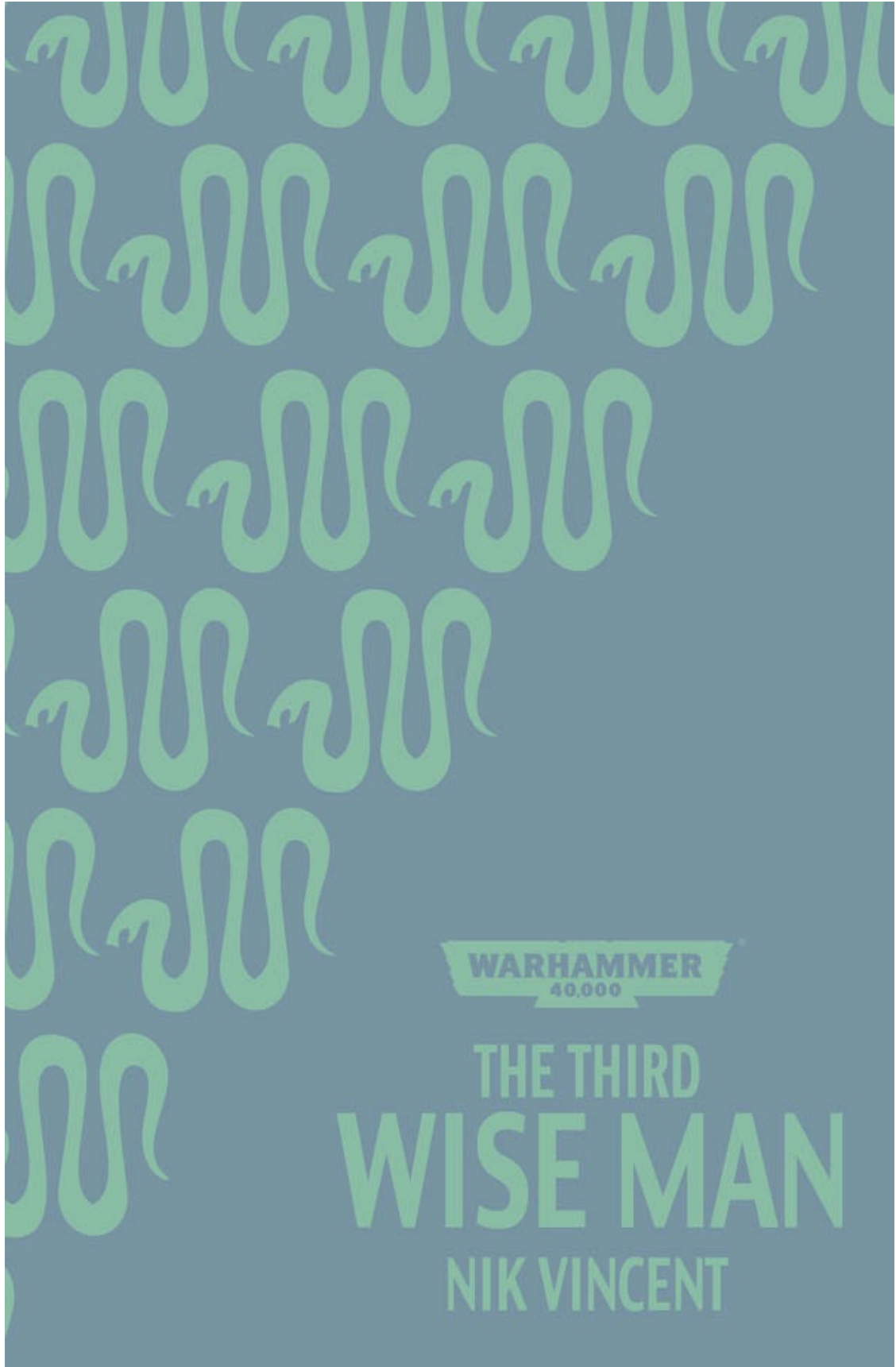


WARHAMMER
40,000

THE THIRD
WISE MAN
NIK VINCENT



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THE THIRD WISE MAN

Nik Vincent

‘I, Brother Constantine, son of Ithaka, veteran of the Iron Snakes Chapter, prostrate myself before you. I yield this pair of lances, honed on the whetstone of Lazaretto, tested in the wild waters of our mother world, blooded on the leviathan water-wyrm of our boyhood dreams, whose skin I also yield.

‘I yield these three symbols of my brotherhood in good faith and fealty. I offer my utter obeisance, and I beg the indulgence of my superiors, my captains, to confer the honour of Chaplain upon your supplicant and servant.’

‘You dare to come before us, a supplicant?’ asked Brother-Captain Didymos. ‘You, who lost three men on the Undertaking to Manolis?’

‘I bear the grievous pain of the loss of my squad-brothers, from that fateful day to this, with heavy hearts,’ said Constantine, his face pressed to the cold, marble floor, his arms spread wide to either side of his torso, his entire body prostrated before the Iron Snakes Space Marine captains who would decide his future and his fate.

‘I must speak, brother-captain,’ said Brother-Sergeant Priad of Damocles Squad. He stood and, as he walked around the prostrate form of Brother Constantine, he took a flask from his belt and began to perform the rite of the giving of water.

Brother-Captain Didymos began to rise from his seat, shocked by what he was witnessing, but a hand was placed firmly on his chest.

‘Let him speak,’ said Brother-Captain Pheus, ‘as is our way.’

Priad poured single drops of water from his copper flask on to the back of Constantine’s oiled head, and then the backs of his naked hands.

