



12-7-2012

# Finding Humanity

Paul Marett  
pmarett@sas.upenn.edu

---

# Finding Humanity

## **Abstract**

Marett explores what it means to be human in this short story

## Finding Humanity

Paul Marett

It lay there, sputtering, pleading for its life. Its legs curled up beneath it as it pressed itself further up against the wall in a futile effort to escape me. I accessed my data storage system and pulled its file.

Name: Roger Morrison. Classification: Homo Sapiens Sapiens, AKA human. Bounty: 800 GB. Criminal Record: None. Reason for Desired Termination: Land Dispute.

“Please,” it stuttered, “I’ve done n-n-n-nothing wrong. Why w-w-would you d-do this?”

“I’m afraid that information is need to know only. And humans never need to know.”

I lifted my arm and activated my laser. The beam charged up, glowing a brighter and brighter red until it burned a hole through the creature’s heart. Within seconds, it was dead.

“The job is done, sir”

“Excellent work C-1319. I am transferring the data to your account now. It is good to know that that vermin living next door to me is gone for good. If I had to see its face one more time I probably would have had to deactivate.”

“It won’t be a problem anymore sir.”

“Yes, you’ve certainly made sure of that. And if I ever have need of your services again, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you sir”

The connection terminated and my mind became completely my own once more.

\*\*\*

I took a seat at the bar.

“Two hits please.”

The bartender placed two small cylinders in front of me. I transferred the relevant payment to the bar’s account and then I jammed the first cylinder into my drives. A jolt raced through me as my energy spiked. Nothing like some extra energy after an extermination.

I surfed the nets for any news. The war with the Eastern Block was still going on. Seemed like it had been going on forever. Over 2,000 robots had lost their lives in the fighting today. Such a tragic waste of resources.

“C-1319, I have a new assignment for you,” my boss’s voice interrupted me. So frustrating that he could just enter my mind whenever he wanted, but I suppose that’s bureaucracy for you.

“Can’t it wait, C-0598, I’m on break.”

“I’m afraid it can’t. A very important client has called in requesting an immediate extermination.”

“Can’t someone else do it? How about C-3987? He could use the experience.”

“Did I mention that this won’t exactly be an easy task? Besides it will pay quite well.”

“You mean better than the crap you’ve been assigning me lately?”

“Hey, watch your tone C-13. You’re lucky you’re one of the best or you’d be out on the streets begging for nuts and bolts.”

“Yeah, yeah, save the tough guy talk. What’s the assignment?”

“A certain very powerful cyborg wants us to take care of a problem that seems to be growing out of his control. I’m sure you’ve heard of the HRA? You know, the Human Rights Activists?”

“Course. Been a thorn in the government’s side for decades. Intent on returning to the past, when fully biological scum like them actually had rights.”

“Exactly. Well it seems like that their leader, a human going by the name of Richard Jones, is becoming a little too outspoken and needs to be removed from the picture.”

“I see. And who exactly did you say ordered this contract?”

“I’m afraid that’s been classified. Even I don’t know. All I know is that it’s important. Know how I know it’s important? How much do you think we’re being paid for this job?”

“I don’t know, a couple thousand?”

“Try 200,000.”

My mind seemed to do a somersault. I had never imagined that so much data could even exist in one place, let alone that it could be at my fingertips. This must be one hell of an important client.

“What’s the catch, then?” I asked.

“The target, this Jones fellow, isn’t going to be easy to find, and once found, isn’t going to be easy to kill. That’s why we need you to handle it.”

“Well at that price, I would do anything. I’ll start looking into it right away.”

“Thanks C-13, I knew I could count on you. And remember, if you pull this off, not only will you get all that data, but this company’s rep will soar sky high. This is important, C-13. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it C-05. I’ll call you when it’s done.”

The connection terminated.

“Important call?” asked the bartender.

“You could say that.” I snatched up the other cylinder of energy and socketed it into my drives, replacing the spent one from before.

Transferring a tip to the bartender’s account, I left the bar.

\*\*\*

I turned into the alleyway and saw him standing there. My latest informant. His projection software was active, generating random facial features to replace his usual ones. Secrecy is something that is hard to come by these days and he was only willing to meet on the condition of complete anonymity.

I approached him.

“On which door does the moon land?” he asked me.

“On the door of he who holds the sun.”

“Good. Glad to see you made it.”

“I did. I understand you have some information regarding Jones.”

“Yes. I can help you. I used to be like them, you know? I used to be *human*. It wasn’t my fault, I was just born that way. Raised in their culture, brought up on their values. But I

always wanted more, know what I mean? I had questions that they just couldn't answer. So I upgraded.

