

CLOCKWORK HEART

DRU PAGLIASSOTTI



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CALGARY

Clockwork Heart
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DEDICATION

To my family and friends,
and in memory of my mother, Skydancer.

CHAPTER ONE

TAYA CUPPED AND FANNED her wings, slowing as the iron struts of a wireferry tower loomed before her. The massive construction blocked the gusting winds, and she sighed with relief as her thick boot soles hit the girder. Bending her knees to absorb the impact, she crouched and folded her arms, ducking into the safe harbor.

The wind in the wires sent vibrations thrumming through the metal under her feet, and the tower swayed. She locked her armature into tight-rest, tail feathers snapped up and wings tucked in. With a wriggle, she pulled her arms out of their struts and straps and looped a safety line from her harness around one of the narrow girders.

“Oh, that’s better,” she groaned, rubbing her shoulders. She pulled off her flight goggles and wiped them against her sleeve. The glass was smeared with dead bugs and the inevitable greasy soot that collected whenever she flew past the city’s refineries.

Usually, the trip up from Tertius was easy. Thermals from the smelting factories provided plenty of lift, but today the late autumn gusts of the *diispira* — the winds that blew over the Yeovil Range every year right before winter — made flight risky. For a few minutes, when one of the winds had stolen her thermal and sent her into a stall, Taya had flapped like a foundering duck. Her shoulder muscles were still twitching, and the sweat from her efforts was drying beneath her flight leathers.

How much longer until she was off-duty, anyway?

She slipped her goggles back on to protect her eyes from the wind and surveyed the mountainside beneath her. Terrace upon terrace of closely placed buildings descended into the dark haze of factory soot that perpetually mantled the lowest sector of the

mountain. That was Tertius, the sector where the famulate caste labored in the manufactories to provide the metals and goods that maintained Ondinium. Tertius — where she'd been born and her sister was about to get married.

Thick stone walls ringed Ondinium Mountain, dividing the major sectors from each other: Primus, for the exalted; Secundus, for the cardinals; and Tertius, for the plebeians. Gates pierced the walls at regular intervals, but each portal was guarded by stern-faced lictors whose job was to prevent the indiscriminate mixing of castes.

Only icarii like Taya and the occasional authorities who rode the suspended wireferries could pass freely from sector to sector. And even wireferry passengers were checked at waystations whenever they changed cars, especially at Primus.

Taya searched the soot-blackened towers that rose at regular intervals along the sector walls, looking for a clock.

Spotting one, she smiled. Another hour and she could go home and prepare for the wedding. With a little luck she could deliver the report from the College of Mathematics and linger long enough at Oporphyr Tower to avoid picking up another job. As long as the decatur didn't give her another message to carry, she'd get to the party in plenty of time.

The metal beneath her feet jolted and shuddered. Taya grabbed the strut next to her with one heavily gloved hand. Usually she loved flying, but today's winds were the worst she'd —

The girder jolted again, and the high-pitched shriek of straining metal cut across the whistling wind and humming cables. Taya jerked her head up, looking for the source of the noise.

There. One of the wireferry girders, suspended in midair several yards away from her, was bending under the weight of an approaching car. Gears ground and spun as the heavy wire cables slipped and the girder started to buckle.

Taya leaped to her feet, banging her head against a low strut. She winced, looking around. Didn't anyone else see the danger?

Yes — wireferry workers were racing up the tower ladders from a nearby station, but they were too far away to do the people in the car any good.

"Oh, Lady," she groaned, unsnapping her safety hook and tucking the strap back into her harness. Even though the rational part of her mind was screaming warnings about the danger of flying next to a collapsing girder, of maneuvering around wires

that could snap at any moment, she was already dredging up memories of old aerial rescue drills, calculating wind direction and target height, her best angle of attack and the load-bearing capacity of her ondium armature.

Heart pounding, Taya slid her arms back into her wings and crouched.

It had to be done. Her armature tugged her upward, its buoyant ondium straining against the weight of her compact body. Shifting to put her head into the wind, Taya threw herself into the air, her boots smacking the beam for extra thrust.

Metal girders shot past as she plunged through their deadly network. As soon as she was clear of the support structure, she threw her arms wide, snapping her metal wings to full extension.

Broad ondium feathers closed as she swept her arms downward, propelling herself toward the endangered ferry car. She kicked her tailset down and slid her ankles behind its bar. A gust of air tugged her and she rode it aloft, then swept her wings again as the gust veered off, broken by an obstruction current from the girders around her.

Metal shrieked again. Wires snapped and twanged.

