

# Attack of the Cyberpet

Zara turns to Brro who seems to have reappeared out of nowhere and says, "Having recently acquired my own cybercompanion, who on a good day is reasonably helpful, I am most interested to hear of the astounding tale of when you found a Nanobot and used it to lead the Space Lizards of Intersolar Space Station Alpha with only the help of your cyberdog." She sits back, looks over a small pad that she has pulled from her pocket and sips her drink quietly.

"I apologize for my apparent loss of concentration, Zara, but as it happens I was musing on the very events of which you speak. It was an old K-9000 series, I believe."

Brro shifts in his seat. "Excuse me, ladies, gentlemen and others, but I must protest that my throat is dry."

He orders another OEB, before turning to begin his story.

"What!?" he says.

## Episode IV- A New Pup

The music system has, for no apparent reason, started playing a stirring martial theme. Brro sips his beer, and sighs heavily. "It was a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, had won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire. "Fortunately, I was on the other side of the damn galaxy. Ever since I resigned my commission, I've done my absolute best to keep out of any wars, civil or otherwise.

"If I remember correctly, my security droid had left the crew to fight in the 56/R97-C uprising, and my engineer had settled down with a miner she'd met on our last layover. Since our ship was a long-haul freighter with a crew complement of three, and Sal and ZX-78 had installed automatic repair and defensive systems on our last trip, it wasn't a huge problem. I figured I'd miss their company, but I'm a loner at heart and besides, it meant that there'd be less overheads for each trip. They were good folk, though, and they chipped in to buy me a farewell present - a second-hand, unassembled K-9000 cyberpet kit. Z joked that it would be able to defend the ship at least as well as he had. They also found a cryogenically frozen dog brain-and-stem from a salvage merchant - probably cost them more than the kit did.

"Well, I was looking at eight months in deep space with nothing but the celestial spheres for company. The ship's AI and I worked out an agreement not to get on each other's nerves, which involved not talking politics, religion, economic theory, or, after a while, anything. I had nothing better to do, so I started working on the kit. No easy task - the instructions seemed to have been translated from Terran to Kalderash and back again, by a Darmok with aspirations of poetry. Still, one cybernetic organism is much like another and I was able to muddle through, though I wasn't surprised to find a few pieces left over at the end. I don't know if you've seen the K-9000 series, but this one was an ugly looking critter, somewhere between a dog, a droid and a gnark. And the brain-and-stem was from a red setter, so the thing was dumb as cuss, too."

Cleaning the table of the detritious of his cheese(ish) sandwich, Simon raises an eyebrow in interest. One of Brro's statements triggering a mimetic memory, the database of factoids scrolling on his inner eye. "I would wager", says Simon as the holographic credit materialises, "that the salvage merchant you previously mentioned was quite anxious to be rid of the canine cryo-parts." "At that time, circa the uprising of 56/R97-C, there was an increased military expenditure by the BEMs of BEMspace in psionic engineering. Which led of course, to the terrorist attacks of the Hedonist Cults of Frequala and the final closing of their experiments. Some of these disappeared from their official inventories, most

likely into the hands of unscrupulous merchants unaware of their danger." "One such shipment was of psychically enhanced canines - a failed experiment, as giving the dogs telepathic abilities caused a psychotic breakdown and they became uncontrollable. The entire control group had to be put down. Rather messily, as I understand it. However - the facility did not contain cremation equipment and no one ever discovered what happened to the parts." "It is not to far a stretch of the imagination to realise that the parts found their way into the black market, and thence, into your possession."

## The Ship Who Scratched

"Well, I'll be darned if that doesn't make some kind of sense, Simon. That dog was way too quick on the uptake, even if it couldn't always work out what you wanted. And it sure got weird whenever it went near another sentient. I had figured it for telepathy. Y'see, your average dog doesn't want anything more than to keep the boss happy, but is not always too good at telling one sentient from another from the thought waves, because it doesn't have the brainpower to deal with the extra sensory input. So, when you've got one guy telling it 'Kill!' but the other guy saying and thinking, 'Don't kill me!' or worse, 'Who is the cute puppy? You is the cute puppy! Does the cute puppy wanna play? Does he? Does he?' it just confuses the poor beast until it doesn't really care who it's supposed to kill.

