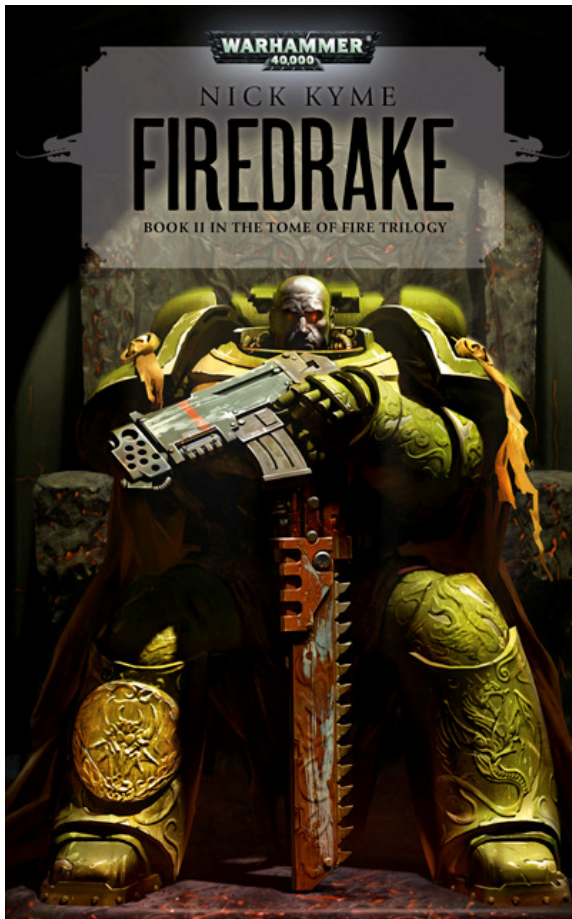


BLACK LIBRARY



FIRE Drake

A Salamanders novel

By Nick Kyme

When Chaplain Elysus of the Salamanders is taken captive by Dark Eldar, he faces a fight for survival at the hands of these cruel aliens. The Firedrakes of 1st Company attempt a daring rescue mission, but much more is at stake than the Chaplain's life. He holds the key to secrets buried beneath Mount Deathfire, secrets that could reveal the damnation – or salvation – of their home world. The Salamanders must penetrate the Port of Anguish and defeat the xenos threat there if they are to unveil the mysteries within the Tome of Fire. Meanwhile, Dak'ir battles to survive the brutal Librarian training, and in his visions lies an even darker future...

About the author

Nick Kyme is a writer and editor. He lives in Nottingham where he began a career at Games Workshop on White Dwarf magazine. Now Black Library's Senior Range Editor, Nick's writing credits include the Warhammer 40,000 Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders, his Warhammer Fantasy-based dwarf novels and several short stories. Read his blog at www.nickkyme.com



• **BY THE SAME AUTHOR** •

• **THE TOME OF FIRE** •

SALAMANDER
FIRE Drake

• **DWARFS** •

HONOURKEEPER
OATHBREAKER

• **EMPIRE ARMY** •

GRIMBLADES

The following is an excerpt from *Firedrake* by Nick Kyme. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Copyright © Games Workshop Ltd, 2010. All rights reserved. Reproduction prohibited, in any form, including on the internet.

For more details or to contact us visit the Black Library website: www.blacklibrary.com.

I Sigils and Portents

VULKAN HE'STAN OBSERVED the pict-captures with careful detachment.

The image on the viewscreen was rendered in grainy monochrome on account of the extreme weather wracking the surface of Nocturne far below. Auspex readers within Prometheus's superstructure gathered the data from picters arrayed in closeted bunkers within the threshold of the Sanctuary Cities. Even in the void of space high above, Nocturne's elite guardians could still keep watch over their fragile world.

Their fragile and volatile world.

The Time of Trial was ending and an arctic winter seized Nocturne in its icy fist. Where once there had been ash plains, now there was snowy tundra; where previously geysers of steam had vented across the rocky plateaus, now placid streams of vapour drifted wistfully on a chill breeze. In the mountain ranges the volcanoes were like vast beacons, illuminating the grey-white fog of drifts and ice flurries. Wreathed with smoky effusions, it was as if the calderas of the fire-peaks were dragons of myth slumbering beneath the snow and rock, their maws pointing to a smothered grey sky.

