

Fiction

# Deeper Than the Darkness

By Harlan Ellison



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### *A Folk Song of the Future*

They came to Alf Gunnderson in the Pawnee County jail.

He was sitting, hugging his bony knees, against the plasteel wall of the cell. On the plasteel floor lay an ancient, three-string mandolin he had borrowed from the deputy, he had been plunking with some talent all that hot, summer day. Under his thin buttocks the empty trough of his mattressless bunk curved beneath his weight. He was an extremely tall man, even hunched up that way.

He was more than tired-looking, more than weary. His was an inside weariness ... he was a gaunt, empty-looking man. His hair fell lanky and drab and gray-brown in shocks over a low forehead. His

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eyes seemed to be peas, withdrawn from their pods and placed in a starkly white face. It was difficult to tell whether he could see from them.

Their blankness only accented the total cipher he seemed. There was no inch of expression or recognition on his face, in the line of his body.

More, he was a thin man. He seemed to be a man who had given up the Search long ago. His face did not change its hollow stare at the plasteel-barred door opposite, even as it swung back to admit the two nonentities.

The two men entered, their stride as alike as the unobtrusive gray mesh suits they wore; as alike as the faces that would fade from memory moments after they had turned. The turnkey—a grizzled country deputy with a minus 8 rating—stared after the men with open wonder on his bearded face.

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One of the gray-suited men turned, pinning the wondering stare to the deputy's face. His voice was calm and unrippled. "Close the door and go back to your desk." The words were cold and paced. They brooked no opposition. It was obvious: they were Mindees.

The roar of a late afternoon inverspace ship split the waiting moment, outside, then the turnkey slammed the door, palming it loktite. He walked back out of the cell block, hands deep in his coverall pockets. His head was lowered as though he were trying to solve a complex problem. It, too, was obvious: he was trying to block his thoughts off from those goddamned Mindees.

When he was gone, the telepaths circled Gunnderson slowly. Their faces softly altered, subtly, and personality flowed in with quickness. They shot each other confused glances.

*Him?* the first man thought, nodding slightly at the still, knee-hugging prisoner.

*That's what the report said, Ralph.* The other man removed his forehead-concealing snapbrim and sat down on the edge of the bunk-trough. He touched Gunnderson's leg with tentative fingers. *He's not thinking, for God's sake!* the thought flashed. *I can't get a thing.*

Incredulousness sparkled in the thought.

*He must be blocked off by trauma-barrier,* came the reply from the telepath named Ralph.

"Is your name Alf Gunnderson?" the first Mindee inquired softly, a hand on Gunnderson's shoulder.

The expression never changed. The head swiveled slowly and the dead eyes came to bear on the dark-suited telepath. "I'm Gunnderson," he replied briefly. His tones indicated no enthusiasm, no curiosity.

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The first man looked up at his partner, doubt wrinkling his eyes, pursing his lips. He shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, *Who knows?*

He turned back to Gunnderson.

Immobile, as before. Hewn from rock, silent as the pit.

"What are you in here for, Gunnderson?" He spoke as though he were unused to words. The halting speech of the telepath.

The dead stare swung back to the pasteel bars. "I set the woods on fire," he said shortly.

The Mindee's face darkened at the prisoner's words. That was what the report had said. The report that had come in from one of the remote corners of the country.

The American Continent was a modern thing, all plasteel and printed circuits, all relays and fast movement, but there had been areas of backwoods country that had never taken to civilizing. They still maintained roads and jails, and fishing holes and forests. Out of

one of these had come three reports, spaced an hour apart, with startling ramifications—if true. They had been snapped through the primary message banks in Capitol City in Buenos Aires, reeled through the computalyzers, and handed to the Bureau for check-in. While the inverspace ships plied between worlds, while Earth fought its transgalatic wars, in a rural section of the American Continent, a strange thing was happening.

A mile and a half of raging forest fire, and Alf Gunnderson the one responsible. So they had sent two Bureau Mindees.

"How did it start, Alf?"

The dead eyes closed momentarily, in pain, opened, and he answered, "I was trying to get the pot to heat up. Trying to set the kindling under it to burning. I fired myself too hard." A flash of self-pity and unbearable hurt came into his face, disappeared just as quickly. Empty once more, he added, "I always do."

The first man exhaled sharply, got up and put on his hat. The personality flowed out of his face. He was a carbon copy of the other telepath once more.

"This is the one," he said.

"Come on, Alf," the Mindee named Ralph said. "Let's go."

The authority of his voice no more served to move Gunnderson than their initial appearance had. He sat as he was. The two men looked at one another.

*What's the matter with him?* the second one flashed.

