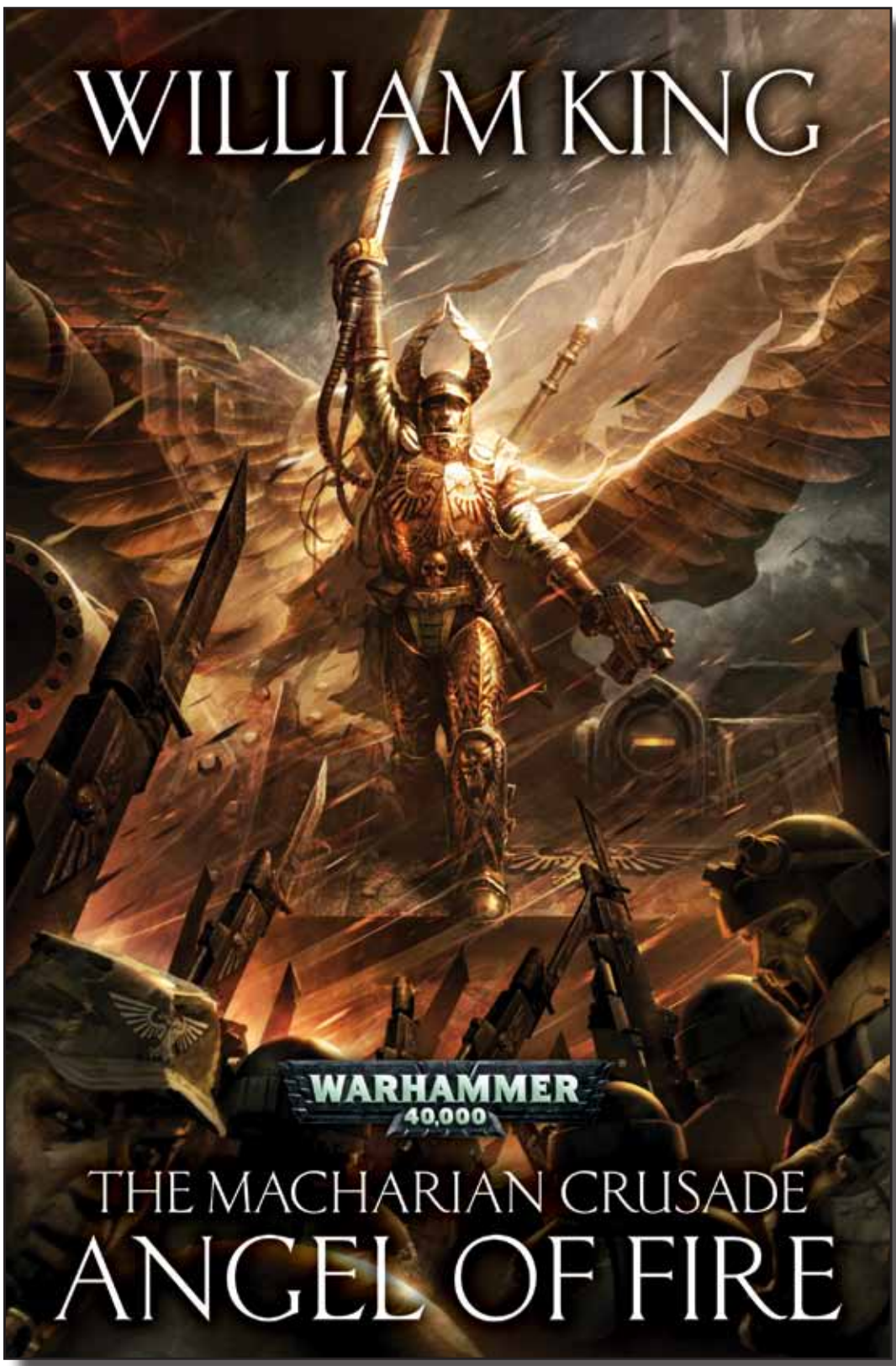


WILLIAM KING



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THE MACHARIAN CRUSADE: ANGEL OF FIRE

William King

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William King's short stories have appeared in *The Year's Best SF*, *Zenith*, *Interzone* and *White Dwarf*. He is the creator of the Gotrek & Felix novels and the author of four Space Wolf novels starring Ragnar Blackmane. He lives in Prague.

