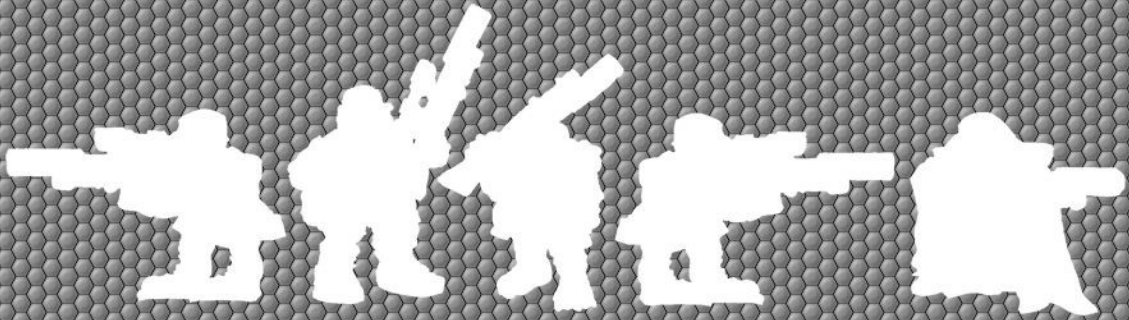


THE SHORT' END OF THE STICK



BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

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The diminutive abhumans known as ratlings do not make natural warriors but the Emperor's armies can find a use for almost anyone and sometimes even the smallest person can find themselves taking on the greatest challenges.

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Nothing previous in his life had prepared Ned Paddock, now Private Paddock of the Astra Militarum for what he experienced when he stepped off the loading ramp of the Imperial Navy lighter and found himself surrounded by people who stood twice his height. There had always been a certain number of baseline humans on his home world, for example the Astra Militarum recruiters who had signed Paddock up and the crew of the starship where he had trained on his way to his first posting had been human but he had never before felt so surrounded as he did now. Paddock's orders were to report to Sergeant Humo Lumfoot for assignment in the kitchens but no-one had thought to provide him with directions to get there. Asking for directions proved a problem for Paddock, with human troops ignoring him as they hurried to complete their own assigned tasks. It was only when out of desperation he approached a group of the even more massive but ogryns and mentioned the word 'kitchen' that one of the dim-witted abhumans grinned at him and pointed towards a structure.

"Food." the ogryn said and Paddock smiled back at him before scurrying off in the direction he had been given.

"Thank you," he called out, not wanting to offend the ogryn but the massive abhuman had already forgotten about him and returned to his own work moving crates filled with ammunition.

As he drew closer to the structure that had been pointed out to him it became obvious to Paddock that this was the camp's kitchen. The aroma of cooking food filled the air and a group of four other ratlings were standing outside. Despite being stood beside the kitchen block all four were dressed in service uniforms that unlike his newly issued uniform were obviously well worn and had their field kit with them, their long barrelled sniper rifles leant up against the wall of the kitchen while they waited for something.

"You must be Paddock." one of the four ratlings said when they noticed him, "You're late boy. I can't stand lateness."

"You can't stand anything sergeant. Why not give the lad some slack on his first day?" another of the ratlings added.

"Perhaps if you'd been flogged on your first day Neverfall, then you wouldn't have turned out as the bone idle waste of His Divine Emperor's space you are." the ratling that Paddock took to be Sergeant Lumfoot snapped back. Then he turned back to Paddock, "So are you Private Paddock or not?"

"Yes Sergeant Lumfoot." Paddock replied and he set down his kit to stand at attention and salute. Then when Lumfoot returned the salute he pulled a document from his tunic and handed it over, "My orders sergeant."

"We can deal with them when we get back. For now we're running late." Lumfoot told him.

"Late sergeant?" Paddock asked.

"Hunting," another ratling answered.

"I'm not sure I understand. I was assigned to the kitchens." Paddock said and Lumfoot sighed.

"And where do you suppose all the fresh meat comes from lad? Enlisted men and platoon commanders can make do with whatever processed slop comes from the canneries of the Munitorium but senior officers expect proper food on their tables and we're going to go out and get some." Lumfoot said and he pointed towards the trees that surrounded the camp, "These woods are full of game. A couple of hours out there and we'll have enough to last us a week."

"They also have more than a few traitors in them so keep your head down." Neverfall added.

The briefing given to Paddock was that the planet he was now on had declared its intention to leave the Imperium of man and a military force had been deployed to bring it to heel. However, he had not been told that he would be facing the enemy as soon as he landed. He had expected to spend some time behind the lines before being sent into combat.

"You'll need your rifle and field kit. Everything else can be left here, though I wouldn't leave anything valuable lying around. There are some thieving types about." Lumfoot told him and then he glanced at one of the other ratlings.

"Yes sergeant." Paddock said and he put his kit bag down just inside the kitchen block, keeping with him just his field kit and rifle.

"Good, now for the introductions." Lumfoot said before he pointed to the other ratlings one at a time, "Quartermaster Corporal Roundstone there is my squad second in command. I'm sure you've heard me mention Private Neverfall and lastly that's Big Dan Orchard." He said and at the mention of his name Orchard stood up to shake hands with Paddock.

"Pleased to meet you lad." He said, smiling as Paddock tilted his head back to look up at Orchard. It was easy to see how Orchard had got the nickname of 'Big Dan', at what Paddock guessed to be almost four feet tall he towered over the rest of the squad.

"Don't stare lad. We all reckon that Big Dan here has some ogryn blood in him." Roundstone said and then he smiled as he looked at Orchard and added, "Did your mother ever figure out who your father was Dan?" Paddock also noticed that the large ratling had a machete slung over his back. This was not the only piece of additional equipment the squad seemed to be carrying among their kit either. Each of the other ratlings had

managed to add another weapon of some sort to their kit, Lumfoot a small pistol that on him looked like a full sized sidearm, Roundstone a more conventional auto-pistol that with the addition of a folding stock looked more like a carbine while Neverfall had a crude looking sawn off single barrelled shotgun hanging from a bandolier of extra shells. With only his standard issue sniper rifle to rely on, Paddock began to wonder whether he was under equipped for whatever was to come.

"Are we going yet?" Neverfall asked.

"What's the matter Idle?" Roundstone responded, "It's not like you to be so eager."

"I'm not. But now Paddock is here instead of Hobbins it means the workload just got lighter for the rest of us. I want to get this done before he ends up the same way as Hobbins did." Neverfall said.

"Who is Hobbins?" Paddock said.

"Hobbins was the man you're replacing and so far you're already of more use to me than he ever was."

Lumfoot told him but Paddock frowned.

