

VILLAGER #7:

Thank you. I came in late, but I have heard enough of what you've said that I can sense the depth of the violence you confront out there on other worlds. It seems to be a dangerous universe out there.

PERRY:

Yes.

VILLAGER #7:

My question is simple: Can we ever find peace in this universe?

PERRY:

(pause) I'll share with you a story. About four months before the Battle of Coral, my ship, the *Modesto*, was part of an attack group bearing down on a colony held by the Ni-ni, who if you don't know are a reptilian sort of race, about a yard tall, and venomous — not in their personalities, mind you, but in that they genuinely spit poison. It makes them very difficult to fight one on one.



The colony was Ni-nin, but there had been a human colony on it a decade or so before. The seed colonists had arrived just before a huge volcanic event that killed off the summer and made the winter unimaginably brutal; the colonists that survived abandoned the planet, and no one could have blamed them. So there were no humans when the Ni-nans arrived and set up shop. But it didn't matter. The Colonial Union had it on the ledgers as our planet, and if it was ours, then anyone else on it was our problem.

And so there we were, the *Modesto* and about twenty other ships, with a total of about 20,000 CD soldiers, which would have been more than enough to wipe out the Ni-nin colony about nine times in a row. We were in the process of suiting up for the attack when a Skip drone popped into our space and broadcast a general cancellation of the invasion. Apparently — in a shocking moment of clarity for both sides — the Ni-nins and the humans realized that they could actually *share* the planet. The Ni-nin colony was situated on the edge of an equatorial desert, which was blindingly hot for humans but suited the Ni-nins just fine, while the Union was planning a new seed colony in a temperate zone on an entirely different continent. So the Ni-nins and the Union decided to call off the war. It was just that simple.

The attack group all went home except for the *Modesto*, which was told to make a courtesy call on the colony. So I and my platoon spent the next three days in the company of the people who earlier we were going to kill. And you know what? We had a great time. The Ni-nins are ugly as hell — they look like exploded lizards — but their body chemistry is close enough to ours that we can eat their food. And these people are *great* cooks. Just dynamite. We stuffed ourselves silly and held spitting contests, which they are *very* serious about, by the way, and generally acted like civilized sentient beings.

And I remember sitting on a sand ridge with a couple of Ni-nans on the last day we were there, watching the sunset with the two of them, and thinking about just how easy it was *not* to fight even the damn creature we came across. Then, of course, we packed up, headed out and found ourselves at a place called Cova Banda, trying to wipe an entirely different species who had a planet the Union had decided was actually ours, but this time, no one wanted to share.

Can there be peace? Sure there can. We made peace with the Ni-ni, and it was a simple thing to do, and now we happily share a planet. But *will* there be peace? Well, that's the question, I think. Making peace is often a simple thing, but simple isn't the same thing as easy. I knew someone who said he believed the Union sometimes thought it was just easier to make war than to bother with peace. I didn't much like this person, but from time to time I see some truth in what he said.

And it's not just the Union — it's all the races all over this part of the universe, all of them deciding to do the easy thing rather than the simple but difficult thing. Maybe what it will take is a great meeting of all the species, where they decide to share worlds instead of fighting each other for them. But God knows it's hard enough even trying to get *humans* to agree on something. Getting all the species together would take a miracle, and about twenty years.

Still, we can hope. We can certainly hope. And that's what I'd ask you to do: Hope for peace. Because I know that I would love to be able to lay down my weapon and get to being a colonist. Just like you are. Just like I want to be.

Thank you, thanks for your attention, and good night.

(applause)

—END TRANSCRIPT—

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