

The Boys

Charles Stross

The boys scuttled over the concrete slab like cockroaches, exoskeletons a dull bronze in the orange glare that passed for daylight. A dense mist concealed rocks and ankles and a corpse. The roar of a police carrier echoed through the trees, a pulsing racket of authority: the boys didn't care. By the time the patrol arrived the corpse was brain dead, stripped of eyes and kidneys and viscera as well as bionics. The boys had left their incestuous joke with the corpse; a noose.

Darkness descended on the area, a protective screen for the armoured hovercraft as it swept through the gap in the forest, cruising slowly between fungus-streaked biomass modules. Among the video surfaces that lined the cabin the Hunter sat bolt upright; her screens scintillated as she focussed on the partially-dismembered cadaver.

"Boys; He's been dead for half an hour." The constables flinched and whined; she noticed them and moderated her voice. They were sensitive units, too valuable to waste.

"Nothing here," she told the autopilot. "Get the skull, then take us home."

The small noises of relief were drowned out by the roar of the fans. Some of the cyborged dogs muttered and scratched their implants as the carrier turned and rumbled back towards the castle. In the wake of the hovercraft the cobblestones were darker than before, by an increment of congealing blood.

The castle, a cube with edges a kilometer long, shone with an ominous red glow that filtered through the grime of centuries. The degenerate bioforms of the landscape twisted away from the laser-veined monolith of lunar basalt; nerve-trees bubbled into fatty shapes and acanthopods bristled as they crept past. The clouds above it reflected a red glow, megawatts of energy expended in a display of power. The ceiling of the world, a continuation of the floor, hung thirty kilometers overhead, masked by clouds: cylindrical storms and spiral winds induced by convection from the algae-fogged solar windows were the predominant weather pattern. The world existed in a soyuz-shell; TransLunar Seven, the Islamic Revolutionary Shogunate, had seen better days.

The view from the incoming drifter would have been spectacular if anyone had bothered to observe it. The pod closed in on the habitat slowly, waiting to be picked up by a tug as it drifted past. Its self-sustaining ecosystem basked in the glare of sunlight close to the sun, pulsing out a call sign to the tracking systems of the orbital city. At a range of a hundred kilometers the orbital nation was a slowly rolling wall of grey metal and ceramic. Outlying parabolic light farms provided a hook for the eye, stationary mylar mirrors focussed on geodesic domes that could contain anything from algae tanks to laser cells. Thin stems of plastic fastened them to the hub regions at either end of the colony. They were huge, kilometers in diameter, as were the gigantic solar windows set into the wall of the world. The drift pod was a bacillus approaching a dinosaur.

But the pod was bigger than any reptile, and carried a varied cargo of sentience. There were the pod's native bionics and their supportive life-system, and more – a human cargo. Nike was a fully gender-identified female human; she had the right complement of arms, legs and sensory organs, which was not mandatory. Coming from Troy-Jupiter, where lots of things called themselves human, this was quite a surprise. But Nike wasn't bothering about the scenery; she was worrying about customs.

"You're still set on going in?" asked the pod persona, an expert system that called itself Valentin Zero.

"Maybe." Nike stared into inner space, mirrored contact lenses turning her eyelids into projection screens for the video nodes in her optic nerves. "I may just go through with this. I may. Just."

She ground to a halt, thoughtfully, remembering what it had been like when she had been here before. A modified wasp buzzed to a six-point landing on her left arm, abdomen curved to inject. Its lance slid out and penetrated her skin, extending feathery biosensors into her peripheral circulation.

"Spying again, Valentin?" She opened her eyes and looked at the wasp. Its metallic carapace shone with black and red stripes, tiny alphanumeric embossed on its wings.

"I can never tell what you're thinking," said the program. "It makes me nervous."

Nike tried an experimental grin, her face twisting into a semblance of spontaneity.

"When you go like that," complained Valentin. "you're unreadable."

"If I do go," she said, "do you think I should continually signal my intentions with my anatomy?" This time the facial expression was more natural; heavy irony. Her face resembled her body; slim, pared-down, designed for an abstract aesthetic of speed rather than comfort. And she was obviously not at home in it.

"You ported into that brain badly if you think you can convince anyone you're human; you don't look spontaneous enough. You don't have to tell everyone what you're going to do; just make them think they know!"

She snorted. "How long is it since you were last human, Valentin?"

The pilot sounded genuinely surprised. "Me, human? What do you take me for? A potential defector?"