"Why?"

"Hobbins was into gambling." Orchard said, "He ran all sorts of games on the side. Right up until he decided to get into cock fighting."

"What happened then?" Paddock said and Neverfall grinned.

"The cock won." He said.

Though the other ratlings seemed friendly enough to Paddock they spoke very little as they left the camp and entered the woods, not wanting to scare off any game or alert advanced enemy patrols to their location.

However, when Lumfoot signalled for them to come to a halt after about an hour of walking when he spotted a cluster of the local lifeforms Roundstone moved closer to him.

"Listen to me lad," he whispered, "try and stash a few of the smaller critters in your pack."

"What for?" Paddock asked and Roundstone smiled.

"We're here for meat for the senior officers, right?" he said and Paddock nodded, "Well there are plenty of platoon commanders, NCOs and private troopers that wouldn't mind a bite to eat that isn't chemically similar to the soles of their boots. Just one rabbit can make you more pay vouchers than the Munitorum will assign you in a week. Even rat stew can-"

Roundstone was suddenly interrupted by a slap from Lumfoot.

"Take it from me lad, you want no part of any of his schemes." He said, "Now show us what you can do." and he pointed towards the nearby herd.

The sniper rifle that Paddock now aimed towards the animals was a far cry from the primitive firearms he had grown up using on his home world. Those required individual powder charges pouring down the barrel before a crude lead bullet was forced down after it. Firing the weapon then produced a loud 'bang' and cloud of smoke that clearly gave away the shooter's position. As well as being time consuming, the reloading procedure also required the shooter to be standing up and exposed. On the other hand the rifle issued to Paddock aboard the transport vessel fired entirely self-contained rounds that were fed from a magazine without him having to work any action at all. The propellant was smokeless and a long noise suppressor was wrapped around the end of the barrel so that detecting him when he fired would be near impossible. Paddock lined his sight up on the closest animal of the herd, it appeared strong and healthy and would provide many cuts of meat. He aimed for the centre of the creature's torso. No matter what the species was there tended to be some vital organ at that spot and so it was the favoured target for hunters. He exhaled, emptying his lungs of air before holding his breath and making sure he was on target before squeezing the trigger.

Immediately he felt the rifle kick and there was a muffled 'pop' followed by the sound of an empty case landing on the ground close by. Meanwhile the bullet itself passed right through the animal Paddock had been aiming at, delivering a wound that made the creature rear up briefly before collapsing in a heap. Around it the rest of the herd knew that something was wrong but thanks to the suppressor masking the sound of the shot they could not tell where the danger was. Taking a shallow breath, Paddock released it quickly as he looked to follow up on this shot and he took aim and fired again quickly to bring down a second creature in the same way as the first before the herd panicked and began to flee. Whether they had managed to sense the ratlings, or purely by chance they fled through the woods directly away from the squad of watching snipers.

"Nice shooting lad." Orchard said, having been watching through his own rifle sight, "Two of them brought down."

"Now go and show the lad how to take the meat from them properly." Lumfoot ordered and Orchard got to his feet, "And the rest of you." Lumfoot added, looking around at Roundstone and Neverfall.

"Regulations require that a lookout-" Neverfall began.

"I know regulations you idle lump!" Lumfoot snapped, "That's why I'll be waiting here to watch out for trouble

as well as making sure you do your fair share of the work. Now get moving.” Before any of the rattlings could start moving towards the two dead animals though they heard a distant rumbling sound and all but Paddock looked off into the distance.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Artillery.” Roundstone told him as the rumbling continued, “Heavy artillery and a lot of it.”

Just then a pair of large missiles flew high overhead, heading in the direction of the Imperial positions. One of these exploded in mid-air as it was hit by ground fire but the second plunged downwards, vanishing over the horizon before an enormous ball of fire erupted from where it appeared to have landed.

“Deathstrikes? Since when did the rebels have that sort of firepower?” Roundstone said.

“Never mind that now. This little hunting trip is over.” Lumfoot replied, “Everyone back to camp. Now.”

The sounds of artillery fire continued as the rattlings headed back towards their camp and as they continued these were joined by more sounds of fighting off in the distance and plumes of smoke began to rise from multiple points. Getting closer to the camp it became obvious that one of these plumes was coming from there.

“Hold here.” Lumfoot said, raising his hand and then he reached for the microbead headset he wore. He had kept the device inactive while the squad was out hunting and there were now other Imperial units around but now that they were close to their camp he estimated that they would be close enough to pick up any signals, “Nothing.” He said after trying several different channels.

“How can there be nothing? There were six companies of troops at that camp.” Neverfall said.

“That’s what you’re going to find out private.” Lumfoot told him and he frowned.

“Me?”

“Yes Private Neverfall. Use that skill of yours to disappear whenever anyone has work for you to do and go on ahead. I want a full report on what’s going on at camp. The rest of us will fall back to the river and wait for you there.” Lumfoot ordered.

Neverfall frowned but knew better than to protest the order further and instead headed off through the woods towards the apparently burning camp.

“Will he be okay on his own?” Paddock asked.

“Don’t worry lad.” Orchard answered, “One thing Neverfall is good at is keeping out of sight when he doesn’t want to be seen.”

“The sergeant’s right.” Roundstone added, “Good old Idle has always had the knack for hiding well, especially when there’s work to be done.”

“Which is why you stay away from him as well as Corporal Roundstone there.” Lumfoot added, glaring at Roundstone, “Neither of them is any good to anyone. Him on Earth included.”

Neverfall stayed off the trail the squad had been using as he made his way towards the camp and he halted when he first smelt the smoke. Bracing himself against a tree he lifted his rifle and peered down the sight, using it to see out of the woods and observe the camp that was still several hundred metres away. Even with the limited field of vision that the sight offered it was easy for the ratling to take in the devastation that had been wrought across the camp, with large holes blasted in its defensive fences and sandbagged barriers while the prefabricated structures used to construct it now lay in ruins.

Technically Neverfall knew that he had fulfilled what Sergeant Lumfoot had asked of him but his curiosity now got the better of him and he moved further forwards to take a better look. He paused while still within the woods though to discard his equipment pack and to gather some loose vegetation that he could use to break up his outline. Through his scope he had not seen any signs of enemy troops at the camp but he was not willing to take the risk of being detected if they had just been staying out of sight.

