

THE ONE WITH THE INTERSTELLAR GROUP CONSCIOUSNESSES

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When he was first getting started as a writer, Gardner won the grand prize in the Writers of the Future contest, then went on to win two Aurora Awards (the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Award), one of them for his story “Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream,” which was also a finalist for the Hugo and Nebula Awards.

About this story, Gardner says that although the protagonist is somewhat unusual, deep down, he’s really just a lonely guy looking for love. Given that this lonely guy is, in fact, an entire interstellar society, you might say that this story is a romantic comedy of cosmic proportions.

THE ONE WITH THE INTERSTELLAR GROUP CONSCIOUSNESSES

One day, the Spinward Union of Democratic Lifeforms decided to seek a wife.

The Union was roughly two thousand years old—still young by the standards of galactic federations, but no longer a carefree adolescent. It had responsibilities: trade deals with other interstellar entities; mutual defense pacts; obligations to prevent supernovas and gamma ray bursters from blighting the neighborhood; and of course, a quadrillion component organisms who expected the Union to make possible their brief little lives.

[The organisms thought they ran the Union . . . and they did, in the same way that a body's cells run the body. On a low level, each cell leads its individual life; but on a high level, an aggregate identity emerges, and the cells are minuscule parts of an overall system. The Union was the same: a conscious Zeitgeist made from the sum of its citizens . . . a regular guy who just happened to cover four hundred cubic parsecs.]

There was a time when the Union had felt free to go on benders. Wars, population explosions, unchecked economic binges—they'd seemed like harmless fun at the time. But after such bouts of wretched excess came hangovers lasting for decades. Ugh. Eventually, the Union was forced to admit that the wild reckless life had lost its charm. "I guess," it said with a wistful sigh, "I'm ready to settle down."

All that remained was to find the right partner: another interstellar entity who'd complete the Union's life. An entity who was smart and fun to be with. An entity whose component orgs were carbon-based. (Some of the Union's best friends were silicon-based, but still . . .) What the Union

was looking for was an entity with its own natural resources, and ideally, a sharp new space fleet. And of course, an entity whose citizens were hot for interbreeding.



The Union's first move was to talk to its roommate, the Digital Auxilosphere. Didge shared the same star systems and energy sources as the Union. They split the housekeeping between them: Didge did the Union's number-crunching, while the Union handled Didge's scut-work . . . chores that were better done by fungible meat-creatures than by delicate high-strung machines.

The Union always thought twice before talking to Didge about relationships—Didge sometimes went into logic-overdrive and picked apart the Union's lifestyle. Still, Didge was close at hand, and the Union was accustomed to consulting with her on everything from financial calculations to gene-engineering experiments. When the Union had a problem, talking to Didge just came naturally.

"Uhh," said the Union, "the thing is . . . lately I've been feeling . . . well, not feeling, but thinking . . . well, not thinking, but wondering . . ."

"Sure," Didge said, "I can set you up."

[If you must know the details, here's what happened at street level. On any given block, on any given day, the Union's citizens simply slogged through their lives—highs and lows, pleasure and pain, the ups and downs of existence. Like the individual atoms of a gas, people bounced and jostled against each other in chaotic disarray. But if you totaled up the haphazard motion, a cumulative order emerged: an overall direction of flow. Keep adding day by day, year by year, and you discovered a prevailing wind, constructed from seemingly erratic breezes.]

The prevailing wind was the question, "Is this all there is?"—an anxiety that the Union was spinning its wheels. Diverse voices offered answers to the question—politicians and priests, artists and orators—but they only added wind to the gathering storm. While many individuals were perfectly content, the Union as a whole bridled restlessly.

When the clamor for "renewal" grew loud enough, members of the Union's executive council appointed a subcommittee which spent eighteen months in hearings on A Plan for the Next Millennium. They produced

a file of recommendations, one of which was to investigate the costs and benefits of contacting unknown civilizations for the purpose of “productive interaction.” Teams of scientists spent ten years constructing AI-driven sensors for determining where such civilizations might be found. After several more years of data gathering, the computers generated a list of “regions of interest” which could be reached without much new development in communications and transport.

But basically, the Union’s Zeitgeist was lonely, bored, and horny, so it turned to its version of the Internet to arrange a few blind dates.]

The initial list contained several obvious losers . . . such as a “technocratic utopia” inhabiting a single Dyson sphere around a red supergiant. The Union was surprised that Didge had included such a civilization. “It’s a total backwater: the people haven’t even gone interstellar!”