Even Mount Deathfire – the largest of all the volcanoes – was quiescent, content to wane in the wake of her explosive fury during the Time of Trial.

Across the surface of Nocturne, the Sanctuary Cities had closed their gates and engaged their void shields. Anyone beyond their walls now would be in the lap of Vulkan. Against the anvil they would be tested – re-forged or broken. It was the way of the Promethean Cult.

A long trail of nomads, having trekked across the frozen floes of the Acerbian Sea, caught He'stan's attention as they closed on a gnorl-whale held fast in the ice. They carried barbed harpoons and encircled it with a hungry predator's disregard. Sustenance was scarce when Nocturne's fire ebbed. Many of the indigenous lizards and saurians were hibernating in the caves. The Ignean tribesfolk would already be fighting a bitter war against the restive ones for food and warmth.

Such was the planet's way of excising the weak and promoting the strong. It was a hard culture but one He'stan respected for its purity.

Such a fragile existence, he thought, feeling the plight of the people as his own. *I have been away from it for too long.*

'Harvest will begin soon in earnest. A few more months and the hillsides and mountains, the thawing lakes and the fringes of the lava flows will be full of Nocturneans.'

He'stan felt Tu'Shan's presence beside him, rather than saw him. The Chapter Master had a singular aura about him, a sense of the indomitable that He'stan had never felt in any other Salamander. He had been young when he'd assumed the mantle of Regent, but it was one he wore with great nobility and distinction. No two greater champions of the Chapter existed in the current

decaying age of the universe. He'stan felt great pride but also profound sorrow at that revelation.

'The ice will recede, the mountains will weep, Deathfire shall speak her rumbling refrain once more,' He'stan said. He'd removed his battle-helm, a beautiful piece of his artificer armour rendered with saurian affectations and artistic flourishes. Underneath it, his face was sombre and grave. 'I am the bearer of Vulkan's Spear and I wear Kesare's Mantle,' he said. 'Upon my left fist is the Gauntlet of the Forge, but it is nothing matched against our mother's fiery heart. What is the will of a Forgefather or a Regent compared to that?'

It was at He'stan's request that they'd come to one of the viewing galleries in Prometheus space port. The long chamber was dark, illuminated by brazier coals. The flickering light revealed the icon of the Firedrakes as they pulled the shadows away, only for it to be swallowed as the darkness reasserted itself again a few moments later.

'Aye, we are humbled by her savage beauty, Lord He'stan.' Tu'Shan clapped a firm hand upon the Forgefather's shoulder.

For He'stan it was an odd sensation. He had been apart from his brothers for a long time. His quest for the lost artefacts of Vulkan had taken him to the edges of known space, to sights he would not describe and deeds he would never speak of. To them, his Fire-born kin, he was an enigma, a distant figure whose ways were inscrutable. It was no small thing to return. Something great and terrible had drawn him back. The signs as related in the Tome of Fire had led him to this point, to this temporal epoch.

He'stan turned his eyes away from the pict-viewer. The grainy feed had worsened on account of the weather on the planet far below, but he had seen well enough.

'You had best take me to it, brother,' he said at last.

'It's not far,' Tu'Shan replied. 'Follow me, brother.'

THE ARMOUR HAD been moved to a vault annexed to the Pantheon Chamber. So esoteric, so ancient and inscrutable were the sigils upon them that Tu'Shan needed the Tome of Fire close at hand to study them properly. That had been three years ago, ever since the 3rd had returned from Scoria.

They were standing in the sacred chamber now, the circular temple at the heart of Prometheus that contained the Tome of Fire. Volume upon volume of the mythic text lined its walls. It was supplemented by scrolls, charts, artistic renderings, well-crafted arcana and other, even stranger, objects. All wrought by the primarch's hand. Some had even been written in his deific blood.

Though shrouded in gloom, iconic representations of anvils, drake heads, great serpents and the eternal flame were still visible. Carved into vast menhirs of volcanic obsidian they shimmered wanly in the light from the low-burning torches that punctuated the room at precise intervals. Their glow also described the edge of eighteen granite thrones. Only vaunted members of the Pantheon Council were permitted to sit upon them. Seldom in the Salamander's long history had they ever been full. Deliberations of the utmost importance were conducted in this hallowed room, matters that affected the entire Chapter and, prior to that, the Legion.

