




There is no greater precondition  
for failure than a lack of hope.  
Mary Morgan, 2048



# THE HERO'S TALE

## The Courageous Man



Winter has come and darkness presides  
Over a perilous land where evil resides.




The monsters we face are not who we thought;  
They appeared to be strong, not scandalously bought.

Our world's been forsaken by the Great Orange Beast;  
Our families are starving while the filthy rich feast.  
They've taken our children; they've stolen our joy;  
They've locked them all up and taken their toys.

They thought they could mold them and make them believe  
That "Bad things are good!" and "It pays to deceive!"  
But they don't realize the power possessed  
By children who imagine the world at its best

Courage will lead us to force winter's end;  
A new world will emerge, new life will begin.  
And who better to lead us than the unexpectedly bravest?  
The smallest, the cleverest, the children will save us.

--Anonymous Penn  
2048 AD





I am Mary Morgan.

I sometimes have to force myself to breathe, to think, and to remember who I am. Doubt has become my greatest enemy and I can't afford to let it win. The world has changed so much in these past three years under Herr Bigly Rump's reign that it's sometimes hard to remember the things that matter.

Kindness matters.

Words matter.

Lives matter.

I am Mary Morgan.

I'm a historical investigator.

I work to uncover the truth about our past wherever it may be and no matter

what I have to do

to find it. I wouldn't

have added that last part to

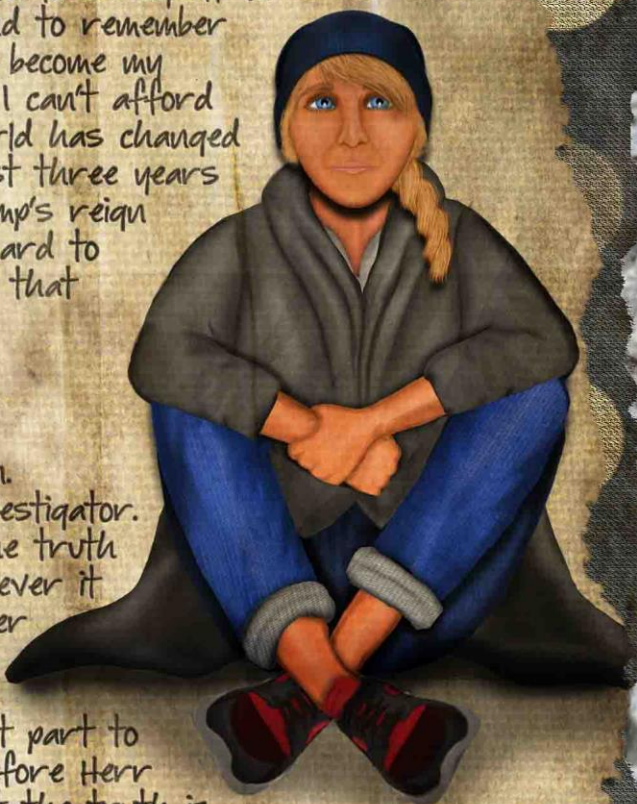
my job description before Herr

Rump took office, but the truth is

so elusive now, so rare and precious, that it can no longer go without saying. The truth is a ghost: ethereal evidence that it once lived, but also that it has died.

I am Mary Morgan. And I am in exile. I no longer frequent the streets of the city or explore the tunnels beneath. I no longer venture out beyond the Borderlands on expeditions to recover important data that might lead us to a safer and more sustainable future. Instead, I hide from the authorities and their evil metal monsters and visit the RumpDumps that dot the outer bounds of society. It's here in these quiet, dark corners that I conspire with other renegades or rebels or resisters or whatever name they choose to call us on any given day. Regardless, we are the enemy. And so is the truth.

I. Am. Mary. Morgan.





Truth is most elusive inside the gilded walls of Rumptopia. Lately, Herr Rump has hosted nightly rallies to which he invites his friends Chain Tankervich, Moolah Bin Greeeed, and Ang Wee Wun, the dictators he most admires and with whom he's formed a secret and sinister alliance. Perhaps the Rump believes we are unaware of the monumental personal debts that encumber these so-called friendships with the sickle, the sword, and the star, but we are not. Nor are we blissfully ignorant to the fact that he must remain in office to have any hope of feeding these sharks.



Also present at the Rump's braaggadocious ceremonies are the Rumptopians, the citizens who endorse the wretched antics of this creature they call their Master, and those too medicated to care. During these boisterous gatherings, hateful things are celebrated while kindness is ridiculed and humanity is punishable by death. Of course, most in attendance are not equally guilty of any crime their leader commits, but they are cheerfully complicit as is exemplified by their jubilation. Each night, the festivities end on the jolly notes of a polka dedicated to Herr Rump:

"Herr Bigly Rump is the greatest alive!  
He's handsome and strong, and he'll help us survive!  
He's smart and he's clever, a leader of men!  
All hail Bigly Rump! The world's great again!"