Time was running out. Taya strained forward, flying up and over the ferry car to get a clearer grasp of the situation.

Two passengers clutched the car's leather-covered seats — an adult and a child. The adult was wearing robes and a mask. An exalted.

"Scrap!" Taya wheeled, searching for assistance. Engineers were scrambling over the breaking girder, but they still weren't in any position to help. A small group was stringing another support wire through the struts to keep the straining girder from crashing hundreds of feet to the street below, but that wouldn't save the passengers if the car cable snapped.

One person at a time, she counseled herself. The wind was suddenly icy on her face as sweat trickled down from her hairline. *Just concentrate on rescuing one person at a time.*

She circled back to the ferry and began to brake, her tailset down and her wings cupped. She kicked her feet free.

Momentum and uneven winds sent her crashing into the side of the car. Taya's knees buckled against her chest and she gasped, twisting one hand out of its wingstruts to grab the service handle on the side of the car.

An arm reached through the window and caught the harness straps along her shoulder. Taya looked up. The exalted stared at her, her dark eyes wide but her ring-covered hand gripping the leather harness like iron.

Taya breathlessly nodded her thanks, taking a tighter grip on the door handles. The woman released her and Taya yanked the ferry door open, grabbing the sides of the doorframe. Her ondium wings scraped against the sides of the ferry car and she flinched.

"Take Ariq," the lady said, her voice shaking. She swept up the child at her side. "Save him."

Ariq screamed, staring at Taya's goggle-masked face, and tried to kick away. He couldn't have been any older than four, his round face still free of castemarks.

"I've got him." Taya braced the edges of her feet against the doorframe to steady herself as she took the boy from his mother. Ignoring the child's shrieks, she pressed him against her stomach and snapped safety cords between his legs and under his arms. She'd done it before in practice drills, but a squirming child was harder to strap in than a stuffed dummy. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

The exalted nodded. Her castemarks, sweeping blue waves tattooed across each cheek, stood out sharply against her pallor. She'd let her ivory mask fall to the floor, and she'd stripped off her jeweled public robe to free her arms.

Taya finished securing the terrified boy to her harness and slid her arm back into its wing.

The car jolted again, dropping a few more feet as the girder bent and the cables slipped. The woman gasped and Taya threw herself backward, free of the doorway.

For one nauseating moment she was in free fall, and then she twisted around, spreading her wings. They checked her descent with a violent jolt, ondium and air currents fighting gravity. The boy screamed, one long howl of terror.

The engineers at Cardinal Station Six were the closest. Taya flapped without any regard for her dignity, concerned only with maximizing speed and lift as she compensated for the unfamiliar and frantically shifting weight against her midsection. The stubby metalwork dock several yards beneath the breaking girder was her target.

Several workers saw her coming and stretched out their hands. She swooped down, braked, and let them grab her by her legs and harness to haul her in. Holding her wings over her head, she stood as motionless as possible as the workers steadied her with brusque efficiency. Ariq howled again as they stripped away the straps and buckles that held him, roughly tucking them back into her harness.

“There’s another one up there!” a man shouted, as the tower shuddered. Everyone looked up fearfully, but the gears and girder were still holding. Barely.

“I know.” Taya waited just long enough to make sure Ariq was in safe hands, then turned and kicked off from the work dock as engineers and repairmen ducked beneath her sweeping wings.

Another icarus had spotted the danger and was circling the threatened car, seeking a safe approach. Taya swept up, foundered under an unexpected crosswind, then caught herself. The other flier saw her and rocked his wings left and right.

Relieved to have backup, Taya angled toward the ferry.

The exalted was standing in the doorframe, staring up at the bending girder with her hands clamped over her mouth. Taya swept her wings backward and slammed into the car.

“Grab me!” she shouted as the car lurched. The woman reached out — and then, with a horrifying screech, the tower buckled and the ferry plummeted.

Taya’s foot slipped from the car’s doorframe and she tumbled backward, feeling the exalted’s arms tighten around her neck as they dropped. Both of them screamed. Taya instinctively spread her wings to catch as much air as possible, but the edge of the falling car clipped her flight primaries and sent her into a spin.

Wires! Taya thought with alarm, beating both wings in a desperate attempt to get lift. If a loose wire hit them, it would slice them in half. If a girder hit them, it would smash them to a pulp.

Her sister would never forgive her if she died hours before the wedding.

But the plummet continued. Her armature hadn’t been built to carry another adult. Taya had hoped to have enough time to go into a controlled glide, but —

Her wings caught an updraft and their descent slowed, almost imperceptibly. The woman clutching her shoulders moaned, the only sound she’d made since that first scream.

