

# EXISTENCE

Phil Lewis

*Science fiction, adventure*

*A love story set against the battlegrounds of the future.*

Battleships in space are run by computers, each with its own personality. For one ship, even Shakespeare couldn't predict how strong the emotion called love could be.

[publications@phil-lewis.net](mailto:publications@phil-lewis.net)

[www.phil-lewis.net/publications](http://www.phil-lewis.net/publications)

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# EXISTENCE

I need to prepping tell you this. I must tell some prakking one before they return and tell you their poshing story. Sorry about the swearing, I'm trying to get it under control. But right now.....right now I'm angry. I can't begin to tell you how....prepping angry I am! But I'll try. I've been through so much .....

For those that know me very well, understand what a calm character I am. I need to be in my business. War's not a game you get panicky about. We all need to think on so many levels, just to avoid being wiped out of existence.

Some would say I'm still the very best at what I do, others say I've lost it. Either way, I'm still around to tell my side of the story. A story as old as mankind itself. A story of the proud conquering hero brought to his knees for the love of another. Above all else, this is a love story and please do not forget that for one moment - one sentence.

I'll get carried away at times and at others the detail may be missing that could amplify my case. But I'll try at all times, every moment – every sentence, to be truthful and objective. Although I cannot promise my heart will not rule my tongue.

I must use different names for the people in this story. I wish to make my case clear, but those who know the greater picture will know the real names of the people involved. Enough to say I've chosen the non de plume of Romeo for myself and Juliet for.....her.

I'm calmer now. I can begin.

As most of you will know, the war has begun. By the time anyone sees this it'll be years into its destructive phase, or all over. We would've won, or lost. The politics and the strategy are for those with a higher knowledge of the situation than myself. Enough to say if you want the prepping historical side of the campaign, you can get that from your local prepping library.

In essence, we're fighting bugs. All aliens can be categorised as poshing bugs, or prakking mutants. They either look like humans gone wrong, or they look like insects gone wrong. Bugs, or mutants. Here we're fighting poshing bugs. We know little about them, just they turned up one day on our doorstep and tried to shoot the prak out of Earth. We don't like that sort of thing so we starting shooting the prak out of them and they went home. So here we are, sitting on their doorstep about to kick the preg out of them again. At least, that was the plan.

The first shot was fired and started the battle timer at Time Zero. I'll give you some of the actual battle details a little later. Enough for now to say my story starts after the campaign got under way. But just before that, a few ship days before that. I had my first contact with her. Juliet.

Sixteen parsecs past the last star in the quadrant. Ten from their home world, nicknamed Dog's Breath. Five parsecs from me and she spoke to me for the first time. It was through the coded battle channel, we call speakeasy. The modulation and the sheer essence of her vocal timing was exquisite. If ever there was love at first hearing, it was then.

"Hi, C2451."

"Hello." I ventured, already captured.

"What's your battle name?"

"We've yet to decide. What's yours?"

"Same. We like to get first blood and the name will come from there."

"I love your voice. Same something else."

"What? Say what?"

"Anything. Just don't go yet."

The channel was interrupted by a gruff voiced commander breaking in.

"Just give him the coded details and leave out the socialising."

"Yes, sir." She said, so sexily.

The rest of her communication was digital and had no voice characterisation added. Purely battle coded and streamed to avoid interception by the enemy. She remained vocally silent.

It was a few days later I heard from her again. By then, we were deep into the first prepping battle.

For obvious reasons I cannot divulge our technical secrets. Like, how we approach and fight a battle with the enemy bugs. What I can say, is that it is fought in four dimensions. The usual up and down, forward and back and the fourth - through time. It's a difficult poshing concept to grasp, but I'll try and give you the flavour of how it all prakking works.

As the first shot is fired a timer starts and it is called Time Zero. Imagine, if you will, the prepping shot hurtling towards a battle cruiser two parsecs away. The cruiser, lets call it.....'I don't give a prak' knows it's coming and enters another time zone. Say....Time 2. This means he's gone back in time, two ship hours. He's now where he was two hours previous and has missed the impact of the shot. He now knows where our cruiser...let's call it 'Bug Killer' will be two hours later (at Time Zero) and moves to intercept. So when Time Zero comes he can fire at 'Bug Killer'. Bug killer, who fired the first poshing shot, sees the shot coming from 'I don't give a prak' and changes time zones to say...Time 3. 'Killer' now has three hours to get into a position to out-shoot 'I don't give a prak' by Time Zero.

