

SKELETON MAN SAVES THE EARTH

Alfred Kinning



Foreward

If I were begin writing this Song of the Spheres where, in my opinion, it can be said to effectively begin, then its first volume would certainly have concerned itself with the tragic romance of Alvund and Steirla on Earth 0. Were I to treat the Song merely as the saga of the House of Drake, then I suppose I would have begun slightly later than that, with the arrival of Fred Drake upon Earth 0. I could, of course, have begun the Song with the story in which I played my small part and of which I have already written for the readers of my native Earth 2, concerning the unhappy school days of my wayward childhood companion John Drake. To my surprise, however, the spirits of the stars have requested that this first verse of the Song of the Spheres be about an incident which, though interesting, seems of little importance to the whole. This is a story involving a man known to the denizens of Earth 1 as Skeleton Man, as related to me by Fred Drake upon his final return to Earth 2. Just who Skeleton Man was, how he became a skeleton-man, and the origins of the deadly feud between him and that self-styled Golden Man are not questions that I feel can or should be answered within this volume. Instead, I now present to you the story of how Skeleton Man saved Earth 1, a straightforward and simple tale of adventure and mystery. Whichever of the eighteen Earths you are now holding this volume upon, however many thousands of years after my death you are reading it, it is my sincerest wish that you enjoy the story.

- *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.