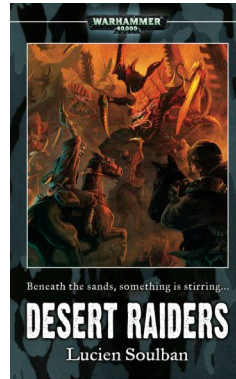


DESERT RAIDERS

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Lucien Soulban

A regiment of Tallarn Desert Raiders is sent to investigate a mysterious distress call from the desert world of Khadar, a planet with no Imperial presence and no signs of life. When the regiment becomes stranded and supplies run low, the Imperial Guard begin to fracture under murderous tribal rivalries. Can they save themselves before the secrets of Khadar and the emergence of a numberless xenos foe wipe them out?



About the Author

Lucien Soulban has authored and co-written over 90 roleplay supplements, and has helped launch three roleplay games. He wrote the script for Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War and Winter Assault computer games. He currently works as a script writer for videogame giant Ubisoft Montreal.

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THE SEARING WINDS rattled bones, while black-hulled troop carriers disgorged Guardsmen. The soldiers wore calf-length puttees, webbing with canteens, battle-pack bags and shelter quarter rolls. They wrapped their weapons in swaddling cloth and protected their faces in kafiyas and blast-oculars. Many soldiers scooped up a handful of sand or knelt down to kiss the earth before scrambling back into formation.

Turk watched the Guardsmen, like ghosts in the storm, file past the Chimera's armoured visors before directing his attention back to the others. The chatter inside the command Chimera was loud, partly to be heard over the thunderous din, but mostly, just to be heard. The Chimera was cramped compared to the more open HQ Salamanders, used for this exact purpose, and it was a speck's shadow in relation to the mammoth command Leviathans used during major offensives. For the Tallarn regiment, it was the best they could muster, especially since the open-topped Salamanders proved less than useful in desert campaigns.

Along the Chimera's back wall sat a bank of auspex devices, rune-plates, a vox-transmitter, a small holocaster, and two operators. Nisri and Turk stood hunched over behind the operators, each accompanied by their respective and immediate subordinates. They motioned to an iron-framed brass plate mounted on the wall. The brass plate was acid-etched with the soft contours of local cartography. The subordinates spoke, while Nisri and Turk remained silent, and studied one another in quick glances.

‘We should pitch camp here,’ Major Alef Hussari said, indicating an area of rippled lines. Alef appeared as weathered as the map, his wrinkles carved into his dark brown skin. His bushy goatee hid his mouth and seemed to dance, almost comically to his words. ‘The dunes will shelter our tents.’

‘The dunes migrate,’ Sergeant Ballasra said.

‘It’s sand, not water,’ Hussari countered. ‘The dunes won’t drown us.’

‘They may,’ Ballasra said. ‘Many dunes are even on both sides. Their faces might collapse.’

‘Possibly,’ Nisri said, stroking his chin, ‘but that’s not what concerns me. We’ll pitch here,’ he said indicating a small plateau. ‘This will protect us from this sea of sand, and that dune pressed against it will be our ramp.’ He pointed to the snaking contour of an ancient riverbed at the base of the plateau. ‘With the riverbed protecting our backs, we can see for kilometres in all directions.’

‘On the plateau?’ Turk asked, impatience skirting the edges of his temper.

‘We’re exposed. The tents—’ Hussari began.

‘We will not stay in tents,’ Nisri responded. ‘We will build an outpost with defensible walls and turrets.’

Hussari raised an eyebrow, but swallowed his words. By Turk’s reaction, he shared Hussari’s disbelief.

‘An outpost?’ Turk asked. ‘Our strength lies in our mobility. You’re talking about penning us in a cage.’

‘I’m talking about protecting us,’ Nisri said. ‘Some enemies you cannot outrun. They are a flood that will overtake you. Your best hope is to let their tide break around the rocks of your shores.’

‘Tyranids,’ Turk said. ‘You’re talking about your fight at the Absolomay Crush.’

Nisri said nothing, but Ballasra nodded.

‘With respect,’ Turk said, ‘by placing us on a landmark, you make it easier for rangefinders to target us with artillery.’

‘What artillery?’ Nisri said, shaking his head. He tapped one of the auspex operators on the shoulder. ‘Have the fleet’s cogitators

found any sign of life yet? An army? Machines? Flint arrows? Anything?’

The operator shook his head. ‘Auspex are clean so far.’