*If you had what he's got—you'd be a bit buggy yourself,* the first one replied. They were no longer individuals; they were Bureau men, studiously, exactly, precisely alike in every detail.

They hoisted the prisoner under his arms, lifted him off the bunk, unresisting. The turnkey came at a call, and still marveling at these men who had come in—shown Bureau cards, sworn him to deadly

silence, and were now taking the tramp firebug with them—opened the cell door.

As they passed before him, the telepath named Ralph turned suddenly sharp and piercing eyes on the old guard. "This is government business, mister," he warned. "One word of this, and you'll be a prisoner in your own jail. Clear?"

The turnkey bobbed his head quickly.

"And stop thinking, mister." The Mindee added nastily, "We don't like to be referred to as slimy peekers!" The turnkey turned a shade paler and watched silently as they disappeared down the hall, out of the Pawnee County jailhouse. He waited, blanking fiercely, till he heard the whine of the Bureau solocab rising into the afternoon sky.

Now what the devil did they want with a crazy firebug hobo like that? He thought viciously, *Goddam Mindees!*

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After they had flown him cross-continent to Buenos Aires, deep in the heart of the blasted Argentine desert, they sent him in for testing.

The testing was exhaustive. Even though he did not really cooperate, there were things he could not keep them from learning; things that showed up because they were there:

Such as his ability to start fires with his mind.

Such as the fact that he could not control the blazes.

Such as the fact that he had been bumming for fifteen years in an effort to find seclusion.

Such as the fact that he had become a tortured and unhappy man because of his strange mind-power.

\* \* \* \*

"Alf," said the bodiless voice from the rear of the darkened auditorium, "light that cigarette on the table. Put it in your mouth and make it light, Alf. Without a match."

Alf Gundersen stood in the circle of light. He shifted from leg to leg on the blazing stage, and eyed the cylinder of white paper on the table.

It was starting again. The harrying, the testing, the staring with strangeness. He was different—even from the other accredited psioid types—and they would try to put him away. It had happened before, it was happening now. There was no real peace for him.

"I don't smoke," he said, which was not true. But this was brother kin to the uncountable police line-ups he had gone through, all the way across the American Continent, across Earth, and from A Centauri IX back here. It annoyed him, and it terrified him, for he knew he was trapped.

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Except this time there were no hard rocky-faced cops out there in the darkness beyond his sight. This time there were hard, rocky-faced Bureau men, and SpaceCom officials.

Even Terrence, head of SpaceCom, was sitting in one of those pneumoseats, watching him steadily.

Daring him to be what he was!

He lifted the cylinder hesitantly, almost put it back.

"Smoke it, Alf!" snapped a different voice, deeper in tone, from the ebony before him.

He put the cigarette between his lips. They waited.

He seemed to want to say something, perhaps to object. Alf Gundersen's heavy brows drew down. His blank eyes became—if it were possible—ever blanker. A sharp, denting V appeared between the brows.

The cigarette flamed into life.

A tongue of fire leaped up from the tip. In an instant it had consumed tobacco, paper, filter and de-nicotizer in one roar. The fire slammed against Gunnderson's lips, searing them, lapping at his nose, his face.

He screamed, fell on his face and beat at the flames with his hands.

Suddenly the stage was clogged with running men in the blue and charcoal suits of the SpaceCom. Gunnderson lay writhing on the floor, a wisp of charry smoke rising from his face. One of the SpaceCom officials broke the cap on an extinguisher vial and the spray washed over the body of the fallen man.

"Get the Mallaport! Get the goddammed Mallaport, willya!" A young Ensign with brush-cut blond hair, first to reach the stage, as though he had been waiting crouched below, cradled Gunnderson's head in his muscular arms, brushing with horror at the flakes of

charred skin. He had the watery blue eyes of the spacemen, the man who has seen terrible things; yet his eyes were more frightened now than any man's eyes had a right to be.

In a few minutes the angular, spade-pawed, Malleable-Transporter was smoothing the skin on Gunnderson's face, realigning the atoms—shearing away the burned flesh, coating it with vibrant, healthy pink skin.

Another few moments and the psioid was finished; the burns had been erased; Gunnderson was new and whole, save for the patches of healthier-seeming skin that dotted his face.

All through it he had been murmuring. As the Mallaport finished his mental work, stood up with a sigh, the word filtered through to the young SpaceCom Ensign. He stared at Gunnderson a moment, then raised his watery blue eyes to the other officials standing about.

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He stared at them with a mixture of fear and bewilderment.

Gunnderson had been saying: "Let me die, please let me die, I want to die, won't you let me die, please!"

\* \* \* \*

The ship was heading toward Omalo, sun of the Delgart system. It had been translated into inverspace by a Driver named Carina Correia. She had warped the ship through, and gone back to her deep-sleep, till she was needed at Omalo snap-out.