Suitably camouflaged he crept right up to the edge of the woods, halting at the edge of what was supposed to be the three hundred metre kill zone surrounding the camp that would give the occupants the chance to fire on any attacker while they had to cross the area of cleared ground. Even without magnification it was obvious to Neverfall that the kill zone had utterly failed to protect the camp. He could just about make out bodies strewn across the camp but there was not one in the kill zone itself. Instead it appeared that the camp had been subjected to a heavy bombardment to destroy its defences before the enemy finished off their assault using armoured vehicles to cross the open ground, the tracks of the treads clearly visible in the dirt. Neverfall lay down on the ground and pointed his rifle towards the camp, using its sight again as a means of observation and as he moved it from side to side what he saw sickened him. The condition of the bodies made it clear that they had been subjected to further abuse even after death. Many of them looked as if they had been laid out in some ritual fashion, with strange designs cut into their flesh and their blood daubed across the few walls that remained standing in equally unusual patterns. Then he noticed something moving and he turned his rifle towards what was left of the kitchen block only to see something that horrified him.

The kitchen staff had been crucified, each of the tiny ratlings who spent most of their time either preparing or consuming food was now pinned to the exterior walls, their own carefully maintained kitchen knives having been driven through their flesh to keep them in place. The enemy had even gone so far as to disembowel them, their entrails now hanging down to the ground. This would have quickened the deaths of the helpless abhumans but Neverfall did not see it as being at all merciful. Then to his further horror Neverfall realised that one of the ratlings could still be seen moving.

"Throne!" he hissed, "Tuppin's still alive."

For some reason the ratling known as Tuppin had not been disembowelled and so had instead been left to die as a result of the crucifixion itself. Although they had not been especially good friends Neverfall had still spent considerable time with Tuppin while off duty and now his thoughts were about what he could do save him. It quickly dawned on Neverfall that there was nothing he would be able to do about Tuppin's injuries though which left him with only one other choice to end the fellow ratling's suffering and he took careful aim with his rifle.

The shot made little sound as he pulled the trigger but it was followed by the sound of an explosion and Neverfall watched as Tuppin's body was blown to pieces by an explosive charge. It now dawned on him why the enemy had not subjected Tuppin to the same treatment as the other ratlings when a group of men suddenly appeared, all of them wearing body armour over their civilian overalls and carrying a variety of small arms. Tuppin had obviously been bait to draw in any other surviving Imperial troops intending to try and help him. The enemy had booby trapped his body and in killing Tuppin outright Neverfall had triggered the trap set for any would-be rescuers.

He could see the enemy looking around as they searched for whoever had triggered their trap but for now at least they could not see Neverfall in his concealed position. However, the ratling knew that this was unlikely to last and when he saw one of the enemy troops produce a compact vox unit and begin to speak into it he decided that the time had come to withdraw and return to the rest of his squad.

The other ratlings were deployed exactly where Sergeant Lumfoot had said they would be, just across a river that was chest deep as Neverfall waded across it with his rifle held above his head to keep it out of the water. The sniper rifles carried by the ratlings would still function after being immersed in liquid but their performance could vary until they dried out and this was unacceptable to any true marksman.

"So what's the story private?" Lumfoot asked as Neverfall took his place with the rest of the squad.

"The camp's gone sergeant, everyone's dead. The only one I saw alive was Tuppin and the enemy had him crucified." Neverfall answered.

"Crucified?" Paddock said, nervously looking at the other ratlings.

"We can't save him." Lumfoot said.

"No, I knew that so I made sure he didn't suffer any more." Neverfall said, "I'm not sorry about it either."

"No need to be." Lumfoot said, understanding exactly what Neverfall meant he had done.

"It was a trap." Neverfall continued, "Tuppin had been wired and when I shot him a charge blew. Then a bunch of rebels appeared to see if they could catch who'd done it."

"Then they know we're about." Roundstone said, "They'll be coming for us." and at that moment there was the sound of movement from across the river.

"Stand to." Lumfoot ordered and the ratlings all took cover in positions where they could shoot towards the other bank, looking down their scopes for a closer view.

"Feth-head." Roundstone hissed at Neverfall, "You've led them right to us."

"Shush now." Lumfoot ordered, "What's done is done. Now let's see what we're dealing with here."

"Hounds." Orchard said softly when the two large canines came into view through his scope. These were not like the cybernetically enhanced creatures created by the Mechanicum for use by Imperial forces though, instead they were purely organic hunting creatures trained from birth for tracking prey by their scent.

"I see them." Lumfoot replied. Held back by leashes, the two canines strained to rush forwards into the river while a single handler held them back from the water's edge before he could be dragged in. This man who came into view just moments after the animals was dressed in a similar fashion to the soldiers that the ratlings had left back at their camp but his equipment had been heavily defaced to remove all Imperial markings.

Neverfall snorted.

"And a thousand ratlings would make less noise than that lot following them." He said when he heard the sound of soldiers making their way through the undergrowth.

"Except you private, now pipe down." Lumfoot ordered and he waited for the soldiers accompanying the canine handler to appear as well.

Like the canine handler, the enemy squad that emerged from between the trees to stand along the river bank carried what looked like standard issue Imperial equipment that had had markings removed. In addition to

this the man who appeared to be the squad leader and now stood talking with the canine handler had a face covered in scars that had the appearance of being inflicted as part of some ritual rather than through combat or an accident.

"I count eleven not including the hounds. A standard rifle squad with a vox set and grenade launcher for light support plus the handler." Roundstone said.

"Agreed." Lumfoot added, "That launcher will be a problem if they get a rough fix on us. Neverfall, he's yours. Orchard you take the light coloured hound and Roundstone take the one with the patches. The vox operator is most important so he's mine. Paddock that just leaves you with that sergeant with all the scars."

"Yes sergeant, but what about the handler? Wouldn't killing him be easier than taking out two hounds?" Paddock asked.

"Look at those beasts boy." Neverfall hissed, watching the two canines still trying to drag their handler across the river towards the ratlings, "They know where we are even if those big dolts following them don't. Shoot the handler and they'll come charging through that river right at us. The handler's useless without his hounds though."

"Neverfall is right. The handler is the least important out of that lot." Lumfoot added, "Now I want everyone to acquire their targets and follow them but don't shoot until I give the word and we'll all fire together. If we do this right they'll lose a quarter of their men and be left without a leader, fire support or a way of reporting in all in one go. After that everyone can chose their own targets but we can't let any of them get away to tell anyone else about us. Sound off when you have your targets in your sights."

One by one the ratlings nodded to indicate that they had acquired their assigned targets and then Lumfoot took aim at the vox operator.

"My shot will be the signal." He said before exhaling and a moment later he squeezed his trigger.

Although the other ratlings were close enough to hear the muffled popping sound of the shot the noise made by it and the volley from the rest of the squad was too indistinct for the enemy soldiers to recognise any of it as gunfire before all of a sudden they were hit.