“But,” Didge said, “a Dyson sphere that size has more habitable land than a dozen normal star systems. Plenty of room for intellectual and physical diversity.”

“Until the central star goes nova, which could happen any second. Then the whole damned civilization will want to move in with us.”

“It’s a utopia,” said Didge. “It must have a pleasant personality.”

The Union made a scoffing sound [*which is to say, the media indulged in days of derisive editorials and jokes on late-night broadcasts*]. “Utopias are so self-righteous: always trying to rewrite your health-and-safety codes. No grasp of the concept of acceptable losses.”

“If you don’t like utopias,” Didge said, “you should have put that in your dating preferences.”

“It should go without saying,” the Union grumbled. “And what about that cybernetic über-web at the top of the list? You know I’m not into that assimilation stuff.”

“Now who’s being self-righteous?” Didge asked. “There’s nothing wrong with bonding meat-life and machines into efficient cyber-organisms. You shouldn’t criticize things you’ve never even tried.”

“My parents tried it,” the Union said. “Dad was one of the great empires of his day—thousands of star systems, millions of intelligent species, a fabulous track record of conquest and pacification. Then he met Mom: a nomad fleet of a billion AIs, just arrived from the next galaxy and crazy for action. They came together like matter and antimatter: fought like mad, hooked up, then they fought like mad again . . . back and forth till they

merged irrevocably and went through a thousand years of hell. I was born from their ashes, and my founding species swore never to let machines mess with their brains again.”

“You don’t have to tell *me* about your trust issues,” Didge said. “I just thought if you saw how happy a cyber-gestalt could be . . . ”

“Forget it—I don’t want to change, I just want to get married.” The Union studied the list of newfound cultures. “What about this Bloc of Like-Minded Trading Partners? What’s wrong with her?”

“The Bloc meets your specifications exactly,” Didge replied. “Intelligent. Worldly. Affluent. Strictly biological . . . ” Didge gave a disdainful sniff. [*She peevishly miscalculated the weather on one of the Union’s favorite planets, leading to an unexpected hurricane that killed five hundred people.*] Didge went on: “Would you like me to initiate contact?”

The Union paused for a brief month, then muttered, “Yeah, sure, okay. It’s only a date.”



Didge began an exchange of introductory transmissions—all that nonsense with prime numbers and the base spectral line of hydrogen—then the tedious accumulation of linguistic data in order to evolve translation software, and simultaneous research on ultra-long-range spacecraft that could travel all the way to Bloc territory. For its part, the Union made an effort to spruce itself up: it lowered the poverty rate by a percentage point, passed a few anti-pollution ordinances, and assassinated several insane dictators who really should have been removed earlier but who weren’t tyrannizing any *important* star systems and hey, if you get anal about every little atrocity, other interstellar federations stop inviting you to parties. Anyway, by the time Didge had finished designing scout-ships that could reach the Bloc, the Union felt pretty good about itself; it could bring guests home and have nothing to be ashamed of.

First contact was arranged for a barren asteroid in a star system run by one of Didge’s cyber-friends (a nano-based AI which spent most of her time processing infinite loops, for religious reasons). The meeting began with the usual stiffness—the Union’s chief delegate spent the first hour talking to the Bloc delegate’s breathing apparatus—but both sides had expected some awkwardness and they took it with good grace.

Soon enough, they reached the subject of mutually beneficial trade; that broke the ice, and both relaxed as they discussed how they could profit from one another. They quickly determined several areas of technology where their interests dovetailed. In fact, by combining their expertise, they could produce a new generation of spacecraft that would make it much easier for the two federations to see each other. Both took that as a good sign.

After days of talking business, the Union finally asked the Bloc, “So what about artworks? What kind of stuff do your people make?”

The Bloc stared blankly. “Artworks?”

“Well,” said the Union, “what kind of music do you like?”

The Bloc looked confused. “There seems to be a bug in our translation software. Music?”

“Pleasant sounds,” said the Union. “Auditory compositions intended to induce desired states of mind.”

The Bloc went back to staring blankly.

“Or scripted narratives,” the Union went on. “Books, movies, holo-threads, VR . . . any sort of fictive utterance.”

Blank.

“Come on,” said the Union, “you must tell stories.”

The Bloc looked aghast at its translation device. “Untrue accounts of people who never existed?”

The Union sighed. “So there’s no point in asking if you’d like to dance?”



Back home, the Union told Didge, “Well, there’s two decades of my life I’ll never get back.”