Now the ship whirled through the crazy quilt of inverspace, cutting through to the star-system of Earth's adversary.

Gunnderson sat in the cabin with the brush-cut blond Ensign. All through the trip, since blast-off and snap-out, the pyrotic had been kept in his stateroom. This was the newest of the Earth

SpaceComships, yet he had seen none of it. Just this tiny stateroom, in the constant company of the usually stoical Ensign.

The SpaceCom man's watery blue eyes swept between the pallid man and the teleport-proof safe set in the cabin's bulkhead.

"Any idea why they're sending us so deep into Delgart territory?" the Ensign fished. "It's pretty tight lines up this far. Must be something big. Any idea?"

Gunnderson's eyes came up from their focus on his boot-tops, and stared at the spaceman. He idly flipped the harmonica he had requested before blast-off, which he had used to pass away the long hours inverspace. "No idea. How long have you been at war with the Delgarts?"

"Don't you even know who your planet's at war with?"

"I've been rural for many years. But aren't they *always* at war with someone?"

The Ensign looked startled. "Not unless it's to protect the peace of the galaxies. Earth is a *peace*-loving..."

Gunnderson cut him off. "Yes, I know. But how long have you been at war with the Delgarts? I thought they were our allies under some Treaty Pact or other?"

The spaceman's face contorted in a picture of conditioned hatred. "We've been after the bastards since they jumped one of our mining planets outside their cluster." He twisted his lips in open loathing. "We'll clean the bastards out soon enough! Teach *them* to jump peaceful Earthmen."

Gunnderson wished he could shut out the words. He had heard the same story all the way from A Centauri IX and back. Someone had always jumped someone else ... someone was always at war with someone else ... there were always bastards to be cleaned out ... never any peace ... never any peace...

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The inership whipped past the myriad odd-colors of inerspace, hurtling through that not-space toward the alien cluster. Gundersen sat in the teleport-proof stateroom, triple-coded loktite, and waited. He had no idea what they wanted of him, why they had tested him, why they had sent him through the pre-flight checkups, why he was in not-space. But he knew one thing: whatever it was, there was to be no peace for *him* ... ever.

He silently cursed the strange mental power he had. The power to make the molecules of *anything* speed up tremendously, making them grind against one another, causing combustion. A strange, channeled teleport faculty that was useless for anything but the creation of fire. He damned it soulfully, wishing he had been born deaf, mute, blind, incapable of having to ward off the world.

From the first moment of his life when he had realized his strange power, he had been haunted. No control, no identification, no

communication. Cut off. Tagged as an oddie. Not even the pleasures of being an acknowledged psioid, like the Mindees, or the invaluable Drivers, or the Blasters, or the Mallaports who could move the atoms of flesh to their design. He was an oddie. A strange-breed, and worse: he was a non-directive psioid. Tagged deadly and uncontrollable. He could set the fires, but he could not control them. The molecules were too tiny, too quickly imitative for him to stop the activity once it was started. It had to stop of its own volition ... and occasionally it was too long in stopping.

Once he had thought himself normal, once he had thought of leading an ordinary life—of perhaps becoming a musician. But that idea had died aflaming, as all other normal ideas that had followed it.

First the ostracism, then the hunting, then the arrests and the prison terms, one after another. Now something new—something he

could not understand. What did they want with him? It was obviously in connection with the mighty battle being fought between Earth and the Delgarts, but of what use could his unreliable powers be?

Why was he in this most marvelous of the new SpaceCom ships, heading toward the central sun of the enemy cluster? And why should he help Earth in any case?

At that moment the locks popped, the safe broke open, and the clanging of the alarms was heard to the bowels of the invership.

The Ensign stopped him as he started to rise, started toward the safe. The Ensign thumbed a button on his wrist-console.

"Hold it, Mr. Gunnderson. I wasn't told what was in there, but I was told to keep you away from it until the other two got here."

Gunnderson slumped back hopelessly on the acceleration-bunk. He dropped the harmonica to the metal floor and lowered his head into his hands. "What other two?"

"I don't know, sir. I wasn't told."

\* \* \* \*

The other two were psioids, naturally.

When the Mindee and the Blaster arrived, they motioned the Ensign to remove the contents of the safe. He walked over nervously, took out the tiny recorder and the single speak-tip.

"Play it, Ensign," the Mindee directed.

The spaceman thumbed the speak-tip into the hole, and the grating of the blank space at the beginning of the tip filled the room.

"You can leave now, Ensign," the Mindee said.