One of the canines gave out a high pitched yelp as it collapsed, while the second died silently. Sergeant Lumfoot's shot passed right through the vox operator's body armour and chest before the vox set itself exploded in a shower of sparks as the tumbling bullet smashed through its circuitry and shorted out its power supply. The grenadier was hit in the neck and spluttered as he fell forwards into the river while the scarred sergeant simply fell backwards when Paddock shot him right between the eyes.

The effect of this on the rest of the squad was profound. With both of the canines and three of their squad, including their leader now dead the rest had no idea of how to respond and no-one to give them any orders. The canine handler dropped to his knees and screamed at the loss of his precious hounds while the other enemy troops looked around and tried to locate the source of the attack. One rushed towards the body of the sergeant and reached down to try and grab the microbead set from what was left of his head but Paddock was already prepared for this and he shot the man before he could take it.

"Suppressing fire!" one of the surviving soldiers yelled and all of a sudden the rest of the squad began to fire their lasguns in all directions.

Firing from their shoulders and with their weapons held level, the energy blasts passed far over the heads of the prone ratlings but they paused from further shooting until Lumfoot spoke up.

"Let's finish this. Pick your own targets and fire in your own time." He told the others.

One by one the enemy troops fell to the ratlings' fire while their own remained ineffective, aimed far from the snipers' true position. Only one of the enemy troops required more than one shot to kill him. By some fluke his armour was able to stop the first bullet even at the close range the firefight was taking place at and although he collapsed, Orchard had to shoot him again before he fired from the ground. However, while the ratlings were concentrating on the infantrymen the canine handler suddenly scabbled up the riverbank and fled into the woods.

"The handler's making a break for it." Roundstone exclaimed.

"We can't let him get away. If he manages to tell anyone else about us then we could have the entire rebel army down on us." Lumfoot said, getting back to his feet now that the rest of the enemy squad were dead. Wading across the river was slow going for the ratlings and by the time they had all reached the opposite bank the escaping canine handler had a considerable head start on them. The man was not in sight of the ratlings but they could hear the noise he was making as he ran through the forest.

"Spread out and if you get a shot at him take it before he can warn anyone else about us." Lumfoot ordered.

Forming a line with Lumfoot in the centre, the ratlings began to move through the woods in pursuit of the fleeing man. In theory their quarry could move faster than they could but this was over open ground and the number of obstacles that the forest contained in the form of undergrowth and trees slowed him down considerably. On the other hand the smaller ratlings could squeeze through gaps that the rebel could not and they soon began to catch up with him.

"I see him." Roundstone called out as he came to a halt and brought his rifle up to his shoulder. However, he had little chance to aim as the man continued to flee, weaving from side to side and so he fired instinctively. Although the shot came close to the rebel it still missed, whizzing just past him and causing him to throw himself to the ground and vanish. Roundstone frowned as he searched for the man but there were no signs of him anywhere so instead the ratling began to creep forwards, keeping his rifle ready as he went. All of a sudden the rebel appeared right in front of Roundstone with a stub pistol in one hand while with the other he reached out and grabbed the barrel of Roundstone's rifle, pushing it away from him before the ratling could fire. Rather than try to wrestle his rifle away from the rebel Roundstone just let go of the weapon and the sudden weight that he had to bear made the larger man stagger before he too let go of the rifle and it dropped to the ground. Taking advantage of the delay, Roundstone unslung his auto-pistol. He did not bother trying to unfold the stock and instead just went to chamber a round. Before he could manage this though the auto-pistol was kicked out of his hands and Roundstone watched as it flew into the undergrowth before looking back up at the rebel and seeing his pistol pointing down at him.

There was a sudden loud 'boom' and the rebel jerked before dropping his pistol and falling forwards, landing on top of Roundstone. The ratling scabbled out from under the body of the man and as he looked around he saw Neverfall approaching with his rifle slung across his back and his sawn-off shotgun in his hand.

"Thanks. Looks like I owe you one." Roundstone said as he picked up his auto-pistol and checked it for damage.

"You're welcome and you better believe that I'll be collecting on that debt." Neverfall replied and he ejected the spent shell case from the shotgun before inserting a fresh one.

Just then the other ratlings arrived, all still holding their rifles.

"What's going on?" Lumfoot asked.

"I got that rebel right here for you." Neverfall said and Lumfoot looked at the body on the ground.

"Well what are you lot just standing around for?" he said as he looked back up at his squad, "I want these bodies searched for anything useful. That means in a military sense Roundstone, we're not here to increase the size of your private little hoard."

"What hoard sergeant? If the camp's gone then so is my hoard." Roundstone protested.

"Ah so the Emperor's justice has caught up with you. Well don't go thinking that this is the time or place to be replacing it. Everything on these bodies needs listing quickly and quietly. Roundstone you and the new lad can search this body here while the rest of us head back to the river and check the rest." Lumfoot ordered.

The dead canine handler's body had little of worth about it but this did not stop Roundstone thoroughly checking the contents of every last pouch and pocket as he and Paddock emptied them.

"Here." He said to Paddock and he unclipped two pouches from the dead man's webbing. Both of these had at one time had the Imperial Aquila stamped on them but this had been largely scrubbed off.

"What are these for?" Paddock asked.

"Field dressings. Add them to your own kit." Roundstone told him.

"But Sergeant Lumfoot said-" Paddock began.

"Better we get it than it goes to waste. You can ask the sergeant if you want but he'll tell you the same thing." Roundstone interrupted. Then he noticed something in the dead man's mouth and smiled, "I need a rock."

He said.

"What for?" Paddock asked.

"Just get me a rock. About the size of my fist." Roundstone responded and Paddock looked around.

Spotting a suitable rock nearby he picked it up and handed it to Roundstone. Then as Paddock was clipping the dressing pouches to his own webbing Roundstone used the rock to strike the side of the dead man's face.

"What are you doing?" Paddock said as Roundstone hit the dead man again and this time there was a sharp 'crunch' sound as several teeth were knocked out.

"Got it." Roundstone said, dropping the rock so that he could instead pick up one of the teeth and Paddock saw that part of it was clearly made of gold., "Would you look at that beauty?" he commented, holding up the tooth.

"But the sergeant said-" Paddock said.

"I know what old Lumfoot said!" Roundstone snapped at him, "He told us to search the body and we searched it and found this. Now it belongs to the Emperor." and Roundstone looked past Paddock into the trees behind him.

"What?" Paddock asked, turning around but seeing nothing.