‘I anoint thee, Supplicant-Chaplain Constantine, with the water of Manolis, where you sacrificed your reputation, along with the lives of three of our brethren, that our objectives might be met, that the remainder of Squad Skypio might survive and that five billion souls might continue to follow the true path of the Emperor.’

Brother-Captain Didymos relaxed a little, and Brother-Captain Cules took up the call.

‘You venture to come before us, a supplicant?’ he asked. ‘You, the sole ignoble survivor of the Undertaking to Hrystalla?’

‘I bear the grievous pain of the loss of my squad-brothers, from that fateful day to this, with heavy hearts,’ said Constantine, unmoving, the single drop of Manolis water, rolling over the smooth dome of his head and collecting in the muscular hollow at the base of his cranium where it met the nape of his neck.

‘I must speak, brother-captain,’ said Brother Kater Holofurnace, lately returned from attachment to the Tanith First regiment in the Sabbat Worlds. He stood, as Brother-Sergeant Priad knelt on the steps between where Constantine lay and where the brother-captains gathered to determine the supplicant’s fate.

Brother Holofurnace took a copper flask from his belt, removed the stopper, poured a single drop from the vessel onto the back of the supplicant’s head, directly over the first drop, and then did the same to his hands.

‘I anoint thee, Supplicant-Chaplain Constantine, with the water of Hrystalla, where, in the face of certain death, you nobly gathered the gene-seed of your fallen battle-brothers on your maiden undertaking, and returned to Ithaka, bloodied but not bowed, to a recovery doomed to keep you from active service for seven seasons. For those seven seasons and beyond you suffered the scorn poured upon you by your battle-brothers, without defending your return; for what petitioner can truly justify his existence?’

A look of satisfaction and a nod passed between Brother-Captain Didymos and Brother-Captain Cules, as Brother Holofurnace took his place on his knees on the step next to Brother-Sergeant Priad.

Then Brother-Captain Pheus took up the call, and completed the triumvirate.

‘Brother Constantine,’ he said, ‘You hazard to come before us, a supplicant, after cowardly failing to deploy your drop-ship at the Undertaking to Baltasar, when an entire planet of the Reef Stars was taken by the foe, lost forever to the Imperium?’

‘I bear the grievous pain of the loss of the world, from that fateful day to this, with heavy hearts,’ said Constantine, unmoving, the single drop of Hrystalla water, tracing the same path as the drop of water from Manolis, adding to the tiny puddle of liquid collecting in the muscular hollow at the nape of his neck.

‘Will you not speak up for yourself?’ asked Brother-Captain Pheus.

‘Two of the wisest men I know have already spoken for me,’ said Constantine.

‘And here comes the third,’ said Brother-Sergeant Priad as the great double doors at the end of the chamber crashed open and Chapter Master Seydon strode in.

‘Have I missed my cue?’ asked Seydon.

‘I believe you are right on time, master,’ said Priad.

Chapter Master Seydon took a copper flask from his belt, unstopped it, and ceremoniously, quietly, serenely, poured a single drop of its contents onto the back of Supplicant Constantine’s head. He said nothing. Then he moved around, first to the supplicant’s left hand and then his right, and poured a single drop of liquid on to the back of each of them.

The air was filled with a rich, sweet scent.

‘I anoint thee, Christos Constantine, Son of Ithaka, Chaplain of the Iron Snakes Chapter, Second Founding of the Ultramarines.

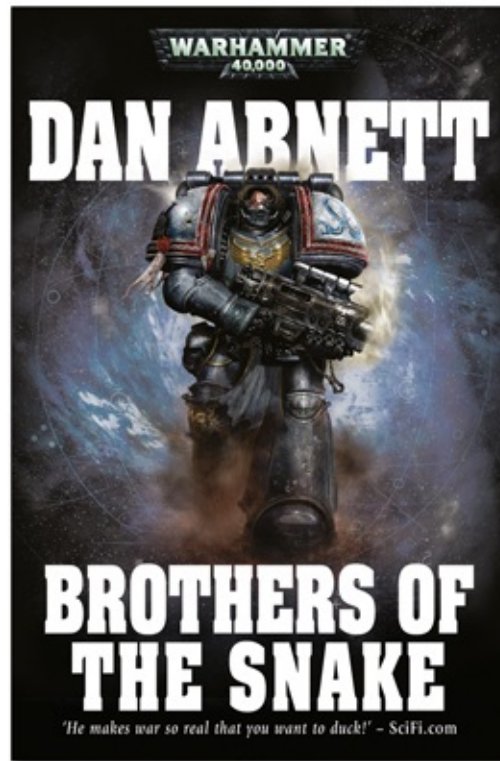
‘Are we done here, captains?’

Brother-Captains Didymos, Pheus and Cules had been on their knees since Chapter Master Seydon walked into the room. They remained on them as he reached down, grabbed Constantine’s shoulder guard, and hauled the newly minted Chaplain to his feet. Then the Chapter Master clapped Constantine on the back.

‘If I’d only listened to you that day, Christos... I might have been your captain, but I was hasty, and your instincts about Baltasar were right. You should have spoken up for yourself. You are the third wise man, today... And never let me forget that you were the wisest man *that* day!’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NIK VINCENT has more than a dozen titles to her name, mostly children's fiction, but also educational and reference books, and comics, and she co-wrote *Gilead's Blood* and *The Hammers of Ulric* with her husband, Dan Abnett. She has finally succumbed to the lure of Warhammer 40,000, and hopes to have a long and rewarding career writing about the guys and girls, and villains and daemons that play games with her imagination. Total immersion will do that to you, so, thanks, Dan.



The war-torn far-future is laid bare as the Iron Snakes Space Marines battle against the enemies of mankind.

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