

Chapter 1

The Sign of the Compass

Petra Kronos woke up to the *tick tick tick* of metal. It was not, as you might imagine, a clock. It did not have chiming bells, and it did not have two hands. Yet it did have eight legs and something like a face, a very tiny one punctuated by two eyes, specks of twinkling green. Astrophil, Petra's tin spider, scampered around the nightstand next to her bed, calling, "Wake up! Wake up, you sloth! Cave bat! Ground squirrel!" His shiny body vibrated as he shouted.

Petra rubbed at the grit in the corner of her eye. "Just because you must have stayed up last night reading a book on all the animals that hibernate doesn't mean you have to show it off."

Astrophil folded his front two legs in a good impersonation of a human schoolteacher. "In fact, sloths do not hibernate. They are simply very, very lazy."

"Hmm." Though the morning sun was already making the room warm, Petra snuggled under the thin linen sheet. "I bet they're stupid, too."

"Oh, yes."

"The sort of animals who just can't take a hint," Petra said. She yawned and closed her eyes.

"Well..." Astrophil relaxed his legs out of their stiff pose. "There is *one* rare sloth, the Spotted Angola Sloth, which is known to be quick-witted."

Petra lay still.

“And generous of spirit.”

No response came from the bed.

“And easily moved by the persistent pleas of friends,” Astrophil added.

Petra rolled over, her back to Astrophil.

“The Spotted Angola Sloth is also prudent, especially when threatened by the prospect of waking up one morning to find sticky, metallic spiderwebs crisscrossing her entire face.”

“A dreadful fate,” Petra declared. She flung back the sheet and slipped out of bed. The sound of clucking hens floated in through the one tall window. A rooster must have crowed sometime earlier that morning, but it had not broken Petra’s steady sleep. She pushed back the tousled hair that she stubbornly refused, against the repeated wishes of her grown-up cousin Dita, to braid into something resembling neatness. Petra’s eyes were gray – or, to be more precise, they were silvery, like they each had been made with liquid metal anchored in a bright circle by a black center. They looked just like her father’s eyes. In general, she resembled him greatly. This usually pleased her.

She turned to a shelf that ran along the white wall between the corner of the room and a rectangular bulge, which was the chimney that began in the kitchen fireplace just below. The rough wooden shelf was littered with bottles, sheets of heavy paper, a few broken goose quills, and a small box the shape and glossy brown color of a horse chestnut. It was wooden and had a hinged lid. Petra took the box and plucked down a bottle.

Astrophil shot a sparkling thread across the room so that it hit the wall next to the shelf. With one swing, he launched himself several feet to perch on the shelf's edge.

Petra uncorked the bottle and opened the chestnut-shaped box to reveal a miniature spoon, into which she poured green, thick brassica oil. Astrophil sucked from the spoon with a delighted noise. After he had drained the oil, his eyes deepened in color and glowed.

"Well," Petra said, corking the bottle. "If you're hungry, the others must be, too."

Astrophil quickly crept up her arm and dug his feet into her shoulder, piercing through her thin summer nightgown.

"Ow!"

If she expected Astrophil to apologize, he didn't.

"By the way," he said, "I was not reading a book last night."

"Oh?" Petra shut the bedroom door behind her. She jogged down the stairs with unnecessary force. The spider bounced up and down. They reached the second floor. A whirring, clanking sound began to come from downstairs.

"Then why do you suddenly know so much about zoology?"

"I was reading ephemera," he said, referring to the thin booklets stacked in her father's library. "You know I can only turn pages, not those heavy leather book bindings. If books are not already open, I cannot open them myself."

Petra raced across the landing and began to hop down the next flight of steps. Astrophil gripped her more tightly. The whirring sound was getting louder.

Astrophil said, "If someone does not remember to leave out the beautiful, big books for a poor insomniac spider, what is a poor insomniac spider to do but consult the badly-written ephemera?"

"Why were you reading about sloths and squirrels anyway?"

Astrophil paused. "I wanted to learn about creatures like me. But there was nothing in the ephemera about spiders."

Petra stopped. She began to walk down the steps at a normal pace. "I'm sorry, Astro," she said. And she really was, for there was no book that could tell him about creatures like himself, even if she took down the zoological guide to arachnids her father had consulted when he made Astrophil. "I'll remember to leave a book out before I go to bed."

She reached the ground floor and opened the door to her father's workshop, which was also the family store. It was here that one could buy metallic objects and machines crafted by Mikal Kronos.

"It is just that I am a very fast reader," Astrophil said.

"Yes, you are," Petra responded with pride.

The workshop looked like you would never find what you were looking for, and sounded like you would never be able to match up a noise with the thing that made it. But it was—or so her father always claimed—arranged in a very logical order. Then again, it was a logic that only he could understand. But in his

absence Petra learned to find what she needed (usually), even if it took her twice or three times as long as it would have taken him.

Squeaks came from a very large cage under a table in the corner of the room. The tin pets were hungry and eager to be let out. “What took you so long?” some of them cried. Like Astrophil, all the creatures possessed tiny, metal vocal cords. Metal naturally amplifies nearby sounds. Petra’s father had designed the animals so that their metal bodies magnified the volume of their voices. Astrophil was a quiet spider, as spiders usually are. He liked to share his opinions on many things, but he liked best to share them secretly with Petra, hidden in her hair and whispering in her ear so that no one else would understand why she giggled. But the tin pets could be loud if they wished. A screeching tin monkey was proving this very point.

