

# IMAGINATION

*Stories  
of Science  
and Fantasy*

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# COMBATMAN

*By John Massie Davis*

**During colonizing operations a Combatman was always in charge — in case of trouble. This trip we really had some — a whole planet of it!**

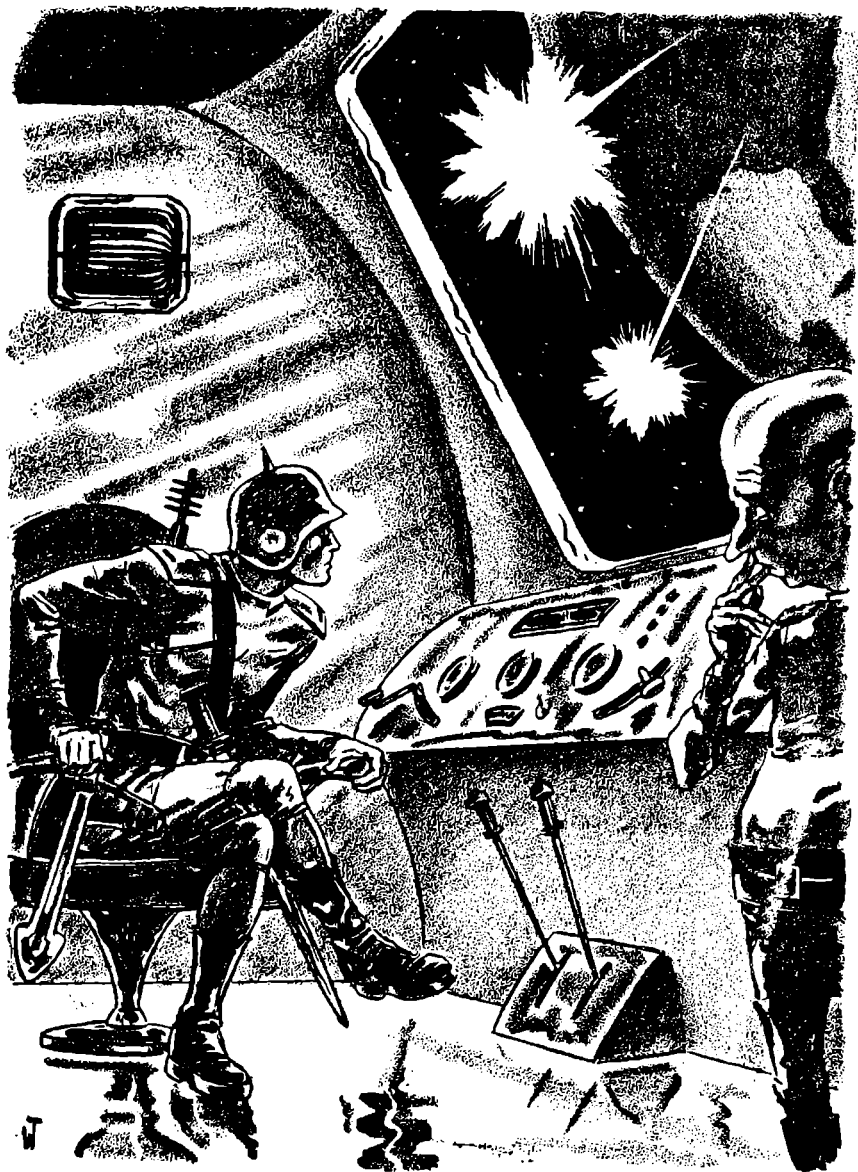
**A**S Computerman, I was the first to come out of deep freeze after we kicked clear of the Time-Warp. So I left the needles in my wrists—the tubes let me reach Brain One—and started punching data from the instruments while my fingers were still half stiff. Finally, stiff fingers or not, I had all the data racked into the primary feed and decided to check on the passengers. It amused me somewhat to note that even Brain One was strictly stalling for time when it came to figuring out where we were, and why. There was much buzzing and clicking but no tape feeding out, yet. Well, let the Brain figure it out. I had other things to do.

I strolled back to secondary freeze unit and checked Combatman. He was on top of the heap, of course—as stiff as a fresh steak, so I stuck the needles in his wrists and switched to defrost. Automatic lift pulled him out and beneath

him was the male Homonorm and the two female Homonorms. They came out, too, as the lifts worked, and pretty soon the cabin looked like a morgue—or a cannibal's shop, if you prefer. Anyway, they were defrosting, so I left 'em to make a check on Brain One and see what brilliant, if mechanical conclusion it had reached. Should be at least an hour before Combatman thawed—even with the needles pumping.

Brain One was feeding out tape now, slow as a snail considering its cycling rate, so I figured we were a long way from home. Okay with me—I'd been around and knew that if we could get somewhere we could get back. But I wanted, and wanted bad, the data from Time-Warp gauges. So I watched the tape, decoding mentally as it fed out and feeling, for a Computerman, an emotion similar to impatience.