"Figures it's the hedonist cults, too. They know what good it does a man to have a dumb animal around, but aren't going to want to do the hard work in training one, especially not one as dumb as a setter.

"It wasn't a problem when the only sentient around was me, of course.

"It also developed a bit of a twitch, in its back leg. Would just be sitting there, staring at you, stupid-like, and suddenly its leg would go fifteen to the dozen for no apparent reason. I reckon I dismantled that leg three or four times before I got to the problem - nanobots eating through the polymer filaments in the servos. "The Ambassador will tell you, that, excepting certain situations, your basic nanobot isn't much of a threat to anybody, no worse than any other microorganism, anyway. But these were some sort of specialised nanoflea, that lives off cybernetic organisms and can cause all sorts of damage if you don't catch them early.

"But I thought, 'Where in the vastness of space has my dog got nanofleas from?' And it hit me.

"'Ship,' I said, 'My dog's got nanofleas.' "'Not surprised,' said the ship, 'it's a mangy looking thing.'

"'Where in the vastness of space do you reckon my dog's got nanofleas from, Ship? The thing was only made last week, and we've been in deep space the whole time.'

"The ship didn't say anything. It didn't have to. But it was about then that the dog, who'd been hunting vermin in the service decks, had made it to the ship's central AI core, the seat of its intellect, and this is where I noticed my mutt's peculiar problem.

"'Cos the ship said, with the full force of its thought waves, 'Curl up and die, ya dumb mutt!'"

Pia flinches. "Ooh - nasty! Did he try?"

## The Return of the Stainless Steel Dog

"Yeah, yeah, he did - thought it had succeeded for a while there. Thing collapsed right down in the

middle of the AI suite. The ship was upset ('I didn't think it would do it! How was I supposed to know it would do it? It's not my fault, I didn't mean it! I'm sorry I gave it nanofleas!') but the ship had its own problems, anyway. The cyberpet had an inbuilt cryosystem, so the brain wasn't going to decompose before I got time to look at it.

"Ship," I said, 'how long have you had nanofleas?'

"A while - I got them off Z. Remember that incident in... uh, no you don't, we promised not to tell you.'

"So why the hell didn't Sal do anything?" I said.

"She did - she set up a magnetic containment grid. Said they'd never get out unless... uh-oh!" "Ship? Don't say 'uh-oh' when you're appraising the captain of a potentially ship-threatening contagion. These things start converting your neural net into biotoxins and we're both dead!"

"It's not my fault! There was a gluon fluctuation field, so I had to send out the service droid with a neutron inversion cannon to stabilise my outer reglomeration network!" "And that disrupted the containment field? Shouldn't have." "Uh, no, the service droid accidentally disconnected the power supply. It wasn't my fault!"

"Right. Rig up the communication array, get me Sal. We'll talk later!"

"So, long story short, we got in touch with Sal in the middle of her dress fitting, so she was not best pleased. In between ordering her bridesmaid-techs 'No, the left, the left!' and 'So, what about the bracing? Fix the damn bracing!' and 'I am NOT walking down the aisle with an inefficient refraction grid!' we informed her of the situation, and she told us where we could get help. Her mother was an egghead on Intersolar Space Station Alpha - not too far out of our way, and close enough that Ship's neural net should hold out. Said her mother was some sort of nanotech genius. She also gave Ship a much better chewing out than I could have done.

"Isn't your mother coming to your wedding?" I asked.

"Why the hell would I want my mother at my wedding?" was the reply, and I had no answer to that. "So we set course for the Intersol. Weren't too long into the trip when Ship said, 'Er, Brro, your dog's not dead.'"