"Never mind. It was nothing. Now let's get back to the others." Roundstone said, bundling up the items recovered from the body and while Paddock was distracted he slipped the gold tooth into a different pocket from the other items he put away.

When Roundstone and Paddock returned to the other ratlings they found them going through the other bodies. Most of them had nothing more interesting in a military sense than the canine handler had had. On the other hand the sergeant had been carrying a number of maps and when Roundstone and Paddock arrived Lumfoot was studying these.

"Find anything on that heretic?" Lumfoot asked, looking up from the body of the enemy squad leader.

"Just a few bits Sergeant Lumfoot." Roundstone answered and he dug into his pocket to remove the items other than the tooth that he had put in there, "What about him?" and he looked at the dead man at Lumfoot's feet.

"Nothing major. He had a map and notebook but they're both clean. They must have been issued just before they set out. I expect we'd find the same on most of the enemy." Lumfoot replied.

"Why's that sergeant?" Paddock said.

"Because they just carried out a surprise attack boy. If word of their plans was spread far and wide in their ranks then it could have leaked to us and where would be their surprise then?" Lumfoot explained.

"So what do you want us to do now sergeant?" Orchard asked, "We're out here on our own."

"Big Dan is right. We need to find a way back to our own forces." Neverfall added.

"Oh do we lad?" Lumfoot said sternly, walking over to Neverfall and staring him in the face, "And where do you suppose they are right now? Because in case you've forgotten our camp is gone and if we try sending out any signals it's more likely that the enemy will pick them up than our own side."

"So what are we going to do?" Paddock said nervously, looking around at the other ratlings.

"What else lad? Our job, that's what the Emperor would want of us." Lumfoot said.

"Then let him come here and tell us." Neverfall responded and all of a sudden Lumfoot punched him in the face, knocking him to the ground. Then as Neverfall looked up at him in disbelief Lumfoot drew the tiny pistol he kept tucked into his belt and pointed it down at the other ratling.

"A commissar would put a bolt through your head for saying that private." he said before lowering the pistol again, "But since there are only five of us that means I need you. Now get up."

"So where are we going sergeant?" Orchard asked at the same time as he reached down to help Neverfall back to his feet.

"Cheers Dan." Neverfall commented before wiping the blood from under his nose while Lumfoot looked into the forest.

"We go that way." He said after a moment's pause.

"Why that way?" Paddock asked.

"Because that's where these guys came from lad." Roundstone told him, "Right sarge?"

"That's right." Lumfoot replied, nodding, "It's also the way that the handler of these hounds tried to run so there must be something that way that he was trying to reach. Now grab what you can carry from these bodies that looks useful and let's get a move on."

Little of the equipment carried by the dead soldiers was of use to the diminutive ratlings, it was all produced for baseline human beings rather than abhumans. However, the ratlings were still able to take additional field dressings and ration bars from the corpses. Paddock also watched as Orchard took a pair of fragmentation grenades from one of them. Lacking the physical strength to hurl them far enough to guarantee being beyond the effective blast radius, ratlings seldom used explosives but Orchard's larger size made him just about able to use them.

"A couple of these heretics have smoke rounds sergeant." Orchard pointed out, taking another grenade that looked somewhat bulky in his grip from the body at his feet.

"Good point private." Lumfoot replied, "Everyone grab a smoke grenade. We may need the cover." and each of the ratlings took a smoke grenade from the corpses and clipped it to their webbing before Lumfoot started to head into the trees, waving for the rest of his squad to follow him.

The ratlings walked for more than an hour before there were any signs of anyone else in the forest with them and they quickly took cover, aiming their rifles towards the noise they had heard. A few seconds later a large force of local infantry came marching through the forest without any idea that they were in the sights of the ratlings. Lumfoot knew that he could give the order to start picking off the enemy unit leaders at any time but to do so would alert them to the ratlings' presence and he wanted to avoid that for now so he remained silent, watching as the enemy moved on.

This force had come from the same direction as the ratlings had been heading and so when they were gone Lumfoot got to his feet again and waved his squad onwards.

"We're getting close." he said softly, "I can smell it."

"Can he really smell the enemy?" Paddock whispered and Orchard grinned.

"He can smell their food lad." he replied and when Paddock sniffed the air he realised that he too could smell cooking meat and he licked his lips before he started to follow the other ratlings, continuously searching the

forest for more enemy troops.

The smell of cooking was coming from more than just a simple camp fire though, as the ratlings advanced further they saw that there was an entire camp ahead of them, one even larger than the one they had been stationed at prior to its destruction. In addition to quarters for hundreds of soldiers there were also dugouts prepared for heavy weapon teams and servicing areas for armoured vehicles, all empty now. On the far side of the base there was a wide, fast flowing river and a row of empty cargo barges was moored along the bank, suggesting that the enemy had moved a lot of their troops and supplies by water in order to launch their attack.

"It's a regimental headquarters." Neverfall exclaimed as Lumfoot brought his rifle to his shoulder and began studying the enemy base through its powerful optical sight. Most of the base appeared empty, the enemy troops and vehicles based there having been deployed for their surprise attack on the Imperial forces but there were still a large number of enemy troops present standing guard over the base as well as carrying out the myriad of other duties an army had in addition to combat.

"Sergeant take a look at that antenna array." Roundstone commented when he looked through his own sight and saw a tall antenna array that had been erected beside a low sandbagged structure near the centre of the base, only visible from the ratlings' position thanks to the absence of any vehicles in the parking and servicing area in front of it.

"A vox antenna like that could communicate planetwide and cut through jamming." Lumfoot said, turning his rifle towards the antenna and studying the structure at the base, "Good work corporal. I think you just identified their command post."

He then saw a trio of enemy officers approach the command post, escorted by a pair of other soldiers who remained outside on guard when the officers went inside. As with the patrol the ratlings had encountered earlier all these soldiers appeared to have taken part in some form of ritual scarring and the marks left by it were clearly visible their exposed skin.

"There's our target." he said, a smile spreading across his face.

"Those two guards?" Neverfall asked.

"The entire command post." Lumfoot replied, "We'll take out the guards and then blow the building."

"So Big Dan gets to use his grenade then?" Roundstone said.

"They should do the trick, yes." Lumfoot said.

"Of course when they go off there won't be any hiding the fact that we're here." Orchard pointed out.

"You'll have to run fast when you're done then, won't you?" Lumfoot responded, "You, Neverfall and Paddock."

"Why me sergeant?" Neverfall protested.

"Because you're always sneaking around trying to avoid doing any work we may as well put that to some use. Now the three of you are to get as close to that command post as you can and then Roundstone and I will take out those two guards. That should leave you free to get close enough to toss your grenades in and blow it sky high. Those sandbags should trap the blast quite nicely." Lumfoot explained.