We were approaching—the Brain



told me—a type three planet, radiations okay, atmosphere higher in oxygen than home, gravity slightly lighter in pull than normal—the same junk I'd been picking up since we started colonizing. Land masses stable, water in the air, semi-condensed. Good place for colonizing, and this pleased me. We were out to establish and leave the Homonorms for a generation, and Brain One had figured all the details out while I was sitting in freeze like a hamburger. So far, so good.

One thing annoyed, or puzzled me. I kept throwing data from TV and Radar into Feed-back and asking about population, life forms, land denizens. All Brain One came up with was Insufficient Data. All right. It would be just another routine landing on another distant planet. Then I heard the noise behind me and turned. Combatman stood in the doorway, his skin still bluish from the freeze, his eyes just clearing and working into focus.

I looked him over while he stood there, somewhat surprised—if one can ever be surprised at what his race did. He was hung with enough weapons to stop a division of Homonorms and I wondered, as I always did, at the origin of his race. His type always came drifting down from somewhere north, back home, and all our radar and planes

had never found their homeland. None of them ever talked with humans except to nose in on our expeditions or break up our wars. This one was quite a specimen, maybe six feet, about 180 pounds, with the quiet and arrogant strength of his race. He took a deep breath, still leaning on the door frame.

“Get me some whiskey,” his voice was hoarse from disuse and the Time-Warp, “and get it now.”

“Now, see here,” I began, “I'm computerman and in charge of this ship and . . .”

I DIDN'T finish. With the quiet sureness of a jungle cat he had crossed the room, taken a handful of my tunic and lifted me from the chair—in spite of the fact that gravity was nearly normal now because of the landing jets. His voice was almost velvety.

“Perhaps you didn't hear me. I will repeat once more.” He paused while I considered striking him and then, sensibly, changed my mind. “Get me some whiskey.” Then he dropped me back into the chair.

I'm not Computerman for nothing, so I computed the situation in maybe a thousandth of a second. No one could push me around, so to prevent being pushed around I got him his whiskey. He knock-

ed off about a half pint at a swallow and in a few minutes his skin lost its bluish tinge. He was awake, and his quick eyes swept the gauges and the TV-Radar image.

"When do we land?" He made no attempt to be courteous.

I checked Brain One's tape, somewhat rattled. "Twenty-one minutes, four seconds," I started, resisting a strange impulse to say 'sir', "Near water, fresh, altitude under one mile from . . ."

"That's all," he said. "Thanks." He left the room like a cat, crouching slightly as he went through the door, leaping through and backing against the wall, but fast, once he cleared. His weapons, all of them, were so skillfully hung that he didn't make a sound. Somehow, I enjoyed watching the play of those muscles and felt rather glad to have him along, rough as he was. Outlying planets often have warlike combat organizations of their own, and Combatmen have saved many expeditions like this. Something in their nature, or training—or both—seems to make them invincible.

I turned back to Brain One, checked the wiring on the denizen circuit and tried to get more information about possible inhabitants. No luck. Either there were none or they were so highly civilized they could block off our probing

rays. That had happened before, and it usually meant a minor war. We always won, though we sometimes had to dig in and send for the Control Fleet from home. The Fleet was run by Combatmen, though no Homonorm had ever figured out how they eased into all the key positions. They were quite a race, all right.

So I sat watching the Radar-screen and the planet, enlarging rapidly. It looked pretty good—about a quarter to a third land mass, I guessed—just like home. Combatman came back in the room, quietly.

"Your pap-fed colonists are waking," he grunted. "Better go and wet-nurse them. They might catch cold." He sat down in the pilot's chair, much to my annoyance, and swilled away at his bottle. I noticed he'd replaced the original crock, and felt a moment's concern. After all, we depended for basic safety on his training, in the event of encountering hostility. He seemed utterly unconcerned as he lazily watched the screen.

**T**HE Homonorms were doing all right, complaining as usual about the cold and asking silly questions about where we were and what year it was—or would be at home. I ducked the questions, gave them their hypos and went back to Brain One and the con-

trol panel. One look at controls and I started boiling; this was the last straw.

"Now, goddamit," I started, "you can boss me around, but when it comes to . . ."

"Shut up!"

"I will not shut up . . ."

"Okay." He was calm, leisurely, even—but before I realized it he was rising, crossed the room and I had an arm behind me. It didn't hurt but I felt pretty helpless. Completely helpless, to be truthful.

"Could it be," he appeared to be bored, "That you are tired of having two arms?" He twisted slightly and I got the idea so I shut up, for the second time. After a few seconds he sat down in my chair and had another drink. When I could talk without sputtering I worked up my mildest voice.

"Would you tell me," I almost choked on the next word, "*Please*, what in hell is the idea of circling at twenty miles, then dropping to ten and circling some more? We're wasting tons of fuel which we may need for—"

"Sure, brainy one, I'll tell you. I want to see what this place looks like and I'm picking the landing site. Not you or that pile of rattling tin there." He gestured contemptuously at Brain One.

