

SKELETON MAN SAVES THE EARTH

Alfred Kinning



Foreward

As I am writing this, a skeleton kneels over a man on the banks of Lake Michigan. I've only just left the strange scene and returned to my home. The skeleton, though bony, is alive. The man, though fleshy, is no more. This silent vigil in the sand is the final note of the Song of the Spheres. The spirits of the stars have tasked me with writing the Song which leads to that mourning on the beach, and I am troubled. I am tasked with singing the Song which spans three Earths and uncountable aeons of time, much of which was experienced out of order by its characters, and I wonder. Where do I begin when taking on such a tremendous task? My sense of reason tells me that I ought to begin by adapting that great Adscraftrean epic: the tragedy of Steirla of Earth 0. A moment later, I feel angry, and I feel that I should begin with the arrival of the Golden Man upon Earth 1, and the catastrophic course which he sent that world tumbling down. I grow calm and consider, for expedience's sake, that perhaps I should start with that topic nearest to my own experiences: the decline and fall of my old friend John Drake, right here upon Earth 2.

No. That eerie vigil on the beach haunts me now as I close my eyes to think, and I know now where to begin. This first verse of the Song of the Spheres I now dedicate to that kneeler in the sand. To the people of Earth 1, he was known as Skeleton Man. I shall open the Song with the story of how he saved that world.

- Alfred Kinning

Chapter 1

Ted Drake knew that the skeleton was eyeing him from across the diner. He took a sip of his coffee, not noticing its hot, bitter waves caressing his throat in just the way he ordinarily would have enjoyed. The skeleton's gaze was a cold and black like its eye sockets, and it sat in its booth, staring at Ted. A voice from behind Ted gave him the excuse he needed to ignore the skeleton. It was the waiter, come to see if his coffee needed a refill.

"Ah, no thanks, buddy" said Ted, "But could you do something about that Halloween decoration over there? It's April, and the thing is kind of freaking me out."

The waiter turned around to look for the Halloween decorations his customer was complaining about. Finding none, his gaze landed on the skeleton. The waiter smiled and turned back to Ted.

"You're not from around here, are you, mister?"

"No," said Ted, "You could say I'm pretty far from home right now. What's that got to do with that plastic skeleton over there?"

"That's no plastic skeleton, mister. That's Skeleton Man."

The waiter turned around and shouted at the thing, "Hey Skeleton Man, quit freaking out my customer!"

The skeleton threw up its hands and turned its eye sockets to the newspaper sitting on its table.

"You all right, chief?" asked the waiter, "You look a little pale."

"Is that, uh, normal around here?" Ted replied, "Is that kind of thing common in Lake Town?"

"Eh, Skeleton Man is normal enough, aside from his being, you know, a skeleton. Far as I know he's the only one like him."

"The hell does he do in a diner? Does he eat?"

"The boss man lets him hang around here when the weather is bad. I've never seen him eat, but sometimes they give him a little cake to take home."

"Man," Ted shook his head, "That's bizarre."

"Welcome to Lake Town, the most bizarre town in Illinois. You sure you don't want more coffee?"

Ted declined the offer, and tried very hard to focus on his newspaper.

Skeleton Man was engrossed in an article about a Soviet spy who was discovered in Chicago when a woman's voice drew his attention away from the printed words.

“Hey, Skelly. Weather's clearing up, boss man says you gotta go now. I brought you a little carrot cake for the road.”

The waitress set a small plate with a slice of dull orange cake down on Skeleton Man's table. Skeleton Man nodded, took the cake off of the plate, and wrapped it in his newspaper. Then Skeleton Man stood up and silently took his cake out of the diner. The waitress didn't mind that Skeleton Man had left without saying a word. After all, skeletons don't have vocal chords.

The sun shone on the dome of Skeleton Man's skull. His bare calcaneus bones clacked against the wet pavement as he stepped out into the Lake Town morning. A few locals waved at Skeleton Man as he made his way through the streets, and he, being a polite skeleton, waved back. At last, Skeleton Man came to the narrow alley that constituted his home. His scant possessions – for the needs of a skeleton are few – were neatly tucked away into the corner of a large cardboard box. Of these, Skeleton man pulled out a thick wool blanket, spread it on the ground, and sat down. He unwrapped his cake and waited.

Finally, a dark, winged form descended from the rooftops and stared into Skeleton Man's eye sockets. One was followed by two, and two were followed by three, and soon Skeleton Man was playing host to no fewer than a dozen pigeons. With his bony fingers, the skeleton picked crumbs off of the carrot cake and tossed them to the birds. The pigeons happily pecked away at the asphalt in search of the sweet morsels, and Skeleton Man looked on with his unreadable, eyeless gaze.

It is said that, pound for pound, bone is stronger than concrete. And in the life of every man, even a skeleton man, there come many times when he must take it upon himself to prove his strength. Unbeknownst to Skeleton Man, just such a time was now brewing for him just beyond the entrance to his alley.

Clio Casten held Dr. Aspen's briefcase tightly to her chest as she swiftly stepped across the concrete sidewalk. The silly old doddard had left the silly old thing in his office when he'd left for the federal building. Precisely what was in it Clio didn't precisely know or care. Some papers or other regarding the good doctor's latest blueprints for his latest project, which was... oh, Clio just couldn't quite remember. All this nuclear physics stuff was just so hard to follow. Clio only knew that Dr. Aspen was frantic to get those papers, and that she intended to return to the power plant in time to punch out for lunch and make the fullest use of that hour and a half break that she possibly could. Thus, she hurried along, almost unaware of the old pickup truck that lurked just outside the alley.

The occupants of that truck, however, were not nearly so unaware of her. As she drew near, a pair of large men leapt from the doors and shouted something in... what was that, Russian? The one man was behind her now, holding her in place by her shoulders. The other was grappling with her for the briefcase in her arms. It was a short grappling match. The second man wrenched the case from Clio's arms as the first reached under her arms and lifted her into the air. Clio Casten surely would have disappeared into that truck had not a singular clacking noise approached in response to her cries for help.

The man carrying Clio felt something hard impact the back of his head and dropped the girl in his stupor. The man carrying the bag saw what had hit his companion. It was terrible, like something out of a story his bubbe might have told him as a boy to make him behave. The figure which had emerged from the alley was nothing less than a human skeleton, wielding its own left arm as a club! The lucid man seized his dazed partner by the arm and threw him into the truck, then leapt inside himself with the briefcase still in his grasp. The old pickup truck sputtered, squealed, and sped off into the town.

Clio checked her surroundings in amazement, wondering what could have so frightened two large scoundrels such as those. Then she heard the clacking. She turned around to see a thin white figure retreating into the alley, nursing his dislocated arm back into its socket. Why, it was that local skeleton fellow! It was Skeleton Man! Clio simply had to thank the dear old fellow. She ran after him into the alley and tugged upon his arm. The arm, not yet fully re-attached, came loose in Clio's grasp, and Skeleton man turned to see her holding it.

Clio laughed nervously, saying, "Ah, sorry about that. Would you like this back?"

Skeleton Man took his arm and resumed the work of re-inserting it into his shoulder. Clio cleared her throat.

"I wanted to thank you for chasing off those hooligans. Dr. Aspen will be hopping mad when he hears that they made off with his briefcase, but I'm just glad they didn't make off with me. Did you hear them shouting? I think they were pinkos, like that fellow that was caught in Chicago."

Skeleton Man could neither speak nor alter his facial expression in response, and Clio began to grow uneasy under his gaze.

"Well, I suppose I'll be seeing you around, Skeleton Man. I'll need to get to the federal building to tell Dr. Aspen what's happened right away. Thanks again!"

With that, Clio waved, about-faced, and made her way out of the alley. Skeleton Man clacked back to his blanket. While he had been away, the birds had attacked and made short work of his unsupervised carrot cake. Skeleton Man sat back down on the blanket and leaned back, staring into the grey sky overhead.

It was bound to rain again soon.

Dr. Aspen was waiting outside the federal building and staring intently down the street. When he saw Clio come round the corner, he all but ran in his haste to meet her.

"Clio, my girl, you've arrived at last! Why, but you've forgotten my briefcase!"

"Oh no, Dr. Aspen, I didn't forget it," Clio replied, "A pair of big guys came and mugged me for it."

"Mugged you! Did they hurt you? Are you all right?"

“Oh, they would have made off with me in that truck of theirs,” Clio shook her head, “If they hadn’t parked it right outside of Skeleton Man’s alley.”

“Good fellow, that Skeleton Man. So he saved you then?”

“Oh yes, Dr. Aspen. But the thugs managed to get away with the briefcase.”

Dr. Aspen groaned.

“You’re not mad at me are you, Doctor?”

“No, no, dear girl. I’m glad you’re safe,” the doctor shook his head, “But the bigwigs inside are going to be mad at me when they learn those papers have fallen into the hands of common crooks!”

Clio scratched her head. Her eyes seemed strangely interested in the sidewalk.

“Ah, Dr. Aspen, I don’t think those were common crooks.”

“Why, what do you mean?”

“They were shouting in Russian. I think they were pinkos.”

Dr. Aspen gazed into the sky and sighed.

“Oh dear. Just like Chicago, eh?”

“Looks like it, Doctor.”

“Didn’t think they’d figure out we’d come to Lake Town.”

Dr. Aspen rubbed his head.

“Well,” he said, “I’ll go let the government people know what’s happened.”

Those government bigwigs were mad, all right. They’d been damned anxious to get their hands on Dr. Aspen’s latest project, the Aspen Plant, and even more anxious to keep it out of the hands of the Soviets. The essential nature of the project was simple enough to grasp. A miniaturization of nuclear power. On the one hand, this could mean a small, easily-maintained plant that could be set up in a hurry to power a single building complex. On the other hand, it could mean a small, easily-maintained nuclear bomb that could be fit inside a single briefcase!

The usual round of intelligence agencies was contacted regarding the matter, only to fall upon the ears of one young buck who wouldn’t rest til he was given immediate permission to go into the field over it. That young man’s name was Special Agent Fred Aspen, CIA, the very son of Dr. John Aspen.

Fast as Fred raced to Lake Town though, his train was only just pulling into the station as the briefcase-thieves were attempting to clear up the loose ends they'd left behind.

The pair of Soviet agents had wanted nothing more than to clear out of Lake Town as quickly as humanly possible. They certainly hadn't wanted to go near that alley again, and certainly not the very night after they'd been there last. Alas, their report had caught the attention of someone high up – very high up, they were assured – and now the damned nomenklatura wanted to know more about this American skeleton-creature they'd written of. Or at least, they wanted the skinny bum from the alley done away with as a witness. The higher-ups also wanted the girl who'd been carrying the briefcase captured, also due to her role as a witness. Leon and Piotr had tossed a coin, and it was Leon who won the right to go after the girl. Piotr nursed the bump on the back of his head, and cursed his partner for foolishly including the account of the supposed skeleton in the final report. Piotr hadn't seen any skeleton-creatures; he'd only been hit in the back of the head. It was that damned silly Georgian with his backwater fantasies that was forcing poor Piotr to pull up to that damned alley again, to face down whatever American security agency had been stationed there, armed with nothing but his pistol and a sack.

Yes, in Piotr's modern, forward-thinking, Russian mind, the unknown assailant who'd gotten the drop on him had been nothing less than a lethal agent of the dreaded CIA. Who else could have successfully snuck up on Piotr? Who else could have dazed him so with a single blow? That damned silly Georgian Leon had duped himself into thinking a pale, skinny man was some sort of fairy tale monster, and now it was Piotr who would pay the price.

Imagine poor Piotr's surprise then, when after leaving his truck and creeping into the alley, he was greeted by the very skeleton-creature that Leon had described! Rational materialists, when presented with undeniable evidence of supernatural occurrences, tend to react with rather irrational behavior. Piotr was no exception. He drew his pistol and proceeded to wildly empty his magazine into the brick walls surrounding the alley. The skeleton stood, and took its left arm into its right hand.

When the intruder had been given a shiny, new lump on his head to match the older one, Skeleton Man half-dragged the gibbering, stumbling Soviet out of the alley. The truck the thug had come from was still running and unlocked, and this, Skeleton Man supposed, was as good as place as any to leave the dazed man.

Skeleton Man gazed into the starry sky for but a moment. Then, his skull level with purpose, he strode out into the Lake Town night.

For a sleepy little town like Lake Town, the night shift at the police station didn't need to consist of more than one sleepy little man. That man was Deputy Eric Sommers. Sommers was just returning to his desk with his fourth cup of coffee that night when the front door all but flew open. It was Skeleton Man.

“Skeleton Man? What could you want at this hour?”

Skeleton Man began gesticulating, it seemed to Sommers, a little wildly. Sommers sighed. Of course he realized that skeletons can't talk.

“Look, there was a mugging today, and the day shift left me with the paperwork, see? I'm a little busy at the moment.”

Sommers indicated the pile of papers on his desk. Skeleton Man pointed at the papers, and then at himself, and then out the door. Sommers frowned.

“Are you saying you did the mugging?”

Skeleton Man shook his head. Then, forming a bony finger-gun, he mimed frantic pistol fire, and again pointed at himself. He finished off the act by repeating the finger-gun charade and pointing back at the papers, indicating the name of one Clio Casten.

Sommers didn't have time to formulate another guess before the telephone receiver on his desk blared to life as it relayed an emergency call. A woman's voice, hushed and frightened, crackled over the speaker.

“Police! Police! There's a prowler in my home! My name is Clio Casten, and I live at 2351 Costigan Boulevard. Please, come quickly!”

Sommers pressed the button on the receiver and spoke into it, saying, “A prowler! Why, I'll be over right away, Miss Casten!”

Sommers looked up with the intention of dismissing Skeleton Man from the station, but the skeleton had already gone.

Skeleton Man's rapid footfalls clattered like timber upon the street as he raced toward Costigan Boulevard. Untiring though he was – for a skeleton has no need of rest – it seemed as though he just couldn't run fast enough for his purposes. It was some minutes before he strode up to the house indicated by Clio's 911 call. By that time, Sommers' police car was already parked in front, lights flashing. Sommers himself was in the yard, speaking with Clio and some young man to whom the girl was clinging nervously. A large man grumbled in something that sounded like Russian from the back of Sommers' car.

“I'm Special Agent Fred Aspen, CIA,” the young man was saying to Sommers, “This lady and my father have been involved in an incident of interest to my agency, and I'll be taking them both into protective custody right away.”

That was all that Skeleton Man needed to hear. He made a motion like a man wiping a nervous sweat from his brow, despite the fact that he himself had neither sweat nor a brow, and made his way back to his alley. The truck was still parked there, though its occupant had apparently fled in a hurry. Skeleton Man, however, was convinced that the intruder wouldn't be in a hurry to return.

Skeleton Man's assumption was technically correct. Piotr wouldn't return to Lake Town for quite some time. The rain, however, was only just beginning.

Chapter 2

Fred had asked the big-shots at Langley for some kind of security detail with which to escort his father and Clio Casten. The big-shots had told him no. Therefore, Fred had commandeered the first train to Washington and ordered everyone off except for the absolutely necessary crew members. Fred wasn't entirely sure if he had the authority to do that, but folks sure didn't argue with that badge of his, and he sure wasn't taking any chances with his own father.

Silence reigned over the train car. Fred's hand kept brushing the service pistol on his hip as he cast furtive glances at the sliding scenery beyond the train windows. Dr. Aspen kept his mouth shut, his brow furrowed, and his nose buried in a newspaper he'd already read half a dozen times. Clio appeared, for all the world, to be making herself very small, her slender hands fidgeting upon her lap. It was she, however, who would first break the silence.

"Gosh, Fred. It sure is nice to see you again."

"I'm glad to see you too, Clio," was Fred's short reply. Though he meant what he said, he wasn't really focusing on the girl. Always and ever his morbid gaze returned to the outside world.

Dr. Aspen looked up from his paper, "See anything interesting out there, Fred?"

"No."

"Well sit down then, will you? Can't you see you're making the poor, dear girl nervous?"

"Oh no, Dr. Aspen," Clio threw up her hands, "I wouldn't want to distract Fred from his work!"

Fred sighed, "No, he's right. It's just that I'm a bit nervous myself. The Agency wouldn't normally send just one young agent for an incident involving the KGB. I'm sure it'll be simple enough, though, getting the two of you to Langley. The irregularity of it all has just got me so jumpy."

Fred slumped down into the seat opposite Clio's. Dr. Aspen shot the girl a covert wink over his newspaper before returning to it, and Clio felt that she could just scream. That doddering old matchmaker! Fred sat with his arm on his knee and his chin on his fist. Though he was staring in Clio's direction, she could tell that he wasn't really seeing her. Silence fell once more over the train car.

Actually, the silence that fell over the train car was so absolute as to jar Dr. Aspen out of his newspaper. Even the clattering of the wheels on the tracks had ceased. The doctor looked out the window in time to see the treetops slide down and out of sight.

"Ah," he said, "Is it just me, or is this train going the wrong way?"

Fred leapt to his feet and stared out the window.

"Why! We're going up!"

“Oh,” exclaimed Clio, “It’s one of those alien abductions! Just like the one I read about in New Hampshire!”

“Now,” said Dr. Aspen, “I’m sure there’s a more rational explanation than-”

The doctor fell silent as the train car ascended into a dark vault, and the three passengers were compelled into a deep sleep.

When Fred came to, he was fastened to an upright table of sorts by five metal braces. One at each wrist, one at each ankle, and one at his waist. The room he was held in was dimly lit by an orange glow with no apparent source, and in that glow Fred could make out Clio on a table next to him, and his father on a table across from Clio. On the table across from Fred, a human skeleton was fixed in place in a like manner to himself. The sight made Fred grimace. Did their captors mean to just let them hang here til they, too, were skeletons?

Clio groaned on the table next to Fred. The young agent wished that he could protect his old childhood friend from the sight of that skeleton, and braced himself to comfort her. Imagine his surprise, then, when instead of a cry of fright, she uttered a cry of delight!

“Skeleton Man! Those spacemen got you too, huh?”

“Skeleton Man?” asked Fred.

When the supposedly-dead thing hanging across from Fred nodded its smooth, white skull, it was Fred, not Clio, who would utter a cry of terror.

“Why, Fred,” exclaimed Clio, “What ever is the matter with you?”

“There’s a skeleton in the room, and you’re having a conversation with it about spacemen!”

“Now, Skeleton Man’s a good fellow,” chided Clio, “He’s one of the Lake Town locals. He’s the one who chased off those briefcase-snatchers the other day.”

“And neither one of you saw fit to write to me that you’d gone and made friends with the living dead?”

Skeleton Man’s ribcage heaved, as though he were sighing without lungs. A low chuckle came from Dr. Aspen’s table.

“Dad,” came Fred’s appeal, “You’re a man of science! How can you just accept this?”

“As a man of science, I accept a fact when I meet one,” declared the old doctor, “Even when it flies in the face of the laws of science. Besides, my specialty is splitting atoms, not walking bones.”

“Oh, Fred, you beast!” scolded Clio, “Now you’ve gone and exasperated him. I can’t believe you, to talk like that about the man who saved my life when he’s hanging right there in front of your face! Why don’t you apologize for the way you’re carrying on?”

Fred regarded the dark eye sockets of Skeleton Man in silence for a moment, but before he could think of something to say, Clio squealed again.

“Why, Skeleton Man! Those shackles don’t look nearly so tight on your old bones as they do on the rest of us. Why don’t you try doing that thing where you take off your arm again, so we can get out of here before the spacemen come back?”

Skeleton Man looked up, and if he’d had eyes then they surely would have widened at the suggestion. Skeleton Man wasted no time in violently shaking his shoulder until, at last, his left arm fell out of its socket. The ulna and the radius fell through the steel band as well as anyone could have hoped for, but stopped mournfully short of the floor when the wide joint of Skeleton Man’s elbow wedged itself into the band with an unfortunate thud. The fingers of the dislocated arm drummed the table to which Skeleton Man was strapped as, with another sigh-like heave of his ribs, he began to stare at Clio.

“Oh, well,” Clio began to sputter, “Sorry about that.”

Skeleton Man tried a few times to wiggle his forearm til something came loose, but gave it up in a hurry when four vaguely man-shaped figures threw open a pair of heavy iron doors at the end of the room and strode inside. The figures were dressed in thick suits of canvas which covered their whole bodies, hands, and faces, and the four of them went about their work silently. Ignoring the protests and questions of their captives, the captors pressed a hidden switch on each table. The bonds were released, but the prisoners had no chance to make a break for freedom. The strange figures, taking one captive each, produced electric rods rather like cattle prods, and proceeded to use these devices to goad the prisoners outside of the room, and from there to different parts of the strange and elaborate complex in which they now found themselves.

His nerve endings long since having crumbled to dust, Skeleton Man felt none of the stinging shocks of the electric rod, though he could tell – in a way that us folk with flesh can never truly understand – when and where along his spinal column the device was applied to direct him where to go. All the same, Skeleton Man knew that his companions weren’t so resistant against the stinging rods, and chose to comply with his captor for their sake.

His dislocated arm, however, now sitting unattended in the room from which he had been goaded, would be somewhat more rebellious.

Chapter 3

Dr. Aspen was thrust into a compartment furnished with a lonesome metal bench. As the old doctor stumbled inside, the heavy iron door was dogged down behind him, leaving him alone in the dim ruddy glow of the complex. For a complex Dr. John Aspen believed it was, feeling still doubtful of his assistant's spacemen hypothesis. He did not, as of yet, have in his possession a better explanation for the train car's silent, airborne theft, nor for the hypnotic sleep he'd been placed in, nor even for the sourceless, orange glow which permeated the room in which he was now prisoner. Yet Dr. Aspen knew that means for overcoming the vastness of the cosmos did not, could not, exist outside of pulp magazines. Traveling through two-dimensional space? What map could direct one to such a plane? The neutralization of inertia? Why not just neutralize reality while you're at it? Though John Aspen, man of science, could suspend in his mind the laws of science in favor of a fact, he would certainly not do so without the fact standing proven undeniably before him. And, until Dr. Aspen saw ether and stars through a window, or one of the suited captors removed his mask to reveal little green horns, the fact was far from proven.

Dr. Aspen rested his tired old bones on the bench. As he did so, the far wall of the room began to flicker, revealing that it was in fact some sort of large visi-plate. The flickering static began to pull itself together to form letters, and the letters arranged themselves in a greeting to Dr. Aspen.

"Good morning, Dr. Aspen," it read.

"I wonder if it is morning," mused the doctor, "It's somewhat hard to tell in here."

The letters on the plate re-arranged themselves in, against Dr. Aspen's expectation, an answer to his query.

"The current Central Standard Time 1:13 PM. However, you've only just woken up."

"Well, that's fair I suppose."

"Would you like to know why you are here?"

"If you're offering."

"You have been credited with the design of a great advancement in your world's nuclear science. The device you have named the Aspen Plant."

Dr. Aspen stroked his whiskers as he muttered, "Yes, I suppose that was my design."

"Your invention has prompted the Council of Zeta to action. The nuclear weapons of your world have already reached a terrifying destructive potential. Earth's nuclear science must not be allowed to develop any further, lest humanity develop a weapon capable of destroying the galaxy."

"Mhm," said the doctor as he scratched at his nose.

The letters faded to noise, and stayed that way for a minute, as though the visi-plate were hesitating.

“Dr. Aspen,” it read, “You seem to be taking this rather matter-of-factly.”

“Oh, on the contrary,” the doctor assured, “In fact, I’m taking it with a fair bit of skepticism. To be short, this scenario seems like something out of the science fiction serials I would watch with my son when he was a boy, and I do not believe a word of what you have told me.”

The letters on the visi-plate held still. Then, one at a time, they fell into a brief response.

“Then what do you believe?”

Dr. Aspen stroked at his silvered mustache as he considered his reply.

“I don’t know quite enough for a solid hypothesis,” Dr. Aspen began, “However, I do have a hunch. Firstly, I believe that this is a Soviet facility, and that you are a Soviet agent. I believe that you have developed some sort of advanced technology with which I am not familiar to engineer both my capture and this facility. Finally, I believe that you will, at some point, force me to build the Aspen Plant for you.”

“Believe or do not believe,” came the plate’s swift, brutal reply, “It makes no difference. Either way, you will live the rest of your life here aboard the starship Unyerg.”

With that, the plate went blank, and once again assumed the form of a plain, iron wall. Dr. Aspen was left alone in the dull, orange light.

In another part of the craft, Fred was thrust into a compartment of his own. In this space, the orange glow of the complex was replaced by one of dim violet, so dark as to seem nearly black. This darkness was soon penetrated by the white glow of the visi-plate wall on the far side of the room. The image of a man, from the shoulders up, flickered into existence on the plate. The face of the man was indistinct, but his image became a shining golden color.

He went on to give Fred a rather similar story to the one which the visi-plate in Dr. Aspen’s cell had given him. He represented the peoples of the Zeta Reticuli, the Aspen Plant was too dangerous for mankind, and so-on. But the conversation ended in a somewhat different manner.

“We of the Council only seek to hold the one you call your father,” droned the man on the plate in his strange accent, “You and the female we are prepared to release upon your Earth. Yourself and the female were captured by the unfortunate circumstance of your presence aboard the vehicle which we retrieved, and we of the Council hope that your spreading of this tale may serve to curtail the threat of Earthly nuclear science. As a warrior of your world, you may choose to remain a prisoner aboard the Unyerg with your father, and we are prepared to respect your choice in this matter. Be aware, however, that our craft is now above a region known to you as Siberia, and that the female will be deposited alone into this country without you should you choose to remain here.”

“Why, that’s a dirty trick!” exclaimed Fred, “To make a man choose between abandoning his own father or leaving a girl he cares for all alone in some frozen, communist waste!”

“You are undecided then,” replied the face, “We shall allot you twenty-four of your Earthly hours to make your choice.”

With that, the screen plate blinked black, and Fred was left alone in the dark.

A third compartment aboard the Unyerg was illuminated with bright, white lights in the overhead and contained Clio Casten. She, too, had been told of the dangers of nuclear science, and of the ultimatum which had been issued to Fred. The girl now knit her brow in thought, and glared at the canvas-suited figure who stood with her in the bright room. The question which now nagged at her mind was not the true nature of her captors, nor was it her own well-being.

“But if you’re going to hold onto Dr. Aspen, and you’re prepared to let Fred and me go,” Clio mused, “then what are you going to do with Skeleton Man?”

Chapter 6

The reader may ask, while reading this chapter, how it is, exactly, that Skeleton Man's arm could see its way through the passageways and compartments of the dread starship Unyerg. To this, I propose a question of my own. How is it that the empty sockets of Skeleton Man's very skull could see? For the eyes that once inhabited those sockets had long since resolved themselves to a dew.

To answer this problem, I propose a concept which my old friend John Drake once told me of. There is a little-understood sixth human sense by which a man may know precisely where the parts of his body are positioned in relation to one another. Authorities upon the subject of human sensation from Earths 1 and 2 – and very likely the ones from your Earth as well – have referred to this sense as the sense of proprioception. It is a wholly psychological sense, relying on no physical organ save only the brain. According to my friend, it is by this same faculty that one "senses" the presence of watching eyes or other such things in the absence of ordinary sensual knowledge. In most of us, this sixth sense is far too undeveloped to sense things beyond one's own body except in a very vague sense. John Drake both claimed and demonstrated, however, that the sense of proprioception may be more fully developed with the right sort of mental training, allowing one to more accurately sense one's surroundings using only his mind. Indeed, the notes of Fred Drake seem to depict men from Earth 0 who had developed proprioception to such a high degree that they could perceive the happenings of entire planets if they exerted the necessary mental force.

Though Skeleton Man was certainly not quite so adept as those mental giants of old Earth 0, it is my opinion that Skeleton Man knew his surroundings entirely by a highly developed sense of proprioception, a sense which was in him precise enough that it could interpret the very vibrations of the air as sounds and speech. Perhaps he inadvertently developed this faculty during his life, or perhaps he was forced to learn it after his sensory organs ceased to exist. But now I see that I've likely drawn your attention to the fact that Skeleton Man did not have a brain any more than he had eyes. The question you now ask me is how exactly could Skeleton Man possess psychological senses – or, for that matter, a psychology – without that thinking organ. To this I now give my humble answer. I don't precisely know.

What I do know is that, even as Skeleton Man's body was locked within a compartment totally devoid of either light or furnishings, his dislocated left arm was now creeping upon its fingers through the orange-lit passageways of the complex. It struck him, as his arm skittered along through the craft, that there were no crew members transiting through or working in those passageways. The singular emptiness of the facilities now weighed upon Skeleton Man's mind, building upon a mounting suspicion as to the true nature of his captor.