A properly constructed Astra Militarum base would be surrounded by fences made of razor wire, monitored by auspex traps and protected by anti-personnel mines and Tarantula weapon platforms but the enemy camp that Orchard, Neverfall and Paddock crept towards had been assembled in such a hurry that it had nothing like this, merely a low dirt wall around the perimeter that would provide limited cover for any defending troops and this served just as well to allow the three ratlings to get right up to the perimeter without being spotted.

"So what do you think Idle?" Orchard asked as they all peered over the top of the wall.

"I think you should keep your fat head down for starters." Neverfall responded as he looked around, "Getting through this place should be easy enough though even for a boy like Ned here and an ogryn hybrid like you Big Dan. We'll head along the perimeter to that dugout they've prepared for a heavy weapon and get in through there. Then we should be able to make it across to those promethium drums and make our way between them until we get to the command post."

"Lead the way." Orchard told him.

Orchard had to stoop as the ratlings walked around the outside of the low wall but both Neverfall and Paddock were short enough that they could remain standing while they walked until they reached the dugout. This was protected overhead by a roof of sheet metal covered in sandbags while more of them were piled up around the firing slit. This slit was lower than the top of the wall and just about large enough for even Orchard to squeeze through, getting them inside the perimeter without having to risk vaulting over the top of the wall.

"We should check what's in these boxes." Neverfall commented when he looked around the inside of the dugout at the stacks of crates piled along one side.

"Remember what we're here for." Orchard replied, "We've got a command post to destroy. We can steal stuff on the way out." and then he shoved Neverfall towards the exit from the dugout.

"Okay, I'm going." the other ratling said and he walked up to the exit and peered outside. As he had expected there were few enemy troops around and those that were visible were far enough away that they would be unlikely to notice the diminutive ratlings.

"Is anyone out there?" Paddock asked nervously.

"Of course there is. The enemy is hardly likely to leave their entire base empty for us to just wander in." Neverfall said, "Now both of you do as I do. There are enough gaps between the promethium drums for us to get through. Just make sure not to stick your rifle up in the air. I'll go first and signal for each of you." Neverfall then darted from the dugout, rushed towards the gap between two clusters of promethium fuel drums. Once there he came to an immediate halt and checked his surroundings again. Then, satisfied that he had not been seen he waved towards the dugout.

"There's the signal. Go quickly now lad." Orchard told Paddock and the new recruit ran from the dugout, moving as quickly as he could until he reached the promethium drums.

"I said keep that rifle down!" Neverfall hissed, grabbed the end of Paddock's rifle and lowering the muzzle so that it did not stick up above the drums.

"Sorry I-" Paddock began.

"I don't care. Just be more careful from now on." Neverfall interrupted and then he waved at Orchard, signalling for the larger ratling to follow as well.

Holding his rifle horizontally, Orchard ran towards the gap between the drums and nodded as he joined Neverfall and Paddock.

"Okay, let's keep going." he said.

"Easy. Just follow me." Neverfall replied and he turned around and started to walk away, following the gaps between clusters of the drums. These gave the ratlings an almost totally uninterrupted pathway through the camp until they reached an area of open ground surrounding the command post where they halted and peered out from behind the drums.

"Still just the two guards." Orchard said.

"Outside." Neverfall commented, "Who knows how many are inside?"

"Grenades don't care about numbers." Orchard commented as he ejected the magazine from his rifle and made sure that its chamber was clear.

"What are you doing?" Paddock asked, confused by this.

"Making sure he doesn't commit mutiny or treason." Neverfall told him as Orchard pointed his rifle through another gap in the drums that led in the direction of where they had first observed the camp from within the forest and he gently began pulling and releasing the trigger repeatedly.

Fitted with a laser range finding and targeting system, Orchard's rifle projected a low powered laser beam from its sight each time pressure was applied to the trigger but before that pressure was enough to fire a round and Orchard now used this to send a message to Sergeant Lumfoot that could not be intercepted or detected by the enemy around them. Knowing where Lumfoot and Roundstone were positioned, Orchard projected pulses of laser light towards them that their own rifle sights would detect to let them know that he, Neverfall and Paddock were in position.

"Okay they're ready for us." Lumfoot said when he saw the flashing light.

"I've got the one on the left sergeant." Roundstone replied.

"And I've got the one on the right. I don't see anyone else nearby so fire when I give the word. Three. Two. One. Fire." Lumfoot ordered and simultaneously both ratlings fired their rifles.

The silenced weapons made too little noise for the shots to be heard from within the enemy camp and both guards promptly collapsed with holes shot between their eyes.

"Move!" Orchard hissed and the three ratlings rushed from their hiding place to the entrance of the command centre, standing over the bodies of the guards while Orchard took the two fragmentation grenades from his webbing.

Before Orchard armed the explosives and threw them into the command post Neverfall pulled back on the sheet covering the entrance to peer inside and he saw that there were five enemy troops inside, the three officers they had seen going in from the forest and also two others. All of them were stood around a large table that had various maps laid out on and also something that looked somewhat like a large metal suitcase. This was open to expose the vox set inside. The lower part of the case contained the vox itself while the upper section had numerous plastic pockets that contained more maps as well as other documents.

"Dan before you use those grenades I think you should see this." he whispered, closing the flap.

"What is it?" Orchard asked as he stepped forwards and cautiously peered inside the command post.

"Everything we need to beat these traitors. We just need to get it back to our own side." Neverfall told him.

"How? What's in there" Paddock said.

"An encrypted regimental vox unit along with maps and code books lad." Orchard replied and he returned his grenades to his webbing.

"With that we could listen in on every message they sent." Neverfall added.

"Sergeant Lumfoot needs to know about this." Orchard said and he bent down to grab one of the guards' corpses, "Give me a hand hiding these bodies."

Between them the ratlings could only drag one body at a time and they moved as quickly as they could to get them out of the way before Orchard began to signal Lumfoot once more, telling their squad leader what they had seen inside the command post.

"Throne!" Lumfoot exclaimed as he watched the pulses of light.

"That could win us the war." Roundstone added and Lumfoot nodded.

"They'll need a distraction to be able to get it out of the command centre." he said, "It's up to us to provide it."

"Okay it's on." Orchard said when he saw the reply from Lumfoot, "The sergeant and Corporal Roundstone will create a diversion. It's up to us to take advantage of it."

"So what do we do?" Paddock asked.

"Wait for the sergeant to stir everything up and then sneak in the back way." Neverfall replied.