‘There you have it,’ Nisri said.

‘And the transmission?’ Turk asked. ‘Someone sent the mortis-cry. Someone died here.’

‘The word of the mind witches,’ Nisri said. A look of displeasure eclipsed his features. ‘Who knows what they saw, or why they claim to have seen in. There’s no sign of life here and the dunes stretch to the horizons. Even if an army hides here, no artillery can navigate the dunes easily. We make our base on the plateau. That is my order.’

Turk bit his tongue, but it was difficult to keep it coiled in his mouth. He felt foolish; he knew the artillery argument was weak the moment he raised it, but he was eager to dissuade Nisri from his decision. An uncomfortable moment passed, long enough for everyone to exchange wary glances. ‘As you wish,’ Turk said finally, biting down on his words.

‘Now,’ Nisri said, barely acknowledging Turk’s bitter acquiescence, ‘on to the matter of the patrols.’

COMMISSAR REZAIL NAVIGATED past the crates and boxes, the soldiers, and the packs of baying dromads and muukali. Chaos had overtaken the plateau, but at least Rezail’s tinted oculars and rebreather mask protected him against the dusty winds. Several kilometres away, transports and troop carriers continued to labour skyward, further agitating the storm.

Tyrell, meanwhile, pointed out the various members of the expedition. The first man to earn description was Duf’adar Nab’l Sarish, a lanky man with ropes for muscles, dark brown leather for skin, and an untamed beard and moustache. He wore a bandolier across his chest and two laspistols at his belt. Sarish pulled at the reins of a mottled dromad that complained and snapped. With its long neck and skinny legs, thick bristles of hair, humps and hooked snout, it was a creature alien to Rezail’s experiences. Sarish gripped its reins tight and yanked the beast along.

‘Duf’adar?’ Rezail asked. ‘That means sergeant, correct?’

‘In a manner, but do not tell him that,’ Tyrell responded.

‘Duf’adar Sarish is a Sen’tach rider. They are a very proud people, very stubborn. Sergeant means servant, yes? And they are no man’s servant.’

‘We are all servants of the Emperor,’ Rezail said. ‘So the rank of Duf’adar is equal to sergeant, but nobody calls them that, correct?’

‘Yes, commissar. Duf’adar Sarish tends to our riding animals and teaches us how to shoot at full gallop. He is an accomplished marksman.’

Rezail nodded. ‘Excellent, but there is one thing I find confusing. Tallarn was viral bombed, yes? Sulphuric and rust deserts from the decomposing corpses of a million tanks.’

‘Yes, commissar,’ Tyrell responded, a faint smile on his lips.

‘You are wondering why our people need pack animals? Tallarn is a wasteland, but our sheltered undergrounds are a vast network of tunnels as great as any hive-world. We also have a sister planet, two systems away, Ibanna Tallarn. The princes of the various tribes grow and train their herds there.’

‘Why?’

‘Livestock is the privilege of the truly wealthy, commissar. The princes have great estates on Ibanna Tallarn, and they train their riders there.’

‘Is this sister world of yours free of tribal friction?’

‘No, commissar,’ Tyrell said as he shook his head. ‘No place is free of it.’

TURK NODDED TO THE commissar as Tyrell gave him the tour of the camp. The battalion commander arrived at a small tent and entered without knocking. The stench of fuel and pack animals seemed instantly forgotten, overtaken by the scent of oil and freshly crushed jasmine. The censers added a pleasant haze, but the cot and regulation gear were otherwise standard issue.

‘This is opulent,’ Turk said, half-entering, making sure the tent flap remained open, to avoid any suggestion of impropriety. He

locked eyes with the woman who sat on the cot. She stood slowly, uncertain and nodded. Her black hair curled at her shoulders and her thick, black lashes swept him into her almond-shaped, black eyes. Red henna tattoos with florid curls covered the backs of her hands and the lower half of her face. She wore loose robes, and a psychic hood made from bulwark plates, haemorrhage valves, a focusing visor and sheathed cable bundles rested next to her, to help focus her powers as the unit's sanctioned mind witch.

'Colonel Nisri Dakar is a conservative man. It's best I not be around the men, battalion commander,' the woman said. 'It wouldn't be good for their morale.'

'Battalion Commander Turk Iban Salid. It is only fair you should know my name, Kamala Noore.'

She nodded. 'Of course. How may I serve a prince of the Banna?'

