

A WASTE OF SPACE

BY SIMON COOKE



“Warning!” said the ship’s computer. “Impact in –”

Bang! Something slammed into the ship. Mia and Tane were thrown across the flight deck.

Mia climbed back into her seat and pulled the ship back under control. “Computer! Damage report!”

“Ship undamaged,” said the computer. “Hold on, here we go again!”

Crash! The ship shook as it took another hit.

“Are we under attack?” asked Tane.

“Yes,” said the computer. “But you won’t believe what’s attacking us. You’ll think my microchips are fried.”

Mia sighed. “Computer, just tell us, please.”

“We’re being attacked by washing machines,” it replied.

Mia saw something fly past on the viewing screen.
“Not just washing machines. I just saw a bicycle!”

Tane scratched his head. “You don’t usually find bicycles and washing machines in space,” he said.

“Maybe there’s a vacuum cleaner out there,” said the computer hopefully. “Tane could use it to clean his room.”

“It doesn’t need cleaning,” grinned Tane. “I can still see *some* of the floor.”

Mia checked the screen again. “Everything’s being pulled towards that large object in Sector 4. It could be an asteroid.”

“I’ve looked through my database,” said the computer. “There is no asteroid in Sector 4.”

“Well, it sure looks like one,” said Tane.

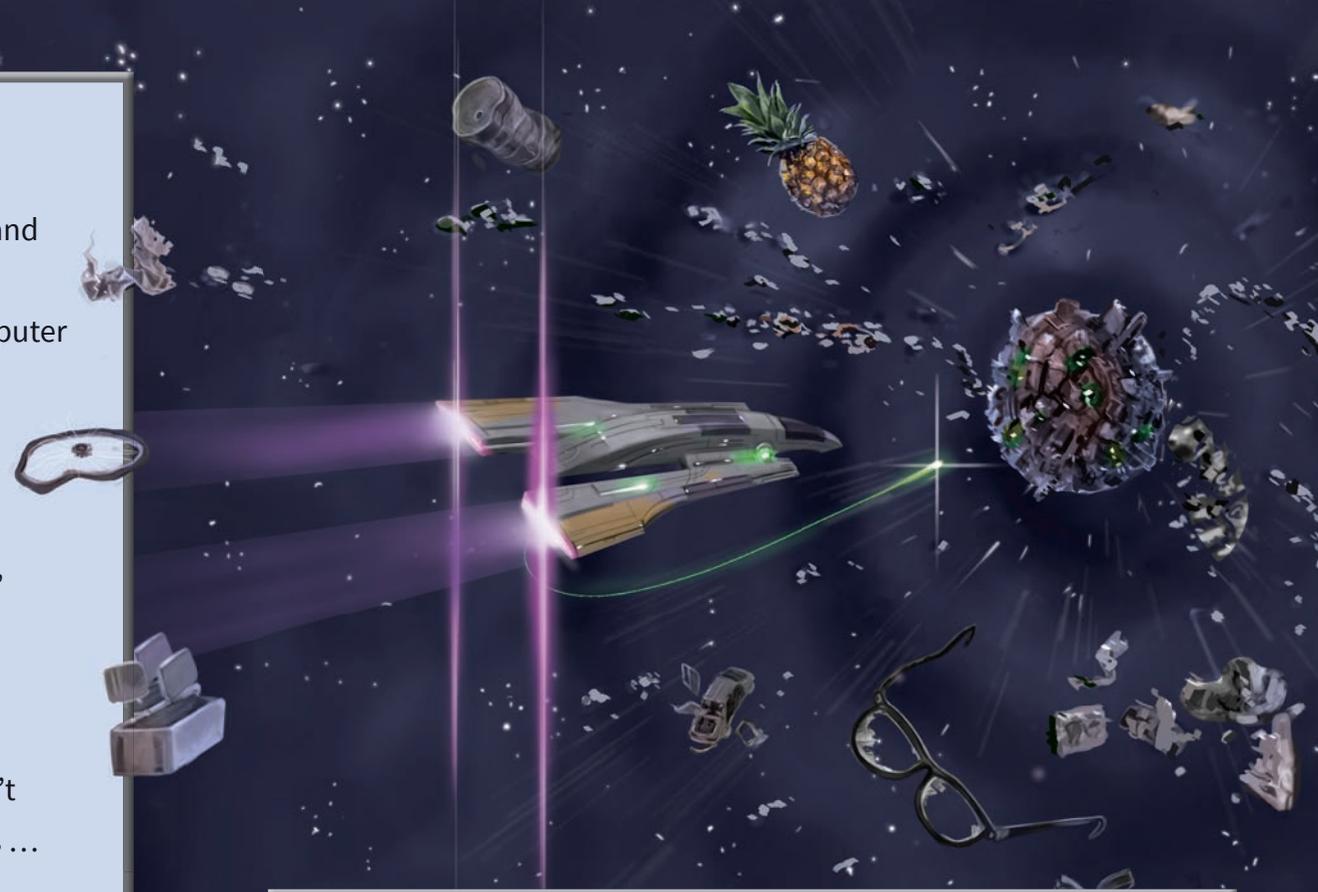
More things flew past the ship. Mia shook her head. “I don’t understand. Bits of old engines, broken plastic buckets, tyres ... there’s even a rotten pineapple. Where’s it all coming from?”