"What back way?" Orchard asked, "There's only one door that I saw."

"Not if you use those muscles of yours to make us another." Neverfall said and Orchard grinned.

"I get it." he said, reaching for the machete slung across his back.

Lumfoot lined up his first shot on a random enemy soldier and fired. The bullet killed the man without a sound but instead of the previous stealthy killing of the two guards outside the command centre this one was done in full view of others and the alarm was immediately raised. At the same time Roundstone turned his rifle on some of the equipment in sight. A bullet fired through a generator created a sudden explosion that created a large plume of smoke as well as setting fire to the area around the generator as its fuel spilled out onto the ground.

Quickly realising that they were under attack the enemy troops rushed to defend the base, hurrying towards the perimeter. Lumfoot and Roundstone continued to fire, picking off enemy soldiers at will and creating further panic as units suddenly found themselves without leaders and unsure of what to do while their attackers remained invisible.

Seeing the chaos that Lumfoot and Roundstone were creating the other three ratlings hidden among the fuel drums added to it by firing out of their hiding place, taking out targets not visible to their sergeant. This spread even more confusion as the enemy tried unsuccessfully to determine the direction from which they were under attack, unaware that some of their attackers were already among them.

"Okay that's enough." Orchard said after he had fired the last shot from his magazine and he reached down to pick up his machete from where he had left it stood against a fuel drum. The three ratlings then rushed back towards the command post only this time they headed for the side of the structure instead of the front where the entrance was located and Orchard passed his rifle to Neverfall before he began to pull some of the sandbags away from the command post until the fabric of the tent side itself was revealed.

By this point the enemy troops defending their base had been able to set up a number of heavy weapons and were firing these into the forest at random, interpreting every sound or apparent movement as a sign that Imperial forces were there. The sound made by this firing provided enough cover for Orchard to swing his machete at the exposed tent side and cut a long slit in it without the officers inside noticing although the ratlings still paused to see whether there would be a response from them. When nothing happened Neverfall peered inside through the slit and smiled. He could see that the slit was very close to the ceiling and he was looking down on the enemy officers as they all talked into various portable vox sets.

"All still there, frantically calling their men to try and find out where the shooting is coming from." he said.

"Then we take them out." Orchard said as he reloaded his rifle.

"What if they are able to raise the alarm?" Paddock asked.

"They won't if we're fast enough." Neverfall answered.

The three ratlings then formed a line beside the sandbagged wall and pushed the muzzles of their rifle through the slit and took aim.

"Now." Orchard said and all three of them fired together.

Paddock and Neverfall had unknowingly picked the same man as their target and so only two of the officers fell initially but the ratlings quickly moved on to other targets before they could react and just seconds later all five of the enemy officers were lying in pools of their own blood.

"Right then, let's go and get that vox set." Orchard said before the ratlings ran around the front of the command post and Neverfall led the way inside with his shotgun held ready, just in case they had somehow

missed someone inside. The tent was empty however, except for the corpses of the officers killed by the ratlings and they ran around the table to grab the encrypted vox unit along with all the documents associated with it.

"Look at this." Paddock commented, coming to a halt about half way around the table.

"We don't have time." Neverfall replied.

"No but look, this map shows the front lines." Paddock said as he stood on the tips of his toes to better see the map on the table that had been marked with various tokens representing both Imperial and traitor units.

"Looks like we've fallen back to the canals here." Orchard said.

"So now we know where to head for." Neverfall added as he reached for the vox set they had come for and dragged it towards him before slamming it shut. Pulling the vox case from the table, Neverfall struggled to hold it, its bulk proving too big for the diminutive abhuman, "Hey Big Dan, give me a hand with this."

"Colonel!" a voice called out from the entrance to the command centre and the ratlings turned around as all of a sudden an enemy soldier burst in and then froze when he saw the bodies of his superiors.

Orchard started to bring his rifle to bear on the man but the enemy soldier was able to bring his lasgun up faster and he fired a single blast into the ratling's chest.

"Dan!" Neverfall exclaimed as Orchard fell and the enemy soldier swung his lasgun towards Paddock. The young ratling ducked behind the table though and when the man fired the beam of energy passed over him and instead burned through the fabric of the tent. Moving forwards the enemy soldier came around the table to try and get a better shot at the crouching ratlings but he froze and gasped when he found himself looking down the barrel of a sawn off shotgun before Neverfall pulled the trigger.

At such close range the soldier's flak armour was unable to stop the blast and he fell backwards, dropping his lasgun to the floor as he died.

"Dan." Neverfall said again as he and Paddock rushed forward to see if Orchard was still alive.

"Go." Orchard gasped. The wound to his chest from the las blast had cauterised itself so there was no external bleeding but with every laboured breath Orchard was bringing up more blood, indicating that he had suffered serious internal injury.

"You're coming with us." Neverfall replied as he tried to get Orchard to his feet.

"No, I'll only slow you down. Now get out of here and get as far from those promethium drums as you can. I'm going to make sure that the enemy have bigger things to worry about than the two of you." Orchard said as he took one of his fragmentation grenades from his webbing.

"Paddock lad," Neverfall said, smiling as he reloaded his shotgun, "let's grab that case and get out of here." Carrying the case between them Neverfall and Paddock crept out of the command centre and then scurried away, taking shelter between two rows of tents. Then when they looked back they saw Orchard exiting the command centre as well, using his rifle to steady himself as he staggered towards the drums filled with highly flammable promethium.

"How big will the blast be?" Paddock said.

"Big enough that we need to get further away. Much further." Neverfall replied and then they picked up the case again and continued to run with it as quickly as they could.

Meanwhile Orchard made his way the short distance to the promethium drums and slumped down between them, resting against one as he tossed his rifle to the ground. All of a sudden a pair of enemy soldiers appeared, both pointing their lasguns at him.

"I told you. A lousy ratling. Let's finish him and be done with this." one of them said.

"Looks like it's already done for." the other responded and then Orchard looked up at them, smiled and began to laugh.

"What's so funny runt?" the first soldier asked and in response Orchard held up the grenade that he had already removed the pin from just moments before it exploded.

The explosion tore through the rows of promethium filled drums and created an inferno of burning fuel. Flaming shrapnel from the exploding drums was hurled all around the base, cutting through tents and setting light to them so that fire spread even further and with no orders from coming from the command centre more junior officers began ordering their men to pull back from the perimeter to try and fight the fire.

"Dan Orchard, you were the best of us." Lumfoot said as he watched the commotion through his rifle sight. He had seen Orchard stagger from the command post while Neverfall and Paddock headed the other way with the vox case and he knew that the large ratling was badly injured, "Died like a soldier, just like we should all aspire to."

