

Contest

WINNER

"500 words or less"

Ashes

by Jennifer R. Povey

The Outer Stars. Far from the center of the galaxy. Far, too, from the depths of the core, where the gravity bent light and few worlds allowed the soft tread of men.

It was here that the Lady Sophia plied her trade. She was no kind of a lady, that ship, a battered old freighter named, no doubt, after the forgotten wife or sweetheart of some previous owner. Or perhaps of the current one, for such things were often whispered of Captain Pia Leonus.

Not that she looked like that kind of woman by the stereotypes of that kind of woman. She was little, lithe, and adorned with bouncing blonde curls. In fact, she looked more like an exotic dancer than a freighter pilot. Perhaps she had been one, once, in her checkered and unspoken past. Her first mate was no better, a man from a bright sun colony, dark as they came and never speaking. His scars spoke of his past and darkness - a veteran, no doubt, of the Core Wars.

It was Pia who walked into the bar, leaving the silent man to guard the ship. It always seemed that that was

the division of labor. A moment later, the whispers came through the crowd, barely to be believed. She found it. She found it.

And, incredulously, she found it?

"I found it." She leaned against the bar. "And I know it won't make me rich, it won't make any of us rich. It's a memory, that's all."

"It never existed," the barkeep opined.

"I've held its dust in my hands. Dust and ashes and the sun dying. It won't be there much longer. We need to go."

The murmurs now, that it, the great secret, had been found only to be lost. And the Lady Sophia gone in the morning light, lifting from the pad without clearance or credence.

No money in it, but the word still whispered, from that bar, spreading out, the word and the coordinates. And from a thousand worlds they came, from a million, all varieties of humanity. The machine people, the descendants and creations of uploaded minds. The fliers of Aviar. The centaurs that roamed the great plains of Blide.

As pilgrims they came to, for one last time, walk a vanished world before it was ash and fire and torn apart by the swelling of the sun. Knowing it was real, knowing they were all human.

Knowing they were all children of Earth.

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