

“Haxr, you are cleared for engagement.”

“Acknowledged, Sieger Prime.”

Haxr moved with the cold, deliberate certainty of a man who had waged war for longer than most civilizations endured. He rolled from behind a pitted column, iron-grey ceramite rasping against dead plaster. His armor’s machine-spirit—an ancient, temperamental thing grown half-feral from centuries of Warp-taint—surged awake. Combat stimms flooded his twin hearts. His vision narrowed. His breath steadied into a predator’s rhythm.

Runes danced across his helm-display, evaluating distance, elevation, wind—every cold factor the Iron Warriors made into scripture. Potential kills bloomed amber in his sight.

The Imperial Guard column was advancing east, a river of mortal bodies herded toward their next doomed objective. Reports confirmed armor at their rear—Leman Russ battle tanks and Basilisk artillery—enough firepower to threaten even Astartes plate. But they were far enough away that the risk was tolerable. Haxr had waged war across a thousand worlds with worse odds.

Farther west, Claevus and Hrather waited with missile launchers. They would attend to those armored beasts soon enough. Haxr and his brother Jorgun—each carrying a heavy bolter whose weight would break a mortal’s spine—were tasked with the opening stroke: break the Guard’s formation, shatter morale, create panic.

Above, perched on the rooftops like carrion birds, Zhruriah and his pack of Raptors waited to descend when the moment turned bloody enough.

[TARGETS ACQUIRED]

Amber runes strobed. Ammo count scrolled. Ranging data chimed green.

Haxr smiled. It was a rare expression, a small, hard thing that spoke not of joy, but of anticipation.

He squeezed the trigger.

The heavy bolter thundered, a sound that devoured all others. The weapon bucked like a chained beast, its recoil rattling even Haxr’s reinforced frame. Shells screamed from the muzzle—fat, mass-reactive bolts that tore through flak plate and mortal bodies with equal disdain. Guardsmen died without comprehension, limbs torn from sockets, torsos punched through as though made of parchment.

The Imperial formation marched ten ranks wide. Haxr carved a burning gouge through their right flank, turning order into carnage in the span of seconds. Survivors flung themselves beneath storefront awnings and collapsed arches. Others fired wildly, las-bolts snapping past Haxr’s position and scarring the plaster around him.

None of it mattered. Las-fire could no more harm him than prayer could.

Jorgun joined the slaughter moments later, his bolter roaring from the opposite flank. The column collapsed inward, discipline dissolving into animal panic. Guardsmen scattered, tripping over their dead as they fled unseen executioners.

Haxr held fire for several more beats of his twin hearts, then rolled back behind cover as return fire intensified. He waited. Five breaths. No more.

Then he moved again.

He rolled left, armor grinding against stone, and opened fire anew. Bolts tore into the rear ranks, exploding bodies and sending panicked screams down the length of the avenue.

Across the battlefield, Jorgun repositioned—Haxr saw his ident-rune shift across the hololithic overlay. The picture was orderly, measured. They were Iron Warriors. Chaos did not diminish discipline; it sharpened it to a killing point.

More Guardsmen fell. More faith died with them.

Heretic..

The word clawed at him—not because it stung, but because of its absurdity. Even after millennia in service to the Dark Gods, Haxr had never considered himself a creature of faith. Faith was for mortals who needed lies to survive their wretched lives. Haxr was iron. Iron did not pray.

He watched the Imperials break beneath his barrage.

Look at what your faith has bought you, he thought. Look at what your faith has cost you.

“Raptors inbound.”

A heartbeat later, the shriek of jump jets tore across his audio-sensors. His helm tagged each descending warrior.

Zhruriah hit the ground first, talons gouging stone, chainswords screaming as they tore into the panicked mass. His pack followed like falling stars—Dirge with his chain-axe, Kyras with crackling talons, Varkh and Al’Sharuun descending in murderous arcs.

They were devotees of Khorne, all of them—half-mad, wholly lethal. Useful. Unreliable. A weapon with no safety.

