

# Icarus IV

The characters in the chapter are about to go on an exploration to see what lies beyond the Grave, a point on their map past which no one has seen. The civilized world west of the Grave wonders what is beyond that point, therefore the act of wondering is what sparks the plot.

“Are you ready?” Leander asked, flicking up the two levers stationed over his head. With his free hand, he pulled a pair of tinted goggles over his eyes. The bands wrapped tight around his head, puffing his hair up in a way that made him look homeless—at least, that’s what Hera liked to tell him.

Hera, right on time and ten minutes late, strolled onto the ship like she owned it. The tiny plane only had space enough for two, and just as many seats. The cramped space would be their home away from home for the next three days while they made the impossible journey from the Western Sea to the Grave and whatever lay beyond. She brushed her hair behind an ear, the choppy blond curls barely peeking out under her helmet.

“No turning back now, right?” she laughed, speaking into the static mic. Ground base could hear them now, so she’d have to keep it short.

Leander gave her a glance as she added, “Everyone’s come all this way. We might as well give them a show.”

“The *show*—” he quipped, playing off her tone with as much mockery as he dared. He would poke back at her where he could, “—begins in t-minus ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes,” she smirked, “enough time for me to kiss a few more babies?”

“Enough time for you to buckle up,” he said, turning back to the controls. Tugging on his gloves, he heard the walk way onto the ship begin to close. With a huff of steam and cold air, their only bridge to the

ground slid shut. Daring a glance in the mirror at his side, he found Hera watching with wide eyes. Her hands shook despite herself as she buckled in, readjusting her own pressure stabilizers. When she turned back, he was still watching. She was red-faced, her chest heaving and her lips parted as if she was about to scream.

His own heart was racing, his hands sweating as he turned to grip the steering. The mirror on his side and the web of radio connecting him, her, and the rest of the civilized world was all the connection he had to her.

The ship smelled new. Metal and rubber and gasoline mingling in the air and infecting his lungs. All built up in the name of exploration—a wonder of what the world beyond the Grave had been up to while they left it behind.

It wasn't Hera's whiny wilt that filled the hollow spaces in his head next. It was the icy bark of the command base beginning the count down.

*Five minutes...* The initial call to make sure they were both sufficiently terrified. To make sure all the oh-so valuable clients were watching as two pilots were shot successfully across the Grave for the first time since it formed.

*Four minutes...* until they would be heroes—or dead.

Leander didn't dare interrupt. Not even as he pulled the ship into movement. Slowly, they picked up speed as they ran the metal bird down the runway. Hera followed his lead, her fingers moving fast across the buttons plastered across the lower panels. Her own goggles were still fashioned like a headband on her head.

*Three minutes...* They were halfway down the runway.

*Two minutes...* Leander pulled up on the steering, sending the front half of the wheels off the ground as the engines began humming.

*One minute...*Fire ignited, and the ship shot up toward the edge of the runway.

*Lift off...*Their path came to an end. His hands on the steering, Leander felt the ship begin to pull up. With one final burst of fire from the engines, they shot up into the sky like a bullet. The air thinned and clouds brushed past the windows in a golden haze. Sucking in a breath, he felt his ears pop and his eyes began to water. Hera was laughing in his ear. When he glanced in the mirror, she was gripping the sides of her seat and smiling like a mad woman.

*There it is...*a faded voice spoke somewhere in the command center, growing further and further away by the second. *Icarus IV with a successful take off. May they soon find the Grave.*

And with that, the ear piece cut out. All contact with the mainland went silent. Both had piloted countless trips. Military, luxury, commercial—they had done it all. They'd spent the last year flying cargo hauls between the Odian Islands and the city that sat below them, only to be called out for this. It was a final job, something worth enough money they'd never have to see a steering wheel or runway again if they didn't want to. They'd face the greatest wonder of the world.

The catch...well, they'd have to survive it to see a cent of the money.

Leander kept his eyes forward, his hands on the steering. His eyes were wide, and he hadn't blinked in so long they were beginning to sting. Faintly, in the crystalline glass of the windshield, he could see his reflection shifting with each gust of wind against the tiny ship. The gears and levers were huffing and shifting over his head. With the press of a button, he could autopilot his way to the Grave's edge.

He should turn on the autopilot, should force his rigid posture back, should force himself to close his eyes and sleep while he had the chance. They'd have seven days and four pit stops before they reached the edge of the world, and the last thing he needed was to be falling asleep half-way across the Grave. Still, he couldn't draw his hands from the wheel. Like the rubber had sunk into his skin and was holding him in place, his fingers didn't stir from the wheel.