Despite Herr Rump's utter hatred of all things scientific, he and his army of enablers have managed to weaponize the greatest threat to mankind's survival: the Mother Machine. She is massive and omnipotent and an absolute terror to anyone upon whom she sets her sights. She has been given such wide ranging latitude for her calculations of who is a threat and who is complicit that she essentially has sole discretion over who lives or dies. Had we not been so completely overwhelmed by the sheer chaos of this administration, we may have been more attentive to this horrid eavesdropper, this silent but deadly superspy, but as illustrated in my reporting, we made mistakes and still we persisted.

Posthumous Krill once told me that whenever he used his mechanical eye to spy on the Mother Machine, he was always careful to listen for a rhythmic click-clicking before taking any real chances. In his line of work as a private detective, he had come across information that this noise he feared should alert him that "Mama" was spying back at him. Although he

claimed to have never heard the dreaded ticking, he likened it to the sound of a doomsday clock counting off the seconds to complete annihilation, for that's exactly what the Mother would do if she discovered trespassers lurking in her mainframe. She would simply and completely destroy them.





I think my friend and mentor Juggler Vein said it far better than I ever could:

# The End of Life

A Study of Mankind's  
Continuing Self-Annihilation

by Juggler Vein,  
Alchemist and Scholar

The End of Life by Juggler Vein

We live in an age when so much of what our government does is cloaked in secrecy or swaddled in lies that information has become currency. Data of any sort is valuable, but that which can be verified is gold. Documents are highly sought, as are eye-witness accounts of incidents that take place in the shadows between worlds: the haves and have-nots.

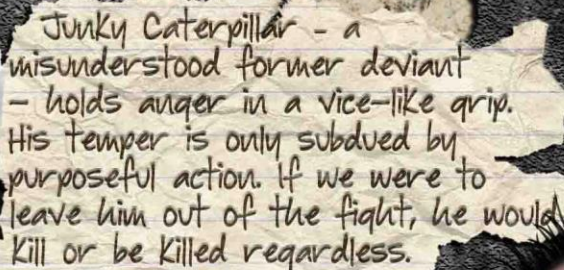
We are a world of immigrants, but nowhere is it more apparent than in the Borderlands where species number in the thousands. How odd is it then that these newcomers from other parts of our world as well as from other planets and even separate dimensions are the ones to stand tallest against oppression? Is it their experience at loss that makes them better warriors? Or is it because they've lost their own worlds and do not wish to lose another? Or perhaps it's our own standards that have fallen by the wayside. Being alive has become an act of valor, and surviving another day, a victory. I suspect the reasons are as many as are the immigrants.

pg. 1,032

What remains of my team are mostly immigrants. They are a diverse collection of rogue warriors most would consider unworthy of recruitment, but they are steadfast in their commitments to each other and to our cause. Their strength lies in their diversity.



Posthumous Keill  
finder Of Lost Things  
Operator #22-148.9  
#14 Being-on-the-Bay, 6th Level



Fortuitous Max sports a tattoo on the underside of his left forearm. It consists of the celestial coordinates his home planet was last known to occupy before it was blown to smithereens during the Last Great War.

ca. We are a collection of...  
on one another for fear of attack. Gr...  
has ended. E Pluribus Unum no longer applies. (con... nex...

NOTE #2

**DIVIDED WE FALL**

Picky Love. The most tender-hearted amongst us has yet to be hardened - or crushed - by the brutalities we face. This, of course, only makes him more precious to us, for he reminds us of our humanity.



# HELP US

# Save you

Now huddled in Juggler Vein's apothecary shop along with the spy Newton Gasbomb, my friends and I considered the note we'd just been given by the children who'd not yet been stolen by Herr Bigly Rump and his minions. Although their imaginations made them quite magical, we were certain that only a few had avoided capture, making it very likely their combined powers had been diminished exponentially. Even so, judging by their message, the children were obviously still confident their abilities could save the world. I wanted to believe it as well and greatly hoped the letter I'd received from the girl who called herself Ever Hopeful would bolster my faith.

From: Meandering Mole

To: Persistent Puzzler  
Borderlands General Delivery  
(Possibly along the fourth dark alley past  
the leech pond. Or not.)





Dear Mary,

It's me again, Ever Hopeful. I hope this letter finds you well and prosperous. I just want to let you know my family and I have finally made it into the city where everything is wonderful! Rumptopia is truly a beautiful place where even the toilets are made of gold!

