

**The Hunter**  
**A Maelstrom's Edge story**  
**by Tomas L. Martin**



When the first rumble came Kayo ignored it, shifting his position in the bed to hug Jena more closely. When the room shook a second, then a third time, he groaned, and his eyes scraped reluctantly open.

The fourth blast shattered the polarised windows, filling his brain with bright light. The apartment building moved beneath them, throwing them off the bed, pictures and lamps crashing on top of them.

Kayo disentangled himself from the mess and got up gingerly, stepping carefully over the broken glass to peer out of the window. Zycanthus wasn't a particularly geoactive planet, despite the changes the Epirian Foundation's terraforming had made, and earthquakes were incredibly rare. This had to be something else, something closer.

"Kayo... What's going on?" Jena's muffled voice came from beneath bedclothes on the floor. Kayo hadn't known her long. This was the first time he'd spent the night at her place, across town from his tiny pad near the train depot. Technically he should have been back there now, in case anything happened, but he'd never needed to in the past, so he'd left his bots on automatic patrol. He leaned his head forward through the empty window frame, a little bit of bravado in

him wanting to impress her, but also checking he didn't need to get back to his post.

Kayo wasn't prepared for what he saw. The city was aflame, with a sky crisscrossed with smoke trails and dark, fast moving shapes – he spotted Firefly drones, larger Epirian gunships and strange, bat-winged creatures. As he watched, a swarm of dark shapes surrounded one of the gunships, tearing at its engine cowlings until it heaved over and tumbled towards the ground.

The explosion of the gunship's crash was not the only blast, even in those few seconds. Down on the street he could hear the staccato of maglock rifle fire mixed in with an unfamiliar soft whine. The air was acrid with smoke. He leaned further out to see a group of Epirian security contractors huddled behind the smoking wreck of a speeder. In front of them a group of soldiers, covered in snow-white armour plate advanced, spraying arcing balls of purple fire from their strange weapons.

"Storms," Kayo swore. "Jena, Pike's Basin is under attack!"

Fire leapt from the windows of a building across the street, sending shrapnel whistling in his direction. Pure instinct made him duck away from the heat of the blast, as the wall of the apartment reverberated with the impact. Jena screamed and burrowed deeper into her fortress of blankets. Kayo puzzled over the white armour of the soldiers he'd seen. Initially he thought this might have been the Broken rebels, who had been brewing revolution for months in the desert, but this size of organised assault was in a totally different league.

Kayo reached reaching for his pistol and neural interface. He'd been a bot handler for three years. During his time at the Foundation academy he'd done a little security work, but most of his job at the train depot involved keeping the freight cars and luggage bots organised. The fear of combat sneaked around his nervous system, making his stomach contract. Then he realised how much trouble he'd be in if his superiors realised he'd been sleeping – in someone else's bed – at the time of the attack, when he was supposed to be keeping watch. Fuelled by that transgression, he tugged his jacket over his shoulders and strapped his Dominator pistol to his thigh.

Jena's head poked out from under the bedclothes. Her face was white with panic. "Where are you going?"

"I have to get back to the depot."

"Now?"

“I’m supposed to be the Bot Handler on call.” The pang of guilt at sneaking off with Jena the previous night burned in his gut. “If I don’t get back to my post soon, the Foundation will have my head.”

“I thought you said you set a patrol so no one would notice?”

Kayo looked incredulously at her. “I set enough bots patrolling to deal with vagrants and petty thieves, not a full scale attack! If they catch me off-base at a time like this...”

He pulled the neural interface onto his skull and began the loading sequence. He sent a ping to the bots he’d left on patrol. Instead of the status update he was supposed to receive from each of them, there was no response. The last updates from the six patrol bots had been over half an hour earlier, and then each had cut out.

“Shit,” he said. “My patrol is down. Jena, I gotta go.”

“But what about me?”

He gave her a quick kiss. “Get down to the basement. The comet shelters are strong enough to keep you safe.”

“Kayo!” Jena’s voice came out at a much higher pitch. “Don’t leave me here!”

He leaned down and looked her in the eye. “We’re under attack, Jena. Do you understand? There’s fires all over the city. If I don’t get back to my post, they’ll destroy everything.”

“You can’t save the city, Kayo.”

“No.” Kayo sending a burst of compressed code across the city to activate the rest of the bots under his command. “But I can protect what’s my responsibility.”