Haxr’s gaze found Zhruriah in the melee, crimson armor drenched in gore. A targeting rune flickered over the Raptor’s form as Haxr’s machine-spirit anticipated his thought.

A single heartbeat passed. Enough time to adjust his aim. To let a “misfire” resolve old grievances.

Haxr dismissed the rune with a blink. Not today. Not like this.

He returned to the battle.

Jorgun raked the column’s left flank. Tanks rumbled forward from the rear. Chaos and order ground teeth against one another.

“Claevus, Hrather. Engage.”

Their runes flashed acknowledgment. Missiles screamed overhead.

The first Leman Russ erupted in a plume of black fire, armor peeled back like wet paper as Claevus’ shot detonated within the crew compartment. Promethium tanks ignited, drowning fleeing Guardsmen in flaming shrapnel.

Hrather’s first shot went wide, exploding cobblestone and bodies alike.

“Again, Hrather. Better.”

The tank lurched forward, turret swinging in frantic arcs.

“Now.”

Hrather’s second missile struck the generator housing. The tank blossomed into a flower of fire and arcing energy. Surviving crew clawed their way from the hatch.

Al’Sharuun fell upon them immediately. His blade gutted the first man. The second he seized by the flak vest and carried screaming into the sky. Haxr’s helm measured their ascent—one hundred metres—before the Raptor released his victim.

The man’s body struck the avenue with a sickening crack. Al’Sharuun descended after him, roaring praise to his bloody god.

Haxr moved east, heavy strides shaking dust from the ruined hall that bordered the avenue. The pillars here bore carved heroes of the Imperium—faces now scarred by shrapnel and fire. Stalls lay abandoned; even vermin knew better than to trespass where Chaos marched.

He reached a bend in the hall and braced between two intact pillars. The command elements of the Imperial column were attempting to rally their troops. Commissars struck soldiers with rods, whips, and pistols, barking orders over the screams.

It was pointless.

Haxr opened fire.

The heavy bolter's thunder shook the hall, each shot a punctuation mark in the Imperium's eulogy. Guardsmen died in clumps. Officers were torn apart as Haxr shifted elevation to decapitate the chain of command. Without shepherds, the flock was meat.

"Zhruriah," Haxr voxed, "deploy Dirge and Kyras to my position. Priority targets: command elements."

"We are not yours to command, Havoc."

Haxr clenched his teeth.

"Khorne demands skulls! We will not—"

"Defy my order," Haxr growled, "and yours will sit highest atop the pile. Sieger Prime granted me operational authority."

Silence. A long, needling silence.

Then: "Acknowledged. Dirge and Kyras en route."

The Raptors arrived moments later, crashing into the last vestiges of Imperial resistance. Dirge carved rivers of red with his chain-axe. Kyras cleaved through Commissars and captains in flashes of blue lightning. The Imperial command structure unraveled in moments.

Haxr let the bolter fall silent. Ammunition low. Time to withdraw.

Far to the south, the warband's siege batteries pounded the shrine city's walls—daemon-mawed artillery and black-iron cannons launching shells inscribed with blasphemies. Haxr's detachment had entered by Land Raider to break resistance from within.

Havocs were not terror troops by design, but Sieger Prime required their firepower. Haxr did not question. He was a weapon. Weapons did not ask why. Weapons were wielded.

"Hephaistos Squad," he voxed, "disengage and reconvene at the rally point for refit and resupply. Execute Bastion Reset."

He marked the waypoint and transmitted it. Runes flashed as each marine acknowledged.

Bastion Reset: a disciplined, staggered withdrawal under rotating overwatch. Iron Warriors doctrine. Iron Warriors pride.

Iron Warriors did not retreat.

They repositioned.

They endured.

Haxr's armor hummed around him as he moved to fall back. The Raptors still ranged ahead, blood-mad and unpredictable.

Zhruriah was many things—violent, unstable, insufferable—but he was not stupid. And Haxr knew better than to turn his back on a man who worshipped betrayal dressed as fury.

Chaos was a knife, after all.

And every knife waited for a spine.