The induction of the first Forgefather, the defection of the Warmaster, counting the cost of the aftermath at

Isstvan, the disappearance of Vulkan – all had been weighed and measured by the Pantheon Council.

These seats, each bearing sigils that represented the role and position of its incumbent, followed the curve of the room. Each was positioned at the same height and no one was larger or more grandiose than another. Here, the Lords of the Salamanders were equals.

He'stan eyed his own seat, a place that had long remained empty amongst the council, and felt the longing for brotherhood return just as it had as when he'd docked at Prometheus.

'Forgefather...' said Tu'Shan, as if replying to his deepest thoughts.

A low grinding of gears and servos invaded the quietude as the Chapter Master unlocked and opened the vault appended to the chamber.

One of the menhirs, a lustrous chunk of hard obsidian, rolled away to reveal the vault door and behind that the inner sanctum itself.

Within, there stood the armour suits reclaimed from the bowels of Scoria, arrayed as they had been in Tu'Shan's throne room.

He'stan stepped into the room, drawn almost against his will to the artefacts before him. 'Ancient...' he breathed, reaching out to touch one of the archaic suits of power armour. It was gloomy in the chamber and the low red lume-light covered it with a bloody cast.

The armour was Salamander, no question – the iconography and design attested to that. But it was of a darker hue and crafted during a halcyon age.

'From the Great Crusade, brother,' said Tu'Shan, standing alongside him, 'and the Age of Darkness that followed.'

He'stan's voice barely reached above a whisper.

‘Our darkest hour...’

‘At Isstvan,’ uttered Tu’Shan.

He’stan met the Chapter Master’s fiery gaze, ‘At Isstvan.’

Both knew and felt keenly the fell deeds of the Dropsite Massacre when the then-Legion had been all but destroyed by traitors in their midst. The violent ripples of it were still felt by the Chapter, almost ten thousand years later.

Allowing a moment of introspection to pass, He’stan asked, ‘What have you learned?’

Tu’Shan frowned, scrutinising the symbols engraved onto the armour. Each individual suit carried a piece of a greater mystery. Alone, the marks were scratches, war-scars that held no intrinsic meaning; together, and when viewed from a certain angle with the eyes of one with sufficient wit to see it, they contained a piece of prophecy.

As of yet, Tu’Shan had been unable to decipher it.

‘That the answer lies within the Tome of Fire. We were led to Scoria by the hand of Vulkan, Forgefather, of that I am sure.’

‘And this was our father’s intent, to furnish us with this shrouded wisdom?’

‘I believe so, yes.’

‘Was there anything else?’ Now He’stan regarded the armour suits up close. Denuded of the bodies they once contained they were wraith-like and cold. Ghosts lived in those ceramite husks now, ghosts and dead memories.

‘Only this...’ Tu’Shan activated a rune-plate in the vault wall. A circular crack appeared in the metal floor of the chamber and the air filled with a dense pressure cloud around it. When it dispersed, a silver column with a force-fielded dome surmounting it had emerged from a

compartment beneath the vault. In the crackling field there was a progenoid gland, held within an armourcrys vial and suspended in some kind of amniotic solution.

‘The fluid within the vial keeps it from necrotising?’

‘Apothecary Fugis manufactured it himself, before he took the Burning Walk.’

A raised eyebrow betrayed He’stan’s interest in the taking of the spiritual path into the desert. He had often wondered if such a journey would reveal anything of his own destiny.

‘Whose is it?’ He’stan asked.

Tu’Shan stepped closer to regard it, as if drawing his answer from proximity to the vial. ‘An ancient warrior of the Legio – Gravius was his name.’

He’stan turned sharply to regard his Chapter Master.

‘He lived? After ten thousand years?’

‘It would seem so, but his mind was shattered, crammed with the thoughts and memories of all of his brothers.’ Tu’Shan encompassed the array of power armour in a single sweeping gesture of his arm.

‘Incredible...’ He’stan breathed. He scrutinised the suits. ‘I recognise this passage,’ he said. ‘These sigils are familiar to me, Regent.’

Tu’Shan’s pensive silence bade the Forgefather continue.

‘Phrases and subtleties of meaning are lost to me, I suspect only the primarch could discern them, but there is reference to the *Ferro Ignis* here.’

‘The “Fire Sword”,’ Tu’Shan translated. ‘It is a doom prophecy. I’ve heard of it, but never seen it rendered in this form.’