"Excellent," I said. 'How do you know?'

"Because it's got its teeth around my core!"

"Ooh," says Pia again, "did it have the standard-model titanium alloy teeth, or the enhanced buckydiamond super-strength bite-through-anything teeth? I'm betting it was the buckyteeth and I'll wager that was the last you ever heard from your ship."

"You're kidding. It was a second hand kit picked up on a backwater mining colony! The damn thing was lucky to have any teeth at all, let alone state of the art buckymacallits! I'm not saying it didn't do some damage, but no, the ship survived."

Brro takes Pia's credit and hands her a two-credit note.

"I believe the question was whether you heard from the ship again, alluding to a loss of its speech or intelligence, not the destruction of the ship", points out Simon. "High tensile flourine molecules, another name for long chain buckyball molecules, have long been standard building material for ship components. I'm sure you've come across uses for this material amongst your adventures, Pia?"

Inexplicably, Pia flushes. "Me? I - uh - ANYWAY... yes, as I was saying, Brro, although the ship may have survived, after the dog had bitten through the core, it must have lost its whole AI system. At the very least, you'd have needed to reboot the backup with a fresh personality structure. But even then, it wouldn't have lasted. If the guy who sold you the dog kit was dodgy enough to give you telepathic parts, there's no way he would have passed up the opportunity to offload the illegal buckyteeth. This was just after that whole big scandal, wasn't it?"

She sees Brro's credits and raises him one.

"Damn ship's the bane of my life. Wish I could say it were true. But no, the thing's skull was more than than a match for the dog's teeth, and, yeah, I'll be having words with the customer representatives of Allied Cybernetic Animaloids, aka ACA, about their so-called guard dogs whose teeth can't penetrate basic shipboard armour. And, yeah, Simon, buckyballs are standard in many of the ship's systems, but only on the quantum scale. Macrostructures? I know of two places that make them, neither of them ACA. "I hate to do it to you, Pia, but I'll have to knock back your wager, in the interests of honest storytelling. Don't suppose you want to enlighten us as to the use for high tensile flourine molecules that Simon alluded to?"

## The Nanobots of Dawn

"See, what had happened was, my dog had wanted to obey the command it got, but, because it was an organic brain rather than a mechanical one, it had some primal survival instincts that kicked in and kept it alive. Only problem was, the only way it could rationalise surviving was in killing the thing that wanted it dead.

"So I ran down to the AI suite with a lead pipe and pried its jaws off the AI core. Ship wasn't grateful, of course. 'What took you so long? Decide to stop off in the galley for a spot to eat? Your dog was ripping my brain out!' But the dog was happy to see me, and even happier when it worked out that it wasn't its master that wanted it dead. Dunno, maybe it correlated my scent with my brainwaves or something, enough to tell the difference between me and the ship. "Still, something told me that all wasn't well with my cyberpet. Something in its eyes - it was a killer, now. Had to keep it tied up on the bridge so I could make sure it didn't go hunting Ship again. Growled every time it heard its synthesised voice, though I can't hold that against it.

"We came up on the Intersol, sending our beacon signal ahead of us, maximum power. What with the beating Ship's brain had taken, and the nanofleas getting into its systems, it wasn't in a good way. 'Save yourself, Brro,' it said, 'I'm done for. Don't blame yourself, for, even though it was all your fault, I forgive you.' "'I ain't going nowhere without you, Ship,' I said. Which was true, unless you count drifting aimlessly. "We got a signal from the station, audio only. These Intersols are small research stations in deep space, isolated partly to avoid background interference on their experiments, but mostly because the scientists are so damn antisocial. Can't put more than three or four of them on one, either, whatever the size. A woman's voice came over saying, 'Shining Wit, this is Dawn Salman of Intersolar Station Alpha. I suppose you want permission to dock and bother the scientists.' Sal's mother, I guessed. "'That's a negative, Station Alpha,' I said. 'The Wit's got a bit of an infestation problem, and I'm not sure the AI's up to docking procedures anyway.' "'Well, ain't that a coinkidink,' said Dawn, 'cos you're permission was going to be denied anyway. We got an infestation of our own.' "'Ah,' I said. 'Know anything about nanofleas?'

