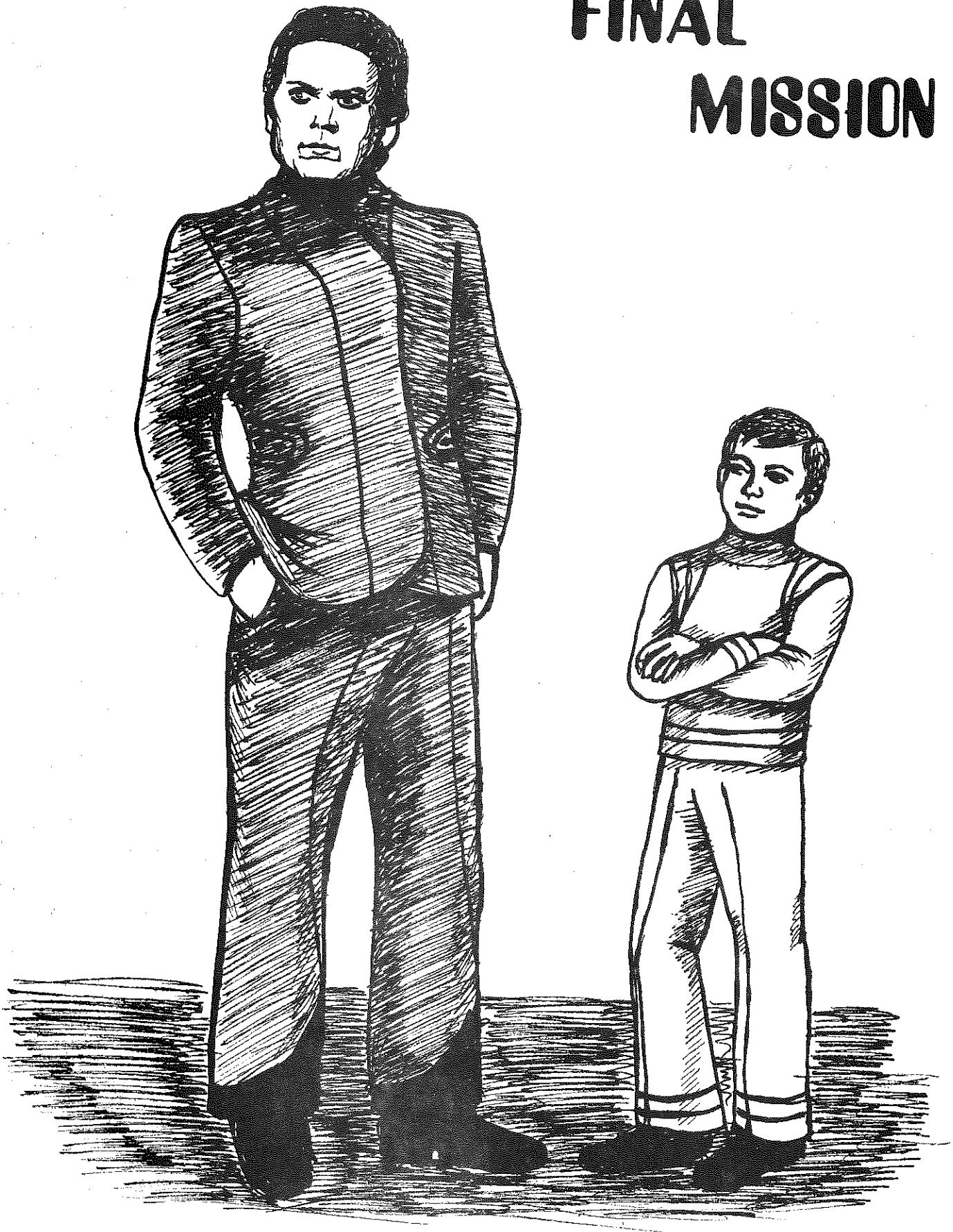


# FINAL MISSION



## Final Mission

by Rich Kolker

(Author's note: For those of you who wonder how writers get ideas, I was snowbound in a remote corner of Denver airport on my way to Aspen. Having nothing to do, I doodled on a notepad I was carrying.

