

## Soldier of 'Tween

\*Look out!\* Red-One's thought roared in Five-Red's mind, and at that instant movement to his left caught both his armor's and his own attention. As his suit's computer chimed in his ear, he drew his disrupter and spun around as best he could in the planet's excessive gravity, the mud, and his battle armor. What he saw brought a curse to his lips and sent a chill of terror rattling up his spine.

Less than fifty feet away and closing with incredible speed, a slug thundered noiselessly through the minefield, skimming almost gracefully over the mud's surface. Miraculously, it avoided the pin-mines.

And it was coming straight for him....

This was the best campaign he had ever fought!

Copyright © 2002, 2007 A. C. Ellis

ISBN-13 978-1-60145-194-1

ISBN-10 1-60145-194-6

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Printed in the United States of America.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used ficticiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For information contact:

A. C. Ellis  
a.ellis@att.net  
www.acellis.net

You can purchase an e-book version of this novel, as well as other books by this author, through a link at the above Web site.

Send an email to a.ellis@att.net with "free short stories" in the Subject line to receive two FREE, never-before-published short stories.

# **Soldier of 'Tween**

**A. C. Ellis**



For Janet, her children, and her grandson.  
We are all soldiers in 'Tween.



In the year 2347 A.D., research on Earth into matter transmission led to the discovery of 'Tween. Neither a time nor a place, 'Tween is a state of existence equidistant from all times and places in the continuum. From 'Tween—a state of being literally in-between—one can, with the proper technology, travel instantaneously to any time and place in the universe. This discovery opened all of creation to the human race....

*Atlas of the Confraternity Worlds*  
by B. B. Fhalron  
146 edition, 12/7 2992 (Earth)



# 1

Five-Red's armor chimed in his left ear and painted a soft blue alpha-numeric line on the helmet visor's bottom edge: 010.3 degrees relative, 312.07 yards. The armor's computer had detected something.

An enhanced display, broadcast from a distal sensor, unfolded on the visor, overlaying the murky red landscape ahead without obscuring it. A fungus mound eight yards across rose five feet out of the mud, pulsating in dim light, its bioluminescence glowing sickly gray-green.

He pulled his disrupter from the quick-release stud on his armor's front and made certain its umbilical was secured. The umbilical had given him trouble this campaign, as had those of many others in his platoon; the planet's thick mud tended to foul the connection.

Holding the disrupter at the ready, he placed his mind on the level necessary to activate the comm-link embedded in his brain, then thought, \*Red-One, Red-Two—ready your battle units. There's a mound up ahead.\*

\*Uh!\* Red-Two's reply entered Five-Red's thoughts, little more than a mental grunt.

\*I copy, Red Leader,\* came Red-One's thought, soft and alluring in spite of its content.

For perhaps the millionth time since she had been recruited into Red Platoon, Five-Red imagined how soft and luxuriant the fur lining her wings might feel on his own bare skin and fantasized her full, firm breasts pressing against his chest and her tongue darting into his mouth. The beginnings of sexual arousal stirred deep in his groin.

\*How many?\* she commed, her thought stimulating him further.

He forced the forbidden fantasy from his thoughts. He had a job to do, a job demanding his full attention.

\*I don't know yet,\* he replied. \*I'm on visible, going to infrared now.\* He tongued the appropriate button in his helmet, and instantly the world projected on his visor stood out in stark contrast. The mud was black as space itself, the sky a seething soup of various shades of gray. The fungus mound glowed a lighter

gray. Superimposed on the mound's image were the nearly white, writhing shapes of several slugs.

Sight of them banished all remaining sexual desire from Five-Red's mind and brought a sting of bile to the back of his throat. A mixture of hatred and disgust raged within him. It was the same reaction he experienced each time he confronted members of a race the Confraternity of Sentient Races considered its enemy.

\*I have them now,\* he told his squad leaders. \*A standard grouping.\*

\*Roger, Red Leader,\* Red-One responded, her thought losing its musical quality and going hard with hatred of her own. \*My battle units are ready.\*

\*Red-Two, is your squad ready for battle?\*

 Five-Red commed as he tongue-tapped the button to recall his armor's distal sensors. The infrared display disappeared, leaving only the visible-light view from his own perspective.

\*Uh,\* Red-Two's response came, a mental grunt in the affirmative.

\*Good. Hold your fire for my order. I don't want to lose one of those damned beasts.\*

\*Roger that!\*

 Red-One replied.

\*Fan out and advance,\* Five-Red commed, and received instant response from his squad leaders.