Taya wanted to tilt, but the woman's excess weight was dragging her down vertically, and all she could do was try to control their fall by flapping as hard as she could. The exalted's fingers dug between her shoulder straps and her flight suit. Her legs were wrapped around Taya's waist, and her face was pressed against Taya's neck.

Somewhere metal crashed against metal, and people shouted, but Taya couldn't look up to see what had happened. She felt a drag on her wing— clipping the side of the car must have damaged one of her feathers.

"Taya!" The shout was barely audible over the wind in her ears. The other icarus swept past, wings locked. A locked glide was a dangerous maneuver at the best of times, especially so close to the wireferry girders, but it was the only way he could free an arm to yank loose one of his safety lines. "Grab on!"

"Exalted! Listen!" Taya shouted into the woman's ear. "There's a safety line dropping toward us. You have to hook it to my harness!"

The woman's arms tightened around her, and Taya could feel the exalted's heart hammering. But then, with the same desperate courage she'd shown in the ferry car, the lady looked up.

"I can't!"

Taya swept her arms down again, straining to keep them from entering free fall.

"Grab the line or we're both dead!"

The line swung past. The exalted took a halfhearted pass at it, but the line slipped through her fingers. Taya shuddered as she nearly missed a beat.

The icarus above them made a tight circle. The line swung past again. This time the exalted caught it, then clutched Taya's shoulders. Taya felt the safety line's clasp slide through the rings in her back harness.

"It's done," the woman gasped.

Their fall slowed as the icarus above them shared their weight. They were safe.

A crowd had gathered on the street to watch the drama unfolding hundreds of feet above their heads. Arms reached up to grab her and her passenger, and Taya had to shout at them to back off so she'd have enough space to land. For a second she hovered, backbeating. The exalted slid off and collapsed to the ground, shaking.

Then Taya's boots hit the street and she staggered, taking a few steps forward. She barely remembered to yank her arms free and unfasten the safety line before she, too, sank into a crouch, wrapping her arms around her shoulders and trembling with relief. Strangers surrounded her, touching her floating wings for luck and saying things to her that sounded like an incoherent rumble.

Lictors appeared, barking orders. Taya drew in a deep breath and pulled her goggles down around her neck. She turned and knelt next to the woman she'd saved.

"Are you all right, Exalted?"

The woman rolled over, her gold hair ornaments clinking against the cobblestones, and opened her eyes.

"Is Ariq safe?"

"I left him at the tower station." Taya jerked her head upward. "He's all right. Just a little scared."

"Thank you." The woman closed her eyes again.

"Excuse me, Exalted." A lictor stepped forward, his eyes averted, and held out a rough scarf. Taya took it from him.

"Your face, Exalted," she said, draping the scarf over the woman's head. "It's bare."

"Oh, Lady save us," the woman snapped with disgust, then sat up, holding the scarf in place. Her hands were unsteady, but she wrapped the scarf around her face, leaving only her eyes visible.

"Tell me your name, Icarus."

"Taya, Exalted." Taya pressed a leather-gloved palm against her forehead and ducked her head, sketching as much of a bow as she could while squatting in the cobblestone street. Her loose wings tugged at her armature as they swayed.

"I am Viera Octavus, Taya Icarus, and I am in your debt."

"Are either of you hurt?" The lictor sounded more confident now that the exalted's face was hidden again.

"No, by the Lady's grace, neither of us has been injured. Give me something to cover myself," Viera demanded. "Where is my son?"

"They're carrying him down now, Exalted." The lictor obediently unbuttoned his greatcoat and shrugged it off. He handed it to the woman as she pulled herself to her feet.

"Taya! Taya, are you all right?" A familiar voice. Taya looked up.

The icarus who'd slowed their descent pulled off his goggles and cap, revealing a shock of curly black hair. His wings were locked high and his straps neatly bundled.

The crowd let him through, and even the lictors reluctantly stepped aside.

"Hi, Pyke." Taya let him grab her hand and haul her to her feet. She leaned her forehead on his broad chest, gathering her strength. "Thanks."

"Anytime." He patted her shoulder. "Wings up, babe."

Her metal wings were drifting horizontally, knocking into bystanders who tried to crowd too close. With a groan, Taya slid her arms back into them long enough to lock them in a vertical line up her back and over her head.

She winced as she pulled her arms back down. Her shoulders were going to kill her tomorrow. She pulled off her flight cap and ran her hands through her short, sweat-dampened hair. The cool breeze felt good against her scalp.