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+++ID: F4H7JJ091. Armasys Corporation Hunter-class warmech, Calliope pattern. Systems loading...+++

Hunter class attack bot F4H7JJ091 came online when it received the wake-up command from Handler Kayo Asikawa. Its processing routines began their warm-up procedure, checking the status of each servo in its limbs, and spinning through the ammunition belt for its Maglock Chaingun, ensuring there was no potential for weapon jams.

+++Weapons systems fully operational. Energy reserves at full capacity.+++

Pre-startup checks completed, F4H7JJ091 released its docking clamps and charge cable and stepped forward out of its cradle into the robotics bay. Either side

of it other Epirian robots were similarly awakening from their dormant state – lanky Scarecrow patrol bots and squat Spider drones plodded their way towards the bay doors, whilst aerial Firefly drones rose on their rotors with a whine and shot through the open skylight above.

+++ Network systems online. Downloading tactical interface.+++  
F4H7JJ091 and its partner Hunter, the long-range G9H3RR020 with Suppressor machine guns mounted on either arm, were not usually called for during routine security of the Pike’s Basin rail hub. It took them a while to download updated maps of the area and tactical overlays, and process the incoming information from the city’s defence network. After a few moments mechanical thought, both hulking robots decided on a course of action and began striding towards the outside world, weapons primed for combat.

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Kayo sprinted through the city, darting down the roads furthest from the fighting, dodging between traffic jams and navigating streams of panicked pedestrians. He was at least five miles from the train depot. Usually he would get one of the monorail lines that crisscrossed Pike’s Basin, but one glance at the monorail cars stuck between stations, the faces of desperate early-morning commuters inside pressed against the glass, convinced him that was a bad idea.

Who was attacking? The net was full of confused messages and broken reports, with no one really able to say what was happening to Pike’s Basin. The fighting was still far from the streets that Kayo was navigating, but the sound of gunfire and the smell of burning told him that it wasn’t far away. He thought about calling in backup, but the thought of being caught away from the depot at such an important moment still made him hesitate. Besides, from the sound of it, most of the Epirian securcons were busy elsewhere.

Every now and then, he’d try and dip his mind into the bots at the train depot, but the lag of communication between the satellite relays meant he could do little other than watch their feeds, tens of seconds behind. There was no sign of attack on any of the drone cameras, but every time he flicked his neural interface over to check, the smoke from the city was getting closer.

By now, the streets had begun to empty. Lines of abandoned vehicles clogged the roadways. In their hurry, some drivers landed their speeders haphazardly between other cars, across the sidewalk and even wrapped around signposts. Some

tried to boost the antigrav of their speeders to get above the gridlock, but many of them smouldered, shot down by the unknown assailants of their capital city.

A warning flashed up on the holo display in his helmet, tactical information floating in the air in front of him. One of the squadrons of Firefly drones at the trainyard had spotted intruders, and the lead drone was querying for instructions. Kayo stopped and pressed against the wall as he activated the neural link to the drone. Kayo's body flushed as the implants in his brain injected a flood of chemicals and the connections in his helmet connected with his synapses.

The rush of projection was an unpleasant sensation. His skin prickled as the interface dampened his nerves, and his eyes swam, as his view of the gridlocked vehicles was replaced with the cold feed from the Firefly's cameras. Kayo shrugged off the physical sensations and threw his attention into the drone's sensor.

The drone's flight was one of two squadrons of Fireflies orbiting the transit hub, and its position high in the air gave it the best view of the vast yards of bullet trains sitting dormant. The high speed line that bisected the planet of Zycanthus was hugely important to connecting the big cities of Pike's Basin in the north and First Landing in the south. Without it, the Epirian Foundation's ability to transport people, resources and robots across the planet would be decimated.

Kayo cycled through the feeds from the Fireflies, searching for signs of intruders. He could see the smoke rising from the city, and the sky was filled with unfamiliar shapes in the distance. But of the enemy on the ground, he could see little. Then he saw flashes of white, moving through the factories to the north of the trainyard. His fingers twitched as he manipulated the drone, sending it swooping towards the movement. The drone's threat recognition marked out around twenty targets, armoured figures taking cover between the stacks of containers.

He zoomed in the camera, studying these unfamiliar attackers. Clad in overlapping white armour plate and their faces masked, they moved with the grace and purpose of trained soldiers. This was no fragmented Broken rebellion. This was an army, and it was focused on knocking out the most important parts of Epirian Infrastructure.