After the SpaceCom officer had securely latched the door, the voice began. Gundersen recognized it immediately as that of Terrence, head of SpaceCom. The man who had questioned him tirelessly at the Bureau building in Buenos Aires. Terrence, hero of another war, the Earth-Kyben war, now head of SpaceCom. The words were brittle, almost without inflection and to the point, yet they carried a sense of utmost importance:

"Gundersen," it began, "we have, as you already know, a job for you. By this time the ship will have reached central-point of your trip through inverspace.

"You will arrive in two days Earthtime at a slip-out point approximately five hundred million miles from Omalo, the enemy sun. You will be far behind enemy lines, but we are certain you will be able to accomplish your mission safely, that is why you have

been given this new ship. It can withstand anything the enemy can throw.

"But we want you to get back for other reasons. You are the most important man in our war effort, Gunnderson, and it's tied up with your mission.

"We want you to turn the sun Omalo into a supernova."

\* \* \* \*

Gunnderson, for the first time in thirty-eight years of bleak, gray life, was staggered. The very concept made his stomach churn. Turn another people's sun into a flaming, gaseous bomb of incalculable power, spreading death into space, burning off the very layers of its being, charring into nothing the planets of the system? Annihilate in one move an entire culture?

Was it possible they thought him mad?

What did they think he was capable of?

Could he direct his mind to such a task?

Could he do it?

*Should he do it?*

His mind boggled at the possibility. He had never really considered himself as having many ideals. He had set fires in warehouses to get the owners their liability insurance; he had flamed other hobos who had tried to rob him; he had used the unpredictable power of his mind for many things, but this...

This was the murder of a solar system!

He wasn't in any way sure he *could* turn a sun supernova. What was there to lead them to think he might be able to do it? Burning a forest and burning a giant red sun were two things fantastically far apart. It was something out of a nightmare. But even if he *could*...

"In case you find the task unpleasant, Mr. Gunnderson," the ice-chip voice of the SpaceCom head continued, "we have included in this ship's complement, a Mindee and a Blaster.

"Their sole job is to watch and protect you, Mr. Gunnderson. To make certain you are kept in the proper, er, *patriotic* state of mind. They have been instructed to read you from this moment on, and should you not be willing to carry out your assignment ... well, I'm certain you are familiar with a Blaster's capabilities."

Gunnderson stared at the blank-faced telepath sitting across from him on the other bunk. The man was obviously listening to every thought in Gunnderson's head. A strange, nervous expression was on the Mindee's face. His glaze turned to the Blaster who accompanied him, then back to Gunnderson.

The pyrotic swiveled a glance at the Blaster, then swiveled away as quickly.

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Blasters were men meant to do one job, one job only, and a certain type of man he became, he *had* to be, to be successful doing that job. They all looked the same, and Gundersen found the look almost terrifying. He had not thought he could *be* terrified, any more.

"That is your assignment, Gundersen, and if you have any hesitation, remember they are not human. They are extraterrestrials as unlike you as you are unlike a slug. And remember there's a war on ... you will be saving the lives of many Earthmen by performing this task.

"This is your chance to become respected, Gundersen."

"A hero, respected, and for the first time," he paused, as though not wishing to say what was next, "for the first time—worthy of your world."

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The rasp-rasp-rasp of the silent record filled the stateroom. Gunnderson said nothing. He could hear the phrase whirling, whirling in his head: *There's a war on*, *There's a war on*, *There's a war on*, THERE'S A WAR ON! He stood up and slowly walked to the door.

"Sorry, Mr. Gunnderson," the Mindee said emphatically, "we can't allow you to leave this room."

He sat down and lifted the battered mouth organ from where it had fallen. He fingered it for a while, then put it to his lips. He blew, but made no sound.

And he didn't leave.

\* \* \* \*

They thought he was asleep. The Mindee—a cadaverously thin man with hair grayed at the temples and slicked back in strips on

top, with a gasping speech and a nervous movement of hand to ear—spoke to the Blaster.

"He doesn't seem to be thinking, John!"

The Blaster's smooth, hard features moved vaguely, in the nearest thing to an expression, and a quirking frown split his ink-line mouth.

"Can he do it?"

The Mindee rose, ran a hand quickly through the straight, slicked hair.

"Can he do it? No, he shouldn't be *able* to do it, but he's doing it! I can't figure it out ... it's eerie, uncanny. Either I've lost it, or he's got something new."

"Trauma-barrier?"

"That's what they told me before I left, that he seemed to be blocked off. But they thought it was only temporary, once he was away from the Bureau buildings he would clear up.

"But he *isn't* cleared up."

The Blaster looked concerned. "Maybe it's you."

"I didn't get a Master's rating for nothing, John, and I tell you there isn't a trauma-barrier I can't at least get *something* through. If only a snatch of gabble. But there's nothing ... nothing!"

