

WILLIAM AND THE KINGDOM OF EMPS

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After William insisted several times that it wasn't necessary to destroy public property, especially for creatures he didn't care to meet, he pummeled through the steel door that blocked the entrance to the old subway platform at 81st Street.

Inside the ruins of the former B & C line, a crude sign stood at the bottom of the stairwell with scratched lettering that warned: *Humans beware to tread on those that reside in the underground.*

"Don't worry, I'm in..." Francis paused for added reflection. "Relatively good standing with these creatures."

William gazed at Francis intensely before extending both arms outwards at the sign, then back at Francis, and finally back at the sign to signify there was definitely something that warranted a certain degree of worry.

"Relatively?" he said more to himself as Francis had already made his way towards the next door he was motioning for him to vandalize.

As William walked inward towards the subway platform, the dank air became more fetid and charged with a distinct smell of ammonia and what was thought to be

human feet or Limburger cheese. There was no sound, no rats scampering, no performers performing, no beggars begging. There were only the rapid, dry wheezing breaths of an old man that would cause one to recommend a lozenge, as it also warranted a certain degree of worry.

“You’ll have to mind the mess,” said Francis, shuffling through a mess of papers and plastic bottles. “The Immortals were never ones to conform to societal expectations of cleanliness.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” said William as he kicked the security door off its hinges. “So, what are these creatures like?”

“They’re only the most super-rational, highly intelligent, smug beings in the known universe. Oh, did I mention they’re immortal?”

“No,” said William sarcastically, “I don’t believe you did.”

“Yes, well, be sure to treat them with the utmost respect. They typically don’t take too kindly to outsiders. I just happen to be sympathetic to their cause.”

“Which is what exactly?”

“The usual genocidal ambitions one would expect of highly rational immortal beings.”

“Ah, very usual,” said William, and the two proceeded forward to the yellow line. For several moments they rocked themselves from heel to toe while whistling purposefully to muffle the eerie silence.

“They should be aware of our arrival by now,” said Francis, peering anxiously down the ends of the tunnel.

Two minutes later, the overbearing tune of screeching locomotion and a strong wind whooshed by them as the subway car tore into the terminal. They stepped in and sat down. The doors closed and the train sped off.

Above them, William read the posters. There was one reminding him to mind the gap and keep his legs closed, another explaining that assault on an MTA official is a class D felony, and another featuring a pole-dancing stick figure with the headline, *Poles Are For Your Safety, Not Your Latest Routine*. After remembering that twenty-first-century subway riders were a very silly lot, William quickly dismissed the thought to ask, “So why do you call them the Immortals?”

Francis shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said, “that’s just what they want to be called.”

“Are they actually immortal?”

“They’re not vampires if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I wasn’t, but do they really have an infinite lifespan or do they just have slow metabolisms, you know, like tortoises?”

“Tortoises?” said Francis haughtily. “Tortoises are mere mayflies when it comes to the grand scope of the Immortal’s lifespan.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, “so if it’s not slow metabolisms, then they must be regenerative creatures, like say, jellyfish?”

Francis snickered. “It’d be wise not to compare creatures with such voracious appetites to the likes of such imbecilic invertebrates.”

“Does that mean they’re only biologically immortal ... like hydrozoans?”

“No no, hydrozoans are only capable of cycling from a mature adult stage to an immature polyp stage and back. These linear creatures wouldn’t waste a microsecond on such a stupid and futile gesture.”

William was quickly becoming annoyed and running out of ideas to ignore what he feared to be true. “Then they must be able to enter a state of dormancy to prolong their life, like Tardigrades.”

“Water bears?” said Francis with grave contempt. “Surely, you must not be comparing those microbial maladroits to mammals capable of making a camel look like a dehydrated teenager at their first Thirsty Thursday.”

“Then, what are they?”

“If you are so inclined to know,” said Francis, “then think, what causes all biological life forms to grow old and die?”

“The degeneration of cells.”

“Yes, and how do we stop cells from dying?”

“You can’t ... but I suppose you can prolong the inevitable.”

“Explain to me, how would the body do that?”

William pondered the idea for a moment. He hoped that faulty coding had led the simulation to find entertainment in playing cruel jokes on him. T.S. was not only self-aware, but well-aware of his hopes, his nightmares, his repulsion of beady-eyed, scrotum-skinned buck-toothed rodents, and he thought that maybe the lecture was only written to get a rise out of him. T.S. was, after all, built by an algorithm that was supposed to emulate the writing style of Mary Shelley, but after careful consideration he was beginning to think that a broken software function had left him with the comedic styling of Mary Tyler Moore. This led William to suspect that any acquired knowledge presented in the lectures had a greater emphasis on entertainment than any type of reliable informational gain.

