

# Immortality

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Johan normally found that the transition from sleep to awareness was only a momentary thing. There were the odd occasions when he could remember the in between times, when dreams became mixed up with the sounds of the morning, but these were infrequent. This time, however, the slope to consciousness was very gradual.

He was lying on his bed – on his back. At least he could tell he was lying on his back in a bed. He felt sheets weighing heavier on his body than he would normally have expected. The ceiling was brightly lit and painted a uniform white. His eyes started to focus properly and the periphery of his vision lost some of its blurriness. There were now two strips of panel lighting he could make out and he knew they didn't belong above his own bed.

He tried to move his head so he could take in more of the room, but his reactions seemed slowed and his body refused to respond at all to attempts to sit up. He did not feel as if he was being restrained in any way, nor did he experience any panic as the realisation that he was paralyzed came in to his mind.

“Ah, Mr Savan, you're conscious. Good.” A face came in to view. A man with dark brown eyes and a slightly chubby look to him, black hair close cropped to his head. No fake aging, but neither did he look overly youthful. “You're recuperating after being in an accident, Mr Savan,” the man continued. “At the moment you're in a local clinic. Nothing to worry about as you are almost fully healed. Your motor functions should be returning soon.”

The man checked something on his patient's arm and seemed satisfied.

It took some effort for Johan to speak and although his throat did not feel dry the words stuck slightly. “I don't remember the accident,” he finally managed.

“No, you won't. It'll probably be a while before your memory comes back to you. The memories will only return when you are able to deal with them. It wouldn't help your recovery if you were to wake up and remember the trauma of the incident,” the man gave him a reassuring smile. “Far better to wake up in some peace.”

With the same bland acceptance he had for the paralysis, Johan experienced no panic that bits of his memory were missing. Emotional suppressants, he guessed.

“Was I hurt badly?”

“Yes, unfortunately. We nearly weren't able to save you. The majority of your body has been replaced.” For the briefest of moments Johan saw the man's eyes lose focus as he accessed some data. “I'm not sure if you have had a rebuild before, but it is usual for a patient to be kept unconscious while the work is completed. Now that your body is back to its previous condition you will be able to leave as soon as you can get up.

“Some people prefer to stay in the clinic for an extra couple of days in case they require any help. If this is your wish you are welcome to have some of your personal items sent over from your home.”

The man stepped back from the bed. “For now I’ll leave you to walk around and get back in to things. I’ll check on you again later this afternoon. If you have any questions just let me know.”

Johan watched as the man left the room, realising only moments later that he had partially sat up in bed. He tested his legs and found that movement had returned to them as well. The carer was correct, he had never experienced a full rebuild before. A sporting accident some fifteen years ago had forced him to have both his legs fabbed, but that had been the only injury he had suffered. The rebuild seemed just the same – a few days out of action and then back to normal.

Stacked neatly on a chair in one corner of the room were some fresh clothes and while he dressed he checked for any references to the accident. There was nothing logged on any of the news services for the last week, either under his name or just under the general accident listings. He put a query in to the planet side admin’ and found nothing. Shrugging to himself he finished dressing. Maybe there was still a block on him finding out what had happened until they were sure he was well enough to deal with it.

The room let out on to a secluded patio area screened by trees. To the left of the doors stood a small table with two chairs. He poured himself some of the juice from a jug that sat on the table and began walking around. No matter that he knew that his body was back in shape again and no matter what tweaks were being done to his emotions to stop him worrying that there were no ill effects from being in a coma for a few days, it still felt good to stretch his legs.

After his second drink he decided that if his memories hadn’t all been released yet he probably wasn’t as well as he appeared. He certainly wanted to make sure he had fully adjusted to the accident as he didn’t liked the idea of spending the rest of his life with parts of his mind suppressed to keep him stable. Everyone knew that full, natural adjustment was far better than the artificial constructs some people choose to live with. A day longer at the clinic would do him good. There was also the matter of telling his mother he had been in an accident. If it was something he had done while diving or sled hopping there would be hours of having to listen to her chiding him. The Order of The Sacred Mind, Body and Soul had a lot to answer for, certainly as far as convincing his mother that her son should show more respect for his genetic heritage. He had a standing request set not to notify his parents unless he was dead for exactly this reason. A few more days holed up in the clinic would be a good way of avoiding the inevitable.

