

A Misdivision of Consciousness

This story is set before, and in parallel with, the opening of A Vision of Unity, outlining the events of Flood Day, and telling them from Raj Tamboli's perspective for the first time. This completes the link with the Chris Parsons novel.

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Sat in his office, Raj Tamboli watched the news in despair. The world was going mad again. And he wasn't ready – at least, not yet. But he could be.

With Europe falling apart, with Russia exploiting its weakness, and China increasingly hostile towards its antagonistic neighbour, conflict seemed inevitable. Even if India stayed out of it, they wouldn't be safe. The leaders involved seemed unstable and were unlikely to back down before they'd unleashed armageddon.

Why couldn't people be rational, stop looking for reasons to fear and hate others, and come to a compromise? There was no need for any of this. If only the leaders were more like him.

Raj might be one of the most influential people on the planet, but that didn't mean the instigators would listen. He'd tried. It was pointless. There was no way to reason with people like that.

That didn't mean he would sit around and do nothing. He was one of the few who could make a difference, and he had a plan. The trouble was, on the current schedule, by the time he was ready to make the world a better place, it would be a nuclear wasteland.

There was no choice but to cut a few corners in testing. That meant he had to apply parts of the plan before the fundamental theoretical basis had been finalised. Difficult risk-based decisions lay ahead, and nobody but Raj could make them – for the perfectly valid reason that he'd told nobody of his plans.

Rani Misra was the only one he'd considered informing, but she didn't have his vision. It was too much of a risk that once she knew, she'd put a stop to financing the component parts of his plan that only he knew how to fit together. It was safer this way. He trusted his own judgement.

The key to the project was the nanovirus to grow the Tap in everyone's brain. It seemed ready. They'd tested it on ten terminally ill volunteers, and it successfully built the Tap, allowing them to access a rudimentary Stream. The only side-effect had been a mild headache. Raj would prefer more testing, but there was no time, not if the nanovirus was to be manufactured and installed worldwide in his drone fleet.

Getting it ready to distribute had to be the top priority, but at least there didn't need to be a huge volume manufactured upfront. Once it was triggered, it would rapidly self-replicate in the atmosphere. Nowhere could escape its influence.

The computer systems behind the Stream were ready too. The primary missing component was a resident consciousness to creatively manage its operation without needing

external control. Raj wished he'd designed it differently, but at the time, he'd been convinced it was the most flexible solution. It was too late to change now, even though the theoretical basis of that side of the project had shown glacial progress.

Still, they had a practical solution, even if they didn't fully understand it: upload a personality completely into the Stream, leaving its body permanently comatose. The biggest problem was that nobody suitable was lined up for it as yet. They would need significant training and would be sacrificing a great deal.

Ideally, their body would be held in cryogenic suspension so that they could return to it in the same state, otherwise it would restrict how long they could stay. The other option was an artificial body, but few would be happy with that, other than the terminally ill.

The biggest frustration over the last couple of decades had been their failure to upload a clone of a consciousness. That would have made it easy; he'd have volunteered himself. It must be possible, yet they'd made no headway, not an iota since the moment Erica Shaw had walked away. He regretted not doing more to keep her, but then again, she'd been defeatist, insisting it couldn't be done. Just because her first experiment had gone wrong, that was no excuse to give up.

They'd made decent progress in the basic techniques since then. They could upload a consciousness and keep it alive, even after the host's body died. With fine discrimination, they could separate aspects of the consciousness's personality and run them on different systems for a prolonged period.

They hoped that would allow them to simplify the problem by duplicating small aspects of the consciousness and build up from there, but nothing yet had worked. Even when separate, the portions still seemed to remain oddly linked, reintegrating rapidly once hosted in the same system.

Signs of psychosis emerged if aspects were kept apart for too long. They seemed to want to be together, but once any disorder arose, it remained even when the personalities were reintegrated. This was something they believed they had a solution for now by regularly reinforcing the quantum wave function, but they were awaiting a suitable test subject.