Some of the pets ran in circles on the floor of the cage or climbed up the bars. When Petra opened the cage, five fist-sized scarab beetles, three puppies with tin scales instead of fur, a finch, a raven, two lizards that would have to be purchased together or not at all, several mice, and the big-eyed monkey burst across the room like a comet. When they saw her reach for a jug of brassica oil and a large saucer on the table, they rushed back to cluster around her ankles.

“Such behavior!” Astrophil sniffed, as if he had taken a leisurely stroll to have his breakfast.

The pets dipped their beaks in, lapped up, or sucked down the oil. Petra nudged the monkey aside to make room at the saucer’s edge for a beetle, which was ramming into the monkey’s bottom. When they had drunk their fill of

breakfast, they moved about the room more calmly, except for the three puppies, who started to wrestle among themselves. They were the very youngest of the tin pets. They had been completed only six months ago, just before her father left for Prague. They were his latest experiment. Unlike the other pets, the puppies were designed to grow.

It was very boring for the animals to be locked up in a cage at night. They were filled with energy. Years ago, when her father had begun crafting the tin pets, he let them have the run of the house at all hours of the day and night. And what happened? A total disaster. Jars of pickled vegetables were smashed on the kitchen floor, vinegar spilling everywhere. A squirrel got into the linen cabinet and tore several sheets into rags for a nest. A bird cracked a precious mirror by tapping its beak repeatedly at its own reflection. If Dita and her family had lived with them at the time, you can be sure she would have quickly put an end to the pets' freedom. But there was only seven-year-old Petra, who howled with laughter at the toys' antics. Her father barely noticed anything. It wasn't until one poor rabbit went missing, and they discovered her trapped and starving inside the gears of one of the models for farm machinery, that her father decided to keep the pets locked in a cage at night. They could play only in the shop, and only during the day when someone could keep an eye on them.

Astrophil was the exception to the rule. But then, he was the exception to almost every rule. He was well-behaved from birth. He took his good manners as a point of pride. He learned Czech quickly, speaking in whole sentences when he was just days old. He was the only pet her father made who learned how to read.

Astrophil actively sought out books on everything from poetry to how to make Turkish delight. Petra often teased him that he was filled with useless information. But while he learned many things Petra never would, he never managed to learn how to sleep. Most pets, when they were about two years old, would begin to doze for a few minutes at a time. A year later, they might be able to sleep through the night. But Astrophil, who was six years old, showed no sign of doing more than blinking once in a while.

Petra tidied the shop to make it presentable for business, dusting her father's handiwork: horse bits and ploughs, intricately engraved silverware, a collection of music boxes, compasses, astrolabes, sundials, and clocks that began chiming ten o'clock. It was already late to open the shop. Dita's husband, Josef, would have left hours ago to work in the brassica fields. Soon Petra would unlock the front door facing the street. She hoped that she might sell a few things. Above all, she hoped her friend Tomik would stop by.

Although it was incredible that she would have heard a shuffling of feet over the noise in the workshop, Petra did. She turned around to see David, Dita's son. He was a few years younger than Petra. "Stella!" he called.

The raven flew across the room in a shiny blur and settled on the boy's shoulder, gently poking her beak into his curly hair.

"Upstart crow," Astrophil muttered.

"I am a raven!" Stella cawed back, insulted.

It was clear that the raven had no intention of being sold to an Okno villager or a traveling merchant charmed by her glossy feathers. The raven liked

her life at the Sign of the Compass just fine, and had grown fond of David, who was stroking her head.

“Mother wanted me to see if you had *finally* woken up,” the boy mimicked Dita’s exasperated voice. “She wanted to know if you were taking care of your *one* duty in this house.”

“Well, I obviously am.”

“Well, you obviously can’t greet customers in your nightgown.”

Petra started to say something rude, but David began singing loudly, looking everywhere around the shop except at her. “*Oh, she’s a lovely lass in her nightdress! But her hair’s a mess, I must confess!*”

The raven cawed.

“*Oh, she’s a –*”

“David, be quiet!”

“*– lovely lass –*”

“Stop!”

He did, for he realized that she was no longer looking at him, but out the window. She had a worried expression on her face. “What is it?” he asked. He saw a cart driven by two men in tattered clothes.

“I’m not sure.” As she pushed the door open, Astrophil climbed into her hair and clenched his legs around a snarled lock of it, looking like a flower-shaped hairpin with eight petals. The animals eagerly rushed for the open door, but David darted across the room to stop them. He hustled them back into the cage.

The two men stepped down from the cart, one of them laughing. The other man glanced at Petra, looked up at the sky, and stretched in the sunlight. They turned away from her and walked toward the back of the cart, heaving at some load in the flatbed.

At first Petra could not believe that the long, angular form the two men carried was her father. But then his head flopped back in the fat man's arms and she saw his long gray-black hair, his wide mouth, and the rust-colored bandage crossing his face.

She looked back over her shoulder at David, who was waiting in the shop, gazing out the door, his eyes wide in horror.

"Dita," Petra whispered. She had lost her voice.

But David easily found his. "Mother!" He spun around and ran into the dark depths of the house. "*Mother!*"