A few queries and he had arranged for some of his personal effects to be delivered to the clinic that afternoon. He was unable to access all of his personal documents, but the dampeners stopped him worrying about what he couldn’t find out. He chuckled to himself more than once at his own relaxed response to be denied access, when a few days ago he would have raged against the system over such a thing.

It was only as the day was coming to an end that Tarah came to mind. He had just settled down to eat some food and was thinking about hunting out some new music when the last concert they had been to see came back to him. Then, of course, he remembered that they had separated just over three months ago. It was odd that it had taken him so long to remember her, but it didn’t appear to be a memory that was part of the dampening. Heck, he thought, he’d been trying to forget about her since they split up, so she wasn’t exactly at the forefront of his mind.

Thoughts about Tarah did, inevitably, cause him to remember those first two months after she had left. He had spent the time holed up in his apartment, not returning friend's messages, and feeling like he had little to live for. In the last few weeks he had started to get back to normal, and once he was out of the clinic he could start catching up with people again and making up for lost time.

That night's sleep in the clinic was peaceful and he awoke to bright sunshine streaming through the thin curtains over the glass doors. After he had eaten breakfast he sat in the sun for a bit. He was just thinking about a walk in the gardens of the clinic when he received a request from the carer to speak to him.

He let the man in and offered him a seat and a drink on the patio.

"Thank you, but I'm not going to keep you long," the nurse told him. "I went over your records from yesterday and last night and everything seems fine."

"I certainly don't feel any ill effects," Johan said. "My whole body feels as good as new and most of the blocks on my memory seem to be fading, although I still can't remember the accident or the days just before it."

The carer nodded. "Some of those blocks may stay on for a day or so. But when you're ready you'll start to get your memory back. It might even start later today. Even the psych's tend to leave that sort of thing up to your own systems," he stood up and John followed suit. "It's your body that knows you best, after all."

"Well, if you think I should be okay to go home I might leave this afternoon. There are a few things I want to finish looking at and then I'll organise my things and head off." He shook hands with the other man. "Thanks for keeping an eye on me."

"My pleasure," the carer smiled.

Johan watched as the nurse left and then picked up the screen he had been using. There were some new pieces of music he wanted to listen to, some he had highlighted on his last scan before the accident, and then he would head home. He settled back in the chair for a relaxing few hours in the sun.

Having spent more time listening to music than he had intended, it was late evening when he finally reached his apartment.

He had moved in some seventy years ago after he decided he needed a change from the house he had been living in on the outskirts of the city. A desire to take up partying and leave behind the suburban lifestyle he had been living, had caused him to look for somewhere in the centre of the city. At that point he had been single for about 15 years. His house out by the lake obviously never stopped him heading in to any of the planet's cities, and the summer months when the water started to warm up were always great, but it didn't quite paint the picture of his life the way he wanted to portray it. The large city centre apartment, on the other hand, gave exactly the right impression.

Whether it was this change of accommodation or his own outlook, but within two years of moving he had met Tarah and the pace of life had started to pick up.

Tarah was a sixty percent party girl, forty percent erratic creative. She was the sort of woman he would have expected to meet at a club or in a bar, but he had actually been introduced to her by someone he had met at an art group. She was tall, with long hair that changed colour almost as frequently as her moods and eyes she adjusted to match. They split their time together between nights at clubs, restaurants in the afternoons, the various art and literature groups they both enjoyed and their apartments. Within two years she had moved her belongings over to his and they settled down to a creative party rhythm that mirrored what most on the planet were doing at that time.