Narrowing his eyes on his hands, he willed them to rise. *Let go.* The words were really in his head this time, not just echoed through a radio. *Let it go.*

He kept his focus forward, the silence engulfing him like an echo. It hit his head first, bleeding down his body in a cold shiver. For a long minute, he was still as a statue in his seat. Waiting for something to shatter the silence, waiting for something to pull him back up from the waters under which he was drowning.

He didn't see Hera coming until she lunged over him. She stood in a hunch as she rose from her seat and reached around him in one swift movement. Leaning over his shoulder, her helmet knocked against his as she reached up and flicked autopilot on. A faint *ding* filled the ship as the red light turned green. The neon hue illuminated her face for only a second before she threw herself back and sank into her seat.

"You're freaking out again," she said, gripping the side of her seat with a hand as the ship lurched against the wind.

Leander glared back at her through his goggles and helmet, his hair still perked up at the top like a child who'd just rolled out of bed. "I'm not freaking out."

She couldn't take him seriously, cracking a smile despite her best efforts and crossing her arms. "So you're just shaking for fun?"

Before he could answer, she drew her hand down under the crook of her chair. Pulling out a deck of cards, she flashed him a knowing smirk. His fight died in his throat, and he shifted gears. "You snuck things on the ship? You were specifically told not to—"

"Yeah, yeah," she scoffed, tossing her free hand up as she used her thumb nail to break the seal on the package. "If I always did what I was told, I'd be boring."

"You could mess up the weight of the whole ship with that," he persisted, reaching for it. She pulled it back, gripping the white box in both hands. "You didn't bring anything else?"

“This,” she shook the box, “Isn’t going to do anything, It’s not even a pound, it won’t make a difference.”

“Yes, it will. This ship was designed precisely to pull us across the Grave. Any change is significant, and it’s not welcome here. I will not risk our lives for your card games.”

Hera rolled her eyes, kicking the bottom corner of his seat. “I’ll ditch it before we enter the Grave.”

Flipping open the top of the box, she slipped the cards out into her waiting hands.

“You know I don’t go anywhere without a little fun in my pocket.”

“That makes it sound like you’re carrying a bomb.”

She scoffed, shuffling the reds and blacks between both her hands, the package now discarded on the slim floor space beside her seat. Glancing up over her captain’s head, she squinted. Leander turned fast, his eyes widening at the sky outside. But it was clear, no airships or storms of any kind. There was only the scorching sun and the hazy blue horizon to fill their vision. He pursed his lips into a thin line as he realized he’d been tricked. Whirling back around, he found Hera leaning back in her chair. Her legs were propped up between their seats as a make-shift desk for the two piles of cards she’d set up between them.

“You’re such a devil, you know that?”

“What? I didn’t even do anything,” she said, throwing her hands up in defense.

Leander threw an arm toward the empty windshield, to the beeping and hissing gears above it too.

“There’s nothing there.”

“I was looking at the time. Nine hours till our first stop.” For a minute, a deep silence overcame the ship. Only the flashing red and greens and blues of the control panel made any noise. Slowly Hera’s smirk broke into an all out grin. “Gods, you really *are* scared, aren’t you?”

He tried to deny it, but his face flushed a bright red. Once he had gotten on the ship, he’d promised himself it would be fine. That if they could survive takeoff, they could survive anything. Hell, they were

chosen for this because they were the best. Because they, out of all the pilots the Council could pay for, would be able to fly across the Grave. But now they were in the air with nothing to do but wait. Nine hours to the first outpost, then five the next day. Finally, on the third day, they'd make their final trip straight across the Grave. A feat undone since its arrival on the coast. Hundreds had tried. Hundreds were lying dead under the Grave skies. And there was Hera, pulling out her cards like she couldn't give less of a damn.

"I'm not scared."

She shrugged, dealing out two hands of five. Nodding toward them, she said, "Just pick one. We have time to kill before we're swallowed up by the void."

"But—"

"Just play," she grabbed his hand, pressing the cards into them. "And take your helmet off, you look crazy."

"You look crazy," he muttered, turning around anyway and pulling up his cards.

For a while, they went back and forth under the blue light of the ship. The blinking gadgets above dyed the cavern in an oceanic hue. Their uniforms, once a pale beige hue, their skin and hair, all of it was underwater. They would fly east until they reached the Gulf of Eden and the Grave that made up its coast.

The sky had consumed them, swallowing up their ship in all its glory. Leander had heard stories of pilots like them—men and women who flew too close to the sun and found their ships lost in the gray abyss covering the heart of their world. Some whispered that the Gods struck them down, others said it was a phenomenon made mostly of rumors. Whatever was causing it, Leander couldn't stop his cautious glances over his shoulder between every few hands. Even when he won, there was no celebration in his face. Even as a child, he'd turned his nose up at stories of ghosts and gods alike. Now, three days from facing them head-on, his surety was wavering.