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When the ork kicked in the door I knew I was dead.

Half again as tall as a man, with a huge chainsword gripped in one massive gnarled fist, the greenskin surveyed the barracks room with eyes the colour of blood. It threw back its ugly head, opened its tusked mouth wide and emitted a bellow of rage loud enough to wake the dead. It grunted something in its brutish language as if it expected us to obey. We would not have, of course, even if we understood it. We were Imperial Guard, soldiers of the Emperor, and orks have always been numbered among His enemies.

The greenskin should not have been so far inside the bunker. That fact alone told me at least a company of men were already dead. Hell, our whole army out there in the Hamel's Tower trench system might be dead for all I knew. We had not heard anything from command in days.

Before I could give any orders, the xenos sprang into the room. Its chainsword flickered, taking off Bohuslav's arm at the shoulder then removing the top of Alaine's head, sending brain and blood and bone splattering across the chamber. Behind me I heard seats clattering to the ground and tables being overturned and the confused grunts of grey-uniformed men rising from their metal bunks to confront this sudden horror, the last thing they would expect to meet so deep within the fortified complex.

The ork took two more steps that almost put it within cutting distance of me. I brought up the shotgun and I pulled the trigger. It didn't fail me. It never has in thirty years of service. The few brains the ork possessed sprayed against the wall. The headless body toppled over, limbs still twitching, the chainsword still roaring and starting to slither across the bloody floor till it came to a stop, the teeth grinding against the metal leg of a bunk.

More orks raced down the plascrete stairs into this chamber, chanting their bestial battle cries. Some of them shot their guns into the air with wild enthusiasm. Others waved outsized, crudely serrated blades and axes, roaring with obscene joy in the knowledge they would get to use them soon.

I pulled the trigger of the shotgun again and sent the leading ork toppling backwards into its brethren. That slowed them down enough for me to ready a grenade and lob it into their midst. I dived, putting myself behind an overturned mess table as the wave of concussion rippled through the chamber. I looked at the rest of my squad. They were mostly just raw recruits, little older than I had been when I joined the Imperial Guard. This was what the proud legions that had followed Macharius across the galaxy had been reduced to. It was a sad thought.

I shouted at them to get ready. It was pointless telling them to fix bayonets – there was no way this sorry lot would survive any sort of close combat encounter

with orks. The ones with any gumption were already doing so anyway. The rest were fumbling with their guns. One or two were struggling to put on their helmets and rebreathers. Andropov was trying to put his boots back on.

'Get those bloody lasguns ready!' I shouted as I stood up. I made sure my shotgun was pointing in their direction. 'At least die on your feet like men. Hell! Shoot well enough, you might not even die today at all!'

Most of the Guardsmen raised their weapons as if they at least knew what they were supposed to do with them. One or two of them looked completely stunned. It was probably the first time they'd ever got this close to an ork, which is not something calculated to reassure even the bravest. If they did not start doing something soon it would almost certainly be the last.

'You're supposed to be soldiers of the Emperor,' I bellowed. There might even have been some foam flecking the corners of my lips. They were starting to look scared of me now, which was good; better of me than the orks. 'Shoot the bastards!'

One of the greenskins was still alive even though one of its arms was only holding on by a thin thread of flesh – bloody hard things to kill, orks. It reared up onto its legs and roared something in a language that none of us would ever understand. I aimed the shotgun at it again and pulled the trigger. The blast hit it full in the chest and toppled it backwards. I stepped forwards and brought my size twelve Imperial Guard issue hob-nailed boot down on the fingers of its good hand, snapping them, then I hit its skull with the butt of the shotgun. You'd think I'd have known better by now. It bounced off the thick bony ridges. Hell, it barely broke the leathery green skin.

I stepped back and put another shot into it point-blank. I could hear more orks chanting on the stairs and I knew that the second wave would be arriving soon. I glanced back at the youngsters who looked to me for leadership and shouted at them again. It was an odd place to make a last stand, a grey-walled plascrete dormitory, bunks lining two walls, lockers lining others, a few metal tables and chairs scattered in the centre. Propaganda posters glaring down from any free space.

