

THE THIRTEENTH SIGN OF THE ZODIAC

CHAPTER I

Robin Muscat was in a terrible mood. It was raining on Paris-sur-Terre like on the rain planets he had visited near the star Algol.

And on the other hand, his direct boss, Mr. Lepinson, director of the huge Interplan organization, the interplanetary police force, had just entrusted him with a file that he already knew, before even opening it, and was stupefyingly dull.

He had left the documents on his desk and filled a pipe with tobacco from the plains of Mars, staring emptily out at the giant city, occasionally pressing his sturdy forehead against the window, with his hair pulled back high, while all the boredom of the world drifted through his gray-blue eyes.

He sighed, "I gotta get started... What a drag! Some obscure story of trafficking, no doubt... These so-called mysteries on board spaceships, always the same thing..."

The file was threefold and Inspector Robin Muscat already knew, roughly, what it was about. Three tragedies had played out in recent weeks on the same interstellar line, namely the Sol-Perseus trip. Three different tragedies, in fact. A crime, first of all. A case of dementia next. Each of them had had a man as a victim. Finally, the third case, a few weeks earlier (in Earth time), when the spaceship *Spica* was about to land at Paris-sur-Terre: a disappearance, this one. That of a young woman.

For Robin Muscat, this kind of case was commonplace.

On the long space trips, trafficking of all kinds (human flesh, drugs, unknown weapons, gems with uncanny powers) was frequent and the settling of scores was manifold. He who had experienced so many incredible adventures across the galaxy never failed to grumble when, on his return from some distant adventure, Lepinson gave him one of these cases which he considered good for little terrestrial inspectors, the "crawlers" of Interplan, riveted to the ground of the home planet.

He took the three files, extracted the small strips and placed them in turn in the "dispensator." In front of him, on the white screen formed by the neutral wall, he saw animated or still images appear, in reliefcolor so perfect that the people and objects stood out in front of Muscat unbelievably real. They talked, they lived and, thus, he learned everything that his subordinates had gleaned either on board the *Spica* or in the immediate entourage of the three victims.

From the start, Robin Muscat was distracted. Lepinson had not hidden from him that in view of his extraordinary record of service, he was going to be promoted to commissioner—a position of huge importance which would give him control over the entire Interplan, a police force empowered to act on all civilized worlds. This pleased him, which was understandable, and the fact of having to go through a file considered tedious was hardly compatible with the carefree delight that would have been appropriate.

However, as the sequence went on and the various pictures clicked by, Robin Muscat began to take a keen interest, driven by his passionate professional self-awareness as a true policeman of the cosmos.

The crime, first. Yum Akatinor, a native of Perseus, was a strange character versed in the occult, particularly cosmomancy, which had long since replaced astrology due to the much wider scope of current clairvoyants. He had been found dead, but in a manner quite incomprehensible. Thunderstruck, one might have said. According to the autopsy, the man had been under tremendous stress, which had ended his life. All attempts at resuscitation were in vain.

Muscat reviewed certain elements of the file. He saw again the slightly greenish face, framed by a dark and smooth beard like those of the Assyrians of Ancient Earth. Then the report emphasized one detail. Muscat looked at the photographs from the medical examiner. A naked corpse. Zoom in on one part of the chest. A tattoo? It looked like it. A kind of sign, no doubt more or less esoteric, under the left breast.

Moving on. The *Spica* passenger who had gone mad was a Martian, one of the last representatives of alien life on the Red Planet, the majority of whom had already emigrated to Venus by the time of the first contacts with Earth, before the restoration of a world which had once had a rarefied atmosphere.

He was a highly esteemed financier throughout the Martervenux, respected not only on the six united planets of the Solar System, but also almost everywhere on other friendly worlds. Cladek Halstar led an orderly life. However, his wife, a pretty Earthwoman, had revealed that he was sometimes secretive, frequently leaving on long trips whose destination she did not know. But because of the billions in various currencies that he moved through space, she accepted this situation, saying only that she trusted in his fidelity.

Interplan had already determined that Cladek Halstar had had relationships with several individuals, including two other women, both of whom seemed a little unconventional and all of whom were involved in cosmomancy.

As for the third case, Giovanna Hi-Ling was a Chinese-Italian woman who had been missing for almost three months. Not much was known about her. Raised on Mars, she rarely returned to her home planet and was also deeply interested in the occult. Her real profession was unknown and, as she no longer had a family, it had been difficult to learn more about her.

Muscat sighed, "Too bad we don't have a nude photo."

He said this while staring at the image of Giovanna Hi-Ling in a swimsuit, a discreet, becoming outfit, but one that made it impossible for him to verify if, like Yum Akatinor and Cladek Halstar, the beautiful Giovanna bore the mysterious tattoo on her chest, below the heart.