"Pile of tin!" I couldn't say more so I went back to the rear

and helped the Homonorms find food and the simple plastic clothes they'd be wearing. The ship lurched suddenly as it changed course at twenty miles and started circling. Even back here I could hear Brain One clacking in protest over the conflicting instructions. That big lunk of a fighting man, of course, hadn't had sense enough to punch Clear and Recompute when he changed course and I could see the tape in my mind's eye pouring frantically out with Data Please, Data Please . . .

Oh, well.

Homonorms were thawing okay but crying like babies from Time-Warp sickness and space fright. I expected this and let them cry it out. Meanwhile I got busy with Sensory Receptors to see if anything we knew of could be blocking Brain One's circuits. This lack of info about the denizens had me a little worried: it wasn't often Brain One came up with a blank, on any subject. It made me furious to be working like mad here while that big oaf lounged in *my* chair sipping up a year's supply of stimulant. Defending the ship was his job; he should be trying to find out what was doing below us. Instead, he sat around watching Radarscreen just like he was watching the fights his race staged back home for amusement.

The ship lurched violently. Then

it lurched again. I started forward, worried, but the tailjets blasted and I slammed against a wall, pinned tight. The pressure cut my wind and I fainted. My last recollection was the smell of scorching duralumin. We'd been hit, by something.

WHEN I revived, we were back at Gravnorm and I staggered, literally, back to control. My nose was still bleeding, and the Homonorms, of course, were still unconscious. Combatman sat comfortably in my padded chair, almost dreamily watching the screen. I felt a surge of anger, then realized I was too feeble to support such an emotion. Remembering my Psycho training I redirected to curiosity.

"What . . ." my voice sounded pretty shaky and Combatman handed me the bottle, grinning.

"Quite a race down there," he seemed pleased. Then he spat, expertly, the result landing on the Radarscreen. "Can you work that thing?"

"Of course," I muttered, half-insulted.

"Okay. We're at a hundred miles. Get that in focus as of two miles, slow the ship and prepare to hold stationary when I see what I want to know."

Weakly I fumbled with the controls, sniffing back the blood from

my nose.

"And turn off this tin god of yours," he continued. "That clacking racket annoys me." Casually, he kicked the part of Brain One nearest him, which was the back of Wiring Panel Six.

"Oh, no . . ." I began. But I did as I was told and ran Brain One through three clearing cycles, just to make sure. There was no telling what this lummoX may have done in my absence. Now I'd have to check everything and feed in the information all over again.

Combatman leaned back in the chair like he expected dental work, and yawned luxuriously. He watched as the screen blurred and focused, blurred and focused. It was sweeping at two miles and the ship was slowing. We dropped tail down and Grav changed faster than the interior hull moved. Finally we settled, and coasted above this planet.

The ship lurched, twice this time almost simultaneously. Then it lurched steadily. Combatman threw the All Screens switch and watched the Radar. By now, he was tense.

"At a hundred miles . . ." he muttered. "What a race this is!"

He watched the screen with eyes that reminded me more of a cat's than a human's.

"Stop!"

From habit I threw the master

Out Switch and everything stopped—our motion coordinated precisely with the planet's, the Radar focused where it had been—and I got slammed against a wall again, of course. Well—I might as well get used to it. When my eyes cleared I studied the image. It was a rather crude city of considerable size, though poorly designed from the light, ventilation and transport angle. There was considerable movement, apparently ground vehicles of some sort. Then I looked at Combatman. His face was registering disbelief and something resembling alarm—though I'd never heard of any of his race being really frightened.

**T**HE missile warning light blinked frantically and the ship started lurching and pitching again. Combatman turned toward me and his face was taut and urgent.

"How soon can you get in to Time-Warp?"

"And—and *leave*?"

"Right, and the sooner the better." He flipped the height control and we moved, smoothly this time, up away from the missiles blasting outside our protective screen. "There'll be no colonizing done here."

"But-but our orders were to . . ."

"No colonizing here. Put your Homonorms back in the freezer and

set up for return. Do it now."

Stunned, I went rearward and told the people. They didn't like the idea very much, but regulations said that when the ship was attacked, Combatman was absolute boss. Then I returned. Combatman shot a glance at me and I nodded, then went to work on the Control panel, reversing the whole set up.

"When you finish I'll get in your ice box," Combatman said. "And when you get out of Time-Warp destroy that wiring. None of your ships is to come back here."

I digested this slowly, wondering how to report to the council. "Why not?" I ventured. "Perhaps with part of the Control Fleet . . ."

"The whole Control Fleet wouldn't last two days on a desert of that world, Brainboy," he said. His eyes misted faintly for a fraction of a second. "Those denizens, as you call them, are all members of my race, and this planet was my home—we called it Earth."

He yawned and strode to the rear and the freezer. At the portal he turned and grinned. "And don't ask me how we get back and forth. I might get mad and have my whole family drop over—in-laws and all."

I didn't really understand him, so went on with my wiring.