"'Sure do,' she said. 'All you gotta do is reprogram them to not reproduce, and to sterilise each other, and to not manufacture toxins if they can help it. Then they spread out over a wide area, and are too small to do any harm to anybody. Can probably set you up with a few pre-programmed ones. Know anything about space lizards?'

"'Nope,' I said.

"'Then you still got a problem,' she said.

"'Well, I can pay for your help,' I said.

"'A., Captain of the Shining Wit, you can't pay enough, and B., that's not what your problem is. Your problem is that the one person that can help you is trapped in a space station infested with space lizards, and ain't in a position to help you, even saying that said person would be willing to help you,

which she ain't.' I was beginning to see why she wasn't welcome at Sal's wedding.

"Hey, look,' I said, 'the Wit's down on crew, and we can evacuate you without any problem, as long as you don't mind working your passage by delousing the ship.'

"You got a deal, but you gotta get to me first, and that means fightin' through a whole mess of carnivorous space lizards. I don't think you got it in you.'

"Lady,' I said, 'I've fought units of currency worse than any space lizard. I got a fully loaded wave pistol and the meanest cyberdog this side of Orion's Belt. We're coming to get you.'

"We pulled alongside, Ship stabilising itself as best it could with the nanofleas all through its systems. I suited up, and the dog and I leaped out, and drifted across to the station. Dawn wasn't kidding when she said the station was infested. Every surface was crawling with them.

"course, this is how I know the dog's teeth weren't worth spit, even after it couldn't bite through the ship's brain. Didn't bite through more than three of the lizards before its teeth were worse than useless. And a funny thing... Brro takes a long draft of his beer.

"Ever wonder what happens when nanofleas get into a fully loaded wave pistol?"

Pia interrupts. "That's no way to talk about your mother in law." She looks at Brro smugly. "I'm right, aren't I? Sal had you all set up for the wedding, and you just didn't know it yet. Bet you tried to run lightyears when you found out." She flips a holocredit into the air to back up the new wager.

## Episode VI: Return to be wed? Aye!

Brro winces. "Oh, sure, rub it in. It was that damn obvious. Old Brro, master trader, falls for a stunt like that. You want to know what happens when nanofleas get into a fully loaded wave pistol? Well, I can't tell you, and I don't want to know myself. I didn't find out, because those space lizards had no teeth in them. The dog stopped biting them, and pawed at them experimentally. They weren't sentient enough to bother it, and they weren't any more carnivorous than a sheep.

"So I go up to the airlock, and it's locked. I call Mrs. Salman on my suit mike, and she tells me there's a problem with the locking mechanism. Ship's drifted back off into space by this point, so I've got no choice but to trek all the way round to the other side of the station, trudging through the apparently harmless lizards.

"She meets me at the other side, all suited up and dressed for travel, with a nano-tech kit and a suitcase. 'Thanks for rescuing me, Captain,' she says. Thanks for rescuing me! "Your lizards aren't very carnivorous,' I observed. "Aren't they?' she replied. 'Well, ya can't be too careful. They escaped from one of the other researchers, who was doing something with hormones and mating.' Can't be too careful! Hormones and mating!

"Now Ship, who was nowhere to be seen while I was slogging miles and miles through lizards, spins up and drops a towline. No time flat we're back aboard, and she's working on the fleas. She had to get them from Ship, because the dog wouldn't go anywhere near her. I'm not saying anything, but if a telepathic dog's not a good judge of character... 'course, it could just be that all the thoughtwaves were confusing it. Guess I'll never know.