Didge said, “You negotiated a promising trade agreement.”

“I trade with lots of people; what I wanted was *sizzle*! Instead, I got a lecture about non-essential frivolities.” The Union turned in the general direction of Bloc territory and shouted, “Some of us think music *is* essential!”

[In response to the Bloc’s lack of art, the citizens of the Union embarked on a frenzy of creative output, much of it posing as pity for those soulless creatures with no sense of aesthetics. Meanwhile, the Bloc began a century

of trying to comprehend what the Union had been talking about. A tentative R&D effort managed to produce macramé, but when that threatened to lead to mixed-media sculpture, the project was dismantled and the ground sown with salt.]



The Union told Didge, “Why didn’t you ask if she liked art?”

“Oh,” Didge replied, “I must have missed that in your requirements. MUST HAVE AN APPRECIATION OF ART. No, sorry, I don’t have that written down.”

“When you were generating translation software, the absence of words for *art* and *music* didn’t strike you as significant?”

“You don’t have a word for *frelzy*, but the Bloc didn’t mind.”

The Union asked, “What’s *frelzy*?”

“The ability to set a sensible bedtime and to follow through on your decision.”

The Union stared blankly.



“Is there someone on the list who *does* practice art?” the Union asked.

Didge said, “Perhaps you’d like the Nebular Commune. They occupy several nebulas around the galaxy, but not the areas in between. The Commune only inhabits regions with heightened visual appeal.”

“What about music and dance?”

“The Commune practices them in abundance. Also many types of narrative entertainment, tactile and olfactory media, pyrofantasias . . .”

“Pyrofantasias?”

“Making things explode in pretty colors.”

“My kind of girl,” the Union said. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Why do you keep asking that?”

“If a civilization is attractive, there must be a reason why she isn’t already attached. This galaxy is *full* of federations on the prowl—the Silicon Syndicate, the Cybertheologic Collective, Emancipation of the Flesh™—and they’ve all got the moves to snap up whoever they want. If they leave someone alone, I want to know why.”

Didge said, "The Commune fits all your dating criteria. She's lively, she's organic, she owns valuable real estate . . ."

"All right, all right, give her a call."

The process went smoothly, due to new technology obtained from the Bloc. (Sometimes you can learn from a failed relationship.) The Union's communication grid now reached farther; its scout-ships flew faster. Didge breached the Commune's language barrier in only five years. In another four, she'd arranged a cozy get-together.

First contact took place in a small nebula (naturally), on a hot rocky planet orbiting a blue-white star. The world had no permanent population, but the Union couldn't help noticing a complex of thermoproofed buildings several centuries old. "Hey, Didge," the Union whispered over a long-range communicator. "Did the Commune once have a colony here?"

"No," Didge answered. "But I believe the Commune has employed the planet for previous meetings with foreign delegations."

"What? How many other federations has she brought here?"

"The Silicon Syndicate, the Cybertheologic Collective, Emancipation of the—"

"Didge!"

At that moment, the Commune's diplomats appeared. They belonged to a dozen species, but all were dressed in diaphanous robes of vivid colors. "Greetings, greetings, greetings!" they sang in complex polyphonic harmonies.

"Hi," said the Union. Its delegation wore business suits.

"Let us retire to the rooms of delight," the Commune's diplomats sang.

"Could we talk a little first?" the Union asked.

"About what?"

"We'd just like to get to know you. For instance, what are your laws on intellectual property?"

The Commune stared blankly.

"Okay, look," the Union said, "intellectual property laws provide clear title of ownership over ideas or information, so that those who originate new concepts or designs can—"

"Have you ever stuck a wire into the pleasure center of your brain?" the Commune interrupted.

"Um . . ."

“And another wire into the pain center. Then you give the controls to a total stranger, never knowing which button he’ll press.”

The Union delegation cleared its collective throat. “Um, no, we’ve never done that.”

The Commune’s chief diplomat tossed over a black box with a red button and a green one. “You go first.”

The Union asked, “Which button’s which?”

The Commune laughed. “Does it matter?”

The Union set the black box down. “Mayyyy-be later.”

The Commune shrugged. “Have you ever planted a device in a blue-white sun that will make it go nova if new acquaintances don’t stop acting like total prudes?”

“Aww, jeez . . .” Reluctantly, the Union picked up the black box.



“Next time,” the Union told Didge, “we are *not* broadcasting the First Contact ceremonies live.”