He’stan ran his gauntleted finger reverently over one of the sigil fragments engraved on a vambrace. ‘Sigil-dialect is old. The ancient Nocturnean earth shamans

used it back when the world was young and our Sanctuary Cities were plains of rock and circles of stone. It was this language that led me to recover one of the Nine.’ He’stan brandished the Gauntlet of the Forge.

‘I see more...’ He’stan added and read aloud, “*“A low-born, one of the earth...”*”

“*“... Will pass through the gate of fire. He will be our doom or salvation,”*” Tu’Shan concluded.

He’stan met the Chapter Master’s formidable gaze. ‘You know who this warrior is, don’t you?’

Tu’Shan nodded.

‘His name is Dak’ir.’

He’stan turned back to the prophecy.

‘And where is Brother Dak’ir now?’

‘Vel’cona has him.’

That admission gave He’stan pause but he masked it expertly.

Tu’Shan continued.

‘He’s below Nocturne, training under the tutelage of the Librarian.’

‘This Dak’ir, he was the one that led us to Scoria, wasn’t he?’

‘He was.’

‘And he’s powerful, too, isn’t he?’

‘Very. The Chief of Librarians has never seen such potency in a student.’

He’stan’s voice dropped to a low murmur as his great mind turned over the permutations of everything he was learning, ‘*Doom or saviour, indeed...*’

II Trial by Fire

DAK’IR’S WORLD WAS consumed by fire.

He knew there was rock at his feet because he could feel it, but he couldn't see it. Even through the retinal display of his battle-helm an impenetrable fog of smoke and drifting ash smothered the view. Flashes of fire tinged the grey pall a deep orange, and temperature spikes on the systems of his power armour that were still functioning relayed intolerable levels of heat and radiation.

Vaguely, he was aware he was crouched down. It was possible he'd passed out for a few moments. For a second, the gauntleted hand that he used to brace against a jagged spur of rock looked strange to him. Through the occluding smog he could just discern its outline and hue. Salamander green had changed to royal blue. Then he remembered. *I am no longer a sergeant...*

He was a Librarian. The colour of his armour signified that and his covenant with the order; the icons inscribed onto his battle-plate his lowly station within it.

Breathing came hard. Even through the helm's respirator, Dak'ir tasted cinder and raw daggers of heat. Pain-killing drugs flooded his body, damping the agony down his left side into a dull ache that only debilitated and no longer incapacitated.

Still, he needed a moment to marshal himself.

Rise, Lexicanum!

The voice was inside his head. Dak'ir wished he could take his force sword and cut it out of his cerebellum but even that wouldn't be an end to it.

Master the blade, the voice insisted. Use it! Arise now!

'I cannot!' Fire burned throughout his body; not the flames of the underworld cavern where Pyriel had left him to die, but fire from pain, from the grievous injuries the monster pursuing him had inflicted.

Dak'ir once believed only drakes prowled the humid depths of Nocturne. Now, his eyes had been opened.

Endure it, Salamander. This is nothing. You are a son of Vulkan.

A series of low vibrations resonated through the earth releasing geysers of scalding steam, and spilling dust and debris from the cavern roof above. Like arteries veining a body, lava plumes erupted from the mountain's craggy flesh, filling Dak'ir's world with light and heat.

A world consumed by fire.

Shadows and smoke shrank and coiled in the magma flare. Pools of liquid fire bubbled and spat like cruel laughter nearby. A heavier percussion interrupted the steady *thump* of the golem's approach. With his senses compromised, it was hard to gauge just how close and from what direction it came.

The cavern itself was long, but also wide and tall. Stalactites jutted from a craggy ceiling, only just visible at the summit of the smoky cloud. Dak'ir couldn't remember how he had got here. He recalled his initial encounter with the golem had gone badly. He had been forced to retreat, down, deep into the earth. Respite was brief. The monster had found him and this time there would be no escape.

He was weak, in mind and body. Strength he thought he possessed, after he had mastered the burning, was mocked by the onyx-black giant intent on his destruction. He knew that now to his cost.

I will die in this place, Dak'ir thought grimly, making a fist as the tremors jarred his wounded frame.

Tentatively, he felt the cracks spoiling his fresh-forged ceramite. They were wide and deep. Blackened by soot, seared by fire, blue paint so reverently applied

by the armour serfs chipped and worn, he would be broken by the time his body returned to the mountain.