The wasp picked up traces of subtle neuropeptides that warned of danger. "Don't be alarmed," she said, "but if I thought that, I'd have to suspend you. I need you here behind me." Mirrors slid down across her eyeballs, a deliberate snub to conversation. The wasp took wing in a vindictive whine of chitin, leaving a bead of blood oozing from her skin. It flew to a nearby neuroplant with yellow tendrils as fat as fingers that dug their way into the hull of the pod, and offered biochemical homage.

"I've made up my mind," she said. "I'm going."

Valentin didn't reply. There was a gentle thumping from outside the pod, followed by the barely perceptible return of acceleration, unfelt for six weeks; the tug had latched on.

Nike returned to her customs video briefing.

"If we accept your application for citizenship you must accept our semiotics. If we accept your physiology you must accept our commensal bacteria. If we accept your psychodynamics you must accept our law."

The customs official stared at her with phased-array eyes, cruciform wings of black synthetic retinæ. It was a robot, and not a well-maintained robot: it recited by rote, sounding extremely bored.

"Repeat after me: Death to the imperialist zionist ronin, the lackeys of neo-humanist cladisticians, and the discorporeate running-dog zaibatsu. I swear to follow the decree of the hezbollah and the shogunate in all things, to abide by the shari'a, to follow humility and modesty as a law for the rest of my natural life, and to refrain from acts of treason against the corporation ..."

Nike recited the oath expressionlessly, word-perfect from memory. The syllables were stale in her mouth; she'd memorized them during the two-day immigration check, startled at how far the original slogans had been deformed. Then she walked through the exit of the customs hall, feeling her feet ache from months of free-fall. The black cross of the robots' retinal array tracked her as far as the path into the forest before losing interest and swiveling back to the entry gates.

Mist swirling at ankle-level obscured roots that looped to catch unwary feet, pits of rotting vegetation hollowed out by subsidence, other unseen hazards. Videomice crouched in the boles of trees, grooming their paws, faces almost obscured by the black buttons of their eyes. Nike walked without guidance into the woods that blanketed the colony interior. There had been major changes unnoted by the immigrant processing module over the past two centuries. A faint rumble drifted from the distance, menacing in the twilight as the colony headed towards nightfall.

The videomice were the eyes and ears of the shogunate, but there were too many of them to monitor simultaneously. Nike ignored them, relying on the prickling of her neck to tell her when one of them was belching a coded data packet to the castle: her close-cropped hair was wired for microwaves. She guessed that there were other watchers in the forest, other eyes, and it worried her. System traffic control had confirmed that no-one had visited the colony for a good six years now, and no-one had left it for over two decades. If anyone human was left alive, Nike would be the subject of intense scrutiny. She stumbled occasionally and paused to brush branches out of her way as she followed the trail. She was right; other eyes were watching her.

Boys drifted like ghosts, moving in silence across the open spaces. Their choreography was uncanny, plotted by computer for a ballet corps of cyborgs. The ground beneath their feet was a bare surface of white ceramic that curved away to either side until it submerged beneath a layer of earth; it was the naked hull, exposed by erosion. Every ten metres a grey pole stood, festooned with branching sensors and small pumps, a trellis left over from the soil-support system. Ecological vandalism had stripped it bare in this area, a kilometer-wide strip of sterility near the equator. Darkness had fallen across it an hour ago

and the people of the night were rising.

The Hunter watched them on a screen in the safety of the castle. Reclining in a throne of skulls festooned with nutrient tubes and neural jacks, she looked superficially akin to those she observed; pale, with the fleshlessness of a rapidly-growing child and the synthetic skin of the ageless. The resemblance was due purely to design convergence. The Hunter – her title was as good as her name – was not a boy. To be a boy was to be a warrior, and the Hunter was hardly a warrior. She was a Hunter – of boys.

"What are they doing now?" The voice came from above and behind her head. She watched the screen with the intensity of a sniper.

"They appear to be constructing something ..." The Hunter paused to consult her throne of brains. "A gallows."

"Why?"

The Hunter thought for a while. "It's an archaic device used for punitive purposes. The victim is suspended by a rope for some time – it looks uncomfortable. Possibly dangerous if no spinal bypass is installed."

"Who is the subject of this device?" The voice sounded bored. It probably knew already and was testing her.

"That's not clear, yet."

"Keep me informed." The voice vanished as rapidly as it had manifested itself, and the Hunter shuddered. She had a morbid fear of that voice, conditioned by a century of ignorance. No-one had met the Shogun face to face and told the tale within living memory. Her memory. The Shogun was an enigma. It might not even exist, and what could be more terrible than that? To serve a fiction for a century ...