'They're coming! Get bloody ready!' I strode back over to them, putting myself out of the line of fire. I did not want to get cut down by a hail of lasgun bolts. It looked like we were about to make a heroic last stand down here in the guts of this half-finished bunker in a half-complete fortress on a backwater planet. I had come a bloody long way to die.

The orks raced in through the door. It was a choke point where they died in a hail of las-bolts, flesh sizzling and blackening as they fell. It did not stop the ones behind. It never does. They forced their way through, pushing wounded aside, trampling on the fallen, desperate to get to grips with us.

'Keep firing,' I roared, loud as any ork. If the greenskins got to grips with these lads it would be all over for us. 'You stop and I'll stick this shotgun up your arse and pull the trigger myself!'

They kept shooting but the orks kept coming, covering the distance faster than you would believe of creatures so big and awkward-looking. I found myself ducking the power axe of a monster almost the size of an ogryn, backing away as fast as I could. It took another swipe at me. I felt a wall against my spine and knew I could retreat no further. The axe passed so close I could feel the vibration its blades left in the air. I ducked down beneath the arc of the swing and brought the shotgun butt forwards, aiming for the knee. More by luck than judgement I hit. The ork grunted and fell, kneecap shattered. It still held on to the axe though and tried to hit me with it. I stepped away and shot again. The force of the blast took the creature to the ground.

I glanced around. It was not going well. The orks had got to grips with my lads, and were tearing through them like a chainsword through a gangrenous leg. I pumped the shotgun and put down another ork but that just got the attention of the remainder.

The distraction seemed to do something though. One or two of the boys with fitted bayonets tore into the orks with the desperate fury of men who know they are going to die anyway and want to drag something down into the grave with them.

One ork got stabbed five or six times before it realised what was happening. It bellowed in rage and fury before it fell to be stamped and trampled on. A few more orks poured into the room, slithering and tripping on the corpses and entrails of their kin. I noticed, and not for the first time, that ork blood was greenish and smelled like mushroom steaks back on Belial. I lobbed another grenade into the doorway, just to keep them busy. It took down another group of them.

The room seethed with violence. It was complete chaos with no way to tell what was going on. Smoke filled the air, and the smell of chemical explosive and ripped flesh. Las-bolts winked in the gloom. The air seemed to vibrate with the bull-bellow of orks and the roar of their chain-bladed axes. A head rolled along the floor towards me trailing droplets of blood. Andropov would not be struggling with his boots any more.

I strode forwards, shouting, 'Rally to me, men of the Seventh!' An ork stood in front of me. I smashed it in the mouth with the butt of the shotgun. It spat teeth and made to bring its weapon to bear. Two men leapt on it, clubbing and stabbing. It went down, a huge hand clutching one man's neck and snapping it. It thrashed around and I noticed the combat knife sticking out of its neck. It kept moving, wrestling with another of my men. I moved around it, unable to shoot without hitting Rostoky. Suddenly it reared up, throwing him to one side as casually as I might have thrown a rucksack. It gave me a clean shot. The shotgun roared. It went down again.

Suddenly, in one of those strange turnarounds you get in battle, I realised there were only a few orks left standing. No more of the greenskins were flooding into the room. There had not been so many of them as fear had made it seem. I knew then that we might actually be able to beat the bastards, if we were quick and held our nerve. Of course, no one had told the orks that. They fought on as if determined to kill and eat the lot of us, and as if we had no say in the matter.

'Stand your ground, you dozy bastards!' I yelled. 'There's only three of them.'

In point of fact there were five but why make the odds any bigger than I needed to. 'You're killing them.'

It gave the lads heart. Las-bolts flickered all around and took down another ork. A group of Guardsmen dog-piled onto one of the remaining greenskins and practically carved it to pieces. Suddenly there really were only three. I reduced the number to two with a quick blast from the shotgun.

The orks stood their ground though, roaring and lashing out with their blades. One of them took out some sort of autogun and snapped off a shot in my direction. I only avoided it by throwing myself flat. When I looked up again, I saw it had taken a bayonet through the neck. I launched myself at it, smashing it in the stomach with the barrel of the shotgun and then bringing the butt into contact with the hinge of its jaw, breaking it. A few heartbeats later it was dragged to the ground and finished by our boys. In another few seconds the fight was over and much to my surprise we had won.

'Well done, lads,' I said. 'That's how orks die!'