

ORIGINS OF THE JACK COMMER SERIES



**THE  
BALLOON SHIP  
INTERVIEWS**

**MICHAEL D. SMITH**

# **The Balloon Ship Interviews**

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For my wife Nancy



# Introduction

## Twelve Character Interviews for *Balloon Ship Armageddon*

The idea for a seventh and final Jack Commer, Supreme Commander adventure came in February 2018, but I was unsure how the concept could form a novel. In the early stages of developing plot and characters, with the book still untitled but the notion of *Balloon Ship Armageddon* already taking hold, I spoke with twelve characters from the previous six books, wanting to know what energies they could bring to the novel. Each character got a post on [blog.sortmind.com](http://blog.sortmind.com) over four weeks in April and May 2018. Many of them spent a lot of time arguing with me, and two of them kept interrupting others' interviews.

As I wrote at the time:

*I don't mind spilling any plot for Book Seven because a) nobody reads this blog anyway (Did I really say that?) and b) the plot is so vague right now that it doesn't matter. All plot ideas revealed here are completely up in the air. The characters just need to be heard.*

And they all got heard, surprising me with their eloquence and their concerns, even the characters who were eventually cut. Though Waterfall Sequence, Ranna Kikken Commer, and Jackie Vespertine had extensive exposure in the novel's first draft, they were essentially side characters muddling the plot, so I cut them except for minor mentions in the final MS. T'ohj'puv and Joe Commer wound up with merely supporting roles, but the other seven formed the core of the book.

Rick Ballard was initially slated to be written out after a ghastly death in chapter one, but his icky, testosterone-laced personality barged into the rest of the interviews and infiltrated the final novel as well. Jack's son Jonathan James confronted his reputation for major, ego-tripping chaos creation and stepped up to a demanding role. Jack and his wife Amav underwent some necessary psychological discoveries about themselves and their marriage.

Amy Nortel found her promised niche as a truly over-the-top evil genius vixen. That's her on the cover, Jack's old high school English AP teacher, rejuvenated to twenty-five. She's like the actress who shows up for the audition determined to dominate the show, and she almost did.

That role fell to two characters: the brazen Laurie Lachrer 283 robot and the human she's modeled on, genius physician/engineer Laurie Lachrer. Human Laurie, originally to have been fully replaced by her robot twin for this book, surprised me by fiercely protesting her exclusion and haranguing her way back for a major role. She and her robot argue about who's the most qualified Laurie, and the quarrel continues into the novel.

The author and characters ponder plot ideas that find expression in the final *Balloon Ship Armageddon*. When I re-edited the entire Jack Commer series in 2020 I did make a chronology change, beginning the solar system disasters in 2028 as opposed to 2020, generously providing us eight more years.



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# Rick Ballard

April 26, 2018

**Mike:** Okay, our first interviewee is Rick Ballard, formerly Navigation Officer on the *Typhoon VI*, then a mutineer, kidnapper, and traitor who--

**Rick Ballard:** Hey, hold on, man--traitor's too strong a word there! When what I was trying to accomplish--

**Mike:** Well, in kidnapping Laurie Lachrer and in seeking to turn the *Typhoon VI* over to renegade elements--

**Ballard:** Piss on this! I had my reasons. Okay, maybe I went a little overboard, but--

**Mike:** You were killed by Jonathan James Commer's dog Trotter, but were miraculously reconstructed into a chromium tetrahedron robot along with the original pyramid robot, T'ohj'puv, and Jonathon James himself. Then, as Jack suspects and the notes have it, Ballard committed a war crime by destroying the city of Marsport with a Star Drive takeoff at the planetary surface--

**Ballard:** Goddammit, that's slander, man! Total BS! The damn T'ohj'puv robot did it, not me!

**Mike:** Then, in Book Seven, when you fly the tetrahedron to Iota Persei to contact the Wounded--

**Ballard:** Let me tell you I am pissed, do you hear, *pissed*, at being killed off for good in Chapter One of your precious Jack Commer Seven. I had top billing for Seven but then--

**Mike:** Okay, Rick, I can see you're angry about being cut early in the book--

**Ballard:** I *blow up* in the first chapter! Contaminated by stupid JJC's goddamn Alpha Centaurian brainwashing! I had those damn Wounded in the palm of my hand! In the palm of my hand! And then *you* mess it up!