“Come on, computer,” said Tane. “You say you have information on just about everything in the universe. What’s going on?”

The ship’s computer buzzed for a moment. “The planets in this star system have no more room for rubbish. The creatures that live here put their rubbish in garbage chutes that empty out into space. Some rubbish burns up in the atmosphere. The rest just drifts away.”

“The rubbish isn’t drifting, though,” said Mia. “It’s being pulled towards Sector 4. But why?”

Lights began flashing on Mia’s screen. “I’m picking up a life form on the asteroid. Maybe some creature is in trouble.”



“A crashed ship?” asked Tane.

“Could be,” said Mia. “All this rubbish is dangerous.” She pressed a button, and a small silver object shot out of their ship. It had a flashing light. “That will warn other ships of the danger.”

Mia steered the ship carefully through the junk and towards the asteroid.

“I can’t see any crashed spaceships,” said Tane.

The computer buzzed. “According to my scanner, the asteroid is made of rubbish. The life form is at the centre.”

Tane suddenly froze. “If I said a giant hand made from rubbish was reaching towards us, would you believe me?”

“Yes,” gasped Mia. “Because I can see it, too. I think the rubbish heap is alive!”

She pulled back on the controls. “Computer – engines to full reverse! Tane, clear me a path through that trash!”

Tane used the ship’s lasers to blast the space junk out of their way. Mia glanced at the asteroid again. It had grown several more arms. In its centre, a great jaw opened to show jagged rubbish teeth.

“Look out,” she said. “It’s coming after us!”

“Do you have a plan?” asked Tane.

“Always,” grinned Mia. “Hang on tight!”

Mia spun the ship around and sped towards a nearby planet.

“It’s Zargos Minor, a giant storm planet. It has really strong gravity.”

“Interesting fact, Mia,” said Tane. “But how’s that going to help?”

“You’ll see,” said Mia.

The rubbish monster tried to grab the spaceship with one of its hands. The ship rocked and shuddered.

Mia flew closer and closer to Zargos Minor. The rubbish monster followed. The planet filled the view screen. It was covered with boiling clouds of red and orange gas. Mia kept the ship aimed straight at it.

“Mia, we need to pull up,” said Tane. “The planet’s gravity is too strong. We’ll never be able to get away!”

“Just a bit closer,” she said. She held grimly to the controls. The ship rattled and shook.

“I compute doom,” whined the computer.

At the last moment, Mia turned the ship to one side. They skimmed across the top of the gas clouds. “Turn on the booster rockets. It’s time for planetary exit!”



The ship flew out of the pull of the planet's gravity and into the calm of space. Behind them, bits of rubbish were breaking off the monster and being dragged towards the planet.

"Brilliant plan, Mia!" said Tane. "Zargos Minor's gravity is pulling the monster to bits. It's still chasing us, but it's half the size." More rubbish broke off. "Now it's a quarter the size!"

Soon the rubbish monster was no more than a glowing green blob. It too had managed to break away from the planet's gravity and was now floating in space.

"That's your life form," grinned Tane. "It's tiny when it's not hiding behind rubbish."



"We can't just leave it here," said Mia. "It'll start attracting space rubbish again." She turned on the ship's suction pipe, and the blob was sucked into a glass container. Mia examined the creature. She could see right through it.

"It's like a hermit crab," said Tane. "But instead of old shells, it uses space junk to make a home."

"We'll take it to the alien sanctuary on Vegos 3," said Mia. "It'll be safe there until we can find it a new home. Or –"

The ship's computer buzzed. "I compute that Mia is having one of her brilliant ideas."

Mia laughed. "Not really. I was just wondering if this creature could help us solve the problem of space junk."

"What do you mean?" asked Tane, watching the blob try to find a way out of the container. An empty cup suddenly flew through the air and stuck to it. A lolly wrapper followed. Soon the flight deck was spotless, and the container was hidden under rubbish.

"What if this creature could be trained to collect space waste? Maybe it could learn to sort and recycle," said Mia.

"You're full of great ideas!" said Tane. He grabbed the container. "Back in a minute."

"Where are you taking it?" asked Mia.

Tane grinned. "We'll clean up the universe later. Right now, I think I'll clean my room!"

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by Simon Cooke

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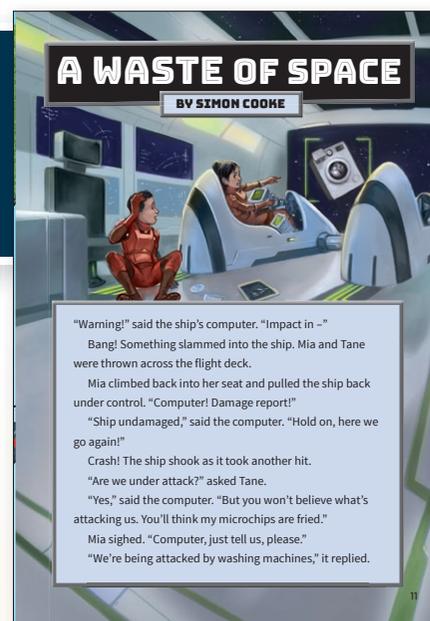
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