"Became like you, like the way we all should be. I learned to see the humans for what they really are. You know, backwards, retarded, disgusting. They need to be taken care of. They have no place in our society, you know?"

"Oh, I most certainly do know."

"So I'll help you. To take down their leader. Like cutting the head off the snake. You know, because it can't survive without its head. He's a strange human, that Jones, so determined to make a difference. He's a hard man to break, at least mentally. Strong willed, you know, that sort of thing.

"But physically, he's weak, like all those scum. The trick is finding him. When I was with him, we were holed up in the remnants of the subway system in New York. Might be a good place to start the search. But, you know, he could have moved since then.

"I do know where his right hand guy is though. Human, name of Bernard. Ryan Bernard. He's out in an old miner's town called Lead, in South Dakota. If you can get to him, I bet he knows where Jones is hiding out."

Suddenly, the informant's body was flung backwards, sailing into the wall of the alleyway. There it remained, dangling from the arrow that had pierced it through the skull.

I turned around, activating my laser and pointing it at the adjacent rooftop, just as the shadow of a figure vanished from sight. I diverted power to my thrusters and leaped onto the roof, the thud of my landing almost obscuring the sound of the rooftop door closing.

I ran to the door and ripped it off its hinges, entering at the top of a main stairwell. The assassin was already halfway down. I leapt off the balustrade and plummeted down to the first floor. The shockwave of my landing unbalanced the figure, who proceeded to tumble down the last flight of stairs and land at my feet.

I grabbed him by his collar and lifted him up to my face. Or should I say it, for the creature I held in my hands was human.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

The human just started to laugh, almost hysterically.

"Who do you work for?"

The laugh only got louder.

"Where is Jones?"

The laugh crescendoed and then came to an abrupt halt as the human went limp in my hands. Dead. It must have taken precautions should it be captured. Disgusting creature.

I dropped the body and left the building. I had more work to do.

\*\*\*

The whole New York subway system was wired to blow. Not surprising. Humans were always such cowards when it came to a fight. Hiding behind their traps. So I tripped the wire intentionally and left.

The explosions echoed down the tunnels as the ceiling caved in behind me. If there were any humans still in there, they would be dead now. Jones wouldn't be in there, though. By all accounts, he's far too smart to corner himself like that.

No, Jones would be hiding out somewhere else entirely.

\*\*\*

I walked down the dusty road. The town of Lead had been deserted for the past few years and it certainly showed the wear and tear. The desert had already started to move back in and reclaim the land.

I activated my thermal scanners and looked around. No signs of life in any of the buildings. I kept walking.

There was a click from beneath my foot. A pressure plate! I looked around. There was nothing near me that would be heavy enough to replace my weight and prevent the mechanism from activating.

I had no choice then but to let the trap activate and hope for the best. I pumped all my power into external shielding and prepared to move as fast as possible away from the area.

3, 2, 1.

I leaped forward and ducked into a somersault, hearing more clicks beneath me as my body activated even more pressure plates with each movement. Behind me, I could hear explosions as bombs jettisoned out of the windows of the nearby buildings.

I diverted all my power into my legs and took off as fast as my system would go. The bombs continued to explode just behind me. Only when I reached the end of the street, and the clicks beneath my feet ceased, did I come to a halt.

I turned around and saw the devastation that the bombs had wrought. The street was in ruins, the pavement cracked and jagged. I had just barely made it out alive.

So this was a trap. There clearly wasn't anyone here, human or cyborg. And New York was a trap too. The informant had lied.

\*\*\*

His body was still where I had left it, pinned to the wall of the alleyway. I reached up and wrenched the arrow out of his skull, allowing the corpse to sink to the ground.

I extended my download cable and plugged it into what remained of the informant's drives. Hopefully there would still be some usable information in there.

I skimmed through his recent memories, searching for the appearance of the name Jones. There it is! A conversation that happened only a few hours before my meeting with him.

Playback:

Jones: Ryan, what's your status?

Ryan: I've convinced C-1319 that I am ready to betray the human cause. He will be here in a few hours.

Jones: Good. Are you prepared to do what must be done?

Ryan: [brief silence] Yes.

Jones: Very well. Know that you will be remembered for this. Generations from now, we will speak of all that you have sacrificed for our cause. You will be remembered and honored.

Ryan: Thank you sir. It has been an honor and a privilege.

Jones: It has indeed. Good luck, and may God watch over you always.

The transmission ended. Strange. It would seem as though this informant, Ryan, was sent here to die. But why? To convince me to trust his information? What reason would I have not to?