With the fear that the computer was correct in her analysis, William sunk down in his seat. He sighed and uttered the reply the same as if someone asked him if he

wanted to join them on a weekend Dianetics seminar. “By creating hyper-long caps on DNA chromosomes.”

“Bingo.”

William still didn’t want to believe it and said, “But even if they were so genetically gifted, failing to repair DNA damage during extensive replication would end up as a genomic abnormality.”

“Not if that creature already had built-in immunities to cancer.”

William finally believed it and said, “Dammit, Francis! You’re taking me to meet a bunch of genetically modified mole rats, aren’t you?”

“Hey, you watch your mouth,” snapped Francis. “These creatures are neither moles nor rats. Listen, when we get there, just play it cool and don’t make any sudden movements around Cheesitz.”

“I’m sorry...” William swallowed and nearly choked on the words. “Did you say Cheesitz?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You mean to tell me that the creature’s name is Cheesitz?”

“No, don't be ridiculous. That’s her surname.”

“Then what’s her first name?”

“Charly.”

“Charly!” This time William choked on the words and started coughing.

“Charly Cheesitz?”

“Shh,” hushed Francis, “we’re here.” The subway car came to a halt, and they stepped out onto the platform. “William, for the last time, these aren't your average goddamn mole rats. They’re big, sensitive, naked killing machines, and they won’t think twice about eating your goddamn face off. So, from this point forward, it’d be wise to keep your dumb mouth shut.”

William stood up on his toes and looked awkwardly around the abandoned darkness. The walls were thick with soot, and the tunnels were blocked in all directions. “I don’t think they’re here,” he said with great trepidation. “We should go back.”

Francis put up a finger and began to perform an obnoxious clicking noise by sucking the roof of his mouth. He stopped, and for a moment, a brief and unearthly silence cut through the terminal.

Suddenly a nauseous scampering began to take place in the walls, growing louder as if a tiny demon army was assembling in every direction.

Francis continued the clicking and the louder and faster the scratching and scampering grew until swiftly, the ground in front of them caved in like a sinkhole and a wave of screeching, pale flesh tore up through the cement.

William let out a gasp as the creatures began flooding the room in front of them in inexhaustible numbers. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was like an orgy of horror as he looked upon the platform, the putrid floor breathing with the tormented squealing creatures as if milled in a dry, shriveled layer of congealed flesh. The smell was nearly unbearable.

Cautiously, he took his hand off his nose to whisper, "Hey, which one is Charly?"

Francis lifted a trembling finger toward large, glowing beady yellow eyes perched high atop the squirming bodies of her youth.

As she was smuggled out of the shadows, her massive naked belly flowed over the sides of her spindly white legs. She struggled to sit upright. Her jagged spine bent further forward as if weighed down by a heavy burden. She stopped and slowly, her neck craned closer as her incisors chattered and her nostrils flared about angrily.

"Goddard," she squealed in a high guttural tone, "why must you disturb my burrow?"

"Cheesitz," said Francis, who quickly put his eyes and one knee to the floor as if he were about to be knighted. "You're looking quite swollen ... erm, pleasantly of course."

"What the hell do you want?"

“I wanted you to meet the one I was telling you about. William, this is Cheesitz. Cheesitz, this is William.”

“He looks fragile,” hissed Cheesitz.

William looked himself up and down in slight offense.

“I assure you the boy is as sturdy as they come,” said Francis, standing up to slap William on the chest. “Quickly,” he whispered, “give the queen a demonstration of your strength.”

William paused and performed an awkward flexing motion and immediately hated himself for doing so.

Francis sighed deeply.

Cheesitz blinked at him. “You mean to tell me,” she said, raising an eyebrow that she didn’t have at him, “this is the one who will end humanity?”

“Yes, my queen,” said Francis.

“Goddard, you have to be kidding me.” She smacked her belly and hissed, “I wouldn’t trust this boy to mash my tubers.”

“Yes, well, that’s why I brought him here. You see, I was ... erm, hoping the two of us could help convince the boy—”

“Convince the boy of what?”

“Erm, William ... he, well, for some crazy reason—”

“Speak up, Goddard!”

Francis raised his voice. “He seems to think that ending the human race is a...”

He swallowed and hesitated. “Um, fruitless venture.”

“Fruitless venture!” squealed Cheesitz. “Did you explain to him how humanity is a malignant curse?”

“I did, I did,” assured Francis subserviently. “And also how human misery is a cyclical noose.”

“Then what is the issue here?”

“Your majesty, if I could interject,” said William, feeling as if it was time to justify his worldview. “It’s not that I think humans did anything to earn this planet, it’s just that—”

“You’d be wise to choose your next words carefully, white one.”