'Have you... sensed anything yet?'

'If a psyker died on this world, then the winds swept his cries away. I sense nothing. It's as if we're alone in the most terrible way possible.'

'I'll expect a full report later,' Turk said. He paused, saying nothing, but remaining at the door.

'Yes, battalion commander?' Kamala said, apparently uncertain how to act around Turk.

'If you were Banna, you would receive better treatment than this,' Turk said. 'You are blessed, an instrument of the Emperor.'

'And you are idol-worshippers according to the Turenag,' she whispered.

'The Orakle is the Emperor's voice. We do not worship him. He is an astropath and he guides us: a saint keeping us on the Emperor's road.'

Kamala smiled and her face seemed to blossom. Turk almost gasped at the sudden and honest beauty in her features.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'but your men fear me as much as the Turenag. I've seen them ward themselves when I pass.'

'Our fear is respect. You could have a place of honour among my people, a consort to the Orakle perhaps?'

‘And the blood spilt between our two people?’

‘What the sand drinks, the Banna still remember. I won’t deny that.’

‘As do the Turenag. Oh trust me, I know,’ Kamala said. ‘It’s all I can see on everyone’s mind.’

‘How close are we?’ Turk asked softly, taking a step inside, the tent flap kept open by the whisper of his fingertips. ‘How close to bloodshed?’

‘Very close. I can taste iron on the winds. The men would gladly spill their enemies’ blood.’

‘Who will start it?’

‘It has started already,’ Kamala said, her smile retreating. Her eyes seemed to fall away.

‘What of you, then?’ Turk asked. ‘Where do you stand? Should I fear you?’

Kamala smiled, the question anticipated. ‘You already fear me, sir,’ Kamala said, each word spoken with some pain. ‘But Banna or Turenag, I serve the 892nd. I serve the Emperor to my dying thoughts.’

‘Thank you,’ Turk replied. ‘I’ll expect your report in an hour.’

Day One: Hour Nine

THE CAMP WAS ONLY hours old and still in turmoil when the planet’s whispers turned into a steady howl that drove thick drifts of sand across the dunes. The horizon was already a deep orange, a sure omen of the storm’s power, and the fleet had stopped the supply drops for the night. The Guardsmen didn’t have time to erect storm walls or to dig trenches; instead, they lashed down the supply containers using gas-powered nail-pumps to secure the cargo netting before running for cover. The dozen or so vehicles were already parked at the foot of the plateau, facing away from the storm, and several platoons lay sheltered behind their treads.

Colonel Dakar tightened the kafiya around his face and adjusted his blast-oculars. He stumbled towards the command Chimera, which had already extended its snort mast high into the dusty air. If the storm buried the vehicle under a lake of sand, the collapsible

snorkel tube would be the only thing saving the crew from certain suffocation, and it would indicate to other Guardsmen where to dig. Nisri grimaced and entered the coffin. Being buried was the worst part of these storms, if one discounted being caught outside by the flaying winds. Nisri silently wished his own men good luck tonight, and hoped the storm would take some of Turk's soldiers.

MAJOR WAHID ANLEEL trudged through the maze of cargo containers, pulling at locked doors and cursing a dozen epithets against the storm. Anleel's men, 1st Company, were scattered somewhere in these stifling steel boxes. The storm, however, tore at his clothing and threw drifts of sand at his feet. He needed shelter, and he needed it now.

Anleel spotted a raised snort mast in the near distance. All Tallarn regiment containers were equipped with such devices, and functioned as emergency shelters. Unfortunately, the regiment's new quartermaster had only opened and unloaded a handful of containers before the storm had overtaken them.

Anleel stumbled towards the cargo container. Half-buried metal crates lay scattered outside its door, probably supplies thrown out to make room for more refugees inside. A black, carbonised flash mark from a laspistol marked the demise of the door's missing padlock: not the quartermaster's standard key, but Anleel was grateful for someone else's initiative. He touched the door and yelped at the nasty jolt of static electricity. His entire arm jerked and cramped. He shook his hand, freeing it of the tingling.

He opened the door, and then quickly shut it against the protest of the winds outside and the huddled men inside. With a grateful gasp, he removed his oculars and kafiya.

'You're not one of us,' a voice said.

Anleel spun around and put his back to the door. He faced two-dozen men, all unfamiliar to him, all hostile, all rival tribesmen belonging to the Turenag. Some had drawn their long scimitars.

