

IMAGINATION

*Stories
of Science
and Fantasy*

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PIONEER

By William Hardy

If you could travel through time to a few years hence you'd find a stone monument in honor and memory of a brave deed you may shy away from!

I DIDN'T much like the way Max—that's the guy who trained me—fastened the broad leather straps over my body. There was a smell of nervous excitement in the air and Max's hand trembled as he fumbled with the buckles. Thinking back on it, the whole morning had been like that. Nervous and excited.

Right after breakfast, Max had given me a good bath and loaded me in the car. I always like to ride in the car and this time Max even allowed me to stick my head out the window. He doesn't usually let me do that, but I was too engrossed in the exhilarating rush of air to pay any attention to the change of routine. When we drew up in front of a large brick building a multitude of strange and peculiar odors assailed my nose, tantalizingly anonymous. Max's big hand caught me before I got halfway through the window. That disgusted me, because I wanted to investigate the funny smells, and I pouted all the way into the building. As the events of the next hour

progressed I got madder and madder.

First there was the doctor, poking around in my mouth, stabbing my eyes with a blinding beam of light, and prodding and squeezing my body. It reminded me of the day I came to live with Max and I was tempted to take a hunk out of this doctor's hand like I did the other one. But Max was there and that stopped me. I didn't want to see the hurt look that would come to his eyes every time I did something wrong.

After the doctor finished Max led me into a gleaming white room where I was surrounded by a gushing mob of women dressed in white uniforms. Their "Ohs!" and "Ahs!" and "Isn't he beautiful!"—I'm not beautiful and I detest the description—put the finishing touch to what had once been a wonderful day. I flopped to the floor, trying to ignore them. Then, indignities of indignities, one of the "girls" tried to pick up my eighty pounds of blue-gray masculinity. That was the last straw!

I let out a deep-throated growl, and sprang clear of her encircling arms. Fangs bared, ears flat against my head, I must have presented a terrifying appearance to the women, because they fled to all corners of the room, squealing and bleating like a bunch of sheep.

For the fun of it, I made a short dash at the one who had tried to pick me up. With a high-pitched scream she slumped to the floor in a dead faint. I could hardly keep from laughing as I turned to search for a new victim. About this time Max came barging through the door and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, putting an end to my fun. He wasn't mad, although he pretended to be, and I could detect the humor in his voice while he scolded me.

Back in the car again, Max roared with laughter while patting me on the head and saying, "You old devil, you!" in that special way he has when amused at something I've done. When he finally got control of himself, he started the car and drove in the direction of the funny smells. As the smells got stronger, I began to get uneasy. Looking at Max, I sensed that he was uneasy too. "What was going on?" I wondered as the car dipped down a ramp and entered a dimly lit cave where the smells became overpowering.

The cave was jammed with huge tank-trucks and that was where the strange smells were coming from. I don't know what was in the trucks,

but Max said something about nitric acid and hydrozine fuel when he noticed my interest in them. Leaving the car, we walked down a short passage branching off the cave, climbed a couple flights of stairs and emerged in the bright sunlight. I nearly yipped in surprise as I caught sight of the over-grown thing beside me. It looked for all the world like a giant cigar that had been cut in half and stood on end. There were still three or four trucks around the base of the thing and a kind of fear spread through my mind. The magic of the strange smells was gone and here, at close quarters, the smell was raw and uninviting.

MAX led me to a group of men and they talked for a few minutes. I didn't pay much attention to what they said until one of them, a big man with a lot of stars on his shoulder, reached down and patted my back. "Better get him loaded," said the Starman. "Only ten minutes till blast-off."

Max led me to a kind of open-air elevator and started up the side of the gleaming monster. At the top Max put me into a padded cage inside the cigar, fastened the straps, and patted me. Then he was gone and a large door slid into place, leaving me in vile smelling, pitch darkness. I lay there quietly, but the uneasy feeling kept getting worse. A sudden hissing noise nearly scared me to death; then I

remembered my training. The hissing was only air, the same as had been in the cage at home, and wouldn't hurt me. Even so, I struggled against the straps, trying to reach them with my teeth. Nothing doing and again I lay quiet—waiting.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew my cage was trembling violently and a powerful roaring dinned in my ears. This lasted only a second, then something crushed my body flat in the cage. My legs grew heavy and a racking, tearing pain ripped at my muscles. A black film blotted out the lighter blackness of my cage.

I don't know what happened in the interval, but when I came to the roar was gone and my body felt like it was floating in the air. My head felt swollen and I experienced some difficulty in swallowing. I couldn't hear a thing except the hiss of air and I was suddenly overcome by the feeling that I was a long way from home.

Slowly I became aware that my body was regaining its weight. The cage was becoming quite warm now and I licked my nose, wishing for a cold drink of water. Suddenly I was jerked against the straps and I forgot all about my other troubles. The jerks didn't hurt me as much as they scared me. I had experienced somewhat the same thing when Max hit the car brakes hard, but he wasn't here to pat me reassuringly.

The cage was getting real hot now and the jerks were coming with increasing frequency. The air had stopped too and I desperately wanted a drink. The last thing I remember before the crash was wishing that Max would open the door and let me out like he always had at home.

Max's gentle voice sounded a long way off. "Good boy!" he kept repeating. "Good boy!" I couldn't find the strength to open my eyes so I just lay quietly and listened to the talk, thankful that the smell, that had penetrated the entire day, was gone now.

"I was afraid that those parachutes wouldn't cut the speed enough to get him down alive," said the Starman who had patted my back earlier.

"No sign of radiation," said a strange voice. "His blood count is normal and he isn't hurt physically unless there are internal injuries."

"What about his weakness?" asked Max, patting me.

"You'd be weak too, if you had been through the ordeal he has," said Strange-voice. "He'll get over that soon and live to father a good many space-puppies."

Strange-voice was absolutely right in his forecast and it's with pardonable fatherly pride that I lead each new family to the great stone monument which reads: "*In honor of Rex, a German Shepherd dog, who pioneered man's first flight into outer space.*"