Johan entered the main living area, and as the lights came on he glanced across at the large windows that spread over two of the walls. They gave a wonderful view of the cityscape and its glinting evening lights. His gaze moved around the room and came to rest on the empty space against one of the walls. That had been where Tarah had kept her favourite chair. She never had that many large pieces of furniture she cared about, especially not compared to a lot of people in an era when collections of almost anything were in fashion. She was never one for the display cases filled with miniature depictions of star systems, or the rows of original sculptures some made an effort to acquire. For Tarah it was just her chair – slightly oversized for one person with more cushions than would be expected, and a colour scheme that she normally swapped between cream or deep red combined with a dark wood.

A pang of longing made his stomach clench briefly. Determined not to get carried away on the emotion he headed to the drinks storage for something alcoholic. He had intended to check his messages and do some hunting around for details about the accident – just to push the blocks a bit – but the thoughts of Tarah changed his mind. The evening now called for a few more drinks, music and the oblivion of sleep.

He started out listening to some cheerful music in an attempt to lift his mood and for a while it worked, but as the evening wore on he reverted back to more sombre tunes. The fact that he had kept his alcohol inhibitors on saved him from slipping further in to a soulful state of mind and after a while he switched from music to the entertainment news services. They wore him out with their constant talk of who was doing what to whom, and it wasn't long before he had decided to go to bed. There was a determination in his mind that tomorrow he would contact a few people and organise his life. Maybe the accident had not only given him a new body, but a chance to start things over.

As he let weariness seep through his body he started thinking about moving house or getting a job. He had not had a job for a long time, having no real desire to work, but he had once toyed with the idea of being a local tour guide. He could register for that in the next few days and find out what positions were available. He smiled to himself as he wondered if a tour guide was required for the cities clubs and bars.

Darkness greeted him as he opened his eyes and he gave a slight groan as he realised it was the middle of the night. He thought he had been dreaming about moving house. There was a vague

image in his mind of Tarah watching him walking away from the open door of the apartment and some idea that she was also throwing his belongings out of the windows at the same time. A lamp falling through the air sprang to mind.

Great, he thought, I decide to start a new life and she's still bothering me. Maybe he missed her more than he realised. Their time together had been good. He continued to think about her for a while, kicking around old memories in his head, until, in a fit of annoyance, he secreted something to help him get back to sleep. Within minutes the blackness swallowed him again.

The next morning came with feelings of both resignation and regret. If the memories of Tarah were going to keep him awake at night it was definitely time to move on. He could not remember being troubled by her before the accident. Maybe it was just the idea of changing things around that had kicked it off. He spent the day organising his thoughts and decided to follow up on the idea of moving house. Most of his access to things had opened back up and he was able to check what he had been doing in the last few weeks. He failed to discover what he was doing the day before the accident though. There were no references to him planning to go anywhere, nothing that showed in his list of movements anyway. Still, it could have been a last minute trip, after all, the whole point of keeping things suppressed was to stop him worrying about them and give him time to adjust. When he was ready he would be able to access those memories.

His mistake that afternoon was to think about Tarah again. He had decided that he would not contact any of his friends until he had made up his mind what he wanted to do – stay around and just move house, move off world, or get a job. In an effort to throw out some of his old life he had started to tag what furniture he wanted to keep and what could be scanned and stored, when he found a rug in the second bedroom that Tarah had bought him as a surprise. The memory of the day he had opened the present and the fun they'd had rolling on the thick pile struck him quite hard and by the time the sun was setting he was already on his sixth drink. With the inhibitors turned off he was feeling the effects of the alcohol as well. He started to play through parts of that final year in his mind and what he had done that had caused things to go wrong.