"Three days she takes to fix up the nanofleas. Still, Ship was holding up better than I expected. I thought it was the novelty of having someone else to talk to, especially someone who it could count off my failings with. I took to taking the dog for a walk on the hull, just for the fun of it. Fixed up his teeth, some nice synthediamond, so it could chew on the space-lizards that drifted across from the station. Not that it was nasty or anything, it only got like that near Dawn or the Ship's AI core.

"Then we got a call from Sal. No time at all the nanofleas were fixed, and we were ready to fly.

"`Good,' I said, `this cargo's late enough as it is.'

"`Oh, we ain't going to deliver your cargo. We're going to my daughter's wedding.'

"So we argue about it. She wins. Not entirely sure why or how, but she does. She invokes some problem with the caterers, not enough food in the sector to feed all the guests. Now, I didn't figure Sal for a big wedding, but Dawn said that there were a lot of friends of the groom's. But just to prove that I wasn't completely bereft of my wits, I did solve that problem.

"`These space lizards,' I said. `Mating out of control like that, must be causing some hefty damage to the station.'

"`Yup,' she said.

"`D'you know the chemical structure of that hormone?' "`Nope, but I can get it.'

"`And Sal's got a catering problem. Know what space lizard tastes like?"

"`Chicken,' she said.

"`Reckon I can solve everyone's problem at once.'

"We flew back to the asteroid towing the dog on a cable, smothered in space lizards with the rest of them following behind in a cloud. I'd had Dawn reprogram the dog's nanofleas to synthesise a huge amount of that sex-attractant hormone, from a minute amount of the its synthefur. Figured I'd save the day, food-wise, at least, and maybe I'd get a bit of appreciation for my trouble. If I couldn't stop Sal marrying some damn fool miner, I could at least make sure no-one would go hungry.

"Got back in the nick of time - thought we'd have a few days to spare, but Ship threw a gear or two and I had to fix it. Thought I'd sneak in to the reception venue and supply the consignment of space lizards to the kitchen, and sneak out before anyone caught me. Dawn made me dress up, so I'd fit in with the catering staff. I took my lizard-encrusted dog to the kitchen.

"Except it wasn't the kitchen that Dawn had given me directions to. It was the main hall. And it was full - for a while I even thought that I must have known the groom, because we had an awful lot of friends in common. Old Admiral Circe, Trader Zog (`Where is my shipment, eh, Brro? Is late, eh? Hahahaburpleha!'), my sister and brother-in-law, a couple of former crew I hadn't heard from in years. Then I noticed a groom-shaped hole near the officiator, and it all hit me: Dawn's delaying tactics. The way Ship's `symptoms' were far worse than the dog's, for the same infection. The fact that Sal had kept the dress carefully out of view of the monitors. The plot to make me go out to pick up Dawn, and the plot to bring me back. The fact that there *were* no miners on our last layover. The fact that I hadn't gotten a wedding invitation, which I must admit had bothered me. It was all to keep me out of the way and in the dark while my own wedding was prepared!

"So, yeah, Pia, when it first hit me, I did try and run a lightyear, or maybe more. But ZX-78 had moved up behind me, and he said, `I apologise, Captain, but as best android, I have been authorised to use whatever means necessary to prevent your escape, as long as it causes no mark that will show in the photographs. I cannot allow you to leave. Also, Ship is a groomsAI and wedding craft, and is not authorised to leave without Captain and Mrs. Brro.' Now, I didn't need to ask who'd given the authorisation, and I didn't get where I am today without knowing when I'm beaten. Seeing my acquiescence, Z's head gave the little *\*klackklack\** he does when he's relieved and he said, `Thank you, Captain. In the event of my failure, the bridesmaids were authorised to use deadly force. Against both of us.'