The Firefly's diagnostics flashed red. The soldiers had spotted the drones, and the sky lit up with a hail of purple projectiles, some kind of energy arcing up towards the Epirian bot. Kayo tried to push the drone into evasive action, but there were tens of seconds of lag to his instructions, and the Firefly shook with the impact of

the energy pulses, tearing itself apart. Kayo slapped off his neural link, cutting the connection before the Firefly's destruction could feed back into his head.

His consciousness flooded back into his body, his muscles numb and tingly. The streams of data running through his head ceased and he retched, adrenaline coursing through him from the Firefly's last moments.

"This is hopeless," he muttered. He had to get closer, where he could connect directly to each bot. He started walking again, aiming in the general direction of the depot. He replaced his neural link and rather than trying to control the drones directly with such a big lag, resorted to more rudimentary ways of organising his little army. Whilst he walked, he laid the positions of the drones out in a hologram in front of him, where he could survey the battlefield and give each defending robot instructions, albeit with a minute or so delay. Already some of the holo icons representing the Epirian bots were winking out as the attackers flanked their cover.

Kayo had trained as a Bot Handler at the Epirian Foundation academy on Flaxos, tens of lightyears rimward. Years of instruction and practice had honed his mind in the art of neural interfacing, projecting his consciousness into a bot's processing core for just long enough to influence its decisions. It was a gruelling, debilitating practice, and even when he had no distractions, Kayo struggled to keep all the information in his head. Managing it whilst leaping across vacated speeders and dodging panicked civilians made it that bit harder.

He tried to move all of the surviving drones into better defensive positions, sending the Fireflies on quick strafing runs making them difficult to hit, and letting the Spiders dig their low profile into the piles of spent rails at the edge of the trainyard. The two Hunter warmechs were by far the most powerful of his charges, and he let them stride ahead of the smaller bots. With his input guiding their targeting choices, the Hunters could advance more quickly, laying down a barrage of shots, keeping the attackers huddled behind cover. Despite the delay in communication, the little tweaks that Kayo was giving to the bots were having an influence on the skirmish.

Just at the point where he felt like he had the enemy soldiers pinned back, and was preparing a counter assault with his remaining Fireflies, his feed cut out, and the glowing map of the train depot in front of his eyes disappeared. He smacked his controller, trying to fix the connection, but it was no good. Every network was down, from the city's social webs to the dedicated Epirian satellites.

The skies above him echoed with a thundercrack, and he blinked back into the real world. A nova of fire burned a new star, and streaks of burning debris rained down towards the city. His eye was drawn to the cable of the space elevator. The familiar dark line shooting straight into orbit twisted and tangled, falling free to the ground below.

Kayo stared up at the catastrophe in the sky, and at the blinking light where his holo display should have been. This kind of attack was unprecedented. If these soldiers were willing to destroy the space elevator, they wouldn't stop there. He couldn't let them take the train depot, but now he had no way to control the drones. The remaining robots at the train depot were on their own.

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Hunter F4H7JJ091 stood in the square in front of the trainyard, assessing the situation. The loss of network had shut down many of the data sources it used to track enemy movement, weather conditions and communication. It could also no longer reach its controller. The warmech's digital brain had only limited capacity for independent thought, but it had enough to work its way through the options.

+++Explosive impacts sustained to left shoulder. One degree loss of freedom in left arm. Maglock Chaingun at 52% ammunition. Two cluster missiles remaining. Power reserves at 41%. Beginning power efficiency subroutine.+++

It took six seconds after the loss of network for the Hunter to complete its system diagnostics. Next it considered tactical parameters. Whilst it rebuilt the map of the combat zone from its last downloaded satellite images, the Hunter pinged short ranged bursts of radar, infrared and comms in all directions, using friend/foe analysis of the resulting images and encrypted responses to identify the locations of both fellow Epirian drones and enemy combatants.

In addition to F4H7JJ091, the other Hunter remained operational twenty metres to the north-east, but G9H3RR020 reported major damage to its motor function and heavy fire from a position to its front. There was one Scarecrow high up on the walls of the trainyard, and two Firefly drones airborne. The Hunter received no response from the ID codes off the other 15 bots that had emerged from the robotics bay.