My father is recovering nicely, thanks to Dr. Sightless Surprise, one of Herr Rump's finest physicians. He prescribed a new medicine for my father that's actually derived from jellyfish of all things! He told me Herr Rump hired scientists who grow these strange, spineless creatures from recovered DNA and that it's such an exciting medical breakthrough that they must keep the harborside facility under close guard! I'm sending you the label from one of his medicine bottles so you'll know what to get if one of your friends or family members is a bit under the weather as was my father. I'm so thankful Herr Rump is back from his vacation.

He truly is a stable genius! Father says we should all be very proud and happy the world is great again! Much love and gratitude from your friend,  
Ever Hopeful



## Rapid Recovery Elixir

For the betterment of our citizens, our kind and caring Magistrate Herr Bigly Rump has commissioned the creation of this wonderful new medicine to help you recover from the trauma of imprisonment for your crimes. Please take as directed and do not lapse.\* Missing a dose is grounds for hard labor at the Rumptopia Utilities Compound.

(\*Dosage is carefully monitored and recorded by government approved surveillance equipment. Any misuse of this miracle medicine will be known immediately by the Magistrate's Council on Complicity, Conspiracies, and Collusion. You are hereby advised to obey.)

P.S. Did you know that scientists are currently trying to bring back other animal species with only their DNA? We may actually see real birds some day!

P.P.S. My new teacher Mr. Morse told me that the only species that survived the war in great number is insects. He said insects can survive anything! They're amazing creatures, don't you think? And intelligent, I'll bet!



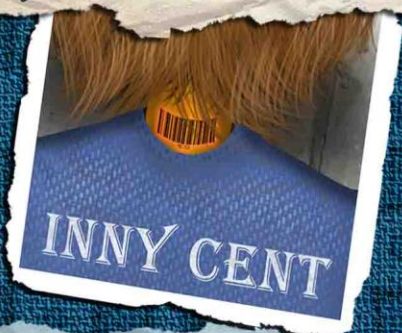


This was the fourth letter I'd received from Ever Hopeful and by this time, I was certain I knew her well enough to understand her sarcasm. She obviously expected the GOB's goons to read her letter and had taken the necessary precaution of sounding particularly pleased to be living in comfort inside Rumpotopia.

Newton Gasbomb grunted, "Hmph! No mention of an exit plan, I see. If she did go there on purpose and with no plan to return, then it's an even worse idea than I thought!"

I recalled the spy had mentioned a ceremony was to take place the following night. "Because of the ceremony? Is that it?"

Newton Gasbomb nodded while rummaging in his pocket. "The ceremony is supposed to be celebrating the opening of the first RICE Academy, but there's more to it than that. Much more!" And with that, he produced two photographs he'd taken of a boy he called "MiniRump Test Subject number four."



"It seems the Rumpotopians are too brainwashed to know what's happening," he explained, "but I've seen it with my own eyes...and my camera, of course. The Rump plans to brand the little beasties with coded information and tracking. They'll become his property and no one will ever see their children again!"

"What!" I stared at the photos, wondering once more how we'd gotten to this point in our evolution. "I don't understand why he's doing this! I thought it had to do with immortality—"

"Our guess is that the Rump plans to...employ the children." I looked up at him. "Employ? Doing what?"

"We suspect he's going to hire them out as laborers to whoever can pay highest for their services. As you must know, their imaginations make them quite magical. Those of us who know about this scheme gave it the code name 'Tragic.' That's short for 'trafficking magic.'"



For a moment, utter silence overtook us while we all tried to process what Newton Gasbomb had just said.

"Trafficking...children?" Max asked. He shook his head in disbelief. "That can't be true! Where did you get this information?"

"In Rumptopia," the spy said. "People talk, I listen. It's my job."

Posthumous Krill gave him a shrewd look. "And just how exactly are you allowed there to begin with? You're an Alien Immigrant. We've seen the new laws. Why aren't you being deported like the rest?"

Newton Gasbomb held out his press badge. "I'm an ORP! An Official Rump Prisoner! He keeps me around 'cause I'm a photographer and he needs someone to document this mess he's making. I'm not the only one either."

My mind was already churning over this new batch of information. I'd had no idea Newton Gasbomb was a prisoner, the same as those he'd helped in the Arctic Mines. "Who else?" I asked. "Who are the other ORPs?"

He blew out a long breath and then appeared to be thinking fairly hard on the matter. "Well, Chroniclers mostly. He needs them to bend the facts to fit his fancy."

"Chroniclers?" I echoed, although I was already scheming about how to use this to our advantage. For the time being, I took a pen and paper from my messenger bag and handed them to the spy. "I'll need names!"



Blah-Blah ChuckaNut

Petty Spewer

Rabid Pollster

Unlikely Kahn

Scandalous Duplicit

Flimsy Noodle

Doubtful Animosity

Bitter Pills

Leaky Panda

Squishy Innards

Innane Scribbler

Acrimonious Slug

Knobby Plume

Gangly Mobb

Poor Precious