A small boy was staring through a clear portion of the painted over window, wincing with delight that he could see behind the scenes at a real airport. I thought of that small boy as I scribbled down ideas for stories. When we finally boarded, I continued to watch the boy, and speak with him. I wrote this story on the plane.

If I only knew that boy's name, I would dedicate it to him.)

In the many years since his friend, Jerry, had died, Questor wandered throughout the world. He had long since passed out of view at Robinson Industries, his nearly 200 years would be unexplainable. The mission was complete, Earth had passed from its quarrelsome younger days to a new peace.

What drew Questor to what was once known as the Midwest of the United States he did not know. He could not accept the fact that Jerry had programmed the basic human emotion and morality into him far better than had Vaslovik's tapes remained intact. This was Jerry's home.

Much had remained the same since he and Jerry first came here following Darro's death. There was one change. The airport had become the continent's secondary spaceport, ferrying men and equipment to the new faster than light ships that plied the stars. Soon they might meet the descendents of those who made the androids sent to Earth, of which Questor was the last.

He had no ties to the cavern at Ararat. Subsequent wars had wiped out the mountain resting place of his ancestors. So he came to the home of his friend, to "die."

"Hey, mister! What do you think of the DY-1000?" The newest of the shuttle ships sat on the apron in front of them. The boy was stocky, with tousled hair and a glint in his eye that could only mean he was in his element. Questor replied.

"You interested in spacecraft?"

"You bet. I'm going to fly some day." The two walked through the park that surrounded the base.

"Would you like to see the inside of one?"

"Would I?!"

"Come." They walked to the base's gate. Questor showed his yellowed Robinson Industries ID. The guard, recognizing the name of the people who designed the guidance computers for all of Earth's ships let him through. They talked.

"You a big shot?"

"Not really. How long have you been interested in rockets?"

"All my life. I grew up right outside the base."

"Why did you talk to me?"

"You were just kinda staring into space, like you knew no one, and nobody knew you. Anyway, you looked like you were interested, and the kids around here really don't care."

They reached the base of the boarding tower. Questor's ID got them past the guard and they traveled to the tower's apex. Vertical takeoff was still necessary for these flights. Questor thought of his last mission, the young scientist who nearly died in the crash of one of these ships. He should design a teleportation device in a couple of years. These flights will be unneeded.

The two toured the ship, from engine bulkhead to cockpit. The boy anxiously fingered the controls. Then it was over.

As they walked to the gate, Questor and the boy spoke of many things.

"What do you want to do when you get out of school?"

"Be a rocket pilot, maybe go to the Academy."

"Do you think you're smart enough?"

"Sure!"

"How are you doing in schoolwork?"

"Not that well. You don't have to read a lot of stupid books to fly one of these."

"What about the Academy? It's tough to get into. Your grades have to be top of the class."

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

"When you're a pilot, you'll have plenty of time to hang around rocket bases. Right now the important thing is to get to work. Fifty thousand people apply to the Academy every year, about ten percent get in, about a third graduate and only one of those fifty thousand will ever reach command. And it will be tougher when you're old enough to go." The guard waved them through the gate. A voice called out.

"Hey, they're looking for you, you're brother Sam broke his leg."

"I've got to go, mister. Maybe I'll see you again. What's your name?"

"Questor. But I doubt we'll meet."

"Hey, Jimmy, your mother wants you!"

"I've really got to leave, Mr. Questor." The boy ran off with his friend.

Questor thought of the boy, of the spark of intelligence you could see in his eye. Jerry probably was a lot like that when he was young. It would be interesting to see how he turned out.

Questor walked down the main street of a small town in Iowa, on the way to join his friend.