Everything was so close to being ready. Raj would personally take the lead in finishing it, testing every remaining aspect that he could. He would ensure he could trigger the Flood within one month, although needed longer to fully reduce the risk. Two to three months would be enough to be fully confident. At least he'd be able to patch things incrementally after it was ready to trigger.

The first step was the riskiest. The nanovirus needed more human testing, but equally, completing the configuration of the Stream would be an order of magnitude faster if Raj used a Tap. He had to have confidence in what they'd developed. Otherwise, how could he impose it on everyone else? He must be the next test subject.

Raj couldn't delay. The longer he took, the more chance he'd find an argument to talk himself out of it. He had a responsibility to humanity and to his legacy. He wasn't doing this for his name to go down in history as humanity's saviour, but it helped.

He took the lift down to his personal laboratory, where a non-self replicating sample of the nanovirus was waiting. Without hesitation, he sat in a padded chair, picked up the nasal

inhaler, uncapped it, squeezed, and breathed it in. It wasn't exactly the same as the final delivery mechanism, but it was close enough.

Raj sat calmly, waiting for the first signs of change. He knew what to expect from the earlier tests, and it panned out exactly the same for him. After five minutes, he developed a mild headache. It gradually became slightly more severe, but he'd had worse natural migraines. Then, without warning, his vision was covered in a scarlet overlay, fading to pale lilac.

That was it. The lilac confirmed that he'd established a connection to the Stream. As expected, the Tethys logo spun into the centre of his vision, accompanied by the requisite audio jingle. That would keep the marketing department happy. Finally, he was left with two lines of text in his vision, accompanied by the Stream logo that he'd personally designed.

Welcome to The Stream™

Blink to continue

He blinked, and it was replaced by a red, flashing message.

Error: Welcome message not found

That was an easy thing to fix. He knew what he wanted to say, so recorded it directly in the Stream using his new capabilities.

'Greetings. My name is Raj Tamboli. Welcome to the Stream.'

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The idiots only gave Raj one month to prepare. As soon as the unrealistic ultimatums had been delivered, it was clear the conflict could only end one way. What kind of warped mentality preferred nuclear armageddon to living on the same planet as their enemies? And who didn't care that everyone else would either die or suffer through a nuclear winter?

Raj had reluctantly divested the responsibility of the annual intake to Rani Misra so that he could concentrate on the Flood. It had to be done within the day, but there was still significant work to do before kicking it off, and then way too much left to ensure it was sustainable. He'd need to isolate himself once it was underway down in his personal lab. He couldn't enjoy the world's gratitude in person, not until the new order was stable.

He had to believe that such a uniting event would make everyone look at the world anew. They were all one people, on one planet, living together in the Stream. The only thing that could make it fail was all the nationalist morons responsible for the war in the first place. They'd just try to whip things up again. Raj had reluctantly concluded that there was only one possible solution to that.

Raj remotely dispatched the remaining drones. Before triggering the Flood, sending a wave of nanoviruses to replicate and change humanity, the Stream computer system needed to be put into production mode, ready to receive the wash of incoming connections. That would lock off the bulk of the external configuration capabilities to be only accessible to the resident consciousness – which wasn't yet in place.

Raj had identified a couple of terminally ill computer scientists of good reputation who might jump at the chance. That selection had been his task for the coming days, but it would be too late now. At least he'd preconfigured everything so that the Stream should keep running for at least a week before it became critical. First, he had a world to save.

The only way it could be stabilised after the Flood was if the antagonistic leaders were out of the way. Raj had sleepless nights over that decision but could see no alternative. It wasn't as if they weren't about to unleash a war that could kill billions. They had to die.

It had been the last change he'd made to the nanovirus. He'd added to the Tap a catastrophic breakdown mode that could be triggered from the Stream. Raj wished there'd been a way to limit it to only his targets, but it had to be a generic solution. The targets could only be definitely identified when they connected to the Stream for the first time.

That was also the last change made to the Stream configuration, having prepared the details of people to kill once they connected. Now all he had to do was upload it.

It was too simple. With a single press, he sentenced everyone who would put peace at risk to death. It sickened him. Yet, he did it. A few more clicks later and the Stream was in production mode.