In the absence of the designated controller and access to the Epirian security grid, F4H7JJ091 determined that based on the classification and operational status of the remaining security drones, it had the best capability to organise the defence

of the Pike's Basin train depot. It unpacked the combat analysis from its allies and combined them with the rapidly ageing satellite information.

Three pockets of enemy fire remained. The other Hunter, despite its damage, had the first unit pinned down by its fire. The Scarecrow was tracking the second group of less heavily armoured aggressors and could cover any assault on the depot gates from that direction. The third group was larger and had destroyed both units of Spider Drones that had tried to stop it, and footage from the Fireflies indicated they were preparing a flanking assault on Hunter G9H3RR020, taking advantage of its loss of mobility.

All of this analysis took the Hunter eleven seconds to process, during which time one of the two Firefly drones was hit by enemy fire and disappeared from the grid in a burst of static. Without a Handler to weigh in on its decisions, the Hunter's own processing unit ran through a series of scenarios, before determining a course of action.

+++Assessing tactical options... Target priority confirmed.+++

Sending the last Firefly to assist the Scarecrow, the Hunter strode forward, crashing through a pile of fencing that had fallen down in the fighting, and stepping past the bodies of three assailants it had previously dispatched. It pinged a command to the other Hunter, instructing it to use its last strike missile on the unit in front of it, whilst F4H7JJ091 came up behind the flanking unit.

The speed at which F4H7JJ091 approached made loud clanging noises on the concrete. As it rounded a container a spray of energy projectiles splashed into the metal, scorching neat circular holes. F4H7JJ091 tracked three human combatants, turning rapidly to train their carbines on the newly emerged Hunter.

+++Targets sighted. Probability of pacification using Maglock Chaingun: 36%. Probability of pacification using Cluster Missiles: 89%. Engaging...+++

F4H7JJ091 released the last of its cluster missiles. It had caught the soldiers out of cover on their flanking manoeuvre, and there was no chance that the missiles would miss, streaking into the unit and throwing them in the air like ragdolls. The Hunter's chaingun barked, cutting the last soldier down with a caseless shell.

The immediate crisis over, F4H7JJ091 began moving towards the other Hunter's position, but then an update from its communication pings made the warmech stop. It had received no more communications from the other three robots in several minutes. It crested a raised rail track to observe G9H3RR020's position.



Parts of the other Hunter were strewn across several metres of ground, its torso split asunder, molten metal at the edges of the hole. Its two arms, each with double-mounted suppressor machine guns, had been torn from its body and tossed aside. F4H7JJ091 stopped, studying the remains for signs of the enemy's location and possible weaknesses.

+++ Known threats eliminated. Probability of further targets: 78%.

Scanning...+++

A loud shriek from behind spun up F4H7JJ091's faster reaction processors, sending an additional burst of energy to its servos. It wasn't quick enough to prevent a pulse of energy splashing into the Hunter's rear armour burning through the protective plate and sending warning messages up about key internal systems.

The warmech pivoted to face the new attacker. It was even larger than the Hunter, an unidentifiable creature with 12 shapeless limbs. It hurtled towards F4H7JJ091, its elongated maw filling with another burst of destructive energy. The Hunter summoned its last energy reserves, charging its weapons for one final defence of the depot.

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Kayo ran down the tree-lined boulevard that led from the curved spars of the central city towards the transport hub as the space elevator's descent threw debris across Pike's Basin, and the sound of battle was punctuated with the crashes of collapsing masonry.

He was now sending messages out on the short-range comm by any means necessary. He'd abandoned all thoughts of recriminations for his misdemeanours, desperate to get support for the depot's bots. When he finally received a return ID burst, he let out a holler of relief, and hurriedly tapped out a request for support.

A few minutes later a squat armoured prowler pulled up on the boulevard's central pedestrian walkway, its six chunky wheels tearing dark brown gashes in the grass. A securcon pulled the door open and looked down from the cab.

"Need a ride?"

Kayo didn't answer, simply swung himself up into the prowler's front cab. He grabbed the securcon's arm.

"I need to get to the train depot. Now."

"So your message said." The securcon glanced over at his neural interface and Handler suit. "Shouldn't you be there already?"

“Never mind that!” Kayo gestured at the crumpled remains of the trade ministry halfway down the block, a shard of space elevator cable neatly bisecting its roof. “Do you want our main transport link to the south end up like that? Drive!”

