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### Immortality

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by *Matias Travieso-Diaz*

*I want to live for immortality, and I will accept no compromise.*  
– Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Iry-Hor was feeling the weight of his years.

He had been for decades the head of a growing empire that controlled much of Egypt and had extended northward towards the delta of the sacred river Nile. In the process of his conquests, he and his armies had slain thousands of men loyal to the local chieftains who opposed him. He was known and feared throughout the land, which was adorned with temples erected in his honor and countless statutes that proclaimed him as the hegemonic ruler of the greatest empire the world had known. Yet, he found himself increasingly dissatisfied. Would posterity grant him the recognition and acclaim his deeds warranted? Would his name inspire veneration, or at least awe, in generation after generation to come?

He had once hoped that his fame would be cemented through the deeds of his heirs. He had married three times and bedded countless concubines; in doing so, he had sired more than a dozen children and grandchildren. His offspring was not the fruit of love, but the result of lustful couplings that satisfied the body but did not engage the spirit. Perhaps as a result, none of his presumptive successors had proved distinguished in any manner that reflected their illustrious pedigree. The best description of them was perhaps what an observer had remarked in hushed tones: “The great King has deployed all the energies of his body on his fighting arms, leaving his sperm weak. There is nothing imperial about the whole lot of his descendants.”

Iry-Hor never heard the invidious comments that were being cast behind his back, but became painfully aware of the dullness of the children he had begotten and realized that his path to immortality would never run through them. Given this disappointment, how could he be sure of achieving everlasting

fame? He had little left to conquer and time was starting to run out, so he decided to seek counsel from a renowned hermit who dwelt in one of the Sabu-Jaddi caves that lay in a remote corner of Nubia. It would be a very long journey to take, but his empire was currently at peace and his subjects feared him enough not to attempt an uprising during his absence.

Weeks later, as the King's slave-carried palanquin came near the hermit's cave, the air became filled with the noxious smells of human waste and decaying and rotting matter. Iry-Hor grimaced as he approached the entrance to the cave and greeted an old man, dressed in stinking rags, who sat by the entrance with his face turned towards the setting sun taking in its final rays.

"Greetings, Holy One" saluted Iry-Hor, concealing his disgust.

"What do you want?" rebuked the old man.

"I have come from afar to seek your counsel" replied the King.

"Go away! You are blocking the sun from me!"

"I am your king, and have traveled a long way to meet with you. I order you to hear me out!"

"I give no wisdom on issues of the heart, and know nothing of war or politics. Material matters do not concern me," warned the hermit.

"Yet your name, Nehesy, is uttered reverently throughout the land as that of a wise and learned man" countered the King. "Anyhow, my question does not deal with the heart or the sword or the coin purse. I just want to know what I must do to achieve immortality."

Nehesy let out an ironic cackle. "A simple question indeed! Why do you seek immortality?"

"I rule over many lands, have prevailed over many enemies, have flown my banner over many cities before burning them to the ground. Yet I crave bridging the gap between life and death. If I can be deemed to still live after I have died, I may be judged a great man. I believe immortality is a ruler's only true success and strive to achieve it."

Nehesy frowned. "I am not sure that immortality is the only measure of a man's success in life. Yet I can suggest a possible path to immortality for a powerful man like you. You must discount all your military successes, the honors you have gained, the boons and homages you received. Build no more statues, no more monuments to your name. You must be remembered instead for what good you did for others, so they will appreciate the gifts you bestowed upon the world. Leaving a trail of love behind is how you will stay alive after you are gone."

"Living in filth has corrupted your mind" sneered the King. "I have no need or desire to be loved by my subjects. All I require is their obedience. However, I will show my mercy to you by sparing your miserable life." He turned back on the human derelict and readied to return home.

"You may build more monuments to yourself, but remember that all stone turns to earth after a time" repeated Nehesy.

Iry-Hor did not answer. He returned to his palanquin and decided to go back home and further add to his fame by launching a new attack on lands across the waters. Whether he did so, and if he succeeded or failed in this undertaking, has been lost from memory.

Millennia later, the nature of Iry-Hor's life has become the subject of controversy. Many scholars have denied him royal status and, when his name appears on an artifact, it is identified as the mark of a slave or a freeman working for some king. The inscriptions of his name in pottery jars and other objects found in the royal cemetery of Umm el-Qa'ab have also been said to identify a commoner; if such a king had ever existed, his exploits and the extent of his conquests would have been recorded, not forgotten. Besides, there are no monuments, statues, hieroglyphs, graphical narratives, or drawings that would attest to Iry-Hor's tenure or accomplishments.

The immortality Iry-Hor's desperately sought was never achieved, because he failed to heed an old sage's advice: his military accomplishments were obliterated soon after his death, and no words of sympathy for the man were recorded by those who knew him. For that reason, he left no trail of love or appreciation behind that would preserve his memory for generations to come.

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Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. One hundred and eighty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of story anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts, including several in *The Amazine*. Three anthologies of his stories have also been published, and a fourth one is forthcoming in April.

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