The biggest reason for them starting to go their separate ways had also been the reason they got together in the first place. He had liked the flighty nature she had – the fact that she could be excited about a friend's exhibition one week and the next she could not care less about immersion sculptures but was really up on grav' chutting. In a society where fads lasted twenty or thirty years, her erratic behaviour was an extreme. It made it difficult for her to keep friends and in the end even he had come to dislike her for it, but when it was fun it was certainly some of the best times he had ever had. The highs and lows of the relationship had taken their toll on him though and after a while they had started fighting. It was not anything serious to start with but over the years the fighting had grown worse and in the end he found little reason for them to spend any of their waking hours together. He was never sure if she had started a relationship with someone else before she had moved out, but it would not have surprised him.

He cried for a time as he lay on the rug, knocking over a drink at one point and colouring part of it a dark red until the marks dissolved away. When he walked back in to the bedroom with another drink he just stood there staring at where the stain had been. Then the idea came to him that he should get rid of the rug. In fact, he thought, anything that reminded him of Tarah should go. He requested

a hand lifter to help him move the larger things and put in a request for collection and destruction of the items. He even skipped over the option to scan and save the profiles of things for later rebuild, his slightly drunk mind having decided that this was going to be a decisive move with no option to go back on it at a later date.

After he had let the collection service remove and disassemble the various items he had tagged he sat staring at the dark night sky, another drink in his hand. He turned the music up louder. It helped, but only for a while and he soon found tears welling up again. She had, he thought, ruined his life. None of his previous relationships had left him feeling this way. He wanted her back and wished he had never met her, all at the same time. All their good times together were now soured by the memories of those last few years.

Was moving off planet going to be far enough away? Was even moving out of the system going to make a difference? He began to doubt it. Another alcohol warning popped in to his head and he overrode the monitoring system. If he wanted to get very drunk for once, he was going to. Where could he go, he wondered, that would be far enough away? Maybe moving wasn't the answer at all. Maybe he should just opt to move house and have a partial erase. That way he could start a new life somewhere different with no memories of Tarah at all.

He staggered back to the drink store to get himself something else and gave the idea some more thought. If he was going to wipe out a section of his life would he be the same person? It was one of those debates that often popped up in various discussion groups. I would be killing the man I am now, he thought. Was that really what he wanted to do? He felt his anger at what she had done to him building again.

Walking over to one of the windows he opened it. Cool air carried by a slight wind slipped in to the apartment. "Bitch!" he shouted out at the darkness, filling his lungs and straining his voice. "You fucking bitch!"

The wind took his words away and he was left with the music blaring out from behind him. He downed some more drink and turned the music up louder. Looking at the drink in his hand he decided it should join his words. He took it in a firmer grip and pulled back his arm and then threw it out the window, watching as the contents spilled out and fell away in to the night. He shouted after it and then turned to get another one.

As he walked away from the open window a piece of music ended and the apartment was left in silence. For that one moment he had only the sound of the wind to keep him company and it made him pause. That was what he desired, silence - a chance to feel nothing.

Turning again he looked back at the open window. Then without allowing another thought he ran at it, throwing himself at the vast expanse and reaching out for the lights of other buildings. In his apartment the next piece of music started – a soulful tune that echoed around the now empty living space.

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Eiko turned away from checking the monitor on the patient's arm.

"I'm glad you're here this time," he said to the woman standing at the end of the bed. "We really thought the other day would be the last time we would see him." He shook his head slightly. "It's a real shame."

There was a low beep from the monitor and Eiko turned back to the man on the bed.

Johan slowly became aware he was waking up. He could feel the bed he was lying on and the weight of the sheets resting on him. As his vision started to clear he could make out a ceiling coloured a uniform white, lighting panels to his left and right.

"Mr Savan," a man with close cropped black hair came in to view as he leaned over Johan, "you will feel slightly disorientated."

The man leant closer and checked something on Johan's left arm.

"My name is Eiko. I'm here with Lesia. You have been in a rather serious accident Mr Savan and for the last few days you've been in a coma while your body underwent a full rebuild. You will start to find your sensations coming back to you and you'll be able to start moving around. When you are ready Lesia will talk to you about adjusting and being ready for when your memories start to be released. I'll check up on you as well and make sure everything is going well."