Red Platoon was deployed behind him. As he so often did, he had taken point; he could not expect one of his battle units to do something he was not prepared to do himself. Besides, Five-Red enjoyed being out front, the first battle unit to see action.

Aware that his platoon would follow, he trudged toward the mound, the mud sucking at his legs in the planet's nearly double standard gravity, making each step an agony of burning muscles and straining lungs. His breath rasped in his helmet and tepid sweat coated his body inside the armor as the distal sensors returned, clustering in the hollow below his left shoulder.

He sniffed, and wished he hadn't. He had been aware of a foul stench building within his armor for more than twelve hours, and for the past six and a half hours it had become nearly unbearable. He needed a shower, badly—but his armor needed a power boost more. Air conditioning and waste disposal, as well as several other non-vital systems, had been shut down more than a dozen hours before to conserve power for the armor's weapons systems and its array of infrared, laser, video, and three-dimensional radar sensors.

Suddenly there it was, the fungus mound, less than fifty yards ahead. A fist clutched at his stomach.

The excitement of battle coursed hot through his veins as he advanced, juggling his disrupter nervously in his large gauntleted hands. There was

*Soldier of 'Tween*

something about combat—a good, righteous fight—that stirred the blood of any battle unit. It was this very excitement that had raised him from a promising yet undistinguished battle unit in the Confraternity's army to the officer in command of Fifth Division's Red Platoon, guiding him unerringly throughout his career, forcing crucial decisions at precisely the right moments. It had assured his success in every battle, keeping him alive for—

*For how long?* he wondered.

A touch of horror entered his thoughts. What sort of question was that? Certainly not what should be occupying a Confraternity platoon leader in the precious few seconds before battle. He pushed the thought from his consciousness and concentrated on the task at hand.

As stealthily as mud, gravity, and battle armor would permit, he led his platoon nearer the mound of glowing fungus, while deep within him a voice screamed, *Now! Give the order to fire now!* Yet he held back, allowing the excitement to build, waiting for it to swell to maximum intensity.

Still nearer he advanced his platoon, feeling the anticipation swell within him. It was a sharp-edged sensation. Release, when it came, would be deliciously satisfying.

Finally, when he was less than seventy feet from the glowing mound, the excitement became unbearable and he knew it was time. He took a deep breath, and... hesitated.

Something tugged at his mind—a strange tickle hovering at the edge of his consciousness, threatening to break his concentration. It was too vague to be a comm-link, and far too alien. The sensation originated somewhere ahead and to his right, away from both his platoon and the fungus mound.

Whatever it was, he had no time for it now. Without further thought, he pushed the sensation from his mind and concentrated on the coming battle.

The glowing fungoid surface boiled as the slugs' massive bodies thrashed within the mound. Somehow, they had sensed Red Platoon's presence.

*\*Now!\** he projected his thought into the comm-link, a mental yell. *\*Open fire now!\**

Even as he thought that command, a slug's probing anterior end broke through the mound's surface, its gray skin glistening with slime in the dim red light. Eyeless head weaving blindly, toothless, puckered, tentacle encircled mouth sucking, it tasted the methane atmosphere, searching for Red Platoon.

Five-Red reached into the pouch on his armor's belly and withdrew a grenade. He pressed the arming stud, waited a few seconds, then lobbed the device at the mound.

His helmet visor darkened as chunks of fungus and slug flesh flew into the air in a dazzling antimatter flash. He aimed his disrupter from the hip and squeezed the trigger.

Spheres of blue fire, no larger than his thumbnail, leapt from the weapon's blunt barrel at a rate of three per second, racing off toward the fungus mound. The first few struck the emerging slug squarely, and Five-Red's helmet visor darkened further as they released their bound-up energy on target with devastating force. The slug's anterior end blew apart in the glare generated by the explosions.

More fire balls streaked past from behind, close on either side, striking the mound and breaking it up. Great clumps of fungus and slug flesh flew high into the air, splattering mud tens of feet from their impact points. One slimy gray piece of slug, roughly the size and shape of a human head, hit Five-Red's armor at mid thigh, nearly knocking him off his feet. Still he squeezed his weapon's trigger, the barrel's aim playing over the quickly vanishing mound.

After what seemed whole minutes, but was in reality no more than a few seconds, he released the disrupter's trigger. Those behind him stopped firing as well, and he surveyed the battle scene as his helmet visor readjusted to the dark landscape.

The mound was nearly leveled, its wall little more than a low, ragged ring of dimly glowing fungus. The few slugs that had survived the initial attack meandered about in the mud, searching aimlessly for somewhere to hide.