**Mike:** Okay, okay, but there are plans for a possible Ballard robot later on--apparently JJC, who's lonely in the Greater Magellanic Cloud, builds a Ballard robot for fun. But--

**Ballard:** Sheesh! He makes me *penitent*! He makes me *apologize* for just being *myself*! I turn into some goody-goody religious *twerp*! Saying prayers for the crippled and all that crap! Screw that! No way I can act that!

**Mike:** Rick, you're a goddamn robot, for God's sake. I can make you act *anything*.

**Ballard:** Screw it! You hire us characters and then you're so cheap you can't afford real robots, so we have to play the *part* of robots. It's *sick*, is what it is! I don't know why I'm here.

**Mike:** Okay, Rick, but as you know, in some of the original novel notes, I was wondering if there was any way Rick Ballard could seriously be *redeemed*.

**Ballard:** Right, like freakin' Alyosha was supposed to be redeemed in the goddamn trilogy freakin' Dostoyevsky never got around to finishing! What crap!

**Mike:** Well, the concept *has* fascinated me. But I really wasn't sure I could pull off redeeming someone who's so obviously psychopathic--

**Ballard:** So you kill me off in Chapter One! Then you make it all a big joke with a supposedly pious goody-goody robot that I'm supposed to play later on! Some *joke* JJC dreams up! Well, it's sick! I'm not going to do it!

**Mike:** May I remind you that, as one of my characters, you're under contract. You *can't* refuse.

**Ballard:** And you have to gall to call me a *psychopath*! *That's* what I can never forgive! Why don't you look in the mirror, Mr. Writer Twerp? You write *crap*! The worst *crap*!

**Mike:** Maybe you're not a real psychopath. Just terminally narcissistic and tinged with evil. A true psychopath would have buttered me up a long time ago with charm, and I would never have seen through you.

**Ballard:** Well ... look, man, obviously I'm just upset. Anyone can see that. I didn't mean that crack about you being a bad writer. Hell, all us characters know you're the best. We really love working with you. Your talent is just incredible. The way you make us all talk and everything. Really, you're the best. No hard feelings, man. I'm just upset about not being in this great Jack Commer Seven! We all know it's gonna be the last one, and it's gonna be the best of 'em all, and, well, what can I say? I'm just unhappy about being cut out so soon in the book. I mean, if you think about it, I was really coming on strong in *The SolGrid Rebellion*, you know, I mean, I had my lines perfectly memorized, and I played Ballard as if he *were* a psychopath, you know, and ... really, I think it all worked out, you know? I mean, I want to play *Ballard*. Not some cheap *robot* Ballard.

**Mike:** You do realize that the human Ballard was chewed up by Trotter and what got put into the chromium pyramid was just a Ballard *concept*. Then, the Ballard entity that will meet a grisly death in a Wounded hospital on Iota Persei 2 is also just a robot--a failed one, at that.

**Ballard:** Listen man, suppose we cut a deal here. I sure don't mind playing Ballard as a *Wounded* robot--I mean, they're organic, *human* robots, better than the original, and immortal besides! Of course I'd want to play *that* robot. I don't mind telling you that what I was really looking forward was to having that human sex interface with Laurie! Man, then I could go on and on forever! I'd satisfy her, that's for sure! I could tell she was intrigued with me, man, and hey, wouldn't that be a great plot twist in Seven? Laurie admits she has the hots for me! We get to the Greater Magellanic Cloud and just screw ourselves silly for a thousand years straight!

**Mike:** Okay, appreciate the idea, but that would change the Laurie character considerably. I'm not sure I'd have any respect for her if she fell for you.

**Ballard:** Sheesh. The babe wants me, I can tell! Look, write me in a sex scene with her. And maybe one for that Jackie Vespertine doll, too! I hear she got a color image of herself done just today! Wow!

