

STRENG GEHEIM

TOP SECRET

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GEHEIME KOMMANDOSACHE

Z E I T A N K E R

A Novel From The Alternate Timeline

CHAPTER ONE

Ü B E R A L L H I N

Peenemünde, Baltic Coast

21 August 1942 · 06:47

The Baltic wind came off the water cold even in summer.

Sergei Pavlovich Korolev stood at the fence watching the rocket on the stand. He had been brought here under guard. No explanation given at the airfield in Berlin. No explanation on the car journey north through pine forests and flat grey sky. Just – come.

He had not slept.

He was still not entirely certain he was not going to be shot.

The rocket was called A-4. Fourteen metres tall. Fins like a child's drawing of the future. It stood in the early morning mist breathing liquid oxygen vapour from its flanks like something alive and cold and patient.

Korolev had been building rockets since 1931. He knew what this one was.

He also knew what they intended to put inside it.

That was why he could not sleep.

The man walking toward him across the wet grass was younger than he expected. Thirty. Perhaps less. Tall, broad-shouldered, dressed not in uniform but in a worn leather flight jacket, hands deep in pockets, looking at the sky the way engineers look at the sky – not at clouds, not at weather.

At distance.

At the specific quality of emptiness that exists above a certain altitude.

Korolev recognised the look.

He had seen it in mirrors.

Wernher von Braun stopped two metres away.

Neither man saluted.

A guard stood twenty metres behind Korolev. Another near the hangar door. Both watching. Both pretending not to.

Von Braun looked at Korolev the way he had looked at the sky. As if calculating distance.

Then he said – in careful, deliberate, almost comically accented Russian, the Russian of a man who had learned it secretly and recently and with great specific intention –

| «Куда мы летим?»

Kuda my letim? – Where are we flying?

The question hung in the Baltic air between them.

Korolev felt something shift in his chest. Not fear. The opposite of fear. He had not felt it since before the Gulag. Since before the arrest. Since before two years of believing he would die in Kolyma with frozen hands and his calculations unfinished.

He looked at the rocket. Breathing its cold breath in the morning mist. Fourteen metres of steel and fuel and the specific human madness that insists –

up.

He looked at the sky. That particular grey Baltic sky that was the same sky as Moscow, as Kolyma, as everywhere on this small planet – the sky that was not the destination but the door.

He looked back at the young German with his hands in his pockets and his terrible Russian and his eyes that had the distance in them.

And Korolev answered. In equally terrible German. In a voice quiet enough that the guards could not hear.

| "Überallhin."

Everywhere.

Von Braun was silent for three seconds.

Then he nodded once. Slowly. The way you nod when someone has said the thing you needed to hear confirmed.

He pulled his right hand from his pocket and held it out. Not a salute. Not a military greeting. Just – a hand. Extended toward another human.

Korolev looked at it for one long moment.

Then took it.

In the reeds at the water's edge, twenty metres away, an American in a stolen Luftwaffe uniform that was slightly too short in the leg put down his camera.

He had been sent to photograph the rocket.

He had not photographed the rocket.

He had photographed the two men.

He put the camera in his pocket. Took out a cheese sandwich. Looked at the handshake.

Thought for a long time.

Ate the sandwich.

Stayed.

- ENDE SEITE EINS -

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Herkunft: Andere Zeitlinie · Freigabe: Keine

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