'You're not welcome here, dog,' a voice said from the darkness. 'Leave while you have the legs for it.'

‘The storm outside–’ Anleel said, stammering. ‘You cannot refuse a man protection from the desert – Colonel Dakar and Battalion Commander Iban Salid... they shared salt.’

‘That is why we’re letting you leave alive.’

Anleel studied their faces before pulling his oculars back down and yanking the kafiya over his face. He backed out of the door, pushing against the drifts piled against the container, and vanished into the howling storm. He was completely turned around, uncertain which direction offered safety. His best hope was to stay near the cargo containers. He stumbled away, one arm against the corrugated walls as a guide.

A flash of light pulsed by Anleel and was swallowed by the storm. He barely had time to turn before a second laspistol beam caught him on the shoulder and cooked the wound. Anleel tried to scream, but his kafiya slipped off his chin, and sand rushed in to choke him. Two more shots punched him in the chest, both white hot, both cooking and cauterising flesh, muscle and bone.

Anleel collapsed face first into the sand. Two Guardsmen swathed against the storm grabbed him by the armpits and pushed his body over the plateau’s edge. The wind and sand took care of the rest.

CAPTAIN BER’NAM TORIA of C Platoon was exhausted. He was searching for Major Anleel, who’d failed to report back to his company. When Anleel was nowhere to be found among the containers, Toria ventured down to the base of the plateau to search the vehicles. Foolish of him, he knew, but the storm made vox chatter impossible, and now he was alone, lost and turned around, his compass useless.

Toria’s legs were iron bundles. The fatigue settled in with a deep ache that burned at the wick of his muscles. His shins sank into the loose sand, and it was growing harder to pull them out. He’d heard something about the properties of the desert, how the sandstorm generated an electric charge. He didn’t understand mechanical crafts, specifically why they affected his compass or the voxes, or even friction, but he was told they did. So there he was, in

sand drifts that seemed more liquid than solid as they almost parted beneath his feet. It cost him more in energy to pull his feet out than it did for his weight to push them down.

In the distance, over the howling winds, a crack of electricity snapped and lit the murky air. Captain Toria had never seen lightning without storm clouds, and the notion that air could generate a charge from nothing frightened him. He stumbled forward, crying out for someone, anyone. More electricity bit at the air in the furthest glooms, coming from the same direction as the last two blasts of lightning.

Toria hesitated. It was hard to think; the fatigue had numbed him, and even the storm's sting was too distant to wake him. He shook his head. Think, he muttered. Why would lightning strike the same area? Something was attracting the electricity, something constant in the storm. It was his only landmark. Static lightning be damned, Toria didn't intend to drown in this dusty sea. He lurched forward, burning through the last rush of adrenaline, forcing his feet to make one step after another.

Too far, it was too far. Toria stumbled and fell forward. The sand swallowed his arms past the elbows. His knees sank and dragged him down to his waist. His face hovered centimetres above the sand, his strength fading, his leverage gone. He tried pushing up, but he sank further. He cried out, but the winds smothered his voice. The struggle to be free pulled him down another deep centimetre. He fought harder, panic overtaking reason, rational thought all but gone. Toria grunted and whined like an animal facing death.

Another few centimetres, and Toria would be drinking sand. His limbs quaked at the exertion, and he moaned softly.

'In or out, boy?' a voice asked, shouting over the wind. 'I can push you in if you've surrendered; make it easier for you to die.'

'Help,' Toria shouted. He could barely see the man out of the corner of his oculars, but he struggled against the sand.

'Out it is.' Someone's arm looped under Toria's armpit and struggled to pull him up. 'Work with me, boy, I'm too old to lift you.'

One arm came free, and then another. In a moment, Toria was standing again, his heart pounding and rattling his senses. His vision swam with fatigue, and the head rush almost tipped him over again. He allowed his rescuer to pull him along.

Moments later, they arrived at a full-track lorry that was buried up to its lower road wheels in sand. A faint bluish light flickered and jumped at the treads, sprockets and rollers; the static electricity was expending itself, the sand no longer as frictionless. The man pushed Toria up the access steps despite the minor jolts that shocked them both. Toria collapsed in the cabin's seat while his rescuer sat in the driver's seat. The engine was running and the air gauzers cleared away most of the interior dust.

'Thank you,' Toria managed, stripping off the kafiya and leather chamfron wrapped around his helmet. He was olive-skinned, his nose aquiline.