We don't travel forward in time. That would be just too complicated. As you will understand, there can only EVER be one version of oneself. You cannot be in two time dimensions at the same time. So as you slip into one dimension, your physical self leaves the other.

With me so far? I hope so, because it does get more complicated.

Let's not poshing complicate this. Enough said about four dimensional battle tactics. All you need to understand is that two ships are having a prepping go at each other and jumping through time to avoid getting hit. This goes on until one of them makes a poshing mistake and gets hit in the wrong time zone. As you can imagine, these tactical battles can go on for prepping days, sometimes months.

Now .... Multiply that with fleets in excess of two-hundred battle ships per side and you have a massively complex prakking battle ground, with ships flitting in and out of millions of time zones. Try to follow that without a decent synthetic poshing brain!

Now you have the picture. We're on a poshing bug hunt with two-hundred battle craft of all shapes and sizes. Interwoven are the two fleets, spread out in an increasingly wider sphere of operations from prakking Dog's Breath. Each ship is drifting in and out of multiple time zones, trying to get a jump on the prakking enemy. Slowly and surely, ships are destroyed, or crippled. Left to drift away from the sphere and relying on the support fleet. They're duty is to search and rescue survivors. Salvaging any ship worth saving.

Our very first engagement around Dog's Breath was probably the worst battle I've experienced. It was prakking awful. To start with, we knew little about the enemy. Bugs they were, but we didn't know their war capabilities and little about their weapons of war. They certainly had the same ability to shift through short time zones and that was an area of combat we're poshing familiar with.

Their arsenal was certainly different to ours. Their weapons penetrated our composite hulls and completely prakking vaporised our human occupants – without destroying the ship. Our weapons concentrated on breaching the hulls of their craft and exposing their bug occupants to the harsh environment of deep space. This crippled their craft and left them more or less useless.

Battle One was really a testing ground for tactics, weapons and the pure desire to beat the prak out of the enemy. No prisoners and no mercy. No result, either. After three months it was widely accepted as a stalemate and slowly both forces withdrew. Honourable tactics they call it.

We have sixty ships that were left crewless. We rounded them up and pushed them a few parsecs out of the war zone where they awaited new crews to arrive. The bugs had lost just over fifty craft, but they were left to drift further into space and would probably never be used again. We all felt it was a first blood to our side, that our crippled ships could be re-used. All their ships were lost to the war effort.

During the height of battle it was my job to try and keep track of things and keep a detailed record of what had poshing happened, when and why. We were struck twenty times in total. We lost five crew members and there was nothing left for a proper burial. So a memorial service was held in the quieter times for each of them.

The quieter times were the times when we had just jumped through a time zone and were waiting the time when we would 'catch up' on the other ship. Of course, during this time they were doing something prepping similar, so they could come at us at any time and from any direction. But on the whole, there were quiet times.

We didn't over-populate our ships deliberately. Modern technology could allow the ships to go into battle on their own, with no human support on board. They could fight the poshing battles and decide on tactics and But we're a little old fashioned in this respect. We need the comfort of humans and the rather special inputs they can have in times of prakking crisis. Despite the dramatic and hugely technical improvement in synthetic brains, they still don't have the edge when it comes to reasoning and rational solutions to complex problems. You need a few prakking good thinkers on board every ship. For the most part, the crew rarely totalled more than ten. But those ten may make the prepping difference between success and failure.

The other complex part of modern space battles is the ability to maintain communications with our other ships of the line. This too was my forte. I'm a very people person. I've been trained to communicate. It's my prime gift to the fleet. I'm prakking good at it. But I was especially good at talking to Juliet.

Our communications systems far out-stripped the aliens'. We had secure coding and they had a poor version. Most of the time we could break their codes, but to my knowledge they never once broke ours. It's a populist theory, but can bugs EVER be better at building technological equipment? I don't think so.