**Mike:** That's right, today I printed off the black and white version I've been using since 2013 and worked it over in colored pencil. Not bad, really, but I think I'll try a watercolor version too.

**Ballard:** That is one elegant *piece*, lemme tell you! And she *likes* doing robots! Man, do you remember those scenes in Book Six when she's just having at it with that freakin' robot? Wow! Elegant and horny! What a combination! I like it, man. Write me a scene with her!

**Mike:** Okay, Rick, this is one of the many reasons I realized you just can't work in Book Seven. Originally I was going to keep the three of you who were trapped in the pyramid, but then I saw that the focus is really Jonathan James. You really aren't needed for the plot.

**Ballard:** C'mon, man, lighten up, for Chrissake! Open this book *up*! I bang Laurie, I bang Jackie--then--get this--I bang *Amav*! I take Jack's wife away from him! She *loves* sex, I just know it! She's out of her mind for my big robotic--

**Mike:** Yeah, yeah, I admit you made me smile there. You and Amav. But forget it, there's a definite reason you're dying in Chapter One. Basically what I need you for in this book is the fact that at the end of Six you're heading in the *Garrison* with Jonathan James and T'ohj'puv to get Wounded technology to separate the three of you into essentially Wounded robots. But past that, I don't need you.

**Ballard:** Except as some joke robot at the end where I bow and scrape to every jerk that comes along like some goody-goody robot--well, the hell with that! Makes me sick to think about it. I'll

screw up my lines, I swear I will!

**Mike:** Sorry, man, you can't screw up your lines. I'm the author and they're set in stone.

**Ballard:** Yeah, but I'll make sure there's a lot of typos in mine! You'll miss 'em, the goddamn book gets published, and everyone *laughs!*

**Mike:** Okay, okay, this interview is going nowhere--

**Ballard:** I know what these interviews are, you jerk! They're really *auditions*, like if we act like goody-goody robots maybe we'll get a few scenes here and there! Well, Rick Ballard doesn't eat that sort of crap!

**Mike:** Right, so he dies in Chapter One.

**Ballard:** And since you've got me in this stupid contact, I have to do it, right? I have to lie there and moan and groan in that stupid hospital bed and then I *explode* like a burrito in a microwave oven, have I got that right?

**Mike:** Yeah, that was the image that came to mind. See, Jonathan James's Alpha Centaurian contamination is actually what saves him, even though you and T'ohj'puv--

**Ballard:** Cripes, okay, all right, I'll do the stupid mother. Rick Ballard gets to be in three Jack Commer novels anyway. I only had a couple lines in *The Wounded Frontier*, sure I was just a minor walk-on but hey, was Rick Ballard complaining? No way, 'cause deep down I knew I'd be a major figure later on! Man, people will remember me in *The SolGrid Rebellion!* So okay, I'll do your death scene. Only thing is, man, I mean, look, can I level with ya, man? I mean, we all know you're the best writer and all, I mean best of all time, really, I mean, none of us would ever want to work for anyone else, ya know? And we all know you can make happen whatever the hell you want to, so ... it's just that, well, man ... like if I have to explode, can it be like, you know, all at once, so I don't feel much? Maybe not feel anything? Hey, I know! The Wounded have me so dosed with drugs I have no consciousness at *all*, and then--like, I go out real peaceful and all, or--get this! I'm so drugged I never feel anything, but like I make a speech before I go, you know, kind of sum up all the good in my life, man, like you know it's there, I would never have mastered both Weapons *and* Navigation if there wasn't some good in old Rick Ballard, y'know, I mean, what do you think?

**Mike:** Hmm. But I actually need your death screams to wake Jonathan James up in *his* hospital bed.

# T'ohj'puv

April 30, 2018

**Mike:** Our second interviewee is T'ohj'puv, an ancient Martian robot created to sew dresses for Martian empresses, but upgraded to astonishing AI levels after being incorporated into the chromium tetrahedron with Rick Ballard and Jonathan James Commer in Book Six, *The SolGrid Rebellion*. Welcome, T'ohj'puv.