Gripping the haft of his force sword, Dak'ir's fingers felt like spikes of unyielding stone. Tiny rivulets of lightning played across his knuckles as he tried to stir psychic energies into the blade.

Endure it! Pyriel's voice came again, hard and insistent across his head like a slap. *You are Salamander!*

Hard rain was falling onto Dak'ir's armour as the golem's footfalls loosened the rocks above. Fist-sized chunks of granite hitting his helmet forced him to stand. The drakescale cloak attached to his armour and falling beneath its power generator felt denser than before, like an iron anvil tethered to his neck.

Turning, Dak'ir closed his eyes and drew upon the burning. It had been over two years since he was first tested, since he had obliterated an ancient version of Nocturne in his dream-vision and nearly destroyed his mentor.

He harnessed the power, corralling it with a thought. The blade of the force sword ignited into conflagration. Beneath Dak'ir's feet, the ground shuddered.

It was close.

The heat, intense despite the arctic winter above, had masked the scent of anointing oils and sacred ash rubbed into his armour for a time, but it had cornered him now.

Dak'ir opened his eyes.

Standing under a hundred metres away, the golem was immense. The smoke and ash seemed to recoil from its presence, allowing Dak'ir to see the monstrous construct. It was over twice the Salamander's height and half again as broad. It was a man, or at least a simulacrum of one. Its skin was onyx-black from the volcanic basalt used

like clay to fashion it. Carved psychically by Pyriel's mind, it was a creation of utter perfection and terrifying beauty. The enhanced musculature was exhaustingly defined. Its noble countenance was hard but eerily humanoid. Its bald pate shone like jet, the reflected fire light swathing it in an orange sheen. And the eyes... they burned like captured pools of flame.

Pyriel had given it no weapons. It needed none. Two massive fists were hard enough to pound rock and ceramite to dust. A mere glancing blow had cracked Dak'ir's armour so brutally.

Two red orbs blazed through the smoky haze. Tendrils of it clung to the golem's brawny body as it parted the grey miasma like a leviathan emerging from the Acerbian Sea. Hollow, pitiless eyes regarded prey.

Death has come, Fire-born...

For such a massive creature, the golem was fast. It ate up the distance between them in long, earth-pounding strides.

Dak'ir braced himself as it gathered speed. It broke the longer stalactites as they scraped across its unyielding shoulders and smashed the columns of rock in its path aside. A juggernaut of impervious obsidian, nothing could stop it.

With the golem scant metres away Dak'ir swung his force sword in a wide arc, fire trailing from the blade, before unleashing its fury. White fire thrashed against the golem's bulky torso arresting its momentum abruptly and violently. It staggered, sending granite cascading from above with the sudden jerking motion. Psychic flames engulfed it, wrapping its obsidian body.

Still it pushed, and Dak'ir took a back step. The golem thrust out its chin defiantly, though no discomfort or effort altered its blank face. It drove into the storm,

matching its automaton's implacability against the fledgling Librarian's will.

Dak'ir fed more energy into the blade, marshalling his powers and attempting to master a weapon only more experienced Codiciers had any right to. He drew upon the burning, the well of nascent destructive potential within his core, and unleashed it.

Smoke, vapour and oxygen were devoured in an instant by the extreme heat. The backwash blistered Dak'ir's armour, sending warning icons flashing frantically over his retinal display. His arms ached with the effort of holding the blade aloft and directing its terrible fire against the golem.

Break. Damn. You, he willed.

But to no avail.

A massive fist loomed out of the blaze, wreathing in flickering bands. Flinging himself aside, Dak'ir narrowly avoided the blow. Behind him, the spur of rock he'd sheltered against was pulverised. Shards of it exploded against his armour. Several were embedded in the ceramite.

Beads of sweat were running down Dak'ir's face as he pulled himself up. Lances of agony skewered his side. He gritted his teeth. A chopping motion with the force sword sent an arc of fire into the golem, the beast turning when it realised its prey had eluded it.

Dak'ir might as well have used harsh words for all the damage he caused. He mustered two more psychic bolts, dragon-headed and surging on contrails of fire, before the monster swung again.

It came from the earth, moulded by fire... Pyriel's voice echoed inside his head.