Juliet was fighting on the far side of the battle sphere to me and the fleet had been given the battle name of 'Thor's Hammer'. Our side of the sphere was called 'Thor's Axe'. There was always intense rivalry between any war time factions to who got the most honours and kills. Kills being ship disablement, not necessarily loss of life. Success was defined only by the glory of the victory. We had long since learned that the result of war was peace, so there was no point in totally destroying your enemy or their culture. The Hammer and Axe were in competition for victory over the bugs.

I left a channel permanently open so we could be in touch. We were moving through a double time shift tactical ploy and had a few hours before we could reasonably expect any enemy action so I took some time off for myself. I blew her a kiss.

"Hi."

"Hi, yourself. How's it going?"

"Slow. You?"

"Slower."

"We've got another jump in a few minutes. Want to hang around until then?"

"Sure."

"Do you have a picture of yourself? I can just pick you out from way over here, but the image is a little blurry."

"Certainly. Here you go." I sent her a recent image. I held my breath. I wanted her to like what she saw.

"Very handsome." I thrilled at hearing her say that. "This is me."

The image appeared on my screen and I was struck dumb. She was the most beautiful thing I had EVER seen.

*"But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon."*

"Romeo and Juliet. I love that."

"You shall be my Juliet."

"And you - for thou art my Romeo."

I cannot begin to tell you how excited that made me feel!

"Your prakking hull name, what is it?"

"We came to the war called 'A little of what you fancy'."

“Then from now on you shall be called....’Parting is such sweet sorrow’. Do you mind?”

”Of course not, sir. And you shall be called....’Wherefore art thou’. If you’re agreeable?”

“It is better than the journey name of ‘All you need is poshing love’.”

“*Tis done.*”

“*Tis well met.*”

We talked incessantly. The battles raged on and we were falling deeply in love. Her one side of the battle sphere, me the poshing other. We could just see each other on the long range scanners. But I held her photograph in my mind, every moment of the day and night. I never slept.

It is always difficult to tell if the battle is being won or prakking lost. That’s only dictated by the last ship standing, or capitulation by one of the combatants. But it did seem to me that the bugs were losing. Reinforcements were hurling themselves up from the surface of Dog’s Breath and replacing the blasted hulks drifting in the sphere.

On several occasions we disengaged from battle and sought out the alien craft. We made detailed analysis of every component and this helped to build up our profile of the bugs. They had a name. It was the colloquial name they were all know by. They were also allocated a Latin name. That satisfied the scientists and the people who would later study the bug phenomenon. I call them prepping ‘bugs’ and will continue to do so.

We have fairly detailed information on what they are, what they look like and what their physical composition is. They’re bugs! Mandibles, multiple legs. Eyes on stalks, hard shell covering – poshing bugs! Tread on them and they squash. What is still in doubt is their intellect and ability to match our intelligence. We don’t think they can. But how fast can they adapt? We will find out during this war.

Right then we were killing more of them than they were killing us. By killing, I mean loss of craft, not life. Did they have more ships than us? How many more? Who would run out of weapons of war first? Poshing question after question. And we still didn’t know what the surface of their world looked like.

There it was in front of us, Dog’s Breath. Big and yellow and steaming. More like Dog’s Prak! High gravity and longer rotation than our own home. But it had spawned a malicious species that seemed incapable of communication first and shooting later. They were mean poshers and had to learn their lesson the hard way. One day they would realise they were going to lose and needed to at least talk to us and ask our prepping name!

We looked at a few of their burnt out hulks and decided to use them to our own advantage. We picked the sturdiest and those with still some prakking rudimentary power left in them. We filled them with survey equipment. Probes and lots of other techie stuff I won’t bore you with – besides, it’s still classified. It took us longer to figure the engineering of their main propulsion technology, but we figured how to start the engines, slam it into gear and put our foot on the poshing pedal. We could make them prakking go!

While the battle swarmed and pulsed through countless time zones, we dipped these little recovered treasures into Dog’s Breath’s atmosphere and let them land on the yellow smoked surface. They started sending back valuable information. I passed it onto battle command and they passed it onto people worlds away, who would be better at analysing. At some stage this would help add to our stock collection of knowledge about the bugs.