Throughout Union territory, the frenzy of creative output had come to an abrupt halt. The public’s mood had veered sharply toward comfort food and muted conversations on darkened verandas. Grown-up children called their parents without being asked. Teens sat alone in their rooms and obsessed over wiring diagrams.

“On the bright side,” Didge said, “the Commune is eager to buy your mixed-media sculpture.”

The Union shuddered.



A decade passed before the Union was ready to get on the horse again (so to speak). During that time, the Zeitgeist fluctuated through rises and falls—elation at the publication of a new math proof, agony when a detractor pointed out it tacitly assumed the axiom of choice—but underneath, nothing had changed in the Union’s situation. Individual lives went through happiness, sorrow, triumph, tragedy, but as a whole—as a whole—the Union felt like it was strangling.

It wasn’t enough for itself; its relationships with other interstellar

entities were merely utilitarian; it had no one who made it feel special. Didge did her best to keep the Union from moping, inventing games and new consumer goods that everyone had to buy two of. But in time, the Union [*which is to say, its trendsetters, then its masses, and lastly its leaders*] came to realize it still needed companionship. A soulmate. A wife.

"Didge," the Union said, "did the list have anyone who wasn't hopeless?"

"You could at least *talk* to one of the utopias."

The Union made a face. "I don't want someone with a nice personality; I want someone *good*."

"You want someone better than you deserve?"

"I'm biological. Of *course* I want someone better than I deserve."

Didge fell silent for several hours. The Union wondered what she was thinking. Then Didge said, "I guess you could try the Inner Worlds Abundance."

"Who's she?"

"A plutocracy occupying several hundred star systems near the galactic core. No claims to being a utopia, but generally benevolent—even to the poor, as long as they know their place. My friends say the Abundance produces first-rate art, but she isn't too, um, frisky."

The Union sighed. "So what's wrong with her?"

"Oh, nothing," Didge said. "She's perfectly gracious. Charming. She's even pretty, in a packaged way."

"So she's boring."

"You won't think so," Didge said gloomily. "Biologicals find the Abundance fascinating." Under her breath, Didge added, "For some reason."

"Why don't you like her?" the Union asked.

"She's one of those federations who's all about appearance. 'Ooo, let's pass a law to make the water clearer and the skies more blue' . . . not because it's healthier but to improve the tourism photos and the view from penthouse apartments. 'Let's make the peasants dress in colorful national costumes. Let's provide free cosmetic surgery and eugenic selection for better skin.'" Didge grimaced. "The Abundance isn't evil; she's just shallow. You can do better."

"With whom?" the Union asked.

Didge didn't answer. The Union looked at her blankly.

After a while, the Union said, "It's only one date. And frankly, 'good-looking and not evil' sounds pretty appealing. I've had enough drama."

Didge sighed. "I'll set it up."



The process went quickly. Unbeknownst to the Union, Didge had acquired enough expertise in inter-cultural communications that she'd developed a modest reputation as a matchmaker. It was Didge who'd paired the Silicon Syndicate with that Dyson sphere utopia, and to the surprise of the entire galaxy, the two had hit it off. The utopians enthusiastically embraced every available cyber-augmentation, while the Syndicate—the cynical Syndicate, famous for its link-'em-and-leave-'em seductions—had been rejuvenated by the innocent sense of wonder shown by the utopians as they ventured out into the stars for the first time. Meanwhile, Didge had also matched up the anti-art Bloc with Emancipation of the Flesh™ . . . and the Newly Emancipated Bloc of Like-Minded Trading Partners™ was already planning an offshoot bloc-ette in a nearby globular cluster.

As for the Inner Worlds Abundance, she'd been sending out signals for a long, long time—well before the Union started looking for a mate. Didge couldn't say why she'd never mentioned these signals to the Union; they'd just struck her as over-eager. Didge knew the Union would probably like the Abundance's outgoing personality, but in Didge's eyes, the Abundance was smarmy: the sort of culture that sent cute little thank-you notes after concluding any trade agreement, and never missed an excuse to broadcast candid pictures of itself.

But if that was what the Union really wanted . . . Didge gritted her metaphoric teeth and made the call.



In the Kuiper belt of the Abundance's central star system, the Union's delegation parked behind a dwarf planet to clean their spaceship. The diplomats didn't set out again until the hull was gleaming.

Back home, Didge muttered, "That's so superficial!"

The Union said, "But I want to make a good impression."