Trace the origin of the call. It came from D.C. The ruins of the old White House to be exact. Looks like I finally got him.

\*\*\*

At the start of the war, The Eastern Block had bombarded the capitol, reducing most of the buildings to ashes. The White House managed to survive most of the onslaught, leaving it somewhat intact.

It was still a bloody mess though. I scrambled over the fallen columns and opened the front door. Unlocked. Why bother locking what no one wants to go into anyway?

My metal soles echoed on the hard floor. No sense in stealth.

“Jones!” I bellowed, “I know you’re in here! Come out. There’s no point in hiding from me!”

My voice echoed through the silent hall. I waited for it to stop and then activated my thermal sensors. There were red figures behind every wall! Humans hiding in every room besides this one.

Before I could even fully register this fact, a bright light flashed, blinding me and turning everything red. Then a gas began to pump into the room. I quickly switched on my lung filters so that the air would still be breathable.

Turning off my thermal vision, I found myself completely enveloped in the misty haze of dark green gas.

The sound of laughter seemed to come from every direction. Then a voice, Jones’ voice.

“You think you’re so smart, haha, you think you had it all figured out, oh yes you did. But you had no idea. That it was I, yes I, who was pulling the strings all along.

“Who wanted me dead? Huh? Huh? Couldn’t tell you, could they? Top secret, wasn’t it? I’ll tell you though, haha. It was me! Yup me! I want me dead. Ooh, didn’t see that coming, did you? Nope.

“But of course, I don’t really want me dead. No, siree, I wanted you! Not dead, but alive. Oh yes, very much alive.”

Suddenly, I couldn’t move. My sensors told me that a vast network of magnets beneath the floor had just been activated.

“Can’t move, can you? Boo-hoo, poor you. Years of living underground. In tunnels, in sewers, in hiding. It can really change a man, can’t it? Yes sir, it can. I tried peaceful ways for years and years and years, but no one cares for us. Nope, not for the humans.

“And why don’t you care for us? Because we’re different! Because we’re strange! Because we’re hahaha funny!”

A ring of humans wearing gas filters appeared out of the fog, closing in around me. In their hands were a series of magnets. The closer they got, the less I could move, until, finally, they closed the circle of magnets around my arms and chest.

The humans then backed away, leaving only one. Jones.

“So now, we do things the hard way, hmm? We force the government’s hand. We make them realize that we were here first. That we designed you, that we built you, that we are you. But most importantly, we make them realize that we have power.”

Jones took a chip out of his pocket and reached forward.

“You see, you passed my tests. Proved that you could survive, that you could beat death. So you will help us of course, whether you want to or not. That’s one thing that we still have, which you don’t. Free will. The ability to, well, say no.”

Jones pushed the chip into my drives. I blacked out.

\*\*\*

Everything was hazy, almost like I was watching a video of someone else’s life. I was in the new Capitol building, floating high above the ruins of DC. I had requested a meeting with the President.

Why had I done that?

\*\*\*

I was in his office. He was at his desk. He wanted to know what was so important that I had demanded to see him so soon. His personal security team flanked him.

I mumbled something. He asked me to repeat myself. I killed him.

\*\*\*

I am still in his office. The president’s body is slumped over his desk, limp. His guards lie dead where they had stood only moments before.

There are people banging on the door. They want to get in, but the door is barricaded from the inside. Did I do that?

\*\*\*

I am free falling. Down from the new Capitol to the old. I must have jumped out of a window. Did I do that on purpose? Maybe I want to die?

Maybe I want to live?

\*\*\*

I am in a bed. I am comfortable. A human with a kindly face sits before me. He smiles. “Well done,” he says, “You have succeeded in your task.” His praise makes me happy. I have not been happy in a long time.

\*\*\*

I am home. I have a family that takes care of me, and I take care of them. They are called humans and I am called a cyborg, but we are equals.

I am not the only cyborg here. Others are here too. The families say that they have done their jobs successfully as well. That all the leaders of every state, all the enemies of humanity, were successfully eliminated.

I am happy to have been part of something larger than myself.

Down here, in the underground, we can live in peace and harmony. My family says that we mustn’t ever go above ground though. That up there a war rages between great machines programmed long ago.

“It is a war that may never come to an end,” says my human brother, “because those who fight it have lost their humanity.”



“Have I lost my humanity?” I ask him.

“No,” he says, smiling, “Your humanity can never be lost, because it has been programmed to be a part of you forever.”

I smile back at him. “That’s good to know. I don’t think I would ever want to lose my humanity. I’m not sure what I would be like without it.”