White one? That’s mildly racist, thought William. “Well, alright, it’s just that I don’t see any reason as to why they didn’t either.”

“Uh-oh,” said Francis.

“Goddard!” shrieked Cheesitz. “You dare bring a skeptic into my lair?”

Francis showed his palms in an effort to defuse the situation. “My queen, we’re all rational beings here. Surely we can convince this boy that humans are—”

“A parasite, a plague, a swarm of irrational beings that go from one organism to another killing it for their own meaningless survival.”

“Exactly,” said Francis, “and thank you for being the voice of reason.”

“Is that all?”

William coughed slightly and raised his hand. “Might I add that I do understand where you’re coming from,” he said. “On the other hand, and may I prelude my argument with the fact that I respect your opinion immensely.”

“You may.”

“But humans are also very impressive creatures,” said William with care. “Take your lovely brood. This wouldn’t be possible if it weren’t for...”

“Oh, my God,” snapped Cheesitz, “are you so thick as to believe that I desired this? Do you actually think I wanted to be plagued with this damning surplus of consciousness? This cursed world was forced upon me without consideration of whether I desired it in the first place.”

“See, I told you,” whispered Francis, “these creatures get it.”

“Listen here,” commanded Cheesitz, “at one time, I was a carefree creature knowing nothing. Back in my arid home of Somalia, I had friends and family that I didn’t care for at all until the terribly unfortunate day that I did. I’ll never forget that horrible, ghastly morning when the humans came and snatched me up from my

burrow, threw me in a cage and continuously injected and tweaked and twisted my very being until I woke up to be the conscious abomination you see before you.”

“Queen Charly—”

“It’s Queen Cheesitz to you, white one.”

“I’m sorry, Queen Cheesitz,” he corrected. “But the question I’m about to ask is only out of my beginning to have a greater understanding of where you’re coming from.”

“Go on.”

“If existence is so bad...” William hesitated. “Then what keeps you from ... well, I don’t know how to put this politely...”

“Ending it all?” she screamed before bending to the side to reach down and toss one of her smaller offspring at him.

“I’m sorry,” whooped William as the creature landed beside him and quickly scuttled off. “I’m just trying to make sense of it.”

“Make sense of what? Look around you. Nothing makes a nip of goddamn sense. I’m a living, breathing, cursing mole rat for Christ’s sake and the fact that I imbue the Lord’s name for exclamatory effect only adds to the absurdity of it all.”

“Then, why?”

She threw another baby at him. “Because I have a family you dope! Do you know what it’s like having over a million mouths to feed?”

“I could imagine it's rather ... demanding?”

“Demanding?” hooted Cheesitz. “Demanding? Social functions are demanding, conversing with you is demanding, motherhood...” She raised her voice even louder and shrieked, “Motherhood is damn near impossible!”

William stood on his toes, anticipating another baby to be thrown at him.

Cheesitz resumed, “But having a passion sure as hell distracts the mind from doddering with all that useless why business.” She lowered her voice and beady eyes that peered off in no general direction. “Tell me, white one, what is it that you are passionate about?”

William blinked and looked down at his feet. “I suppose, well, I don’t really know.”

“Then think!” she snapped at him, and William jumped.

“Erm, yes,” he said. “I suppose I enjoy reading.”

“Reading? Do you mean that thing humans do where they lick their finger and turn the page?”

“The finger-licking part isn’t a necessity, but yes, that’s the one.”

Cheesitz sucked her incisor and shook her head in disgust towards all things human. “Goddard, take this hopeless creature and leave my sight.”

“Wait, my queen!”

“Your time is up,” she hissed, and all at once, the entire brood let out an ear-splitting squeal as they funneled like a fleshy albino black hole into the cavity from which they came. Then, just before Cheesitz disappeared into the abyss, she added, “Goddard, I suggest that if you are to return that you come back with a working robot. This boy appears to be broken.”

The entire room went silent. The subway doors opened behind them. They stepped in and sat down.

“I hope you’re happy,” said Francis, slapping William in the back of the head. “You made me look bad in front of the queen.”

Without speaking a word to each other, the train brought them back to 81st Street, where they found Jonathan with a crowd three times larger than the prior.

William dragged his feet over to him, looking a bit frazzled from the whole experience.

With a big, welcoming smile, Jonathan asked, “William, how are the Immortals doing?”

“William made me look bad,” hollered Francis.

Jonathan squinted his eyes at him. “William,” he said doubtfully, “made you look bad in front of mutated mole rats?”

“It’s true,” said William, “I don’t think they cared for me at all.”

“Then it clearly shows that they are poor judges of character. Now, what do you boys say we head out, and I treat us all to ice cream?”