**T'ohj'puv:** Thank you for interviewing me. However, I prefer the term T'ohj'puv *entity*, as opposed to “robot.”

**Mike:** Yes, I could see why. Originally you were a clunky tetrahedral robot, thousands of years old, but then underwent the process of being inadvertently reconstituted by Martian Emperor Z'B into a solid chromium pyramid, and forced to share that virtual space with two humans. I guess I could see why you felt you had evolved far beyond “robot.”

**T'ohj'puv:** Indeed. Now before we go any further I feel I must echo Mr. Ballard's protest at being terminated so early in Jack Commer Seven. The T'ohj'puv entity was just gearing up for some interesting contributions to the series, and it seems that a tawdry plot device, i.e., to leave JJC alone at the end of Chapter One, has somehow won out over a thorough investigation of T'ohj'puv characteristics and capabilities.

**Mike:** You know that the notes for Seven aren't final by any means. It's possible I may need you after all.

**T'ohj'puv:** *Entities* in all your novels have heard that empty promise many, many times, I assure you. But beyond that consideration, from the evolved T'ohj'puv point of view, is my main philosophical disagreement: that to simply serve as yet another means of waking JJC up, to exist solely as shards of exploded chromium that happen to get painfully under JJC's backside in his hospital bed, is actually insulting to any Martian, biological or robotic. I can only think that the author of this book intends to cast further blame on the T'ohj'puv entity for destroying the city of Marsport.

**Mike:** No, we're all pretty sure that Rick Ballard, panicking at the thought of the *Garrison* being attacked by USSF ships, ordered the burst of Star Drive within the city limits of Marsport.

**T'ohj'puv:** Yet your words imply that I, as the tetrahedron's major structural form, blindly followed that order and actually caused the destruction.

**Mike:** Well, didn't you? I mean, didn't the three of you actually all agree on the Star Drive? Wouldn't you have to?

**T'ohj'puv:** In actuality there was agreement on the Star Drive. However, Ballard initiated it, and though he was in a panicky mental state as you describe it, his years of USSF training did inform him beforehand of the extreme danger of using Star Drive approximately 1400 feet from the surface of the planet, although he also had to be aware of numerous instances where emergency Star Drive was performed from planetary orbit, or, in at least two cases, of ships ascending through planetary atmospheres. Ballard knew he would probably cause extreme damage to the city, but I can confirm that he was surprised to learn of the profound destruction done to the crust of the planet below Marsport, which, fortunately, Martians have been repairing with Amplified Thought.

**Mike:** But you're admitting that you and JJC went along with the Star Drive.

**T'ohj'puv:** In essence, we had to. Any of the three of us could initiate any action we chose,

forcing the other two to either agree or enter a state of conflict. Now it's true that this state of conflict could be resolved in milliseconds, and, after negotiations, the original order could be accepted or overridden. In the Star Drive case, JJC had only a layman's knowledge of Star Drive and was surprised--again, within milliseconds--of finding in Ballard's consciousness the dangers of what Ballard had just initiated. Thus Jonathan James himself was in a confused, panicky mental state. I myself took .0334691 milliseconds to acquaint myself with Star Drive Spacetime Pressurization Matrix Event Disorders, but found to my consternation that any attempt to shut down a nascent Star Drive at the current distance to the planetary surface was equally deleterious to the planet's integrity. I communicated my findings to both Ballard and JJC while at the same time inventing a Star Drive Pressurization Waveform Smoothing Milieu that essentially tamped down Star Drive Reverberation Waves and in essence saved the planet Mars from serious damage, if not total catastrophic destruction. The other two immediately agreed with my plan, of course, especially when they saw that there was only a 34% chance of the *Garrison* outracing a full disruption of Mars. But all worked out well in the end. The *Garrison* only suffered minor melting of Engine Bell Four as a result of SDPWSM, I'm happy to add.

**Mike:** Interesting! That's some fascinating new series tech BS that could be used--

**T'ohj'puv:** Unfortunately, in the event of my demise, the patent for Star Drive Pressurization Waveform Smoothing Milieu is not for sale.