His rescuer nodded. 'You're lucky I saw you,' he said tapping the night vision periscope attached to the ceiling before unwrapping his kafiya. He was old, with a full growth of frosted hair that glowed against his nutmeg dark skin and elaborate, looping tribal scars spread across his chin.

A jolt shot through Toria. His rescuer was Turenag, his markings those of one of their chief tribe, the D'Shouf.

'You're Turenag,' Toria said.

'I couldn't tell which tribe you belonged to,' the man admitted. 'But, curse my father for raising me right, I would have saved you either way.'

'I thought all Turenag blood ran hot at the thought of killing us.'

'Not mine,' the man said. He leaned in close, the glimmer of a mischievous smirk on his lips. 'My blood is ice cold, boy. Would you care for a sip?'

Toria smiled despite himself. 'No,' he said, drawing up his canteen, 'I have my own water.' He tilted the bottle towards the D'Shouf tribesman. 'Not as cold as yours, though. Have some.'

The old man shook his head. 'Thank you, no.' He revved the engine of the lorry and pushed the steering lever forward. 'I have to

keep her out of the sand. Another minute and I wouldn't have seen you at all.'

'Captain Toria, 1st Company, C Platoon.'

'Captain Qal Abantu, Armoured Support.'

Toria grinned. 'We have armoured support?'

Both men started laughing.

'Barely, boy,' Abantu replied, 'barely.'

It was the last thing Toria heard before he fell fast asleep.

Day Two: Hour Ten

THE STORM WAS A day old and still pitching its fit. The interior of the command Chimera had grown stale and humid on body sweat, and a crackling voice filled the interior. From the wash of hard static, a few words floated through the cacophony.

Immediate – Forced – Althera Beta – 892nd – Orbit – Weeks

One of the two auspex operators continued fiddling with the knobs on the vox, trying to fine tune it. The voice was heavily distorted, the bursts of static haemorrhaging through the signal.

'Can you decipher it?' Nisri asked.

Corrupted – Anchor – More – Hives – Sector Lord

The operator shook his head. 'It's the storm. She dirties the air and wreaks havoc with communications.'

'I've heard worse,' the other operator replied. 'On Canimos Prime, the static discharge was enough to kill a man. But, this is the best we can get, sir.'

The vox warbled in response.

Alert – Command – Light of – Unable to – Estimated, two –

'I've heard that before,' the fair-haired Sergeant Raham said, straightening up in his seat. 'That sentence fragment, I heard it before.'

'Confirmed, sir,' one of the operators replied. 'The transmission is looping.'

Supplies – Time – Munitorum – Location – Convine

'I heard Convine,' the second operator said. 'Isn't that a hive?'

'I heard hive mentioned before,' Raham said.

‘Why would they be sending us a looped transmission?’ Nisri muttered.

Expedite supplies – Weigh – Unable to – Two.

‘They may have been trying to reach us for several hours, sir,’ the second operator replied. ‘The interference varies. This is the clearest window we’ve had in a few hours.’

‘Fine,’ Nisri said, annoyed. ‘Keep listening, start piecing the transmission together. Raham, I need your ears on this.’

Nisri and Raham gathered around the vox-caster while the two operators collected message strings and transcribed them to a data-slate. The words slowly clustered together into sentences.

Alert ground forces Khadar, 892nd Command.

They switched words out...

The Convine Manufactorum Hives on Althera Beta have turned against the Light of the Emperor.

...and back in again, like a grammatical puzzle.

All Imperial forces required to respond by order of Sector Lord General Behemot.

The sentences flowed together...

Fleet immediately weighing anchor to respond to call.

...some more easily than others...

Unable to send more supplies for the time being.

...until finally, the truth stood out.

Will request Departmento Munitorum expedite supplies to your location, estimated, two months.

Nisri’s eyes widened. ‘When was the message sent? When?’

The operators scrambled, trying to find a time-stamp in the transmission.

‘About seven hours ago,’ one replied, ‘probably more.’

‘Transmission source confirmed to be a satellite relay,’ the other responded.

‘That puts them outside the system,’ Raham said.

‘They’ve already left,’ Nisri said, falling back into his seat.

‘But it’s only two months,’ Raham replied. ‘They sent us enough supplies for that.’

Nisri shook his head. ‘They sent us the wrong supplies, sergeant, and the storm prevented them correcting their mistake! Get me the quartermaster on vox. We need to find out how much trouble we’re in.’

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