He'd had no sleep for longer than he cared to remember. It was hard to concentrate, hard to stay rational, but he couldn't rest. There was still too much to do. The next step was simple but once complete, there was no going back. He mustn't hesitate.

Raj Tamboli triggered the Flood.

He opened the status console to monitor incoming connections to the Stream. Given the nanovirus's lifecycle, he'd not expect to see anything for up to half an hour once they'd self-replicated through several generations and dropped through the atmosphere. He'd modelled that the connection rate would follow a bell curve, so he displayed that graph too to see if his theories proved correct.

In the last month, they'd held more human trials. The worst response they'd encountered was a severe migraine accompanied by flashing lights in their vision. He wished they'd had a chance to test in different real-world scenarios, but it wouldn't have been ethical to use non-terminal patients – other than himself – until he was sure. He was confident now.

While waiting for the first connections, Raj reviewed his remaining top priority tasks. As well as installing the resident consciousness within the next week, he had to get his manifesto out. There would be a political vacuum that urgently needed filling. It wasn't far off ready now. His team had put it together well, but a couple of sections required their causal relationships to be clarified.

He couldn't quite make it work. It was probably the distraction of waiting for the connections to start, but it felt as if his brain was wading through treacle.

Twenty minutes later, the first connection to the Stream came in. It was happening. Over the next ten minutes, the rate increased. It was slightly slower than he'd predicted, but the shape was right. It gave him renewed focus.

Finally, he saw the solution to his manifesto. It needed a rework of a couple of sections, but once that was done, he could write a new bridging clause. He started it with gusto.

Raj lost track of time. It was all he cared about. He could get this done before most people were connected if he focused.

His Tether app rang. It was Rani Misra. That was the last thing he needed, but she was one person he shouldn't ignore. Irritated, he clicked to accept the call.

'What? Can't it wait?'

'Have you seen what's happening?' said Rani.

'What?' said Raj.

'This,' said Rani. 'Sydney. Singapore. New Zealand. It's spreading. Like a virus.'

As Rani named each place, she shared a video feed, then several more. He didn't believe it. They were scenes of devastation, bodies strewn everywhere. Horrendous pile-ups on motorways, ablaze. There was even a plane crash. He stared blankly, refusing to accept its cause.

'What have you done, Raj?' said Rani.

'I...' Raj stumbled. What could he say in the sight of that chaos? 'I had no choice.'

'Over what?'

'I thought it was ready. It worked in the lab. Only headaches. There was no time for more testing. I had to do something to stop the war before we all died.'

He was annoyed with himself for sounding so pathetic. He could justify it better than that. He would have to.

'What's happening?' said Rani, her pitch rising.

Raj thought Rani had already worked it out, given she was already blaming him. Rani had realised his nanovirus was responsible but didn't know what it was for. That was disappointing. He'd given her enough clues.

'The Flood.'

'What the... what's the Flood?'

Raj was getting fed up with Rani's attitude. She knew what was happening in the world. She knew the things the company was working on – and let Raj do them, no questions asked.

'What did you think the point of everything was?' said Raj. 'It was obvious this day was coming, so I had to find some way to unite humanity. Together, in the Stream.'

'The Stream?' said Rani. 'But that's just a concept.'

'You need to pay attention. Did you think there was no purpose behind all our development programmes? The distributed internet infrastructure, the nanovirus to grow neural connections, the new drone fleet to deliver it. Everything I needed to deploy the Stream.'

'So, you lied to me,' said Rani.

Raj shrugged dismissively.

'You make the money. I use it as I see fit.'

That was a mistake. It was never a good idea to rile Rani.

'What gives you the right to force this on everyone?'

'Who else was going to save us?' said Raj. He wasn't ready to relent. 'The Russians? The Chinese? The UN? Look where that's got us. It had to be done. It just... wasn't quite ready.'

'Well, that worked well, didn't it? Look at what you've achieved.' She shared more video feeds. 'Look. Look at it. The destruction. The deaths. You've got to stop it.'

'I can't. It's too late.'

Rani threw up her hands and glared at him.

'I want nothing to do with it. You're on your own now.'