\*Move in!\* he barked his command into the comm-link. \*I want a clean sweep.\*

Without waiting for response, he put his disrupter on single fire and advanced on the remaining slugs. His battle units would pick their shots more carefully now; their comrades were fighting out among the beasts.

As he fired into the nearest slug's massive body, his thoughts went to Red Platoon—his platoon. It was the best combat group in all the Confraternity's army, something it had proved through countless campaigns. He had seen to that. After all, his life depended on its combat abilities.

A twinge of doubt slithered into his thoughts, and he frowned within his helmet. He was Five-Red, Red Platoon's leader, and theoretically its most capable battle unit. Yet only a few seconds ago he had endangered his platoon. This skirmish, he had given the order to fire nearly too late. The slugs had already been aware of Red Platoon's presence when he had issued the command. His attention had been diverted by that strange sensation, that mental tickle...

He stopped himself. He couldn't think about it now. Pushing the thought from his mind, he concentrated on the battle.

*Soldier of 'Tween*

Dispatching his slug quickly and efficiently, he turned his disrupter on another beast, assisting several of his battle units. That slug, too, quickly flew apart in a brilliant hail of disrupter charges.

Then he again felt it—the strange tickle in his mind. Using visible mode, he scanned in the direction from which it originated.

At first he saw nothing, only the same dark mud he had seen since the campaign began. Then the computer chimed in his ear and delivered an enhanced view. Nearly twenty yards distant and fifteen degrees to his right, something laid half-buried in the mud, reflecting dim red light from the sky. It was outside the area his armor's computer shaded in warning red on his helmet's visor—outside the pin-mine field.

Just to make certain, he took his bearings from the scant landmarks: the slight rise in the ground to his left, the blasted fungus mound his platoon had stormed three days before on his right. Whatever that thing was, it was definitely not in the minefield. It was near the field's boundary, but still within Red Platoon's patrol lane.

He struggled toward the object through calf-deep mud, the tickle growing stronger in his thoughts. That sensation felt decidedly oily—alien. Yet he knew he had felt it before. Although he could remember neither when nor where, sometime in the past he had encountered another object that had done much the same thing to his mind.

*How can that be?* he wondered. If he had ever before encountered anything like this object, if he had ever felt anything like its tickle in his mind, he would certainly have remembered. He would be able to assign a specific time and place to the experience.

Yet, somehow, he could not.

A pin-mine detonated less than ten yards to his left, blasting those thoughts from his mind, the flash of its matter-antimatter annihilation smarting his eyes in spite of his instantly darkening helmet visor. He heard the mine's muffled report through his helmet as the concussion lifted him roughly off his feet and threw him several yards to the right.

He landed on his stomach with bone-jarring impact, then lay still for several seconds as mud oozed up over his armor. Arching his back, straining to keep his helmet visor clear and his disrupter out of the mud, he gasped for breath as his eyes readjusted to the dim world around him, silently cursing himself for a fool.

It had been a dumb move. Sure, the object had been outside the minefield, but going after it had been plain lunacy. It had taken him too near the field's perimeter.

He knew a slug moving about out there in the mud had triggered the mine, and if it had exploded just a bit nearer the field's boundary he might be as dead as that slug certainly was. It was beyond belief that he had approached so near; more than any other battle unit in Red Platoon, he should have known better.

But he had not been able to stop himself. Although the action went counter to all his training—counter, even, to common sense—he had been unable to do anything about it. That strange object had touched his mind, subtly calling, compelling him to approach it. Even now, as he lay motionless in the mud, momentarily blind, he felt its alien call in his thoughts.

His vision returned quickly, and within seconds he again saw the object for which he had come so near death. It rested mere inches away.

Almost completely covered with mud and further obscured by the dim ambient light, its features were nearly impossible for him to determine. The thing seemed roughly egg-shaped, and a bit smaller than his closed fist. It appeared to be made of metal, but he couldn't be sure.

*\*Red Leader,\** came Red-One's thought, *\*are you all right?\**

*\*I'm fine,\** he answered, reaching out with his right hand to cup his gauntlet over the object. His left arm continued to strain upward, keeping his disrupter free of mud.

With difficulty, he climbed to his knees in the thick goo, then wiped mud from his torso and snapped his disrupter onto the securing studs on the front of his armor. Facing out into the minefield, he kept his back to his platoon, shielding his actions from their view.