Interplan had been able to examine the Martian at their leisure because Cladek Halstar was crazy, raving mad, and was currently locked up at the Sainte-Anne psychiatric hospital in Paris-sur-Terre, one of the oldest in the world and, without a doubt, the most modern of all.

But science was still making few inroads into curing insanity.

Muscat carefully reviewed the entire file and focused on the enlargement of the mysterious tattoo. He had grabbed an electro-pencil with inexhaustible lead, and scribbled while smoking, no longer listening to the film which continued to roll, no longer looking at the images.

He was drawing and redrawing the sign... A loop, two points... No, two lines in the shape of an upside-down V... One loop, two curves like circumflex accents...

What could it represent? A bird? Yes, possibly, relying on the hieroglyphic writings which, on Earth and elsewhere, were the origin of current writings, but which were all inspired by original drawings, having a precise visual meaning.

Let's say a bird. Two wings. But what are these lines that cross the wings? And the six little lines below?

Frustrated, Muscat pushed the drawings away and remained for a moment pondering.

Wings... wings... a bird... No, more like a beast, not a bird. A bird is always graceful, even when it is a bird of prey, a condor, a vulture, an algomaus of Wolf 424 or a pyromithocus from the planets of Altaïr, a bird that spits electric fire, a feathered predator...

"I'm sure there's a symbol in there for something that flies. But it's not a bird..."

A machine? A spaceship?

The Quetzal, the feathered serpent of the ancient Incas... Wasn't it, as had been demonstrated in the 20th century, the memory of the first alien spaceship to come from Venus?

"It flies... No, it's not a machine, not a bird, it's..."

He frowned, got up, went to get a dictionary and put what corresponded to the letter Z in the dispensator from which he had previously removed the tapes from the *Spica* file.

Zeppelin... and there showed up an implausibly old-fashioned flying machine, but one which had been the origin of the jets that Robin Muscat knew. Zeus... and he saw the god of the Greeks, the lightning god... not the time to get into mythology. Zibeline... the sable, a charming little creature, pretty furs... Ziggurat... Mesopotamia... Zingaro... the bohemians who became legendary...

Wonderfully sharp images, a whispering voice.

Muscat pressed the "fast forward" button. Zircon...

"I don't care about precious stones."

Zodiac!

The soon-to-be commissioner examined the ancient representations of the celestial zone which always formed the ideal horizon for Earthlings.

“Yes! These kinds of signs... Now I’m getting somewhere. There’s Virgo, Libra, Scorpio and Aries...”

He picked up the sheet where he had scribbled the same sign thirty times, the strange tattoo noted from the chest of two of the victims.

“Zodiac signs. Ah, there are also the symbols of the planets...”

The letter P in the dispensator replaced the letter Z and Muscat mused for a moment in front of this parade of esotericism.

“Oh!” he raged, “if only I knew if this Giovanna...”

Suddenly, the intercom rang. Grumpily, he answered, “Muscat. What’s the matter?”

“Inspector, there’s a visitor for you.

“Who is he?”

“A citizen from Tycho-City, passing through Earth.”

“What does he want?” Muscat growled, already determined to send this untimely Selenite away.

“He wants to tell you something about the *Spica* case.”

“Ah? Well, well... Send him up!”

A moment later, Muscat pushed back the files. Standing at the window, he watched the rain fall on the immense spiral which dominated the city and around which the tramono lines wound up—the urban trains whose single tracks ran above the houses and streets, replacing the old metro of yesteryear, whose endless tunnels had long been converted into underground routes for electric cars and other kinds of individual transport.

“Inspector Muscat?”

“Yes. Please sit down.”

Muscat had not seen the man enter. He turned around, took his seat and looked up, his eyes clear and hard, to probe his visitor. He was a young man in his early twenties. He had the special tan of people who lived on the Moon, in its weird lighting; that ashen complexion known as “earthlight.” Skinny and brown, he probably originated from southern Europe.

“So, you have something to tell me?” Muscat said.

“I am Giovanna Hi-Ling’s fiancé,” the man began.

Suddenly, this boy warranted closer attention, thought the inspector.

“Go on! Tell me everything you know. She’s disappeared and we think it was a kidnapping. Do you think so too?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have any other theories?”

“No. She could never have left me. She didn’t run away.”

“Suicide?”

The young man laughed nervously, a little sadly.

“Oh no, she loved life. Passionately...”

He too seemed passionate, but was overwhelmed by the tragedy.

“One moment. Your identity?”

