

Eyes in the Sky

by Cliff Burns

The guard's name was Chorney.

It was printed on a triangular badge pinned to the tunic of his spotless, meticulously pressed uniform: *A. Chorney*.

A for Al or Anthony or Andrew.

A for pompous, over-efficient *ass*.

"May I see your identification, sir?"

Seething at the delay, Pete Vukovich dug into his pocket and produced his credentials, waiting as the burly soldier took his sweet time, examining the laminated card and accompanying photograph with exaggerated care. "Can we move it along, please, Corporal Chorney? You know who I am. And right now I'm running late, so if you don't mind..."

Chorney gave him a withering look. "It's *Sergeant* Chorney, Mr. Vukovich. Since February. Three stripes, see?" Showing Pete the hash marks on his sleeve, giving him ample time to count them. "And they call you folks *watchers*, huh?"

As far as their routine went, it was a pretty typical exchange. The guard was insolent but he was also the size of a defensive tackle and could kill him with one flick of his little toe. So Pete held his tongue and kept his temper, grinding his teeth until at last Chorney passed back his I.D., snapped him a mock salute and sent him on his way.

He kept meaning to lay a formal complaint against the jerk but somehow never got around to it. Not sure what, if anything, would come of it and reluctant to rock the boat. To be honest, once he passed beyond that last checkpoint and entered the egg-shaped inner chamber, he rarely gave Chorney--or anything else from the outside world--another thought.

By then, his mind was preoccupied with other, far less mundane matters.

The air in the RVC was dry and none too fresh. It smelled of sweat, cheap cologne and over-worked machinery.

Reese sauntered past. "Welcome back to Weirido Central," he offered by way of a greeting. That was Reese. The man was an enigma, the wild card in the deck. A petty criminal and chronic gambler. He made all kinds of extravagant claims, bragging about how when he was on a real tear he couldn't lose. The right card or die *always* popped up, like he'd willed it. As far as Pete could tell, Reese's main talent appeared to be an innate ability to annoy just about everyone in the vicinity. General Murray referred to him as "our resident misanthrope" and cut him some slack for the sake of the program. But there were whispers circulating that he was hanging on by the fingernails. His scores woefully low, his intel obscure and frequently contradictory. Not good.

Tonight the RVC was bustling, a full complement of watchers along with the usual support staff and requisite military types. No one below the rank of Major. General Philip J. Murray, their sponsor, mother hen and avenging angel, was present, conferring with his junior officers. The program was *his* baby and its success or failure

weighed heavily on his career prospects. From the expression on his face, he was definitely feeling the strain.

Pete's attention was drawn to a group off in one corner. They were gathered, three deep, around a television set, a big Motorola someone had wheeled in and parked by a convenient wall outlet. Technicians, mostly, two of them wrestling with a troublesome antennae, another playing with the controls, trying to get better reception. More and more people came wandering over, jockeying for position, vying for a good viewing angle.

Pete went to see what all the fuss was about. On screen, a commentator was talking to a bespectacled man wearing the patient expression of a long-suffering saint. He noticed Reese, shouldered his way closer. "What's going on, Tom?"

Reese grinned mirthlessly. "Tonight's the big night. Those crazy space boys are giving it one last shot. That's von Braun, selling more snake oil. He just got finished explaining how this one's got new, improved engines, performed perfectly in every test run."

Pete scowled. "Won't those idiots ever learn? Every single one of their death machines blows up and *still* they keep wasting taxpayers' money."

"But this is it. If their latest rocket-propelled coffin doesn't perform as advertised, they've shot their wad. And this time they ain't sending up no damn monkey."

Right on cue, they cut away to a shot of the interior of the command module, jerky, crackling footage of a suited figure, strapped in, immobile, listening to the countdown along with the rest of them. A fine specimen of American manhood, selected

for his physical stamina and steadiness of nerve; the best of the best, secured to a sacrificial altar, pointed at the stars.

Pete felt sick, knowing what was about to happen but helpless to do anything to prevent it. At least tonight would be the end of it. A brave man wasn't dying in vain.

