

TERRY BISSON

THE PLAYER

The belt is a quiet place. The sun is so far away you can't hear its singing. The roar of a million million stars devouring themselves doesn't make sound. The silence was broken by a beep.beep.beep.

Carol Ben Carol heard the beeps. She sought them with her seeker, found them with her finder. What she found was about the size of a car. She pulled it into the coldlock with a net.

CB Carol was named for her mother and father before her, as they were named for theirs. She was of a naming kind that had survived the hundred generation "here I am" that every naming kind undergoes, and one in a thousand survives, and settles down to enjoy the one galactic turning life span of every species, sentient or not.

Smaller than I would have thought, she said, not in English, but in a tongue that still held flourishes of that ancient, soaring, creaking, reeking mix. A language, like a Douglas fir, lasts about 500 years.

Carol talked to herself a lot. She was a good listener. She had been cruising the Belt for almost a year, looking for heavy metals. What she found was a silver sphere about the size of a car. She pulled it into the coldlock with a net.

Not a ship, said CB Carol. That much was clear. No propulsives, no attractives, no environmentals. In her young heart of hearts she thought it might be that ancient dream of dreams come true: the smoke of another fire. For it was a made thing and she was of that making kind.

She cut short her trip and took it home. For she was of that homing, that gathering kind, that had gathered the branches of the planets together in a cradle to rock their babies to sleep. She took it all the way back to their ancestral watery, windswept little Ert or Earth or Heart or Hearth or Home.

The Q Group invited her to join (for she had pulled it into the coldlock with a net). Others in the Q group included: TRan de Markus, Bitter Sweet, Orson Fart, and Grohn Elizabeth, plus two sets of twins for symmetry. They were all of that prodding, that poking, that questioning kind.

The Q group went into a huddle as the oak leaves fell around them, in long lovely shallow drifts. Good listeners, they listened to the beep. beep.beep.

Each beep was made of smaller beeps, and those of smaller still. Mathematical. Bitter Sweet did the math. "Find me," it said.

Already did that, Carol Ben Carol said.

They found a little panel about the size of a door. Inside, there was a smaller sphere spinning in a beam of stationary light. Singing beep.beep.beep.

TRan de Markus did the music. "Fix me," it sang, and so they did, for they were of that fixing kind. A slight wobble, a simple test of hand and eye. The stars straightened up on their silvery strings. The beeps folded into a hum, long and flat and thin.

Then stopped.

The silence was eloquent. "Send me on," it whispered. The Q Group nodded, a little forlorn. Their work done.

Carol Ben Carol took it back out to the Belt. Orson Farr went with her. The planets whirled by in their giddy whirlpool stream.

Carol Ben Carol thought about those who had found it and fixed it before, and those before them, and before them. It was so old. She wondered who would find it and fix it after she sent it on. What if nobody found it? She was afraid to let it go.

It has to be found and fixed every million million years or so, or it will slow down, she said. Develop a wobble. Stop playing true. Then stop playing altogether. She was afraid to let it go.

Let's keep it here, said Orson Fart. We might live a million million years. But probably not.

Probably not, said Carol Ben Carol, who had pulled it into the coldlock with a net. She wiped it off and made it shine like a mirror. Peering into it she saw a million spinning wheels of streaming carbon sparks that someday might, that someday would, weave another wandering, finding, fixing kind.

And what's it playing? asked Orson Farr.

Carol pointed it toward the stars. The universe, she said, and gave it a spin, and sent it on its way.