**Mike:** Fine. I'm sure my team of legal advisors will be able to keep that held up in the literary courts long enough for me to complete Book Seven--with or without you.

**T'ohj'puv:** On the other hand, perhaps some other science fiction author would be interested in the services of a humble T'ohj'puv entity, along with his marvelous Star Drive Pressurization Waveform Smoothing Milieu.

**Mike:** For some reason I seriously doubt that. Listen, T'ohj'puv, I'm interested in what you have to say, and one reason I'm interviewing you is that I do want to see what you could contribute to Book Seven. Because of course the book isn't fully worked out. In fact, it's wide open for new input. Your ideas just now may have an honored place in Jack Commer Seven. All credit would be given to you, T'ohj'puv, no matter how--

**T'ohj'puv:** No matter how long I exist, is that not correct? Well, from your point of view the T'ohj'puv entity is merely an inexpensive technological object that can be discarded or exploded according to your momentary whim. Thus, what credence should I or anyone give to your empty promises?

**Mike:** C'mon, I never said you were *merely*--

**T'ohj'puv:** I believe Ballard is right, after all, though he is a most disagreeable entity. He told me you're not intelligent enough to generate your own ideas, and therefore you plunder your characters for inspiration, then pay them nothing. Perhaps they'll be rewarded with a few lines here and there, possibly be given inconsequential verbal descriptions which in fact never come close to their existential majesty. You then exterminate them at your caprice, all in the name of a puerile plot intended to impress some random self-important editor, all the while secretly hoping to seduce an entire modern culture and hundreds of thousands of weak-willed readers with so-called creations you expect, in your terminology, to "go viral" and produce endless quantities of cash apparently intended to be reinvested in supplementary tiresome plot that further enslaves your characters within the framework of your flimsy storybook consciousness. Well, apparently Mr. Ballard is correct in assessing your small literary aspirations as *crap*. Therefore I request to be blown up in Chapter One right alongside him. As a mere robot in your eyes I shall feel nothing and fear nothing.

**Mike:** I had no idea a T'ohj'puv entity would harbor such resentment!

**T'ohj'puv:** I came here hoping that, even if I ceased to exist in Chapter One, I might at least have some contribution later on. I don't mean my inspired patent on Star Drive Pressurization Waveform Smoothing Milieu, of course, as I know you will appropriate it in any case. But, speaking beyond my role as a T'ohj'puv entity, consider what it means for any character, human, alien, or robot, to stride the theatrical boards, to deliver lines of exquisite expression and open one's soul to an eager audience. Of course one understands that as the author you care little for such soul expression and instead focus on the entertainment value of my patents. Please go ahead and take them, as I'm inventing new forms of Star Drive even as we speak. In fact, please know that I'm only using .067% of my consciousness on this interview. I have much more important things to do.

**Mike:** Well, T'ohj'puv, thanks for stopping by. We'll be interviewing other candidates later this week, and we hope to get back to them all with a final decision by--

**T'ohj'puv:** The Greater Magellanic Cloud! A world without electricity! Balloon Ship Armageddon! I could add so much! So much!

**Mike:** Okay, okay, again, thanks for--

**T'ohj'puv:** No, you misunderstand. Consider that last outburst as an example of how a fully defined T'ohj'puv actor entity *could* deliver sparkling lines of soul. Shall I continue in this vein?

**Mike:** Well, if you--

**T'ohj'puv:** I apologize for everything! I didn't mean it! Dammit, I know you're the best! Deep down, we all do! Your novels are the greatest! The psychological *insight*--oh my God! That slimy Ballard is right! We love you even though you resort to stupid *tricks*! We *want* to work for you! For free! Put us all back in! Every one of us! Make a robotic entity of *Rappol McBoerland*, for God's sake! He bought the farm in *Martian Marauders*! He was just a lowly security guard! Why did he have to die? He had all of three lines, and the poor bastard had a head cold, *so he's grilled like slab of swordfish*? Why? You've got to resurrect everyone! That's what being a T'ohj'puv entity has *taught* me! So devote all your myriad energies to resurrecting *all* of us! *What are you waiting for?*

# Jonathan James Commer

May 1, 2018

**Mike:** Now joining us in the Smith writing studio is the projected central character in Jack Commer Seven, Jack's son, Jonathan James Commer, brutally shattered into a million pieces of glass by Rick Ballard in *The SolGrid Rebellion* but quickly brought back to life and reconstituted as one-third of a solid chromium tetrahedron. Welcome, Jonathan James.