Everyone around them was talking excitedly, some of them even laying bets, morbidly predicting how far the craft would get before becoming the world's most expensive firecracker. General Murray had to bark for silence as the countdown approached zero and switches were engaged, chambers flooded with volatile fuels, intermixing, channeled downward with tremendous force. The people in the room gasped as flames poured from the base of the rocket, streams of bright energy erupting from its powerful engines. Pete watched along with the others as the supporting clamps and restraints fell away and the craft began to ease up from the launch pad, fighting the stiff bonds of gravity, rising with reluctant grace.

"It a miracle!" A woman next to Reese cried, clutching his arm. "He's going to make it!" Reese caught Pete's eye and winked.

"Not in a million years!"

Pete thought about the man in the metal capsule. They told him he would be a hero, exhaustively trained him for this moment. Half killed the guy in their efforts to find out if he could withstand the physical and mental rigors of life beyond earth. Stuck him atop a device so complex no one man could understand it. Ten thousand different people drawing up plans, conferring on the science, spending a couple of billion dollars in the process...but if you asked any single one of them how it worked, you'd get nothing back but a blank stare.

But it *wasn't* working, that much was immediately clear. The bullet-shaped craft had barely cleared the gantry and was already looping back on itself, metal crumpling and then, inevitably, a massive explosion, billowing gouts of yellow-orange fire that consumed the spacecraft, launch pad and anyone unlucky enough to be within two thousand feet of the blast zone.

Viewers in the RVC reacted with horror, recalling that there was a human being in the fiery heart of that inferno, a man who likely suffered a great deal in the long seconds it took him to succumb. Some of the women were weeping and everyone was smoking cigarettes, looking grim. But not Tommy Reese. He appeared unmoved by the tragedy.

"So much for Smilin' Al," he quipped. Roth, one of the twerps from Recon, glared at him. "Hey, I ain't cryin' over spilled milk. Remember when Sputnik went *kaputnik*? At least the Russkies had the decency to cash in their chips right then and there. Not us. We gotta spend *another* billion bucks and charbroil a good American boy, *just to prove rockets don't fly!*" People were nodding and through the throng, Pete caught glimpses of von Braun, looking shell-shocked, trying to explain what had gone wrong.

"Well, everyone, we're back in business!" A lusty roar greeted the announcement.

Pete Vukovich drifted off, not interested in celebrating what amounted to the official end of the so-called "space age". *Schadenfreude* wasn't his cup of tea.

"Sickening, isn't it?"

Marla Dunbar stood a short distance away, so small and undemonstrative you hardly noticed her. Achieving invisibility at will, a faculty he secretly envied. The others called her "the mouse" and were always taking little digs at her, but he liked Marla--she

seemed like the real deal to him, unlike Reese and a few more he could name. That was the problem with this business: it was hard to tell the charlatans from those who genuinely possessed the gift.

"You thinking about that poor astronaut? Whazzis name?"

She shook her head. "I mean how smug everybody is. Building reliable rockets with our present technology is virtually impossible. They still haven't perfected fuel mixtures and many of the alloys are untried or--"

He headed her off at the pass. "You don't have to convince me, kid. I got nothing against those rocket jockeys. Brave men...they'd have to be." He resisted the urge to pat her head. "But Reese is right: what we just witnessed was a--a pointless exercise and we lost a good man for absolutely no reason. Now explain to me how that makes any kind of sense."

She looked glum. "They're saying that's it. Now the President will be forced to cancel the program."

"About time too." Then he softened his tone. "They've been wasting vital resources on a lost cause. It's time to divert those funds into programs that have proven worth, that yield reliable, real world data."

"You sound like our fearless leader," she muttered and he realized she was talking about Murray.

Pete blushed, embarrassed and somewhat nettled. "I'm no super patriot, all right? I have a job to do and I do it. It's thanks to people like you and me that our nation can sleep safer at night. Is that such a terrible thing?"

She gave him an odd look, like she was trying to decide if he was kidding. "Oh, Pete," she sighed, "how can you can talk like that? Surely you realize..." But she stopped herself. Touched his arm and walked away, head down. Acting like she'd just met a man who still believed in the Easter Bunny. Trying not to pity him but, at the same time, recognizing that he was too far gone to help, his delusions too deeply rooted...

He didn't have much of an opportunity to ponder whatever was eating Marla. Mulvaney, his PA, was signaling him from over by his cubicle. A meticulous man who wore a watch on each wrist, Mulvaney hated it when Pete was last one in. Claimed it made him look bad. Occasionally tried to lay a guilt trip on him but Pete wouldn't bite. Mulvaney did a quick check of his vitals, thumbed back his eyelids, examined his pupils. Aware of doors closing around them as the other watchers took their posts.

"No alcohol or illicit drugs in the past twenty-four hours?"

"Nope."

"Any changes in your physical health?"

"None."

Only then did the PA relax. Switching the clipboard to his other hand, he clapped Pete on the back. "Nice to have you back."

"I was only gone three days. Not much of a holiday."

"No rest for the wicked."

"At least I got to see the sun."

"Anybody else around?"

Pete grimaced. "They must have cleared the beach. Had it to myself for as long as I wanted it."

Mulvaney laughed. "Without broads? No chicks in bathing suits? What's the point?" Then he saw Pete's face. "Er, sorry, Pete. I guess it's, y'know, national security or whatever. Can't take any chances."

Pete stepped past him, jerked open the door. "Thanks for being so understanding about it," he cracked.

Slamming the door behind him to punctuate his complaint.

He brought home another headache, a real doozie this time. Aspirin wouldn't touch it and two gin and tonics only made it worse. Pete was reduced to getting an ice pack from the freezer and gingerly resting it on the back of his skull. A spot the size of a quarter throbbed with each beat of his treasonous heart. In desperation, looking for something to distract him, he turned on the TV.

Two channels came in reasonably well but he wasn't sure how much of it was edited and doctored before it got to him. Did that sound paranoid?

But I'm their golden boy, they wouldn't mess with me, would they? Would they? General Murray is a good man, the one person who's believed in this program all along. He had to put up with a lot of crap, endure the taunts of "voodoo science" and, meanwhile, the space nuts were collaborating with Nazis and passing off science fiction as science fact. Murray heard about people like me, recognized the possibility for a whole new branch of human endeavor and now look at us! The guardians of the frontier,

the first line of defense against the Red hordes. Ever vigilant, fearless and omniscient, never allowing our enemies a chance to sneak up on us again...

It had been a good night, he knew that. He handed over his notes and watched as Colonel Frers, Murray's adjutant, scanned the raw data, his expert eye quickly plucking out the best nuggets. Finally, he looked up at Vukovich, grinning wolfishly. "Those Commie bastards. Thought they'd pull the wool over our eyes. Got it into their stupid heads that if they snuck around at night we wouldn't notice. Real smart, doing it under cover, using rail lines." Tapping the sheaf of papers. "But you can see, it's plain as day: they're massing troops near the border, threatening ol' Tito again. Telling him in no uncertain terms to start toeing the party line, or else."

"D'you think they're bluffing? Is this a genuine threat or are we getting our socks in a twist over nothing?"

The Colonel, who had somehow missed action in both theaters of operation during the previous war, gave an impatient shrug. "Who cares? It'll give us a chance to demonstrate our level of preparedness, or lack thereof. Goose those boys up on the Hill, come appropriations time. Besides, with the Ivans, you don't want to show weakness. Gotta let 'em know we're out there, eyeballing them, our finger on the trigger." He hurried away to brief his superior. It was the kind of intel guaranteed to get the old man's juices flowing.

So orders would go out, troops placed on alert, a few pawns moved about on the great checkerboard known as Europe. Would it amount to anything? Secure the peace by alerting the godless Bolsheviks that their schemes had been uncovered and they

should tread carefully, the eyes of the Free World were upon them? It was a dangerous game, hide and seek with global implications.

Sometimes, when he was having trouble sleeping, Pete told himself he was helping maintain deterrence, averting a calamitous clash between the two super-powers. There were nights, increasingly rare, when he could *almost* bring himself to believe it.

Nobody wanted another war. Not really. The man in the White House, the brass at the Pentagon, the Reds and their minions and *apparatchiks*, these weren't stupid people. They knew the score. And most of the time they played by the rules. After all, there were certain formalities to be observed. Two societies, divided by history, language, ideology; two armies, poised for war. You had to strike a fine balance. Know when to call and when to fold. Sometimes things got tense. On the other hand, the on-going state of crisis quelled dissent and solidified popular opinion. Which simplified governance and helped keep their respective populations in line. It also fed endless streams of dollars (and rubles) into military-industrial combines that measured their worth in billions and corrupted every single politician they touched, left, right and center.

It was up to the spies and watchers to keep everybody honest.

Ludmilla's beloved Sergei was killed during the assault on the Japanese home islands in October, 1945. The war was supposed to have been over by then. They should have been married, preparing for the arrival of their first child. There would be ample food and little Tatyana (her choice) or Fyodor (his) would never want for anything. Their children would grow into a bright future, educated in the finest universities, traveling

around the world, experiencing many diverse cultures, representing a new generation, with exciting new ideas...

At Potsdam, the Americans promised to produce a miracle weapon, a device so powerful, they assured Comrade Stalin, that a single demonstration would convince the Japanese to sue for peace. But two test runs in early August finally forced the Americans to admit that their much-vaunted super weapon had fizzled. A billion dollar bust. Scientifically unsound, wholly impractical. A much-ballyhooed fiasco it would take the imperialists many years to live down.

And so, while MacArthur pored over plans for "Operation Downfall" and Truman dithered, spooked by the massive casualties an invasion of the Japanese mainland would incur, the Great Helmsman acted. Two hundred and fifty thousand Russian soldiers splashed ashore near Otaru and one of them was Sergei. *My first hours have been charmed*, he wrote later, *while others drop around me, I carry on without a scratch*. He didn't paint a very romantic view of his fellow soldiers. That fateful morning, half of them were drunk and the landing craft awash with sick, everyone desperate to be off, even if it meant wading out into machine gun fire.

They landed virtually unopposed and the Soviet juggernaut sped swiftly inland, whipped on by a leadership that wanted a *fait accompli* before the Americans got wind of what was going on.

It was a brutal, ugly campaign, no quarter given on either side. "I can't write in detail of some things," one of Sergei's notes went, "but let us just say that old scores are being settled." No one could forget the disgrace of 1905, the Czarist navy, grown fat and

complacent, relentlessly pursued and pummeled, out-sailed and over-powered by the crafty Nips. "The yellow man will pay the price for his aggression and cruelty."

One of the last letters she received from him and it was nothing but patriotic platitudes. It didn't sound like Sergei at all, the confidences and intimacies they had exchanged, the risks they'd taken together and damn the consequences!

Finally alerted to what they were missing, the Americans began a horrific aerial and naval bombardment of Japanese targets, including major population centers. It was the kind of total war they had perfected, along with the Brits, in the skies over Germany. These, of course, were the same Yanks who had waited until the last moment, with the German army literally at the gates of London, before declaring war and launching a counter-invasion, appropriately enough, from Plymouth. Too bad Churchill was already dead. He always put great faith in his American cousins. Refusing to believe they would betray him...

The drunken old fool.

All the histories and accounts Ludmilla read were unanimous on one point: the Japanese defended their homeland with a ferocity and determination that shocked their adversaries. They died *en masse* rather than surrender, and that went for civilians as well as soldiers. Even after the high command conceded defeat and the Emperor abdicated, many Japanese refused to capitulate. The fighting was savage, barbaric, rural farmers brandishing sharpened bamboo stakes, city-dwellers erecting barricades, fighting house to house, yard by yard.

The Japanese propagandists had done their job too well, the ordinary men and women thoroughly indoctrinated, imbued with a contempt and fear of the invading horde,

the atrocities committed by enemy soldiers feeding the jingoism and xenophobia that helped sustain and legitimize the Japanese insurgency.