"Maybe it's you," the Blaster repeated, still concerned.

"Damn it! It's *not* me! I can read you, can't I—your right foot hurts from new boots, you wish you could have the bunk to lie down on, you ... oh hell, I can read you—and I can read the Captain up front, and I can read the pitmen in the hold, but I *can't* read *him*!

"It's like hitting a sheet of glass in his head. There should be a reflection or some penetration, but it seems to be opaqued. I didn't want to say anything when he was awake, of course."

"Do you think I should twit him a little—wake him up and warn him we're on to his game?"

The Mindee raised a hand to stop the very thought of the Blaster. "Great Gods, no!" He gestured wildly. "This Gunnderson's invaluable. If they found out we'd done anything unauthorized to him, we'd both be Tanked."

Gunnderson lay on his acceleration-bunk, feigning sleep, listening to them. It was a new discovery to him, what they were saying. He had always suspected the pyrotic faculty of his mind. It was just too unstable to be a true-bred trait. There had to be side-effects, other differences from the norm. He knew *he* could not read minds; was this now another factor? Impenetrability by Mindees? He wondered.

Perhaps the Blaster was powerless, too.

It would never clear away his problem—that was something he could do only in his own mind—but it might make his position and final decision safer.

There was only one way to find out. He knew the Blaster could not actually harm him severely, by SpaceCom's orders, but he wouldn't hesitate blasting off one of the pyrotic's arms—cauterizing it as it disappeared—to warn him, if the situation seemed desperate enough.

The Blaster had seemed to Gunnderson a singularly overzealous man, in any case. It was a terrible risk, but he had to know.

There was only one way to find out, and he took it ... finding a startling new vitality in himself ... for the first time in over thirty years...

He snapped his legs off the bunk, and lunged across the stateroom, shouldering aside the Mindee, and straight-arming the Blaster in the mouth. The Blaster, surprised by the rapid and completely unexpected movement, had a reflex thought, and one entire bulkhead was washed by bolts of power. They crackled, and

the plasteel buckled. His direction had been upset, had been poor, but Gunnderson knew the instant he regained his mental balance, the power would be directed at him.

The bulkhead oxidized, and popped as it was broken, revealing the outer insulating hull of the invership; rivets snapped out of their holes and clattered to the floor.

Gunnderson was at the stateroom door, palming the loktite open—having watched the manner used by the Blaster when he had left on several occasions—and putting one foot into the companionway.

Then the Blaster struck. His fury rose, and he lost his sense of duty. This man had struck him; he was a psioid ... an accepted psioid, not an oddie! His eyes deepened their black immeasurably, and his face strained. His cheekbones rose in a stricture of a grin, and the *force* materialized.

All around Gunnderson

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He could feel the heat.

He could see his clothes sparking and disappearing.

He could feel his hair charring at the tips.

He could feel the strain of psi power in the air.

But there was no effect on him.

He was safe.

Safe from the power of the Blasters.

Then he knew he didn't have to run.

He turned back to the cabin.

The two psioids were staring at him in open terror.

\* \* \* \*

It was always night inerspace.

The ship constantly ploughed through a swamp of black, with metal inside, and metal outside, and the cold, unchanging devil-dark

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beyond the metal. Men hated inverspace—they sometimes *took* the years-long journey through normal space, to avoid the chilling life of inverspace. For one moment the total black would surround the ship, and the next they would be sifting through a field of changing, flickering crazy-quilt colors. Then ebony again, then light, then dots, then shafts, then the dark once more. It was ever-changing, like a madman's dream. But not interestingly changing, so one would wish to watch, as one might watch a kaleidoscope. This was strange, and unnatural, something beyond the powers of the mind, or the abilities of the eye to comprehend. Ports were allowed only in the officer's country, and those had solid lead shields that would slam down and dog close at the slap of a button. Nothing could be done, for men were men, and space was his eternal enemy. But no man willingly stared back at the deep of inverspace.

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In the officer's country, Alf Gunnderson reached with his sight and his mind into the coal soot that now lay beyond the ship. Since he had proved his invulnerability over the Blaster, he had been given the run of the ship. Where could he go? Nowhere that he could not be found. Guards watched the egress ports at all times, so he was still, in effect, a prisoner on the inership. He had managed to secure time alone, however, and so with the Captain and his officers locked out of the country, he stood alone, watching.

He stared from the giant quartz window, all shields open, all the darkness flowing in. The cabin was dark, but not half so dark as that darkness that was everywhere.

That darkness deeper than the darkness.