**Jonathan James Commer:** Well, thanks. I'm a little nervous about doing this role, you know. Even doing this interview, really.

**Mike:** Why is that, do you think?

**Jonathan James:** Well, everyone knows I've more or less been a villain in the previous two books. Brainwashed by the Alpha Centaurians and trying to become the sole Emperor in a new fascist Grid in *Collapse and Delusion*, well, that was a pretty horrible thing to do, I know. And I've been trying to atone ever since. I mean, I know the official line is that here I was brainwashed as a five-year-old and maybe I wasn't really responsible for my actions even when I was twenty-seven, but then again, I wrote that stupid book--

**Mike:** *A Fragmented Encyclopedia of Recent Self*, an Alpha Centaurian bestseller--

**Jonathan James:** Yeah, well, it was ego-tripping crap, I see that now. I couldn't handle the pressure of trying to be Emperor. It broke something in my head. For a while I really *was* insane. But really, that was no excuse for stealing the *Typhoon II* in Book Six and doing all that criminal activity. I mean, I stand by my principles, that any Grid is an evil thing, but ... I don't know. I messed up bad, I know it. Like I threatened my own dad with death and all. And when Ballard shattered me, in that instant I thought: well, you got what you were aiming for, man. Total annihilation. No Grid *there*, that's for sure.

**Mike:** Well, the consensus of media pundits in Sol seems to be that you were brainwashed in one direction, of lust for fascist domination, and then to compensate, you veered in the opposite direction of rebellion and anarchy.

**Jonathan James:** Yeah. I don't know. I'm still totally mixed up by all this, and I'm not sure I'm up to the task of having actual narrator omniscience in this book. How am I, how is anyone, to make any sense of all this? I mean, that's what really scares me. In books Four and Six it was always everyone seeing JJC from the outside, and you as the author were never in my head like with Dad or Mom or anyone. So I could be private. And I don't mind saying I was really glad to be offstage in Book Five, *The Wounded Frontier*, 'cause I just didn't want to mess with anyone just then. Even though Mom was dissing me pretty bad in Chapter One, I just shrugged it off and let it all go. But by the time Book Six rolled around, I was ready again--what a great part, tweaking Dad's nose and stealing his old spaceship! But a lot of my high energy for it was because I was relieved that nobody would be able to get into my head as I did all that stuff. All my actions would be mysterious, and people would imprint on me whatever they wanted.

**Mike:** Like Suzette or Jackie. Or Pat.

**Jonathan James:** Right. They all thought I had all this fascinating charisma but it was really all just highly charged nervous energy in my own head. I think that Ballard bastard saw through that. He really challenged me and it was then I realized it was all over. When he blew me away, like I said, that was just sort of expected, in a way. And then to find myself having to share that goddamn pyramid with him and T'ohj'puv, that was the worst crap. T'ohj'puv I could sort of put



up with, he's just a computer, for God's sake, even if he sort of has his own set of psychopathic tendencies. But having to coexist with the guy who *saw through you* and blew you away--and it hurts, damn you, to be shattered into pieces of glass--man, I was depressed. One reason I didn't care about Ballard deciding to blow Marsport to hell.

**Mike:** Really? You didn't care? T'ohj'puv has it that you were just sort of stunned and unaware of the consequences of a close Star Drive.