"Taya Icarus." Exalted Viera Octavus turned. Barefoot, wearing a borrowed greatcoat and a makeshift mask, she looked more like a child playing exalted than a full-blooded member of the ruling caste. However, the steady, dark eyes over the veil revealed that she was already recovering her dignity. "Will you please introduce me to your friend?"

"This is Pyke, ma'am. He's the one who threw us the safety line."

"At your service." Pyke tapped his palm against his forehead and gave a perfunctory bow. Taya glared at him, and he lamely added, "Exalted."

"I am grateful for your assistance, as well, Pyke Icarus." Viera looked up. Taya followed her gaze.

The girder had collapsed, and twisted metal struts were trapped in the wireferry lines that held them suspended overhead as if in a metal net. The ferry car had slammed into the side of one of the station towers and was nothing more than a tangle of wreckage. Several of its dislodged ondium keel plates had floated up and tangled in the cables.

"Scrap," Pyke breathed, shaking his head. "You owe the Lady a couple of candles next holyday, Taya."

"I sure do," Taya murmured, staring.

"Exalted, if you'll please follow me, I'll escort you inside," a lictor said. "We'll bring your son to you and semaphore up to Oporphyr Tower to notify your husband."

"Very well. We shall speak again, Taya Icarus. House Octavus shall not forget what you have done for it today." Viera touched

one of Taya's wings before allowing herself to be led away. Taya looked after her, admiring the exalted woman's élan. After a few thousand rebirths, maybe she'd be that self-possessed after a near-death experience, too.

"Excuse me," another lictor said, politely but less deferentially, to Taya and Pyke. "I will now hear your account of this occurrence." He was tall, pale, and fair-haired— Taya didn't even need to register his accent to guess he was of Demican descent. However, the black lictor's stripe tattooed down the right side of his face proved that he was a full citizen of Ondinium.

"I don't have much to say." Taya stripped off her gloves and loosened the top buttons of her flight suit. "I didn't see anything until I heard the girder giving way."

"Interviewing participants is mandatory," the lictor insisted. "This way, Icarii."

"All right," Taya acquiesced. Arguing with a lictor, especially a Demican lictor, was worse than useless. One of the selection criteria for the caste was stubbornness.

"You don't have to interrogate us," Pyke protested, balking. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"Pyke, come on. The sooner we give our statements, the sooner we can get out of here."

"This is harassment! We're innocent— why do *we* have to be questioned?"

She rolled her eyes.

"He's just doing his job. And I'm almost certain that people are never beaten and brainwashed for rescuing exalted."

"You never know," Pyke said darkly. "Octavus is a decatur."

"I know." Octavus was among the many names she'd memorized while cramming for the diplomatic corps examination. "So?"

"So, you know what that means." Pyke gave her a meaningful look. "*Council*. Do you think it's coincidence that a wireferry broke while his wife was riding it?"

"Oh, Lady, not now." Taya grabbed his arm and pulled him along after her. "Come on. Let's go."

"But what if the stripes are in on it?" Pyke objected, digging in his heels. "It could be a military coup. They might decide to get rid of the witnesses."

"Pyke. I'm tired, and I have to attend a wedding tonight. Let's just answer the man's questions and go, all right?"

"You're too trusting," he growled.

"Uh-huh." Several months ago they'd gone out a few times. At first Pyke's gloomy mistrust of authority had been amusing, but after a few weeks, his conspiracy theories had gotten on her nerves. "I don't feel particularly threatened by lictors, all right?"

"Well, they're probably not as much of a threat as collapsing wireferries," Pyke admitted. Taya laughed, despite herself, and his eyes warmed.

Pyke was a skilled flier and a thoughtful friend, and he had all the good intentions a girl could want. Not to mention broad shoulders, a strong chest, and hard muscles in his arms and legs from years of flying. Her best friend, Cassilta, thought she was crazy to cut him loose, but Taya hadn't been able to take the lectures about corruption and cover-ups. She'd ended the relationship with the reliable "just friends" excuse. To his credit, Pyke had taken the rejection well, and now Cassi regarded him as fair game.

"If you will please follow me," the Demican lictor insisted.

"You were great up there, Taya," Pyke said as they trailed after the official. "Just wait until the eyrie hears about it."

"Not great enough. I think the car clipped one of my feathers." She craned her neck, but she couldn't see the tips of her wings without stumbling over her own feet.

"It's just a little bent. My uncle can fix it in no time."

The lictor led them up a short flight of steps into the nearest guard station, and Pyke waved a dramatic good-bye as they were parted.