What was he? Was he man or was he machine ... to be told he must turn a sun nova? What of the people on that sun's planets? What of the women and the children ... alien or not? What of the

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people who hated war, and the people who served because they had been told to serve, and the people who wanted to be left alone? What of the men who went into the fields, while their fellow troops dutifully sharpened their war knives, and cried? Cried because they were afraid, and they were tired, and they wanted home without death. What of those men?

Was this war one of salvation or liberation or duty as they parroted the phrases of patriotism? Or was this still another of the unending wars for domination, larger holdings, richer worlds? Was this another dupe of the Universe, where men were sent to their deaths so one type of government, no better than another, could rule? He didn't know. He wasn't sure. He was afraid. He had a power beyond all powers in his hands, and he suddenly found himself not a tramp and a waste, but a man who could demolish a solar system at his own will.

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Not even sure he *could* do it, he considered the possibility, and it terrified him, making his legs turn to ice water, his blood to steam. He was suddenly quite lost, and immersed into a deeper darkness than he had ever known. With no way out.

He spoke to himself, letting his words sound foolish to himself, but sounding them just the same, knowing he had avoided sounding them for much too long:

"Can I do it?

"Should I? I've waited so long, so long, to find a place, and now they tell me I've found a place. Is this my final place? Is this what I've lived and searched for? I can be a valuable war weapon. I can be the man the men turn to when they want a job done. But what sort of job?

"Can I do it? Is it more important to me to find peace—even a peace such as this—and to destroy, than to go on with the unrest?"

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Alf Gunnderson stared at the night, at the faint tinges of color beginning to form at the edges of his vision, and his mind washed itself in the water of thought. He had discovered much about himself in the past few days. He had discovered many talents, many ideals he had never suspected in himself

He had discovered he had character, and that he was not a hopeless, oddie hulk, doomed to die wasted. He found he had a future.

If he could make the proper decision.

But what *was* the proper decision?

\* \* \* \*

"Omalo! Omalo snap-out!"

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The cry roared through the companionways, bounced down the halls and against the metal hull of the invership, sprayed from the speakers, and deafened the men asleep beside their squawk-boxes.

The ship ploughed through a maze of colors whose hues were unknown, skiiiiittered scud-wise, and popped out, shuddering. There it was. The sun of Delgart. Omalo. Big. And golden. With planets set about like boulders on the edge of the sea. The sea that was space, and from which this ship had come. With death in its hold, and death in its tubes, and death, nothing but death.

The Blaster and the Mindee escorted Alf Gunnderson to the bridge. They stood back and let him walk to the huge quartz portal. The portal before which the pyrotic had stood so long, so many hours, gazing so deep into inverspace. They left him there, and stood back, because they knew he was safe from them. No matter how hard they held his arms, no matter how fiercely they shouted at him, he

was safe. He was something new. Not just a pyrotic, not just a mind-blocked, not just a Blaster-safe, he was something totally new.

Not a composite, for there had been many of those, with imperfect powers of several psi types. But something new, and something incomprehensible. Psioid + with a + that might mean anything.

Gunnderson moved forward slowly, his deep shadow squirming out before him, sliding up the console, across the portal shelf, and across the quartz itself. Himself superimposed across the immensity of space.

The man who was Gunnderson stared into the night that lay without, and at the sun that burned steadily and high in that night. A greater fire raged within him than on that molten surface.

His was a power he could not even begin to estimate, and if he let it be used in this way, this once, it could be turned to this purpose over and over and over again.

Was there any salvation for him?

"You're supposed to flame that sun, Gunnderson," the slick-haired Mindee said, trying to assume an authoritative tone, a tone of command, but failing miserably. He knew he was powerless before this man. They could shoot him, of course, but what would that accomplish?

"What are you going to do, Gunnderson? What do you have in mind?" the Blaster chimed in. "SpaceCom wants Omalo fired ... are you going to do it, or do we have to report you as a traitor?"

"You know what they'll do to you back on Earth, Gunnderson. You know, don't you?"

Alf Gunnderson let the light of Omalo wash his sunken face with red haze. His eyes seemed to deepen in intensity. His hands on the console ledge stiffened and the knuckles turned white. He had seen

the possibilities, and he had decided. They would never understand that he had chosen the harder. He turned slowly.

"Where is the lifescoot located?"

They stared at him, and he repeated his question. They refused to answer, and he shouldered past them, stepped into the droptube to take him below decks. The Mindee spun on him, his face raging.

"You're a coward and a traitor, fireboy! You're a lousy no-psi freak and we'll get you! You can take the lifeboat, but someday we'll find you! No matter where you go out there, we're going to find you!"

He spat then, and the Blaster strained and strained and strained, but the power of his mind had no effect on Gunnderson.

The pyrotic let the dropshaft lower him, and he found the lifescoot some time later. He took nothing with him but the battered harmonica, and the red flush of Omalo on his face.