The securcon stepped on the accelerator, fishtailing the prowler back around and speeding off down the boulevard. The ride was bumpy and unpleasant, as the bulky APC dodged abandoned cars and fallen trees, using its bulk to slam smaller objects out of its path. The engine whined and squealed as the securcon pushed it to its limit.

“Hell of a thing, huh?” the driver said, yanking the wheel to squeeze the prowler through a gap in the traffic. There were bangs and annoyed shouts from the rear of the prowler as the other securcons inside got thrown about. “We were out fixing a power line when the whole world starts exploding.”

“It’s crazy,” Kayo managed to say, his hands gripping tightly to the seat to fight the motion of the vehicle. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

The securcon shook his head. “Head Office stopped responding to our calls, even before all this goes down. We’re just a bunch of part-timers watching the city explode, have no idea what’s happening, then this Foreman called Van Needen calls up and tells us there’s a big attack going down at the spaceport, requested support from all units.”

“The spaceport?” Kayo blinked. This was bigger than he thought.

“We were in a big convoy headed that way when your message came in. We got told to come help you out.”

“I hope it isn’t too late,” Kayo muttered, thinking about the dwindling numbers of robots under his command.

The prowler pulled up at the gates of the depot with a squeal of brakes. The rear hatch swung open and the securcons inside leapt out, their maglock rifles trained nervously at every movement. Kayo jumped from the cab, spooling his neural interface back up, pinging the surroundings for signs of electronic life.

“Looks like the excitement’s over,” the driver said, kicking the body of a white armoured soldier.

“But at what cost?” Kayo said, taking in the remains of several of his drones strewn across the plaza. Had the depot fallen? Were the trains and tracks lined with explosives?

A faint signal bounced back from his ping from within the container yard just outside the depot. Ignoring the worried shouts of the securcons, Kayo dashed in that direction, pulling the Dominator pistol from his belt.

When he passed through the gate he was stunned at the devastation. Shipping containers the size of trucks were strewn haphazardly, their frames dented with the impact of large objects. Bodies of enemy soldiers smouldered amidst the wreckage of Firefly and Spider drones, and the destroyed remains of one of the Hunters was spread over such a wide area that Kayo could hardly recognise it.

He followed the signal, heart thumping at the sight of so much destruction. He found the second Hunter, standing over the tangled body of an eldritch horror, a tangled mess of tentacles and bone, its flesh slowly losing its shape as whatever it was made of seeped into the ground. The Hunter was barely functional, the tattered remains of its left arm hanging by a few cables, a mess of scorched metal making up one side of its body, and great scratches across its head.

On hearing Kayo's footsteps the Hunter's remaining sensors flashed and its Chaingun swung slowly towards him, rounds clicking along the ammunition rack. Even this motion seemed like a challenge for its servos, which whined and clicked with the strain.

Kayo ducked instinctively and sent another ID ping, desperately trying to get his control of the warmech back. Was it too damaged to tell him apart from the enemy?

+++CONTROLLER RECOGNISED.+++ The Hunter's communication came both on his neural interface and, through distorted speakers, in audio form.

"Report."

+++DEPOT IS SECURE.+++ It flashed him an update of the battle, with icons indicating where Epirian bot and enemy soldier alike had fallen. +++TWENTY FOUR HOSTILES ELIMINATED, NINETEEN FRIENDLY ID INOPERABLE. ENERGY RESERVES AT THREE PERCENT.+++

Even as it spoke, the Hunter swayed, its limbs getting slower.

+++ORDERS REQUIRED.+++

Kayo stared at the warmech. Despite all the damage it had sustained and the fraction of its power remaining, the bot was still dedicated to defending the depot. He stared at the destruction around him, and the dark clouds of smoke in the sky above. Behind them, the train carriages of the maglev stood pristine, waiting

patiently, undamaged, as the securcons swept through to secure the compound. They'd come so close to losing it all.

"Power down," he told the Hunter. He glanced at its service tag. F4H7JJ091. "Site is secure. Well done, Friday."

Kayo patted the mech on the shoulder as its systems shut down. He'd been lax in his duties, sneaking off to be with Jena when he should have been here. Maybe if he had been here more of the drones would still be functional. He'd make sure Friday was repaired, even upgraded if he could swing the parts. The Depot was still standing. Kayo would need all the help he could get, if he was going to keep it that way.

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