"I'll tell you, when Sal came down that aisle, her wedding dress was a miracle of aesthetic engineering. The fractal veil shimmered, the train swayed with a hypnotic rhythm, the skirts flowed through N- dimensional subspaces, the bodice was like - er, well. Suffice it to say that that dress was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, excepting the woman inside of it.

"Gotta hand it to her, she'd had the whole thing planned down to the last detail. Only thing she hadn't counted on – the effect all them sentients would have on my poor cyberpet!"

"As I understand it", hazards Simon, "It's been policy for years to have a cyberdog on board"

Brro snorts. "I prefer the term 'artificial pain in the ass', myself." Simon looks askance, "I'm sorry, the cyber.. the 'artificial pain in the ass' on my last voyage malfunctioned. A number of deaths were involved."

"I'm \*shocked\*," says Brro. "Was it an older model?" "A Cyberdyne systems' 120-A/2.", Simon confirms.

Brro nods. "Well, that explains it. The A/2's always were a bit twitchy. That could never happen now with their behavioral inhibitors. Impossible for them to harm or, by omission of action, allow to be harmed a human being."

Simon grabs a tray of cornbreads from a passing waiter and throws it across the room. "They should stay away from me!", he yells. He calms somewhat and attains his usual detached manner. "It'd be a wonder that the new versions can do anything at all."

"I would wager", says Simon tossing a Fluvian Joystick on the table by way of credit. "That your cyberpet, in a fit of psychotic fury attacked your bride and mauled her so badly that the only way to save her life was to immediately transfer her brain to the nearest life support system. Which, unfortunately for your cyberpet, was it."

"You know," says Brro reflectively, "I really feel I should be rejecting this wager. Lucky for you Ship collects Fluvian Joysticks, and that ones a rare 3509 commemorative of the Wing Commander Revolution."

"I find your apparent problem perplexing." stirring to life, as such, states the ambassador. "Surely, if you did not actually wish to marry the young person, perhaps you could have merely stated such and been on your way. I find the irrationality created in both genders by this marriage thing problematic. "However," and one gets the strangest impression as if the giant purple egg is holding up a single finger to make a point "some of your previous comments imply that irrational violence was in fact being offered. I would further wager that, frankly, you completely caved in this circumstance and the phrase 'yes, dear' was soon to become a major part of your vocabulary. Saved only by the dog, whose brain, overloading badly caused a telepathic surge among those guests possessing latent teep abilities, linking everyone in the hall, and the caterers, into a single gestalt intelligence, at least for a short while."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ambassador. I'm not saying I didn't want to marry the girl - I sure as hell did. Maybe I'd have gone about it in a more circumspect way, traditional-like, but Sal's a girl who knows what she wants, and she knows how to get it. I was taken by surprise, and maybe I'd have liked a bit more time to think about it, but it wasn't the threat of irrational violence that made me agree to it.

"Though if you'd met the bridesmaids, you'd understand that it wasn't a minor consideration, either."

## Flowers for Algernon (and Sal!)

"'course, when Sal said she was missing a trip because she settling down with a miner she knew, I didn't know she meant Trixie, her head bridesmaid, and I didn't know she was talking about helping

her with a long-standing problem involving some restive semi-sentient doonas. So I jumped to all the wrong conclusions. Played right into her hands - she'd already planted the nanofleas on Ship, so that she could get me out of the way and send me to fetch her mother, all at the same time.

"The ceremony went well to start with - the bridesmaids hefted their girl-portable plasma accelerators and glared meaningfully at the guests when the officiator asked if there were any objections - and we were just at 'Do you, Sally Capability Salman, take you, Algernon Earnest Brro' when my dog's head went - wherever the hell it went.

"Still not sure what happened, exactly - that gestalt thingummy doesn't happen every time a Teep gets overloaded. But maybe, and I'm just speculating here, maybe the sterile nanofleas had gotten into just the right neural connections and had already been forming some sort of telepathic hive-mind of their own. Possibly the space lizard fluids helped, too. So when the psychic feedback surge came, all that happened was that the hive got bigger, so that the thought energy would have some sort of structure to go into rather than frying *\*everybody's\** brain.