Fighting just to breathe, Dak'ir didn't answer. He was moving again, dodging the overhead blow meant to

shatter his spine and end his life. Sheathing his blade, he concentrated on running through the cavern. Lava pools, smoking streams of fire went by in a blur of motion. The golem's massive footfalls pounded behind him.

The hot veins feeding the heart of the mountain thickened as Dak'ir went deeper into its fuliginous depths. A vast magma river surged alongside him as the cavern opened out and the smoke thinned at last. The end of the subterranean chamber was revealed. A sheer drop gaped in front of Dak'ir, the river cascading over the edge into a syrupy morass below.

'Vulkan's mercy...'

Coming to an unsteady halt a few steps away from a fiery demise, Dak'ir suddenly found his battle-helm stifling. The hot metal seared his flesh, the smoke and ash clogging his respirator was choking him. He smashed at the mag-clamps urgently to disengage them.

What are you doing? Do not remove your armour, Salamander!

'Choking... can't breathe...'

The battle-helm came off with a jerk. Dak'ir let it fall from his fingers and land noisily at his feet. Without his auto-senses, even befouled as they were, his orientation worsened.

At least the smoke and drifting ash was clearing.

Something vast and powerful loomed from the thinning grey miasma...

Throwing up a barrier of flame, Dak'ir took one final step towards the chasm behind him. The golem was close.

'You have made a monster here, Pyriel...' Dak'ir muttered, collapsing a thick granite column into the monster's path.

It swept the obstruction aside, utterly heedless for its own safety, utterly committed to the destruction of the Librarian.

Such an implacable foe...

Sensing Deathfire's heartblood beating beneath the cavern wall, Dak'ir opened a fissure in the rock with his blade and unleashed a fountain of lava onto the golem. The creature was bathed in liquid magma and the Salamander dared to hope... until it emerged on the other side unscathed. Waves of scalding heat emanated off its body in a haze as it charged, determined to end the fight and take them both over the edge and to oblivion.

With all the incredible momentum of a battle tank, the golem couldn't have stopped even if it wanted to. Its rudimentary intelligence did not appreciate the danger it was in as Dak'ir levelled his force sword like a spear and raced towards it.

A tiny crack, the smallest of fractures was visible in its chest. Dak'ir had seen it when the monster parted his fire wall like it was air. The blast of white-hot fire had wounded it and the magma flow, expanding its igneous flesh, had exposed the weakness.

Seconds before impact, Dak'ir pulled the blade back the full length of fist to elbow and then thrust it forwards as the monster crushed him.

Dak'ir felt his rib-plate crack, the ceramite armouring it had already shattered exposing torn bodyglove and black Salamander skin beneath. Breathing was no longer possible; the air was punched from his lungs with all the force of a siege cannon shell. Blood filled his mouth, riming his teeth and releasing the heady stench of copper into his nose. The impact up his arm went all the way to his shoulder and fractured it, but the force sword had gone deep, splitting the golem's impenetrable skin.

Cracks webbed its onyx torso. Magma lines glowed inside them like the ichorous blood of the divine. Except the monster was not divine, it was a construct forged psychically from volcanic clay and fortified by Pyriel's warcraft.

Consciousness fading, Dak'ir was vaguely aware of being carried along by the golem's massive momentum. A few more steps and they would descend into the abyss...

He fed a bolt of flame down the blade and the cracks widened. Lava gushed from the wound, corroding his armour where it splashed it. Dak'ir let his numbing fingers fall from the sword hilt, instead pressing his hand against superheated rock.

We are not only pyromancers... we are earth shamans too.

Pyriel's words from the first day they had come to the catacombs beneath the mountain returned to him even as the golem slowed, as if only now realising its folly. Channelling the last of his power, Dak'ir sent a huge seismic tremor through the cracking flesh and like a fault line exposed, the tectonic fury of its plates pulling apart, the golem separated.

Dak'ir fell backwards. His vision was fading. His last sight was of the golem breaking apart, devoured by its own heartblood into molten slurry... Beneath him, the chasm of fire beckoned.

FIRE Drake can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

In the UK: Price £7.99

ISBN: 978-1-84416-004-7

In the US: Price \$8.99 (\$11.99 Canada)

ISBN: 978-1-84416-005-4

- Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop's webstore by going to www.blacklibrary.com or www.games-workshop.com.
- Bookshops: Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.
- Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.
- UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000
- US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME