

CHECKMATE

by Kent Walker

"We have liftoff!" The voice crackled in Max's earphones, and that was all he heard until the ship left Earth's atmosphere. Then he allowed himself a weak smile. It had finally been done. Several decades ago, in the 1970's, there had been a joint launch between the Soviet Union and the United States, but this would be the first joint landing on the moon between the two powerful countries. Since the last cooperative effort, there had been several cold wars and a general decrease in space exploration, due mainly to poor economy. Now, however, the two nations were back on speaking terms, and this mission would be a giant step in the political world for both.

Max studied Alexi for a moment, wondering how the Russian felt about him. As far as Max was concerned, Alexi was just another astronaut, and a pretty good one. Maybe if he wasn't so damned serious, Max could get to like him. He was a professional, that's for sure. He knew his business, and concentrated on it a great deal. He left little time for conversation, and that was fine with Max. He wasn't much of a talker himself. He enjoyed his work, and devoted a lot of time to it.

Though it took almost a full day to reach the moon's orbit, it seemed to Max only a few hours.

"Run a check, will you, Alexi?" Max spoke slowly to make it easier for the Russian. Max watched the blank face of the cosmonaut as he ran a routine check of fuel, supplies, and oxygen. Then he saw Alexi frown, and run through the series again. When he started the third check, Max asked him what was wrong.

"The oxygen supply. It's impossibly low!"

"Let me see." Max studied the computer read-out. He asked the computer how far the oxygen supply would carry them.

"According to the computer, Alexi, we've got enough oxygen to carry us 51.382% of the way home. He paused. "Or enough for one of us to make it all the way."

They had landed on the moon now, the computer doing all the work.

"Alexi, are you thinking what I am? This baby is run through hundreds of checks; there is no way the base boys could have accidentally forgotten to give us enough oxygen, our most important supply!"

"You are saying they are trying to kill us? Why?"

"No, Alexi. Not us. Just one. There's enough oxygen to get one of us home. Don't you see? They're playing political chess with us. Which ever one of us makes it home, his country will be able to say they're the strongest, they have the will to survive and live, while the other country is weak and couldn't adapt. They'll release notices saying something like the oxygen supply was

damaged, and one, the weaker, died, while the other one applied good ol' American or Russian know-how. You see? We're being used as political pawns!"

"What can we do?" Alexi asked, feeling angry at being used.

"I say we can't let them win, Alexi. I say we go out on the moon's surface, and just stay there until our oxygen runs out. Sooner or later they'll send somebody up after us, and they'll realize that their little game didn't work, that we wouldn't fight each other."

"I think that is best, Max. We have little choice."

Both astronauts slowly put their helmets on, realizing they had only a few hours left. The Russian was outside first, with Max close behind.

"What shall we do, Max?"

"Let's take a look over there, Alexi. See? Where the craters are larger."

As Alexi turned to where Max was pointing, Max turned the switch on Alexi's helmet that cut off his oxygen supply. Alexi turned around, shocked. Max was surprised at how little time it took. He gathered up Alexi's oxygen supply tank, and said quietly, "Sorry ol' buddy, but I think I know better than you what has to be done."

He climbed back into the landing module and set a course for home.

For several hours Max thought about Alexi and the damned game-playing politicians. Then, before he realized it, his landing target was in sight. He was to land beside a large platform where all the big-wigs for both countries were. They would all shake his hand and make speeches that said nothing but lies.

As he got closer to the platform, Max switched the controls over to manual. He could see the leaders of the United States and Soviet Union waving and smiling and looking important.

Max turned his ship directly at them.

"This is for Alexi and me," he said.

ALVIN

by John Cunningham

Alvin's hands were still shaking as he finished reading his poem to the creative writing class. He slowly looked up into the circle of faces which surrounded him. Every eye in the room was focused coldly and critically on him. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The room was silent for a long time. He fearfully awaited his literary execution.

"Ahem."

The professor cleared his throat.

"To get things started - Horton. What did you think of the poem?" asked Professor Wheeler, addressing himself to the first student whose name he could remember.

Horton looked down at his copy of the poem. One copy had been passed to every student. Horton studied it intently. Finally, he looked up. Like a judge pronouncing sentence, he spoke.

"I liked it. It thought it was really good."

Alvin felt lightheaded. Someone liked it!

Professor Wheeler nodded. He turned suddenly to another student, cocking one eyebrow as he spoke.

"I'd like to hear what you thought of it Greda."

Freda scanned the poem rapidly.

"I liked it too," she offered, "especially the line 'glowing sun astride the earth'. It's a good image."

Alvin's head was beginning to swell. No one in the class seemed to notice. They were all trying to think of something they would say if the



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