'You think anyone will believe you didn't know about it?' said Raj. 'I need your help. Otherwise, it's your word against mine.'

Rani smirked at him and picked up her tablet. She turned it to reveal where she was: in the auditorium with all the new intake. Damn, he should have realised she wasn't in her office.

'I think you'll find I have witnesses,' said Rani.

Raj panicked and disconnected the call.

He didn't know what to do. What had gone wrong? There had been nothing like this in their trials. His mind was rapidly awash with theories.

The welcome screen was probably too big a distraction. He'd wanted to make sure he got credit, Tethys too, but it was easily dismissible. A short-lived interruption didn't explain the scale of the problem that he'd seen. The process must have affected some, maybe the majority of people differently. But why?

All the test subjects had been terminally ill cancer patients. Did their cancers have an impact on the growth of the Tap? Did their medication alter things? None of that applied to him though, and he'd been fine.

Was there a genetic component? Something environmental?

All the trial subjects had one thing in common, including himself. The test had been done in ideal conditions, with the patient in a calm, relaxed state, sitting down, expecting it to happen.

That seemed the most likely difference, but he needed more data. First, the short-term risk was Rani Misra. He had to see what she was doing. It didn't take long to find the video feed from the auditorium. He stared at it in disbelief.

He caught the last moments of Rani Misra collapsing to the ground. Groans spread across the audience; most seemed to be falling unconscious. There was no time to wait. If he wanted data, he had to take a closer look.

On the way to the auditorium, he passed a couple of people slumped on the floor of the corridor. To his relief, they were alive but peacefully unconscious. That was good, but he needed to see more.

The first people seemed to be coming around as he entered the auditorium. From their semi-conscious glazed expression, he assumed they were listening to his welcome message. That was good news. It had worked. Maybe not in the way he'd intended, but the end result could be the same: a world reborn.

He had to work fast. He made his way up the rows, checking pulses, feeling temperatures, looking for signs of the Tap springing to life. Most seemed to be safely unconscious, although there were a couple whose breathing was worryingly shallow and hesitant.

Then his worse fears were realised. This young man had no pulse. There was a small quantity of blood in one ear, which left only one possible conclusion: the nanovirus had killed him.

He heard someone say his name, so looked up. A young woman was staring at him.

'Raj Tamboli?' she said.

This could be his chance to get a first-hand account of how it had gone.

'Did it work?' said Raj.

'What?'

'The Stream. Did you see the welcome message?'

'Yes.'

'Isn't it incredible?' said Raj.

Disappointingly, she didn't answer but looked down at the body he was standing over.

'How... how's Nikhil?'

'Who? Oh, him. He's dead.' As she clearly knew the person, Raj felt the need to explain. 'Strange. Never had a reaction like this in the lab. I don't understand... maybe it works better when the subject is relaxed. I wonder.' He needed information from her to make sense of it. 'How do you feel? You've recovered quickest. What was your mental state when it started?'

'Dead?'

'Tell me how you felt. I need more data.'

The scowl of hatred that distorted her face shocked Raj more than anything that day.

'Fuck off, you murderer.'

Raj wasn't going to take that from one of his employees.

'That's not-' he began, but the woman hadn't finished.

'Look at him. Look.' She waved angrily toward the body. 'You killed him. Look around the room. He's not the only one you've killed. You'll die for this.'

Raj couldn't help but follow her instructions. She was right. Despite all his best intentions, he would get the blame for this. Even if fewer people had died than would have done in the nuclear war, people would take the deaths of their loved ones personally.

He had to get out of there. Rani Misra was starting to come around at the front. He couldn't face her, not yet.

'Well, what are you going to do?' said the woman. 'Well?'

Rani had noticed him.

'I... I must go.'

He sprinted towards a door at the rear, then took a back route to his office. Even that wasn't safe. He needed time to think. There were still things to do if it wasn't going to get even worse.

He took the elevator down to his private lab, making sure there were no signs of it from his office. Only Rani knew it existed. She was the danger, and he'd just treated her badly. He needed to send her a message.