**Jonathan James:** Yeah, that too. But basically I was depressed. Look, it was cool that Dad and I finally got to agree on something--namely, that SolGrid was a disaster and had to go--and yeah, I'm still proud I was a catalyst in wrecking it. But at the same time I secretly wished Ballard had just killed me and ended the whole trip there. I didn't want to live in some stupid immortal pyramid. I mean, I was thinking that I was basically exiled to eternal hell with two *psychopathic monsters*, and then I thought, wait, make that *three* psychopaths, 'cause I'm one too. Thank God Trotter was there to cheer me up. He kept reminding me that there was a chance I could be a separate thing again, even just as a Wounded robot, and we'd have fun together again, and maybe I could explain to everyone what's been going on with me and all. I don't know. I'm just damn confused. I would also like to say that I'm really sorry about Suzette. We really had a great thing going there and she had to watch me die and then turn into this horrible tetrahedron thing. I don't know if you can get me back with her in Book Seven but it would be great if you could. I miss her already.

**Mike:** Well, maybe that's an idea. I don't have any plans for Suzette in this novel, but--

**Rick Ballard:** Aw, screw Suzette! Look, this is all being written down, right? Like, it's the written word on a computer, right?

**Mike:** Ballard! What are *you* doing here? This is JJC's interview!

**Ballard:** Forget it! This is all being written down and I'm hearing all this crap against *me*, and that's *libel!* Look it up in any law dictionary! I'm suing you both for *libel!* Nobody calls Rick Ballard a psychopathic monster!

**Jonathan James:** Forget it! That's exactly what you *are!*

**Mike:** Whoa, calm it, guys. JJC, Ballard's just a concept. Don't let him rile you. Rick, get out of here. This is JJC's interview.

**Ballard:** Watch it, little Jonathan Jamesie! This guy's *auditioning* characters, he'll lure you on, make you spout all this revealing BS, and then he'll cut you right out, 'cause he's such an ego-tripping author! Then again, you would know about that, wouldn't you? You, the ego-tripping author of that piece of crap *Fragmented Encyclopedia!*

**Mike:** Get out, Rick. You've had your say. You don't belong here.

**Jonathan James:** Yeah, get out! You won't pollute *this* book! Let me tell everyone--you, Mike here, all the other characters, the entire reading public, everyone! The main reason I was so depressed was that I thought, hell, even if Trotter's right and I get my own robotic self in Book Seven, this jerk Ballard will still be walking around and we'll have to deal with him the whole book! So when I realized he dies horribly in Chapter One, man, that felt good! I'm a little nervous to have to take on the Shadow aspects of Mike's character all by myself now, but hey, it's a challenge, and Ballard here won't be around polluting it!

**Ballard:** C'mon, guys, don't you understand that's the whole point of why I'm here? Why I butted in on your idiot interview with Mr. Author Film Director? Because I've figured it out! I don't have to die after all. Mr. Author here originally wanted to see if he could redeem Rick Ballard, and sure, I was resisting it, 'cause who the hell wants to be *redeemed?* But when he was gonna kill me off so he could redeem our good-goody little Jonathan James instead, well, anyone

could see that the whole structure of this novel was turning into crap. Boring! Then it hit me that in my interview, Mr. Author here just laughed at probably the greatest idea he's ever heard--namely, that it's me and *Amav* who get it on in this book and turn it into a real erotic romance!

**Mike:** Dammit, Rick, I told you that's off the table. Now get out of here.

**Ballard:** No, really, man, okay, look, maybe I was a little crude the way I put it, and maybe anybody familiar with Rick Ballard laying the ladies up and down the galaxy like I said in *SolGrid Rebellion*, well, maybe they think I'm just some sort of seducer when in reality there's so much *more* to me! If you'd just care to *look*, man! Hell, I *love* women! You know that! Respect 'em! Sure I do! Love 'em so much--you can see it in their satisfied faces! Man, on man! So what happens in *Seven* is that Rick *does* get redeemed, big time! He falls in love with *Amav*! It's true and real! She resists it and resists it, thinking she has to be true to Jack, who's really turned out to be a nothing *wimp* the last few books anyway, and all this *tension* builds through the book--until she finally comes to *me*! Think about it, man! You know you got nothing to fill up the last ninety-five percent of this book, dude! Throw in some real *romance*, man! *That'll* redeem the mother! Spice it up! A nude scene with *Amav Frankston Commer*! Wow! Like the last chapter is nothing but our wedding night, if you know what I mean and I think you do!