The twilight ritual of the boys played itself out. One of their own, out on the white plain, was stripped of his exoskeleton; they bound his hands behind his back with a cord of red silk. It was impossible to tell if he struggled – those who surrounded him were too strong for unamplified muscles to resist. Up went the rope, the prisoner on the polished teakwood scaffold, the drop ... the Hunter watched, fascinated. Centripetal acceleration dragged the twitching feet out. There's something nasty about this, she realized, as infrareds observed the body cooling. The boys left an hour before she admitted to herself that what she'd witnessed was not a punishment but an execution. The absolutism of age. They cannibalized one of their own, she wondered; why? Have the boys become so jaded that they gamble with their own lives? And, dawning slowly in her mind: I don't understand this any more.

The house was so well camouflaged that Nike almost stumbled into it before she realized what it was. It slumbered among the trees, concealed by a dense thicket of ivy; its owner waited for her patiently outside.

"You're the immigrant," he said; "I'm Ben."

"Nike." She watched him closely, noted dark skin but no cranial hair.

"Winged victory? Or a missile?" When he spoke he held his head on one side. "Never mind. You'll be wanting somewhere to stay while you find out what it's like here. You'll be wondering why I'm offering that. I'll tell you; we don't see many strangers."

"How many of you are there?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Maybe five hundred, maybe less. Nobody counts. There's the boys, the servants of the Shogunate, a few civilians who keep quiet. And the neuroplants; about six million posthumans." For a moment Ben looked like something else; infinitely weary, lines engraved on his face like tribal scars concealing eyeball-tracked weapons systems. It passed; Nike concentrated on the smell of his skin, the pheromones he exuded. They smelt so perfectly natural that he might have been a prehistoric subsistence farmer or a test pilot. There was a sense of archaic simplicity about him.

"Do you eat?" she asked.

The Hunter dug through her collection of spare skulls in search of an appropriate memory, in response to a desperate urge to understand. She found one, long-jawed with the baroque horns of an extinct fashion. The motions were instinctive by now; she plugged it into her throne by a fat nerve trunk and felt the alien emotions expand her perceptions into something that felt more complete. The skull had been poorly maintained, isolated in sensory deprivation for the better part of a century; its personality had ablated away to a core of memories and a vague, gnawing loneliness.

She remembered being a he: experienced at first hand the sea of stars beyond the window of a cramped cargo drifter between worlds, the waves of vapour churning at the edges of the red spot as mining drones scooped up megatons of methane from the Jovian

atmosphere. That wasn't right; she carried on searching. Later she remembered arriving at TransLunar Seven shortly before the revolution. Being caught up in the confusion and arrested by the hezbollah, undergoing the terror of forcible decapitation. This was too recent; she wanted somewhere in between. Tried to remember. What had it been like in Troy-Jupiter two hundred years ago?

The agonies this brain had been squeezed through made her wince. It was easy for a Hunter to fall into the fatal trap of thinking of her memories as something more than a very cunning source of information, of trying to relate to the dead minds in the boneyard. She hunted and eventually found what she was looking for, partially obscured by the pain of a bizarre and self-destructive marriage.

A memory of what it was like before the revolution, before she had become a Hunter.

The house vomited pre-digested morsels into the feeding trough. As Nike and Ben ate, she tried to assess the situation. It was worse than she'd expected; the place wasn't far from dead. An unseen ruler who might not even exist, a dissident faction with unspeakable habits, and a dying periphery of humans.

"They shut down half the farms a century ago," said Ben, "and most of the rest forty years later. There wasn't enough demand on the manufacturing capacity to justify running them all. Nobody needs anything – the die-backs left a vast overcapacity. The city's a playground for the boys so nobody lives there anymore."

He shoveled in another handful of food without looking up. "You came at the wrong time."

Nike watched him silently for a while, fascinated. She wondered if she'd met him before, years ago; so many of her memories from the early days had been wiped to make room for new experiences that she couldn't be sure.

He finished eating and finally looked up. "Just what did you come here for, anyway?" he asked with an elaborate shrug.

"To take over," she said. "We need this space. What's your interest?"

He grinned, face in a shadow cast by the sunduct in the roof. "I'm a neutral. I have no interest in conflict."

"So?" she asked.

"The question is what you can do for us," he added. "Who you are."

Her eyes flashed, reflecting the night with mirrored venom. "I'm the forerunner. My people are coming and they need a vacant biosphere. Don't stand in our way!"

"I'm not," he remonstrated mildly; "I just want to know who you are. I'm not opposing you! But the boys probably will. And the Shogun might."