'I'm so sorry, I reacted badly to everything that was happening. This is my fault, but I fear you'll get blamed too. I'll fix that. I did it for the best, but I got it wrong. I need time to try to improve things before I turn myself in. Please, please, cover for me for a while. Nobody else knows where I'll be hiding. Give me time to mitigate the impact on everybody, then I'll make sure you're absolved from all blame. Trust me.'

He didn't wait for a reply. Using a diagnostic command, he detached his message queue which was already being inundated by queries. It would appear as if he was dead, bouncing back an error message.

Raj was running short of options. Luckily, everything he needed was waiting down below.

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It took a few days, but Raj Tamboli could wait no longer. The world could wait no longer.

Raj had been closely following the news channels. The mood was febrile as governments tried to restore order, in some cases needing to be rebuilt after the deaths of the leaders killed during the Flood. The only thing that united everyone was hatred of Raj Tamboli. They wanted to find him. To bring him to justice. To execute him.

He had no future, not as Raj Tamboli. That left only one option.

Raj could only function if he didn't focus on the deaths he'd caused. People forgot that it was still fewer than if war had broken out. Probably. Yet all they wanted was retribution.

Rani Misra had been arrested. At least she'd listened to his plea and kept his location secret, realising he was her only hope. He owed her, but only once his plans were complete.

He was ready. He double-checked the rooms on his personal floor. The Manifesto for World Peace was resting on a bench, waiting to be found once conditions were right. The Decemverate must be created. It was the only way to ensure rational stability flourished in humanity's future.

The Elector was next to it, a shiny black box to ensure the right Decemviri were chosen. The prototype for it had been ready for a while. There were things he'd prefer to adjust, particularly how it would adapt as the world changed over the centuries, but there was no time. It could be fixed later.

He entered his main lab. The cryo-chamber loomed at the far end. It didn't work. He knew it would kill him, but that was good. It had to appear as if he'd died. He'd even written a cover note to pretend he'd done it to help his research team.

He'd also recorded a message introducing his political works, to be triggered as soon as his body was discovered. It had to be taken seriously, but on its own, his manifesto would be ignored given the current state of the world. It needed active promotion.

First, to fully seal his legacy, the Stream needed a resident consciousness – and soon. There was no choice. It had to be his.

The trouble was, he also needed to be out in the world, secretly arranging and fixing things. He'd promised to help Rani Misra. He couldn't do everything required to ensure his manifesto was accepted from within the Stream. He had to risk separating his consciousness.

A humanoid robot sat in the chair next to the cryo-chamber. That was to be his other new home, living as Kieran Mason. He'd created Kieran's life story in the Stream, ensuring that he was ideally qualified to pick up the pieces and recommended by all the right people. He'd isolated the right parts of his personality to make it work, with the smallest viable aspects transferring to live in the Stream.

It was a risk. The new techniques to minimise the psychosis were untested, but he was confident they would work, even if only for a year or two. One of Kieran's tasks would be to find a new consciousness to take over in the Stream, allowing him to fully reintegrate himself as Kieran Mason.

He climbed into the chamber. It wasn't turned on yet. That would be Kieran's job when tidying up to remove all traces of what had been done.

One-by-one, Raj fitted the electrodes through which his consciousness would flow. He felt surprisingly calm. He didn't need this body. His intelligence was what defined him. Once he was reintegrated into an artificial body, he'd be able to transfer to another whenever he wanted. He could live forever, nurturing humanity across the centuries.

That had never been his plan at the start, but given how things had turned out, he could see the advantages now. The first thing he would need to do was calm the world down. The mood control accessible through the Tap was a side-effect rather than a goal of the design, but the way the world was right now, it was essential to stabilise things.

It only needed to be temporary. Once Kieran Mason had ensured the manifesto was accepted and the Decemvirate was being created, it should no longer be required. He'd be there to ensure nothing went wrong.

Humanity needed a wise shepherd to keep them on track. Raj Tamboli would fill that role, or whatever he chose to call himself.

He triggered the transfer process. A wave of lethargy washed over him.

Raj Tamboli closed his eyes for the last time, and a satisfied smile broke out on Kieran Mason's face.