The Great Patriotic War in the East finally wrapped up in the spring of 1947. There were still isolated pockets of resistance, militarists and right wing crazies refusing to acknowledge the hopelessness of their cause, exploding the occasional bomb or ambushing the odd motorcade. But those incidents became more and more infrequent; the damage, it seemed, had already been done.

For all intents and purposes, Japan had ceased to exist. What little that remained after years of incessant bombing and warfare was jointly administered by the USA and USSR, but neither side had any great desire to govern lands scoured and depopulated by armed conflict and its handmaidens Famine, Disease and Death.

The Allied coalition tried but it was simply not possible to feed hungry multitudes in the ruins of Europe and, at the same time, provide for their Japanese wards. There were shortages: medicine, shelter, even basic foodstuffs.

Asia would never forgive or forget America's role in what happened next. Who knows what the final death toll was? It was classified a state secret, as were the locations of many of the mass graves.

But the Motherland had taken no part in that dark chapter. Moscow, as Comrade Stalin assured the world with a foxy smile, did not have imperial ambitions. Such things were in direct contravention of the revolutionary spirit. She couldn't remember the exact wording but it went something like that. While the Americans struggled to feed and shelter the Japanese with winter fast approaching, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics withdrew all combat soldiers, leaving behind only a few advisors and diplomats, perhaps

a spy or three. And what did they ask in return? Oh, nothing much--the Kuril Islands and a few other innocuous lumps of rock, for purely strategic purposes.

Another great coup for the Father of All Nations, the Red Tsar!

She glanced at her watch, an expensive Swiss model, a gift from Colonel Laptev.

Who knows of my lavish tastes.

Further on that subject, a new *Beriozka* shop had recently opened on Blavatsky Prospekt. Very chic. She'd heard from an unimpeachable source that all the diplomats' wives shopped there, which told her everything she needed to know.

The lift was out of order again and on the way downstairs she encountered her next door neighbor, Rejdak. A revolting specimen of manhood and, it seemed, utterly smitten with her. So far she had managed to ward off his attentions but one had to be careful. You could never tell who might be a *stukach*. Every building had at least one and probably more. The fat old *telkas* downstairs wouldn't hesitate to denounce her the first chance they got. It wasn't wise to have too many enemies. And so, as much as she loathed herself for it, she pretended to be flattered by his advances, tried not to recoil as he fawned over her.

"Such a lovely wrap," he crooned, referring to a beautiful sable stole that she would be paying for, as the joke went, until either Stalin died or a Pole was elected Pope. Not Russian made, *Scandinavian*. An impulsive, stupid act on her part; her state stipend was generous but hardly accorded her the disposable income required by her roving, acquisitive eye. She couldn't bear to watch him stroking the gorgeous fur with his greasy fingers. At last she was able to extricate herself with a half-hearted promise to get

together at a later date. Hurried down the poorly lit stairwell, her heels clattering on the treacherous steps.

A black Zil was waiting outside, one of the new models they'd recently introduced. Her driver was a thick-headed Georgian with a deplorable accent that reduced even the briefest exchange to a mime show as they struggled to make themselves understood.

When they passed Blavatsky Prospekt, she rapped on the glass partition but he ignored her. The dark sedan sped along a lane reserved for those on official business, making good time. She tried not to sulk over missing a chance to pick up some authentic American blue jeans. He took her directly to the Ministry. She had to show her pass three times before she could report to her immediate supervisor.

Some cruel bureaucrat had assigned Vasili the smallest office in the building. A converted broom closet. She could barely get through the door; poor, fat Vasili, meanwhile, all a hundred and fifty kilos of him, was wedged in so tight behind his desk he couldn't rise to greet her. Its surface was a debris field of half-eaten food and mounds of stained paper. It was said that he lived at the desk for *months* at a time, terrified he might miss a call from the Inner Sanctum. It could come at any hour, day or night. The Boss was a notorious insomniac.

"The Americans have been buzzing about," he informed her without preamble. "I think it's time we fed them a little more candy..."

To read the exciting conclusion of this novelette, zip over to Amazon and snap up the Kindle version, with accompanying cover art and an Afterword by the author.