He shoveled a few antimatter grenades from the pouch on his armor's belly and let them fall into the mud. Scooping the remainder of the grenades out, he balanced them carefully in his open palm, then placed the object in the bottom of the pouch. He replaced the grenades he had been balancing in his gauntlet, putting them on top of the strange object.

*\*You're sure you're okay?\** Red-One's concern-heavy thought said in his mind.

*\*Just got the wind knocked out of me.\** He pressed the grenades he had dumped deeper into the mud, then smoothed the surface over with his gauntlet.

*\*What were you doing out there? Why were you so near the minefield?\** There was harsh scolding in her thought, but also concern. Or was he reading into it what he wished to detect?

*\*I didn't realize I was so near,\** he lied, pushing the forbidden thought from his mind. He struggled to his feet, then turned to face Red-One's armor encased form. Red-Two stood beside her in his squat, wide suit of armor. Apparently—amazingly—neither squad leader had seen the object.

*Soldier of 'Tween*

\*Look out!\* Red-One's thought roared in his mind, and at that instant movement to his left caught both his armor's and his own attention. As his suit's computer chimed in his ear, he drew his disrupter and spun around as best he could in the planet's excessive gravity, the mud, and his battle armor. What he saw brought a curse to his lips and sent a chill of terror rattling up his spine.

Less than fifty feet away and closing with incredible speed, a slug thundered noiselessly through the minefield, skimming almost gracefully over the mud's surface. Miraculously, it avoided the pin-mines.

And it was coming straight for him.

Almost absently, he noted that the slug was charging rather than retreating. That was something that had occurred seldom this campaign. The slugs almost always avoided the Confraternity's battle units. Although the smallest slug out-massed the largest Confraternity battle unit by a good five hundred pounds, they seemed to prefer running and hiding to fighting. Yet, because of that extreme difference in mass, each time a slug did decide to attack, at least one battle unit died.

Reflexively, he aimed for the slug's rapidly approaching anterior end, and fired.

Nothing happened.

He looked down. The weapon's umbilical had come loose from the navel on his armor's belly. He quickly snapped the cord into the navel, then again aimed and squeezed the trigger.

A single ball of blue fire jumped the swiftly closing distance between the tip of his weapon's barrel and the slug, exploding on contact and blowing away the beast's entire front end. But what remained massed in at well over two tons. And, although it was undoubtedly dead, its momentum carried it relentlessly toward him at nearly sixty miles per hour.

Suddenly, he realized his disrupter was still set on single fire. And there was nothing he could do to get out of the dead slug's way in time!

A swarm of fireballs flashed past on either side, missing him by mere inches, centering on the still-advancing slug. They exploded on contact, and the slug flew apart in a rapid series of brilliant flashes. One mass of fleshy debris struck Five-Red in the chest and knocked him off his feet. Again he found himself stretched out in the mud—this time on his back.

\*Red-Leader, are you all right?\* Red-One asked again.

\*Couldn't be better,\* he replied, smiling up at the swirling red methane clouds as his vision cleared.

*A. C. Ellis*

And, in spite of the smell and the heat build-up inside his armor, and the countless bumps and bruises covering his body, he did feel good. This was the best campaign he had ever fought!

## 2

The remainder of Red Platoon's part in the planet-wide mop-up went according to plan. In fewer than five hours its sector was cleared of slugs.

While the minelayers seeded the vacated patrol lane, Five-Red stood sweating in his battle armor, waiting for Red-One and Red-Two to take their battle units' accounts of the day's combat. In a matter of minutes it was his turn to take his squad leaders' final reports.

Casualties, equipment losses, armament and munitions usage, field rations consumption and more were reconciled. When he was finished taking their tallies, he commed his final planet-side report to Fifth Division Commander, headquartered in one of the twelve huge troop transports waiting in geostationary orbit. Then he squatted in the mud and traded campaign stories with his squad leaders while they waited for the shuttles that would take them up to Fifth Division's transport.

\* \* \*

Upon arrival onboard the transport, he lumbered to the platoon leaders' berthing compartment, the suit's magnetic boots holding him to the deck in zero gravity. By regulation, he should have gone straight to the armory, to turn in his armor, disrupter, and other combat gear and field equipment. But he could not do that—not yet. There was something he had to do first, something he had to hide.

He saw no one, and was equally certain no one spotted him. Fewer than four hundred individuals inhabited the transport now; as was so often the case, Red Platoon was the first out of the entire Fifth Division to finish its sector mop-up, and the transport's crew and support units numbered a mere fifty-three.