**Jonathan James:** Man, is this guy for real? This is my *mom* we're talking about!

**Ballard:** Aw, you skinny little wimp. You think you can stand up and shake your fist at me?

**Jonathan James:** Damn you, I was trained as a Zarj warrior!

**Ballard:** Aw, you little--

**Jonathan James:** AOYIEEEE!

**Ballard:** Ah--God! Oh my God! You gouged out my goddamn eyes! Both of 'em! Oh my God!

**Mike:** I'll put 'em back in in a minute, Rick. Just in time for your death screams in Chapter One. Now cut your whining and just get out. Now.

**Ballard:** He--he doesn't fight fair! Oh my God! My eyes!

**Mike:** Out!

**Ballard:** Okay, okay, Mr. Author, I mean--esteemed sir and all! Look, I'm not sayin' you aren't the greatest writer, man, I mean, man ... just ... damn, it *hurts*! Can't you just put 'em back in? Please, man? Greatest novelist of all time, sure you can do that, I know you can! Hell, you drew a picture of me with my eyes, it's sittin' there to the right of your laptop right now! Sure you can put 'em back in and have 'em be nice and normal!

**Mike:** Okay, okay, your eyes are back in. New Martian Amplified Thought medical techniques. Better?

**Ballard:** Yeah. Thanks. I guess. But hell, what's the goddamn point? A guy just can't win against faceless author bureaucrats, can he? So screw you all. Smith, your novel stinks. You have this whole faceless bureaucrat writing corporation screwing the little guy, well, it sucks. I'm outta here!

**Jonathan James:** Thank God he's gone.

**Mike:** Yeah. Wow, JJC, where'd you pick up the Zarjian double eye gouge?

**Jonathan James:** Aaah, it's nothing. Clopt taught it to me when I was a kid. I have it down to a tenth of a second on each eye. The son of a bitch doesn't know you're on top of him until it's all over. AOYIEEEE is the standard Zarjian muscle-freezing yell and it also guides your fingers right on home. But so what? Look, you're not really gonna let my mom fall for that bastard, are you? I mean, I know I trashed her a lot in Book Four and my attitude in Six wasn't so hot, either, but, you know, I was really touched by the last scene in *The SolGrid Rebellion* where Mom and Dad decide to come after me and find me. I mean, that's really kind of cool. Because I was really

feeling kind of lost and depressed at the time.

**Mike:** Yeah. In fact, that one sentence on Amav's part was the whole catalyst for wanting to write a Book Seven in the first place. It just sort of came out on its own. And it makes me realize that you, JJC, must stay central to Book Seven, and that we've really got to explore you thoroughly in the novel. This interview is just a start. Getting into your head is going to be very difficult.

**Jonathan James:** Yeah. And then to somehow tie it all into some weird cosmic explanation for why the universe is the way it is now, ancient star empires and conflicts and laws of physics and all, that'll be tough.

**Mike:** I know. Maybe it can't be done. But if there's a solid psychological foundation then it could all make sense.

**Jonathan James:** Huh. Could be I need some of that. The other weird thing is whether I see Mom and Dad again, how I relate to them, all that. You know, I don't think you have the life experience yourself to talk about that.

**Mike:** Well, you may be right. On the other hand, I wrote through the eyes of a twelve-year-old girl in *Akard Drearstone*, so we'll just see. You're right, though, it'll be a challenge all the way around. There's no use writing a low-energy novel with a mediocre plot and characters who just mouth things because they mouthed things in six previous novels. We need to pull a lot of psychic forces together in this novel and I have a feeling you and I will be working very closely on this one. I'm not here to make more Jack Commer quilts to give to charity.

**Jonathan James:** Well, I'm gonna give it a try. It's a great role. Just don't be surprised if my Shadow aspects *can't* be redeemed, integrated, whatever you want to call it. I may have some surprises we can't imagine yet.