"Yes," she said. "But just what are these boys? And who is the Shogun?"

He raised an eyebrow. "That," he replied, "is something I expected you to know already."

The Hunter stared at the screen until the pain in her eyes forced her to blink furiously, tears trickling down her cheeks. It was hard to bear, this sense of her humanity being reduced to a cypher by isolation. The feeling that she'd been locked in her role for too long while the boys played their blood-games in the forest. Sometimes she sent out for a warm skull to scan for the wet sensations of dying; she couldn't remember her name but she felt that if she concentrated on it for long enough it would return... she was close to an overload with time. It had been too many years since she had been merely human. Damn, damn, she whispered to herself in a monotonous litany; why do I keep forgetting what it was like? There was no answer; there never was.

All she knew was that she couldn't get a grip on her emotions. There'd been a time, not so long ago in historical terms, when she had possessed a blindingly important purpose for which she had sacrificed her freedom to be anyone but herself. The purpose might have been connected with the Shogun or the boys; it had faded into the cobwebs of neurones that died and were replaced by the longevity programs. To those who knew the signs she was as old as the artificial hills. She knew that it had meant everything to her once: but now it was merely the voice from behind her throne, and the boys.

Three short grey cylinders the size of mice drifted in free fall, jostling in the thin breeze along the axis of the world. One of them was capped at each end by a blue, very human eye. Another sprouted two surreal ears, perfect fleshy miniatures that merged seamlessly with the cylinder. The third had no discernable sense organs, but from a crack in its flank grew an almost perfect stem of convolvulus. The bindweed curled and twisted,

loosely holding the other two cylinders in its green coils. A wasp coasted nearby, red-banded and bearing stenciled cyrillic insignia on its wings; five kilometers below, the cotton-wool swathes of cloud veiled the floor of the world. Valentin Zero had smuggled his cortex modules into the shogunate as seeds disguised in Nike's gut. Reaching the free-fall zone via the sewage system, the modules had matured and grown rapidly by preying on wind-born organisms; the wasp was one of many infiltrators sweeping the world for news.

As darkness fell, the twittering code-pulses from the videomice quietened down; Valentin tuned in on the steady, low-powered grumble of the neuroplants, the tok-tokking of a factory talking to its robots, the muffled crackling of poorly-shielded bionics hooked into the soil-support system. The microwave traffic was richer and more compressed than sonic communication, echoing back and forth along the eighty-kilometer cylinder. But Valentin was listening for a single delicate pulse-train; the side-band transmission from Nike's eyeballs.

This situation interested him, inasmuch as anything could hold his attention these days; the ins and outs of betrayal, of wheels within wheels and subordinates who were superiors. Valentin Zero was an expert system wired for espionage, and his current mission was to monitor Nike. She was so old as to be almost obsolete: old enough to have been here before. His sensorium ghosted through winds of data – the life-blood of even the most seriously injured orbital republic – until he finally locked onto a signal that looked right. It was faint, but the sophisticated coding matched his key; he locked on and submerged in the transmission, saw what Nike was seeing.

The wall of the house caved in soundlessly, blood spurting from severed arteries buried in the walls, followed by a soundless spasm as the floor shuddered and died. A release of sphincters flooded the food trough. A boy stepped through a great ragged rent in front of her; his left arm was coated to the elbow with a smooth sheen of gore, the chainsaw semi-retracted and murderous. His bronze exoskeleton exposed white skin and atrophied genitals, a wildly ecstatic smile of welcome beneath a cowlick of brown hair. The running lights on his spinal carapace were blinking green and violet pips, as membranes slid down across Nike's eyes and a targeting display flashed a red crosshair surrounded by flickering digits across his face.

"Hello," he said, and tittered. Ben sat where he was, very still, eyes narrowed; Nike felt her perception compress into a point on the boy's forehead, a point that could be made to explode.

"Hello," she replied. The boy frowned, as if disappointed.

"You're not scared," he complained, "and you're not dead. What are you?" He pouted with a transsexual sullenness that struck her as grotesquely old-fashioned.

"I'm a visitor," she replied. "What are you?"

"I'm a Boy," he said, smiling suddenly; "I've come –"

"He's come to negotiate their surrender," said Ben. The boy flared again, mercurially angry.

"You shut up, old man! That's for me to tell. It's not true, anyway."

Ben shut up, his face blank. Nike felt as if solid ground was dissolving beneath her feet. She'd pegged Ben as a non-participant, but this boy seemed to know something that she didn't.