"Anyway, since the dog was next to me at the time, and I was next to Sal, we kind of got caught up in it first. Thing is, while she saw the whole wedding thing as an elaborate practical joke, which she set up on account of how I'd taken so damn long to propose, I was still at the stage of being somewhat put out at how easily I'd been played for a fool - and I don't like being played for a fool. I wasn't mad about getting hitched, but I sure was mad about the way we were doing it. I'd been planning to talk to her about it later, of course - but that could have turned out nasty, people being people, women being women and Sal being Sal. Thing with sharing someone's mind is, you're not always sure who's thinking what, so you treat pretty much every thought as your own. Makes for a mighty fine way of seeing the other party's point of view, and seeing the other party's point of view is half of any sort of conflict resolution. I think... I know she understood where I was coming from, just as I knew it was my own damn stupidity in not asking for the last eight standard years that had made her do it in the first place. There was something else, too, that I'll get to in a little bit.

"Suddenly, though, we had to deal with the thoughts of Z and Trixie. Now, sharing a brain with your beloved is one thing, but sharing one with her best friend is just downright weird. And you mix in a high- end calculator, and it gets unsettling fast. There were a lot of thoughts going in a lot of directions, and I'm not going to tell you what they were in any detail. Luckily, when Dixie, the second bridesmaid, came into the mix, she knew exactly what to do.

"'Sing!' she said. 'Sing, the first song that comes to mind!' Her thought came through loud and clear: She's a sergeant in the Alganian Peace Force, and telepathic interference drills are part of the training.

"Now, I won't say what the first song that came to my mind was, but luckily my other groomsthing Zog didn't know that one. Sal came up with an old Terran tune from the late 23rd century, called 'The Ballad of Benny and Gbiulgdsaiou', the wedding song from the touching and, thankfully, well-known opera about forbidden love against a backdrop of first contact between our people and Zog's people. Things. Whatever. Dixie told me later that the trick is to make sure you're all thinking the same thing - doesn't matter what it is, as long as you're all doing it. Dancing helps, because you've got to concentrate on coordination, too. As soon as Belle, the third bridesmaid and stunt pilot was, uh, connected, Dixie told her to take over the choreography so she could blast the dog. Sal insisted on finishing the number, though, for the look of the thing, which meant Dawn ended up singing the part of the Evil Matriarch, which everyone found amusing.

"Soon as she could, though, Dixie opened up with her plasma cannon, and pretty soon Trixie and



Belle fired theirs off as well. Well, cyberpets can take a bit of punishment, but I pity anyone who gets between these girls and their best friend's wedding. Firing such heavy weapons in an enclosed space isn't always a good idea - they're only supposed to be ceremonial, after all - and I don't think Dawn got back her cleaning deposit. There wasn't much left of the hall, or my suit, or the officiator. The Admiral was more than happy to do the honours, though, saying I'd been military once, and that was good enough for him!

"There was one other thing. While we were linked, there was another, little, consciousness. I reckon I was the only one that noticed it, but then, maybe I had special reason to. There was another reason Sal wanted to get married so fast, and so suddenly, after so long together. Why she thought the ceremony was so important, and why she didn't tell me before... well, as the Ambassador pointed out, humans are irrational, me and her included, and she thought it might have changed things. Wouldn't have, but she wasn't to know that.

"Now I don't know what being in a brainlink with so many sentients so young did to her, but she sure turned out to be one bright kid. And, while I can tell you that the dog sure as a scorchmark died, I'm damn sure its mind didn't. I reckon it's just as loyal as it ever was, but got a whole lot better at looking after us. Just a guess, mind, and I can't say for sure, but I think it's been looking after me and my gals ever since.

"Speaking of which, I have to be back at the \_Wit\_ in half an hour - looks like we've finished just in time!"

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