

## **"Four on Four"**

by Steve Carroll

Director Klip was wavering. Should he or shouldn't he? The enemy had stopped firing in the midst of a burst from their heaviest weapon; it seemed that they were out of ammunition. And now Flern wanted to charge instead of hold position. Klip's paracousin Krid would do whatever he said, of course. He was a good dran. Platicas was also a good and steady warrior.

Flern wasn't married. Klip, with two spousal units and 17 assorted offspring, could still remember being hungry - literally - for that first claw-to-claw kill that had allowed him to marry (What did the hoomanx call those soft wiggly pink things they had instead of claws? Hantz? And finkerz? Weird!).

Klip had almost 20 solarevs in service, too; almost time to return to the den for good and maybe open a small narble exchange (something he had always wanted to do). Why take a chance? They had plenty of ammunition and he was certain that at least one hooman was hit. All of his dren were fine.

Flern spoke again, softly, "I will give you the firstmeats of my kill."

Incredible! Although it was the kill itself and not the eating thereof that would make young Flern eligible, it was a rare thing to offer firstmeats of one's own first kill to another. This was close to bribery, but could as easily be considered an offer of honor to Klip. It had the effect that Flern had hoped for.

Okay, thought Klip, fine. We can't stay here all planetrote trading potshots. He made up his mind: the enemy WAS out of ammo! A quick charge would surprise and destroy them!

"Secure from fire and ready for a charge," said Klip to the others.

The three others removed the field spikes from their stowage in the gunstocks and affixed them to the fronts of the barrels of their assault rifles. Klip pressed a switch on his handgun and folded it from "fire" to "club-and-cut" mode.

"Go!"

They rose, a bit awkwardly as usual for Drantakhs, and moved forward, a short line of four dren. They knew they could cover the intervening ground quickly now that they were on their feet.

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Sergeant Mann loaded the last round in his automatic. Maybe it wasn't Shema's fault that the patrol's MG had jammed - for good! - but it was certainly untimely! He'd have

Shema braced on the parade field with a 20 kilo ruck for three hours. If they got back. Shema wouldn't really mind. If they got back.

Now they had redistributed the few remaining rounds: Mann and Shema took two each in their autos, and Darcy and Fujisaki with three each in their rifles. Ammunition standardization was a beautiful thing.

No telling how long before the cuds opened fire again. Kind of funny, thought Mann, when on the same side we have to call 'em Drantakhs or Dren, but when fighting them, all PC considerations are OUT!

The running firefight had lasted a long time, and the enemy seemed to have the edge. Mann and Fujisaki had a wound apiece. Baby-faced Fujisaki might never look the same. Mann's arm would heal (again).

"Okay, we'll try it without the MG," stated Mann. He eyed Shema reproachfully, but then grinned. Everyone knew that any MG might have a problem under these conditions.

He continued, "Everybody fires at once and then we'll try to make it back to company. If we pin 'em for a moment and then take off fast, they might not catch us. Once they get going, though..." his voice trailed off. Everyone in the patrol knew how fast the enemy warriors were, especially in rubble or other rough terrain, like here.

"Sarge, look." It was Darcy.

Mann could hardly believe what he saw. The Drantakhs were leaving cover and advancing in the open, with their version of bayonets fixed. They must have thought Mann's patrol was out of ammo because of the sudden end to the final defensive fire they had tried to lay down with the MG. They must have an unmarried warrior. Stupid social system determining military tactics! The enemy soldiers thought they were charging to victory, but really it was to their deaths.

"Hold fire until they are so close you can't miss," Mann ordered. Nobody was making a snack of him and his boys today, he thought.