Hera hadn't cracked a smidge. She kept smiling, kept dealing, kept shuffling and tossing the cards from hand to hand. She'd tossed her helmet off, leaving it tucked behind her seat. Her legs had moved, one draped over the side of her seat and the other propped up to rest her head on. Her suit, a slick red thing made of thick, rubbery material, pinched her neck and wrists where it cuffed. She had half a mind to strip it off instead of waiting the rest of the time until they landed, but she feared Leander might actually flip his shit. The suits, she was convinced, didn't actually help with anything. They were supposed to stop her lungs from exploding inside of her chest when pressure around them changed too significantly, but the walls of the ship did that too. Still, she'd already pushed it with the helmet. Every time she glanced up from her hands, she could see his eyes twitching. He hadn't stopped chewing on his lip or cheek since they took off.

"Oh, damn," she huffed, mulling over the card he'd thrown down. It was a middle card, nothing special. Anything in her hand could've beat it, but she sighed anyway. "I fold."

His eyes were far off, pinched on a random point on the floor. He pursed his lips, furrowing his brow as his cards sagged in his hand.

"Hey," Hera said, snapping before his eyes, "I said I fold."

"You what?"

"You win, moron," she said, slapping his forehead with the back of her hand and shaking her head.

"Oh, okay."

She shook her head, tapping the top of his head with her cards. "Hey, we can land early if you need."

"I don't need to land early. We're making it to the outhouse."

"You look sky-sick."

"I feel fine," he said, turning toward the sky. Still not a cloud in sight. Smooth sailing. That didn't stop his heart from racing or his breath from catching in his throat. "Stop worrying about me."

"Well, I can't have my captain dying. Then I'd have to fly the whole ship myself."

Leander scoffed, shaking his head and tossing his cards back at the girl. “I can feel the love.”

“Can you feel the insanity creeping in as well?”

“I’m not insane—”

“That—” Hera pointed at him with two fingers, raising her brows “—is exactly what an insane person would say.”

He shook his head, resting a hand against his helmet. “We’ve done trips like this before, it’s no big deal.”

“*No big deal*,” she scoffed, spinning around in her chair for effect. As she turned, she knocked into Leander with her knees. “We’re flying to our most certain deaths!”

“Stop saying that.”

Finally, she turned to her normal rotation, her seat clicking back into place at the bottom as it settled. “Just admit that it’s a big deal. I mean, nobody knows what’s out there.”

“It’s not a big deal,” he said, leaning back and brushing his hands off on his pants. “And if it is, let the Old Gods strike me down.” He threw a hand up, as of summoning the ancient powers, and a bolt of lightning came down in the distance. The thunder rumbled softly, barely audible over the hum of the engine, but the flash filled the space with a burst of white.

Hera’s jaw dropped, her eyes widening as she said, “You better get off my ship if you’re gonna be talking like that.”

“Your ship?”

“The Gods are coming for you now, boy,” she dropped into the thick accent of their squad leader, putting a finger under her nose to mimic his thin mustache. “You don’t mess with dems in the sky, they’ll shoot ya down real quick.”

“Good thing I don’t believe in the Gods.”

She sighed, swiping her cards out of his free hand. Flipping them through her fingers, she slid the pile back into the container. Her next words were normal, her eyes downcast. “What do you believe in?”

And he didn’t have an answer. Himself, his mission, their ship.

He shook the question off, turning his chair around to face the front once again. Hands back on the wheel, he flicked autopilot off over his head. The ship lurched once, the wings leaning to one side as the wind took them. Pulling up, Leander said into his mic,

“Two hours left until touch down, but we’ll begin descending now. Don’t want to get caught in the storm.”

Hera nodded, finally putting her helmet and gloves back on. She suffocated in the suit as they began their first landing. The air left her lungs as they plunged hundreds of feet down toward the ground. Baiae would be their first stop, some shiny city deep in the Red Sea House. Neither of them had seen the rumored city outright, but the whole world had heard rumors. Floating islands, buildings that reached the north star—a place with no poverty, no suffering. A place built on a sea of bones. She shook her head, leaning to one side to watch the windshield over Leander’s shoulder. She’d heard stories like that before. Utopia, but at what cost? She’d lived stories like that before.

The mask of an immovable pilot had fallen back over Leander’s face. If he noticed her swaying, he didn’t comment on it. Not even one hour passed and the turbulence died. Not even as the ground came into view, and the sparkling city beyond opened its arms to them.

He didn’t speak, didn’t radio back, didn’t even glance in the mirror as he usually did. He was gone, somewhere far away, and Hera was left in the dark alone.

Leander never answered her question. There was only one thing he knew he believed in: her. But he’d never tell her that.