"Sergeant look over there. Twenty degrees right." Roundstone commented and Lumfoot turned his rifle in the direction he had specified. There he saw Neverfall and Paddock still carrying the vox case as they darted from one hiding place to another, making their way closer to the perimeter.

"Looks like they're heading for the river." Lumfoot said, "Let's see if we can join them."

"Why are we heading this way?" Paddock asked as he and Neverfall continued towards the river.

"Because it's as far from the fire as we can get. Besides that wall doesn't extend around the riverbank. I don't fancy trying to lift this thing over it so maybe we can get around the end." Neverfall answered.

"Look out!" Paddock exclaimed when he saw an enemy soldier appear from behind a parked truck and the ratlings dropped the case and reached for their weapons. Paddock tried to unslung his rifle but the weapon was too cumbersome for him to do this quickly and Neverfall was faster with his shotgun, drawing and firing while the enemy soldier was fumbling with his holster to try and remove the las pistol it contained. The blast killed the soldier and Neverfall quickly began to reload his weapon.

"You'll have to manage the case on your own. I'll lead the way." he said, swapping his shotgun for his rifle again.

"But it's too big and heavy for me to lift." Paddock pointed out.

"It's got a strap. Drag it. It'll take a few knocks." Neverfall told him.

Neverfall then moved forwards, pointing his rifle around the corner of a tent while Paddock wrapped the vox case's carrying strap around himself. This was intended for a human to be able to carry the case off the ground but for the ratling it simply provided him with a means to spread the weight across his body while he dragged it along the ground behind him. Neverfall fired his rifle twice in rapid succession when a pair of enemy soldiers came running towards him and both fell.

"Neverfall what should-" Paddock began.

"Just shut up and keep going. Look, the river is right over there. I'll catch up." Neverfall interrupted before firing a third shot that brought down another man and Paddock continued to drag the vox case towards the river.

The sound of an engine from behind him made Paddock turn and he saw a light vehicle manned by two enemy soldiers drive into view, one sat behind the steering wheel while the other manned a belt fed heavy stubber mounted on the open rear of the vehicle. Neverfall fired just as the vehicle was slowing down and the driver slumped forwards, causing the vehicle to swerve into a ditch. The second crewman was thrown from the back of the vehicle by the sudden halt and Neverfall turned his fire on more enemy infantry now closing in. The gunner was not injured though and he quickly clambered back onto the vehicle and swung the stubber around before firing a long burst towards Neverfall. The tent that the ratling was using for cover offered no protection at all from the heavy calibre armour-piercing rounds and Neverfall was hit repeatedly, thrown backwards under the hail of fire.

Paddock gasped when he saw this and when he looked at the vehicle he saw the gunner turning the heavy stubber towards him. However, before he could fire the gunner suddenly fell backwards with a hole in his chest and Paddock turned towards the river again to see Lumfoot and Roundstone standing on top of the dirt wall around the camp.

"Run lad! We'll cover you." Lumfoot called out and Paddock began to drag the vox case towards them. With the ratlings' position known more enemy troops were converging on them and las blasts flew past Paddock as he dragged the vox case behind, struggling under the weight. Lumfoot and Roundstone continued to lay down covering fire with their sniper rifles and one enemy soldier after another fell dead. It was only this that prevented Paddock from being chased down and the vox case taken from him.

"You're almost there. Keep going lad." Lumfoot shouted as Paddock neared the end of the barrier where it met the river.

Paddock looked up at the barrier in front of him to see Roundstone leaning over and holding out his hand to help the young ratling up. However, before Paddock could take the corporal's hand there was a flash of light as a burst from a las gun hit Roundstone and he fell from the top of the barrier, his body landing at Paddock's feet.

"You'll have to climb lad." Lumfoot said as he shot Roundstone's killer and Paddock began to scale the dirt barrier, pressing his fingers into it as he dragged himself up the side.

All of a sudden there was an explosion as someone fired a grenade launcher at the ratlings. The round flew over the abhumans and landed in the river before it went off but the blast still sprayed both Lumfoot and Paddock with water.

Paddock was almost at the top of the barrier by this point and Lumfoot reached down to help him up, pulling him onto the flat top and then helping to drag the case up after him.

"Good work lad." Lumfoot said, "Now let's-" but before he could finish there was another explosion as a grenade landed close by and both ratlings were thrown from the wall into the nearby river.

Paddock's arms and legs flailed as he landed in the water and immediately began to sink. He had been taught to swim of course, as had the vast majority of Imperial Guardsmen. However, those lessons had not counted on him being weighed down by all of his equipment. He stopped sinking though when the strap connecting him to the vox case went taught. When closed the case was air tight and this meant that it acted

like a floatation device, limiting how deep he could sink. Struggling to release his rifle and as much of his other equipment as he could Paddock suddenly saw Lumfoot appear in front of him and for a moment he thought that the sergeant had come to save him from drowning. However, his hopes were dashed when he saw the cloud of red billowing out of Lumfoot's neck as he looked into the sergeant's lifeless eyes and Paddock realised that the other ratling had been killed by the grenade, probably dead before he hit the water. The strong river current carried Paddock and Lumfoot away from one another as Paddock continued to try and get rid of the equipment weighing him down and he had just managed to undo the sling of his rifle before everything went dark.

"Tempestor!" one of the tempestus scions called out when the optics in his helmet picked up an object, "There's a body by the water."

"One of ours?" the leader of the elite squad of Imperial troops responded.

"Looks like a child." the scion said as he walked closer to the river before seeing the waterlogged uniform, "Wait, it's a ratling."

The five man squad began to converge on where the river had washed Paddock to the muddy shore and the man who had seen him first crouched down to roll him over.

"Is he alive?" the tempestor asked.

"No, drowned by the looks of it." the scion replied before he noticed the strap still wrapped around Paddock that led to the vox case that was now coated in mud, "There's something else. A case."

"What's in it trooper?" the tempestor said as the other soldiers gathered around the first and he opened the case to expose the equipment inside. The moment the case was opened the vox set inside activated, displaying frequency settings and letting the scions hear the sound of the signals it was picking up.

"It's a vox set." one of the scions said.

"Those aren't our signals though. This ratling captured an enemy vox. This will let High Command listen in on everything they say." the tempestor added.

"I wonder who he was." the first scion commented, looking down at Paddock's body.

"I'll tell you who he was." a stern voice said from behind the tempestus scions and a man in a long black coat and peaked cap marked with the Imperial aquila strode between them before closing the vox case and unhooking its strap so he could pick it up, "He was a hero of the Imperium."