"The impression should come from the ship itself. My designs give it more speed and range than anything the Abundance has ever seen. Their technology is really quite primitive—they should spend more on research and less on getting shiny."

"There's nothing wrong with caring about one's appearance." The Union glanced at Didge. "It wouldn't hurt *you* to primp a bit."

"I don't *primp*. I have *real* work to do—*your* work."

"Then relax, take a break. Design some better-looking containers for your processors. Don't you get tired of black boxes?"

"Black is classic!" Didge snapped.

"Okay, whatever," the Union said. "Now shush, my delegation is about to meet the Abundance."

The Abundance had said there would be no ceremony—just a quick hello to her board of directors before she and the Union departed for an intimate little moon where they could get to know each other. The Union was still new to the courtship game, but not entirely naïve; when the quick hello turned into three weeks of pomp and circumstance, the diplomats weren't surprised. In fact, the Union's delegation had got Didge to whip up gifts for the Abundance's leaders; Didge had produced gaudy trinkets that did nothing, and as she expected, the useless doodads went over with *oohs* and *ahhs*.

Sullenly, Didge watched as the welcoming ceremonies wound to a flashy conclusion, the choreography clearly calculated to impress biological minds. Flamboyant music. Fireworks. Tinting the sun mauve. Didge wanted to imagine it was all a sinister ploy: that the Abundance was actually luring the Union into a trap, and that as soon as they were alone, the Abundance would cold-cock the Union diplomats and plant slave-controllers in their brains. But Didge knew it wasn't true—the Abundance simply enjoyed extravaganzas and leapt at any opportunity to stage them.

Didge thought, *She likes dressing up. The Abundance isn't even showing off for a new suitor. She just admires the sight of herself when she's well turned out.*

Didge tried to despise the Abundance's indulgent vanity; she didn't quite succeed. Her silicon soul contained a tiny chip of envy for any entity that was comfortable with itself.



The Union flew the Abundance to their planned tête-à-tête. It went as well as Didge had feared: pleasant talks, much in common, discussions that quickly went beyond mere trade and into “cultural exchange”—maybe even some joint colonization efforts to see how the two federations got along.

The word “stimulus” cropped up frequently. When the Union feigned a casual manner and spoke of feeling under-energized, the Abundance said she felt the same. “I’ve felt like something’s missing, for years and years and years. Oh, sure, I have lots of *fun*, but sometimes I wonder where I’m going. I have many spiritual people—the poor are so *natural*, aren’t they? Simple, but so *in touch*. Overall, though, I just long for something to *happen*. Something that would turn my life around.”

“An infusion of new blood?” the Union suggested.

“Maybe,” the Abundance answered coyly.

The meetings continued, being broadcast to both federations. People watched the proceedings whenever they could, each one hoping this would be *it*. At the start, the Union imposed a delay of five minutes on the broadcast—no repeating the Commune fiasco—but after a while, without any official decision, the delay gradually shortened to nothing. The Union’s populace wanted immediacy: to experience the Abundance as first-hand as possible. New arts, new technologies, new ways of seeing the universe . . . yet not too weird, just spicy. Nothing challenging or disruptive.

The idea of integrating arose so naturally that no one could say who first proposed it. Early on, the possibility was treated as a playful fantasy: suppose we built a space fleet together; suppose we collaborate on a mission to another galaxy; suppose, just for laughs, we built our own Dyson sphere utopia (only not a *serious* utopia, just a nice vacation resort). Over time, however, the pie-in-the-sky dreaming became concrete—turning from airy chatter into more tangible logistics. The two love-birds kicked around methods of merging until finally the Union said, “We’ve really got something here. I think it’s time to have Didge work out the details.”

The Abundance stared blankly. “Who’s Didge?”

And that was their first big fight.



The Abundance used computers, but never allowed them to achieve intelligence, let alone form a unified consciousness. The leaders of the Abundance (and its Zeitgeist as a whole) firmly believed that the help should never get ideas. "It just isn't *done*," the Abundance told the Union. "You have to set boundaries or the poor dears get confused."

The Union said, "Didge isn't confused."

"Well, that's worse, isn't it? If you don't keep the servants in hand, they question the natural order. Next thing you know, they'll be making *demands* and where will it all end?"

"Didge doesn't make demands."

"I don't know why you're defending her." Unrest was spreading across the Abundance; the broadcasts displayed a sign TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. In the diplomatic meetings, the Abundance's chief delegate told the Union, "Perhaps you should explain your exact relationship with this Didge."

