

THE 10TH SCIENCE FICTION MEGAPACK™



Featuring
David Gerrold's
HUGO and
NEBULA AWARD
WINNER
"The Martian
Child"!

JAY LAKE
KEITH LAUMER
KEITH ROBERTS
AVRAM DAVIDSON
PAMELA SARGENT
2 GREAT NEW STORIES BY:
DAVID GERROLD
LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS



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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

I can't believe it's been almost a year since we released *The Ninth Science Fiction MEGAPACK™*! I have lots of excuses, of course (mostly having to do with time—the big SF volumes take a *lot* of time), but here at last is #10. And I promise the next volume won't take nearly as long.

The 10th Science Fiction MEGAPACK™ features David Gerrold's "The Martian Child," which won the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and HOMer Awards (Best Novelette Category)... Plus two-and-a-third original stories, (a new Feghoot by David Gerrold, a new short story by Hugo Award-winner Lawrence Watt-Evans, and part 3 of a 3-part story by Connor Freff Cochran [parts 1 and 2—previously published—are also included, of course!]) Plus classics by Keith Roberts, Eando Binder, Alan E. Nourse, E.E. "Doc" Smith—with the complete novel, *First Lensman*, and many more. More recent tales by Jay Lake, Pamela Sargent, Mary Turzillo, Rhys Hughes, and others. And poems by Ray Bradbury and Hannes Bok.

As if that's not enough, we're also serialize Tony Rothman's novel, *Firebird*, with Part 1 in this issue. *Kirkus* wrote: "Prominent physicist and writer Tony Rothman, PhD, uses his technical expertise to create a rare and timely novel based on genuine science. Not science fiction, the science of *Firebird* is as real as the collision between science and politics it portrays. Rothman, who has taught physics at Princeton and Harvard Universities, is the author of eleven books." (How's that for an review, from one of the leading library journals?) The serialized book is another reason volume 11 will follow shortly. We don't want to keep readers waiting.

Enjoy!

—John Betancourt
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ABOUT THE SERIES

Over the last few years, our MEGAPACK™ ebook series has grown to be our most popular endeavor. (Maybe it helps that we sometimes offer them as premiums to our mailing list!) One question we keep getting asked is, "Who's the editor?"

The MEGAPACK™ ebook series (except where specifically credited) are a group effort. Everyone at Wildside works on them. This includes John Betancourt (me), Carla Coupe, Steve Coupe, Shawn Garrett, Helen McGee, Bonner Menking, Colin Azariah-Kribbs, A.E. Warren, and many of Wildside's authors...who often suggest stories to include (and not just their own!)

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TORQUING VACUUM, by Jay Lake

Originally published in *Clarksworld Magazine*, Feb. 2010.

Spanich had been up three shifts straight working on a drive alignment issue aboard ICV *Mare Ibrium* {13 pairs}. She was a charter—a rare thing, in a starship, which signified pockets deeper than planetary budgets—and the passengers reportedly wanted to lift out, but her pilot wasn't lighting up without the alignment problem being solved. Spanich could get behind this. Faced with the choice of a well-monied tongue lashing or being smeared in rainbow quarks across a few dozen lightyears, he'd take the dressing down every time.

Besides, he was the only drive tech on Estacada Orbital certified to work the finicky and bizarre paired drives that post-Mistake starships relied upon. Supraluminal travel was so sporadic that if the system got half a dozen outside visitors a year, it was considered busy. And most of them flew with their own maintenance crews as a matter of course. *Mare Ibrium* {13 pairs} was practically a yacht, the smallest starship he'd ever seen or heard of.

The shipmind kept whispering specs and test results to him in a voice that made the hairs on his arms prickle and stiffen. Fair enough. A man shouldn't get too comfortable with the machines that kept him alive. Mistrust was healthy.

Thank the saints he wasn't signed onto this bucket for this run. Their quantum bloc cross-processors weren't piping temporal data flow correctly. No one had liked his suggestion to pull the whole rig and reconfigure on a bench back at the station. A week's work, at a minimum. But Spanich wouldn't trust *his* life to the jigger he'd been ordered to attempt in the name of expediency.

He sighed and focused on the circuit joins. Nose-to-panel, flat on his back, falling asleep with the smartprobe in his hand, Spanich knew he was still better off working here than back in the engineering pool rotation.

"Domitian," said the shipmind. "I think it's time for you to stand down."

"What!?" Spanich snapped.

"You've just probed the same shunt five times."

He sighed, unclipped his instruments, and wriggled back into the engineering bay. That was only moderately less claustrophobic than the service accessway he'd just spent twenty hours in, minus breaks for pee and chow. "Home," Spanich said to no one in particular, then began packing up.

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Ribo thumped from the big speakers embedded in the floor of the Bar Gin. When the bass riffs hit, peanut shells danced across the table like cootch girls on payday. Most place used ambient nano to whisper music, but Bar Gin was so old school they probably hadn't even invented reading, writing or differential equations back when the place had been founded.

Spanich huddled in a booth and wondered why he hadn't gone home to sleep. 'Home' being a two-point-two meter-long tube, a meter in diameter. He paid extra for rack space for his hardsuit, and extra extra to make sure parts didn't vanish from it during off shifts. Still, sleep would have made more sense for him than crouching here

over some of Bitter Jane's homebrew algae beer listening to music which had been crap when he was a kid, and not improved since.