"What have you got to tell me?" she asked, itching with unease.

"Merely to enquire after your health and your diplomatic patronage," said the boy, sniffing disdainfully. With a distinct lack of theatrical presence he sniffed and scratched under one armpit. "But the old man of the monolith's got to you already, I see!"

"The monolith?" she asked, tracking Ben with her peripheral vision. He sat as still as a rock.

"The castle ... the claw of the Shogun. We've been trying to get him to shut down the Hunter for decades, haven't we?" The boy glanced at Ben pointedly; Ben rocked slowly back and forth. The boy grimaced. "Observe the Shogun: theoretical ruler of the world, patron of the ongoing revolution, supreme systems authority of the dreamtime, etcetera. We've been trying to get him to do his job since he ran away fifty years ago."

"Why?" she asked, wondering to whom she should address the question.

"Because I'm not ready to let the boys do what they were designed to do," said Ben, not looking at her: "I'm not prepared to forcibly digitise the entire human biomass of the System to suit an ideological goal. When we designed the boys –"

"– Who were 'we'?" she butted in, gripped by a sense of déjà vu.

He stared at her and yawned. "You just want to confirm this, don't you?" he said. "We were the Posthuman Front, the society for synthetic intelligence. The Islamic Corporate Shogunate was an experimental deployment for the revolution; fanatical cyborgs. Some of

them were the wild boys and some of them were less obvious, like the hunters. They knew that when they died they'd be preserved in the dreamtime; their job was to forcibly integrate all reactionary elements. Very successful, I might add: most of the neuroplants in this world are part of the mind-support system. But it didn't work out too well." Ben paused, head bowed; the boy looked at him accusingly.

"The ecosystem was damaged during the revolution; it began to shut down," said the boy. "We stayed on in hope of finding transport to another world where we could integrate, but evidently there was a quarantine pact; all the exfiltrators lost contact. And then Ben reprogrammed that blasted Hunter – the only surviving one, we exported all the other clones – on our collective ass to keep us from getting enough slack ..." He shook his alloy-framed head. "Unless those early cadres succeeded, the revolution was an abortion. Any idea how many humans want what's on offer?" He snorted, disgustedly.

Nike looked at him enigmatically. "Yes," she said; "I have. I've seen it at first hand."

"Why are you here?" asked the boy. Nike shrugged.

"My people aren't very popular out there," she said. "We need some where to go; the Deconstructivists are pushing in everywhere, and we've lost ground so heavily that unless we find a closed habitat we'll be forced to condense in order to prevent mass defections."

"Deconstructivists?" said Ben. "What are they?"

"Human revenants. You honestly don't want to know," she said. It was so tiring, being on edge like this: even the wild boys didn't seem threatening enough to justify keeping her defenses on edge. "We just can't compete." A soft rain was falling outside, pattering through the hole in the wall.

"And who are you?" probed the boy, looking for completeness.

"Can't you guess?" she complained. "You've had it easy with your smug mind-games and your revolution in one habitat! Don't you see?" The wind ghosted through the house like the soul of history, ruffling her hair. "We tried to carry the revolution through outside the closed habitat, we fought for a century ..." She stared into reflective distances, eyes like dark mirrors, resembling her mind.

"... but we lost."

The Hunter was wandering, adrift in an ocean of despair, when she came across Valentin Zero. Her video surfaces were locked into the sonic images of a fruit bat in free fall; when she saw something unusual she tensed instinctively. Could it be a boyish thing, here in the axial zone? A surge of conditioned reflexes drowned her nervous system in adrenalin and hatred; but as the bat approached the object it resolved into three components, all too small. Her skulls couldn't find a meaning for it. Drifting into a close approach, she noted three cylinders and a bushy twirl of vegetation. Modified axons in the bat's ears recognized vague high-frequency emissions, the fingerprint of molecular-scale processors; it had to be intelligent.

"Hello unidentified structure," she squeaked through the ultrasonic larynx of the bat. "Talk to me."

The structure began to rotate, sluggishly; the bat picked up another object, the vibrating flight surfaces of an insect. An eye swam into view, shielded by a triangular leaf. The bat screamed; something was scanning down its nervous system, trying to locate the hunter's interface.

"Who are you?" said the cluster of grey cylinders, words burning silent tracks of silvery pain through the mind of the bat. "Visualize yourself." The Hunter framed an image and transmitted it, waited as the intruder scanned it.

"Nike," broadcast Valentin; "What are you doing here?"

Then there was silence, as high above the castle the Hunter remembered who she had been.

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