Standing before the bank of lockers, he removed his helmet. He dampened its momentum, and it floated motionless beside his head in zero g. Opening the pouch on the front of his suit, he scooped out the grenades. They began to drift, and he wasted a few seconds rounding them up. To keep from losing them, he placed them inside his helmet.

Then he withdrew the object he had found on the planet's surface. Just as he had thought, it was made of metal, almost bronze in color. And he thought he detected tiny marks on its surface, as though it had been machined.

What was it? In spite of the unshakable thought that he had encountered something like it before—where or when he still could not recall—he knew it had not been left on the planet’s surface by a Confraternity battle unit. And the slugs couldn’t have manufactured it; they were mere beasts, they would never be capable of developing the sort of technology necessary to produce anything like it.

A sudden chill of terror ran up his spine. *What am I doing?* he thought. There he stood, in the middle of the Fifth Division platoon leaders’ berthing compartment, fully suited in battle armor, holding in his hand an artifact from a campaign planet’s surface. Although he had never before heard of such an object being found on any other campaign planet, he knew without thinking that if he was caught with it, he would be arrested and sent to Reconditioning.

His gaze darted around the compartment. Empty web hammocks, like abandoned cocoons, filled the small space, oriented at every conceivable angle. Lockers lined bulkheads, overhead, deck. At the compartment’s center hung the latrine, a complex device designed to accommodate both males and females from a variety of basically humanoid races in everything from weightlessness to several standard gravities. Around it were anchored four showers, engineered for the same range of race and gravity as the latrine.

The compartment was quiet; only the mechanical whisper of the air conditioner’s fans broke the silence. He was alone.

Still, he had to get the object out of sight before someone happened by—before they caught him with it.

He put an eye to the retina-lock set in the center of his personal-effects locker and heard a soft click. The door sprang open. Shoving the artifact into the locker, into the confusion of small belongings and scraps of paper, he closed the door.

Again he glanced around the compartment, then breathed a sigh of relief. He was still alone.

He scooped the grenades from inside his helmet and placed them back in their pouch. Tucking the helmet under his right arm, he made his way out of the transport’s berthing section as quickly and quietly as full battle armor would permit.

\* \* \*

Like Five-Red himself, the duty armorer was human. A nondescript woman of indeterminate age, she was dressed in a gray jumpsuit identifying her as a transport/support unit. Her head and face were hairless, as were those of all the Confraternity’s battle and support personnel; only pleasure units and the Aiegi

*Soldier of 'Tween*

retained body hair. Near-microscopic symbiotic insects inhabiting the fur lining the underside of the Aiegi's wings were essential to their health.

The armorer's nose wrinkled at Five-Red's pungent body odor as she went about her tasks with the customary light smile of contentment playing on her lips. She said not a word, but took his disrupter and grenade pouch, then helped him out of his armor. Even in zero gravity, removal of a full suit of battle armor was a task nearly impossible for one unit to perform, and not at all easy for two.

After shucking the armor, leaving it hanging in its rack against the bulkhead, Five-Red floated before a waist-high counter in his soiled red jumpsuit, his left arm threaded through the anchoring ring, and tackled the inevitable forms. The information on munitions and armament usage would eventually be entered into the computer, but for now he had to fill out the forms by hand. He only hoped his report successfully hid the grenades he had dumped on the planet's surface.

Throughout the task the armorer watched him silently, continuing to smile in clear-minded bliss.

Half way through the final set of forms, a comm blossomed in Five-Red's thoughts. He stopped, the stylus poised in mid air.

*\*This is Fifth Division Commander's secretary,\** came the thought. It was a unit he did not recognize. He could not even tell whether the thought came from a member of the human race, nor if the other was male or female. All he knew for certain was that it was not the same decidedly female unit who had been serving as Fifth Division Commander's secretary when he had last been aboard the transport three weeks before. *\*The Commander wishes to see you in his office as soon as possible,\** the thought continued. *\*How long do you anticipate being?\**

*\*I should be finished here in less than five minutes,\** he answered, looking to the armorer. Still smiling, she nodded.

*\*Fine.\** The comm-link went dead.

A wave of panic crested in his thoughts. Had Fifth Division Commander found out about the artifact he had smuggled aboard the transport? Did the other somehow know it rested in Five-Red's locker?

He doubted it. If that were the case, Fifth Division Commander would not have had his secretary comm, but would have sent Security units to arrest him. It was probably only the customary post-campaign debriefing. At any rate, there was no way Fifth Division Commander could know about what he had taken from the planet's surface.

Or was there?

Forcing the panic down, he completed the forms, then hurried to Fifth Division Commander's office, four decks outboard.