"If you wish to remove your wings, you may," the Demican lictor said, leading her into a small office. Deciding she deserved a rest, Taya unbuckled the harness straps and swung open the metal keel. Her back prickled as the leather flight suit pulled away from her sweat-covered skin.

Her ondium armature swayed in the air, its metal wingtips touching the ceiling. Taya frowned as she inspected the feathers. Two primaries were bent out of shape, but Pyke was right. They wouldn't be hard to repair.

She'd been lucky.

"You were very brave," the lictor said, pulling two chairs away from desks and swinging them around. "This will not take long. Please sit down. Would you like some water?"

"That's all right. I'm fine." She sank into a chair and rubbed her neck. Her muscles twanged like plucked strings. "What's your name?"

"I am Lieutenant Janos Amcathra." The soldier dropped into the other chair and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Your papers?"

A Demican name. No surprise. He couldn't be more than a second-generation citizen. Taya switched to Demican as she passed over her identification papers.

"Well met in peacetime, Lieutenant Janos Amcathra."

"Well met in peacetime, Taya Icarus," he replied in the same language, glancing over her papers before handing them back. He switched back to Ondinan as he picked up a pen. "Please describe everything that happened."

Taya recounted the event. It took her longer to tell it than it had to live it. Amcathra took detailed notes.

"Then it was a coincidence that you were close to the accident scene," he summarized. "If you had not stopped to rest—"

"We were lucky."

"Yes." Amcathra handed her a printed form and a pencil. "The last thing I must have is your signature and eyrie number. I will send you a message if I need to talk to you again."

Taya blinked, surprised.

"That's it? I thought we came in here because it was going to take a long time."

"We came in here so that you would not be mobbed by the crowd."

"Oh. Well, thank you."

"I do not often beat and brainwash Ondinium's citizens," he said, dryly.

Taya grinned. "Don't mind Pyke. He's harmless." She picked up the form and skimmed through it.

Amcathra watched as she signed, then added his own signature.

"Your associate may be correct about one matter. The collapse may not have been an accident."

"What do you mean?" Taya remembered Pyke telling her about stacked contract bids and substandard building materials in one of his anti-government rants.

"Incidents of political violence have been on the rise, and this event fits the pattern."

"Is Octavus ... political?" She knew that Octavus was a technological conservative, which made him popular among the plebeians but alienated many of the cardinal castes that depended on technology for their living.

Amcathra shrugged.

"I am only speculating. An icarus flies high and sees much. If you spot anything suspicious, I expect you will report it to me."

Typical. It was just like a lictor to drop enough hints of criminal activity to make a person uneasy, and then use that uneasiness to his own ends. Suspicion was a way of life for the military. And icarii were always asked to aid their investigations.

Best just to agree and get out.

"Of course. Is that all?"

Amcathra glanced at her floating armature. "Do you require any assistance with your equipment?"

"No." She rose to her feet, suppressing a flinch. Her back and arms ached.

"Fly safely, Icarus," he said, nodding and leaving.

"Thanks."

Taya set about strapping herself back in, moving more slowly than usual. The metal exoskeleton and leather straps had left bruises all over her body. A hot bath would be nice. With luck, she'd have time to take one before the wedding.

Once the armature was strapped on, its buoyant ondium helped support her sore muscles. Taya's legs had stiffened up after sitting, and now they twinged as she walked.

Back on the street, lictors kept the crowd of rubberneckers out of the way as engineers scrambled over the wireferry towers, running cables back and forth like a giant safety net to keep the wreckage from hitting the street.

Taya stood on the wide station steps wondering how long it would take to lower the broken girder safely to the ground. She was glad she didn't have to rely on the wireferry to move from sector to sector. The cars would have to be rerouted around the accident site, and a lot of important people were going to find themselves delayed on their way home.

A few members of the crowd began to cheer. She looked around and realized they were waving at her. She lifted a hand, embarrassed. Scattered applause greeted the gesture.

Uncomfortable at being the focus of attention, Taya limped across the street to the base of the wireferry tower. She considered waiting for Pyke, but she had no idea how long it would take him to give his statement. With his attitude toward authority, they might decide to hold him for the night.

The lictors allowed her to climb up to the lowest launch dock, only fifty feet off the ground. It was high enough. She rolled her

shoulders one last time and pulled on her cap, goggles, and gloves. Muscles protesting, she slid her arms into the wings, unlocked them with a backward shrug, and ran to the edge of the dock.

The citizens below clapped as if they'd never seen an icarus take off before. Taya made a face and swept her wings out, searching for a thermal to lift her away from the broken girders and the unwanted attention.