Muscat clicked on the camera which would record the man’s statement, both in video and audio. The young man began:

“My name is Jean-Marie Spontini, born in Corsica, residing in Tycho-City.”

Some professional and marital status information followed, then he stated that he had met Giovanna during a layover. She had told him that she was a student, and he had fallen madly in love with her. She planned to travel to Perseus... He wanted to go with her, but she’d told him that it was not possible.

It wasn’t a very long trip, in fact, despite the enormous distances. It had taken only a few weeks. The *Spica* was about to bring her back when she had disappeared, inexplicably, on the spaceship as it had entered the the Solar System.

“Tell me, was she rich?” inquired Muscat.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so, or you do not know?”

“No, I’m sure she wasn’t.”

“What about you? You just told me that you work in Tycho, as a wind tunnel technician.¹ It doesn’t pay a lot of money. So, how could you have afforded a trip to Perseus?”

Spontini made an evasive, if somewhat distraught, gesture.

“There were some mysteries in your girlfriend’s life, weren’t they?”

The young Corsican nodded silently, then said:

“She wasn’t really my girlfriend.”

“But you just told me so implicitly. Don’t worry. Miss Hi-Ling is very beautiful and you don’t look so bad yourself. You’re a nice-looking couple. Tell me, did she tell you about her past... about her experiences with the occult?”

The visitor became visibly uncomfortable.

“I see that she did,” continued Muscat. “But again, don’t worry. It’s not a crime. We police officers understand what the study of parapsychology has contributed to humanity. And there are some truly fascinating cases... Only, you know about the *Spica*... Miss Hi-Ling is our third case.”

“Yes. First, there was that guy from Perseus who died. And then, the banker who went crazy.”

A cloud of horror passed over Spontini’s face. Muscat stood up, and went to sit on the desk in front of him.

“We’re amongst men here... So do you have anything to confess?”

Spontini looked up in shock.

“What do you mean?”

“I’d like a small but intimate clarification concerning your girlfriend...”

Muscat noticed that his visitor was trembling slightly, very slightly.

“Have you ever seen... on her chest... a small tattoo? Oh, a trifle... Just below her left breast...?” he asked.

Spontini jumped but quickly restrained himself. He was visibly frightened.

“Well, what’s the problem? You knew her well. So, tell yourself that I’m here to help you, that our role is to save her, to return her to you. Besides, you are so worried about it that you came here by yourself... spontaneously. So come on, spit it out, Spontini!”

He leaned over, pointed his finger at the young man’s chest, towards the heart.

“There... Does Giovanna have something tattooed there?”

But Spontini pulled back so quickly that an idea flashed through Muscat’s brain. For a moment, a very short moment, his eyes burned through this boy who seemed so spooked by his outstretched finger.

“Spontini, take off your shirt!”

“What? What do you mean?”

“You know very well what I mean.”

Giovanna’s fiancé jumped up in panic.

“Inspector!”

“You want us to help you get Giovanna back, right? Yes or no?”

Spontini took a step back. Muscat grabbed him by the arm.

“Then don’t try to run away. It’s a stupid move. You have to help us help her—if you love her.”

Spontini’s face tensed. He was on the verge of tears. Muscat said more gently:

“Show me. And afterwards, you’ll tell me everything... everything you know.”

And he was the one who undid the magnetic strips of the jacket. Spontini had given up; his teeth were chattering.

“Now the shirt,” ordered Muscat.

The skinny boy was shivering, but he took off his shirt. Muscat leaned over the bare chest. He had not been wrong. The sign was there.

A tattoo? He wouldn’t have sworn to it. It looked as if it was engraved under the epidermis itself, just under the left breast. And he recognizes the same mysterious symbol he had been tracing.

The central loop, the two wings in circumflex accents, the six small lower lines, also arranged in groups of three. The lines that crossed the wings, like lightning. It was about half an inch high, but inscribed in the flesh using a process that Muscat did not recognize.

“So I wasn’t wrong. Now you will...”

¹ The oxygen blowers that feed the cities under the globe built on the Moon. (*Note from the Author*)

A scream suddenly erupted in the office. Before his eyes, while he was still leaning towards Spontini, while he was lingering to better analyze the sign, Muscat saw it—this strange symbol—suddenly start blazing!

From a dark blue color, it changed to fluorescent crimson, dazzling the officer's eyes with a sudden point of fire. And Spontini's entire bare torso—and his entire body—in a split second, appeared enveloped in a fiery aura.

It was brief. And then, there was nothing left, at Robin Muscat's feet, but the body—the corpse—of Giovanna Hi-Ling's unfortunate fiancé. A thought passed quickly through the mind of the Interplan inspector:

“The dead man didn't talk. The crazy guy can't talk. But that one will talk!”