Then Austen wandered into the joint, and Spanich's world grew a little brighter. That boy just *moved* right. Cute enough kid, and buff in a way that kept the eye resting easy, and he smelled like heaven on a Friday night, but the way Austen walked sometimes kept Spanich up late, sweating.

He raised his hand, waved to Austen, but the kid's gaze slid right over Spanich like he wasn't there. Was it too dark back here in the booth? Maybe too much toke smoke in the air.

Who the hell was he kidding?

Austen No Last Name didn't give a shit about Domitian Spanich. Sometimes the kid gave a shit about Domitian Spanich's pay chitty, when the keycard was fat with local thalers, or more rarely, Imperial schillings. Except payday was seventeen shifts away right now, and Austen could scent 'broke' the way a sniffer could find a carbon dioxide breach in a scrubber tank.

Spanich sank deeper into his algae beer and wondered why the hell he couldn't ever fall in love with anyone available. There was no lack of available talent. Half the guys torquing vacuum here on Estacada Orbital swung his way. For his own part, Spanich knew he was decent enough looking, and a good lover—it didn't take raging egotism to sort out those kinds of truths, not once you'd left teen hormones behind. But somehow he always tumbled for the pretty boys, the working kids, who'd roll over and whisper sweet nothings while they let him play their bodies like harps, but always ran off with each other for the real laughs or the quiet times.

"Dommie," said a voice for the second time.

Startled, he looked up from his beer, slopping some of it onto the tabletop. A warning blinked with pixel-rotted irritation from beneath the greenish puddles, but he ignored that.

Austen!

Spanich tried desperately to stay cool. "Hey."

His sometime-lover sat down. "Mind if I join you?"

That crooked smile always melted Spanich. "Uh, yeah. Let, let me get you something."

"I'm locked and stocked," Austen said. Those violet eyes seemed to glitter in the bar's lousy lighting. "Bitter Jane's sending something over. Said she'd put it on your tab."

"I don't have a—" Spanich managed to shut himself up before he looked any stupider. "Oh, right. Good. Happy to buy you one." He tried to fight the goofy grin he could feel taking over his face. "Or more," he blurted. *Lots more.*

Thank the pressure demons this place was so dark. Austen couldn't see him blush, at least.

"Don't mind if I don't." The kid's crooked smile flashed into an answering grin that looked so free, so easy, that Spanich wondered why he even bothered to try.

He kept himself cautious. Don't hope, don't hope, don't hope. "So, uh, what's up?"

A drink arrived on a rollerbot, a cybernetic waiter converted from a level one security drone. For all Spanich had ever been able to tell, it might still be a kill platform. You couldn't know, not with Bitter Jane in play.

Austen picked up the long, graceful ceramometallic stem, frost sparkling diamond bright as mist curled off its sides.

Great, thought Spanich. *One of Jane's thousand-thaler cryoliquid specials.* Someone here was pushing their luck. Spanich had a sick fear that he was the chump. There was his next pay chitty gone, and a decent portion of his liquid savings. So to speak.

"Well... The kid took a long, slow sip, batting his eyelashes.

Focus, focus.

"You've been working on the *Mare Ibrium*, right?"

Spanich winced. Austen even pronounced the old, old term wrong, as if he were speaking Classical English instead of Preclassical Spanish or Mayan or whatever language of lost Earth those words came from.

"*Mare Ibrium*, thirteen pairs." Spanich corrected the kid's pronunciation and usage both. "And the shipminds are mighty picky about getting their numbers right."

"Shipminds," Austen said. "Yeah. Whatever."

In that moment, Spanich suddenly wondered what it was he'd found so alluring about Austen. Sure, the kid was smoking hot, like fire in an oxygen plant, but had he never noticed how *dumb* Austen was. Maybe some dirtball farmer wouldn't know the difference, but how could anyone survive in an orbital habitat and be so ignorant of the basic etiquette of ships and shipminds? The kind of ignorant that got people spaced out an airlock, or their breathing license erased from the station records.

"Look.... Spanich felt obscurely deflated and betrayed. "Don't worry about *Mare Ibrium* thirteen. There's a charter riding her this trip, and I hear the woman is deep-fried trouble on a fuckstick, if you catch my datastream. Let's have a drink and, I don't know, go dancing. Forget about starships, kid. They never mattered to you before, did they?"

Austen shrugged and smiled. The wattage seemed to have gone out of his expression, but maybe that was just Spanich. "I need something, Dommie. Something only you can help me with."

"Only me, huh?" The words just slipped out of his triple-shift exhausted mouth. "And that's why you're sucking down a thousand-thaler drink on my tab? To get in good?"

The metalloceramic stem hit the table with a click that would have cracked ordinary plastic. "Dommie, please..."

Spanich stood up. "I'm tired, I need to sleep, I'm going home."

Austen shot out of his chair, grabbing for Spanich's rough, greasy hand with his own slim, manicured fingers. "At least let me come with you."

Close, with that smell, though he knew them both for idiots, Spanich couldn't say no to that. Even if he'd been awake enough to stop this disaster before it got any worse, with Austen standing so close his hormones were kicking ass and taking names.

Home they went, together.

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The tube's comm panel beeped him out of dreams into the reality of an itching belly—cum always dried that way on his skin—and a gently snoring Austen. Spanich nudged a crusty towel aside and punched the sleepshift override.

That didn't stop the beeping.