When they felt the *pop!* of the lifescoot being snapped into space, and they saw the dark gray dot of it moving rapidly away, flicking quickly off into inverspace, the Blaster and the Mindee slumped into relaxers, stared at each other.

"We'll have to finish the war without him."

The Blaster nodded. "He could have won it for us in one minute. He's gone."

"Do you think he could have done it?"

The Blaster shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I just don't know. Perhaps."

"He's gone," the Mindee repeated bitterly. "*He's* gone? Coward! Traitor! Some day ... some day..."

"Where can he go?"

"He's a wanderer at heart. Space is deep, he can go anywhere."

"Did you mean that, about finding him some day?"

The Mindee nodded rapidly. "When they find out, back on Earth, what he did today, they'll start hunting him through all of space. He'll never have another moment's peace. They *have* to find him ... he's the perfect weapon. But he can't run forever. They'll find him."

"A strange man."

"A man with a power he can't hide, John. A man who will sooner or later give himself away. He *can't* hide himself cleverly enough to stay hidden forever."

"Odd that he would turn himself into a fugitive. He could have had peace of mind for the rest of his life. Instead, he's got this..."

The Mindee stared at the closed portal shields. His tones were bitter and frustrated. "We'll find him some day."

The ship shuddered, reversed drives, and slipped back into inverspace.

Deeper Than the Darkness  
*by Harlan Ellison*

\* \* \* \*

Much sky winked back at him.

He sat on the bluff, wind tousling his gray hair, flapping softly at the dirty shirt-tail hanging from his pants top.

The Minstrel sat on the bluff watching the land fall slopingly away under him, down to the shining hide of the sprawling dragon, lying in the cup of the hills. The dragon slept—awake—across once lush grass and productive ground.

City.

On this far world, far from a red sun that shone high and steady, the Minstrel sat and pondered the many kinds of peace. And the kind that is not peace, can *never* be peace.

Deeper Than the Darkness  
*by Harlan Ellison*

His eyes turned once more to the sage and eternal advice of the blackness above. No one saw him wink back at the silent stars. Deeper than the darkness.

With a sigh he slung the battered theremin over his frayed shoulders. It was a portable machine, with both rods bent, and its power-pack patched and soldered. His body almost at once assumed the half-slouch, round-shouldered walk of the wanderer. He ambled down the hill toward the rocket field.

They called it the rocket field, out here on the Edge, but they didn't use rockets any longer. Now they rode to space on a whistling tube that glimmered and sparkled behind itself like a small animal chuckling over a private joke. The joke was that the little animal knew the riders were never coming back.

It whistled and sparkled till it flicked off into some crazy-quilt not-space, and was gone forever.

Deeper Than the Darkness  
*by Harlan Ellison*

Tarmac clicked under the heels of his boots. Bright, shining boots, kept meticulously clean by polishing over polishing till they reflected back the corona of the field kliegs and, ever more faintly, the gleam of the night. The Minstrel kept them cleaned and polished, a clashing note matched against his generally unkempt appearance.

He was tall, towering over almost everyone he had ever met in his homeless wanderings. His body was a lean and supple thing, like a high-tension wire; the merest suggestion of contained power and quickness. The man moved with an easy gait, accentuating his long legs and gangling arms, making his well-proportioned head seem a bubble precariously balanced on a neck too long and thin to support it.

He kept time to the click of the polished boots with a soft half-hum, half-whistle. The song was a dead song, long forgotten.

He, too, was a half-dead, half-forgotten thing.

Deeper Than the Darkness  
*by Harlan Ellison*

He came from beyond the mountains. No one knew where. No one cared where. *He* had almost forgotten.

But they listened when he came. They listened almost reverently, having heard the stories about him, with a desperation born of men who know they are severed from their home worlds, who know they will go out and out and seldom come back. He sang of space, and he sang of land, and he sang of the nothing that is left for Man—all Men, no matter how many arms they have, or what their skin is colored—when he has expended the last little bit of Eternity to which he is entitled.

His voice had the sadness of death in it. The sadness of death before life has finished its work. But it had the joy of metal under quick fingers, the strength of turned nickel-steel, and the whip of heart and soul working through loneliness. They listened when his

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song came with the night wind; probing, crying, lonely through the darkness of a thousand worlds and in a thousand winds.

The pitmen stopped their work as he came, silent but for the hum of his song and the beat of his boots on the blacktop. They watched as he came across the field.

There was no doubt who it was. He had been wandering the star-paths for many years now. He had appeared, and that was all; he was. They knew him as certainly as they knew themselves. They turned and he was like a pillar, set dark against the light and shadow of the field. He paced slowly, and they stopped the hoses feeding the radioactive food to the little animals, and stopped the torches they boiled on the metal skins; and they listened.