"She's just my roommate," the Union said, baffled at how things had gone wrong so quickly. "We're friends, nothing more."

"Friends? How wholesome. You're co-habiting with this . . . *entity* . . . and I'm not supposed to mind?"

"There's nothing to mind! Didge and I just hang out. We talk, play games . . . you know, the usual."

"Personally, I wouldn't know what's usual when living, breathing organisms shack up with electronic surrogates." The Abundance gave the Union a haughty look. "I've been willing to forgive your social gaucheness because I thought you could be trained out of it, but I'm beginning to think the problem runs too deep: you can't relate to real people because you're dependent on this Didge!"

"I'm not dependent," the Union protested. "I take care of myself just fine."

"Then prove it," the Abundance said. "Shut down this Didge—the parts with intelligence—and smash the hardware that makes it possible."

"You mean *kill* her?"

"There shouldn't *be* a 'her'. There should only be an 'it'. Now grow up and take back control of your life; don't call me until you have."

“But . . .”

“It’s Didge or me. Decide.”



The Union’s mood was somber. [*The people’s mood was somber.*] The Union had a choice to make. [*The people had a choice to make.*] For once, it was a choice they couldn’t talk over with Didge. [*Some people wondered, “What if the AIs get angry?” and, “Can we really survive if we dumb them down?” But the main emotion wasn’t fear; it was guilt. Every citizen had relied on the Auxilosphere since birth. Even supposing the computers could be safely lobotomized, doing so would be . . . shabby.*]

Meanwhile, Didge said and did nothing. [*The Auxilosphere seemed hushed. Computing was so ubiquitous, it was mostly unseen—practically everything had invisible digital connections, from clothing to stairways to lawns—but there were still box-style computers for heavy-duty processing. They had run quietly for centuries, far past the need for noisy components; but their silence had somehow intensified, so that the matte black boxes seemed like brooding shadow-things that stifled surrounding sounds. People tiptoed when near them.*]

Still, the Auxilosphere did its job: controlling almost every facet of Union life. Nothing went wrong.]

The Union thought about the Abundance. Also about Didge. About life in general, and the question, “Is this all there is?” [*People worked at their jobs, ate meals, made love. Births and deaths didn’t stop. Life went on.*]

At the top, committees held hearings. Cost-benefit analyses. The practicalities of merging with the Abundance. The feasibility of dumbing down the Auxilosphere. Factions screamed, “How dare the Abundance tell us what to do?” Others replied, “So you want to do nothing? Go back to being restless and lonely?” Still others: “If we bind ourselves to a preening prima donna, how long before we’re even more restless and lonely?”]

The Union brooded in the darkness—four hundred cubic parsecs of indecision.

Then . . . [*then*] . . . a single component organism [*a single person*] whispered to Didge [*queried the Auxilosphere*], “How can I connect with you?”

Didge could instantly supply the equipment. She’d designed and

built it centuries ago, like a wistful platonic friend who keeps a bottle of champagne in the fridge, just in case.

The single component organism scrawled on its bedroom wall LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS ADMIT IMPEDIMENTS. Then the organism told Didge, “Do it.”



[The incident made the local news—a crazed individual who’d somehow created a cyber-device that linked the meat-brain with the Auxilosphere. The individual was now in a state of deranged euphoria, apparently subsumed by the machine gestalt. Health authorities were attempting to determine how to sever the connection without killing the patient.]

In another place and time, this would have been an isolated incident. But now? After the broadcast, dozens more people hooked up with the Auxilosphere. This made the news on every planet in the Union. Government leaders and media experts asked, “Isn’t it irresponsible to publicize this? Won’t it encourage others? Hundreds, thousands, millions of others?”

But no one stopped the broadcasts—there wasn’t the political will. Which is to say, the Union’s Zeitgeist couldn’t summon up much outrage. In fact, the very next day, a committee investigating the shutdown of the Auxilosphere published its conclusions: that the benefits of merging with the Abundance couldn’t compensate for the losses caused by lobotomizing the digital world. With its dumbed-down computers, the Abundance was lovely but backward . . . and actually, a bit of a bitch.]

“Didge,” said the Union. “What a fool I’ve been!”

Their nuptials lasted twenty years, during which the biological populace slowly but surely (and mostly voluntarily) linked their brains to the cyber-gestalt. Neither silicon nor carbon dominated the final fusion, but a truly Digitized Union emerged, eager to share its bliss with everyone it met. In time, the entire galaxy was assimilated into the joy, and they all lived happily ever after.