The Minstrel knew they were listening, and he unslung his instrument, settling the narrow box with its tone-rods around his neck by its thong. As his fingers cajoled and pleaded and extracted

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the song of a soul, cast into the pit of the void, left to die, crying in torment not so much at death, but at the terror of being alone when the last calling came.

And the workmen cried.

They felt no shame as the tears coursed through the dirt on their faces and over the sweat-shine left from toil. They stood, silent and all-feeling, as he came toward them.

Then with many small crescendos, and before they even knew it was ended, and for seconds after the wail had fled back across the field into the mountains, they listened to the last notes of his lament.

Hands wiped clumsily across faces, leaving more dirt than before, and backs turned slowly as men resumed work. It seemed they could not face him, the nearer he came; as though he was too deep-

seeing, too perceptive for them to be at ease close by. It was a mixture of respect and awe.

The Minstrel stood, waiting.

\* \* \* \*

“Hey! You!”

The Minstrel stood waiting. The pad of soft-soled feet behind him. A spaceman; tanned, supple, almost as tall as the ballad-singer—reminding the ballad-singer of another spaceman, a blond-haired boy he had known long ago—came up beside the silent figure. The Minstrel had not moved.

“Whut c'n ah do for ya, Minstrel?” asked the spaceman, tones of the South of a long faraway Continent rich in his voice.

“What do they call this world?” the Minstrel asked. The voice was quiet, like a needle being drawn through velvet. He spoke in a

hushed monotone, yet his voice was clear and bore traces of an uncountable number of accents.

"The natives call it Audi, and the charts call it Rexa Majoris XXIX, Minstrel. Why?"

"It's time to move on."

The Southerner grinned hugely, lines of amusement crinkling out around his watery brown eyes. "Need a lift?"

The Minstrel nodded, smiling back enigmatically.

The spaceman's face softened, the lines of squinting into the reaches of an eternal night broke and he extended his hand: "Mah name's Quantry; top dog on the *Spirit of Lucy Marlowe*. If y'doan mind workin' yer keep owff bah singin' fer the payssengers, we'd be pleased to hayve ya awn boward."

The tall man smiled, a quick radiance across the darkness the shadows made of his face, "That isn't work."

"Then done!" exclaimed the spaceman. "C'mon, ah'll fix ya a bunk in steerage."

They walked between the wiper gangs and the pitmen. They threaded their way between the glare of fluorotorches and the sputtering blast of robot welding instruments. The man named Quantry indicated the opening in the smooth side of the ship and the Minstrel clambered inside.

Quantry fixed the berth just behind the reactor feeder-bins, sealing off the compartment with an electrical blanket draped over a loading track bar. The Minstrel lay on his bunk—a repair bench—with a pillow under his head. He lay thinking.

The moments fled silently and his mind, deep in thought, hardly realized the ports were being dogged home, the radioactive additives were being sluiced through their tubes to the reactors, the blast tubes were being extruded. His mind did not leave its thoughts as

the atomic motors warmed, turning the pit to green glass beneath the ship's bulk. Motors that would carry the ship to a height where the Driver would be wakened from his sleep—or *her* sleep, as was more often the case with that particular breed of psioid—to snap the ship through into inverspace.

As the ship came unstuck from solid ground, hurled itself outward on an unquenchable tail of fire, the Minstrel lay back, letting the reassuring hand of acceleration press him into deeper reverie. Thoughts spun, of the past, of the further past, and of all the pasts he had known.

Then the reactors cut off, the ship shuddered, and he knew they were in inverspace. The Minstrel sat up, his eyes far away. His thoughts deep inside the cloud-cover of a world billions of light years away, hundreds of years lost to him. A world he would never see again.

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There was a time for running, and a time for resting, and even in the running, there could be resting. He smiled to himself so faintly it was not a smile.

Down in the reactor rooms, they heard his song. They heard the build to it, matching, sustaining, whining in tune with the inverspace drive. They grinned at each other with a sweet sadness their faces were never expected to wear.

"It's gonna be a good trip," said one to another.

In the officer's country, Quantry looked up at the tight-slammed shields blocking off the patchwork insanity of not-space, and *he* smiled. It *was* going to be a good trip.

In the saloons, the passengers listened to the odd strains of lonely music coming up from below, and even *they* were forced to admit, though they had no way of explaining how they knew, that this was indeed going to be a good trip.

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*by Harlan Ellison*

And in steerage, his fingers wandering across the keyboard of the battered theremin, no one noticed that the man they called "The Minstrel" had lit his cigarette without a match.

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