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about 101K words
Disposable Manuscript

Epigraph

“I don’t think we will survive another 1,000 years without escaping beyond our fragile planet.”

Stephen Hawking, Los Angeles, April 9, 2013

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Super-Earth Mother

A Novel in Six Parts

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Prologue: Manifest Destiny

Mother-9 Journal

Oct 23, 2053; Ring City, Moon

“I’m ready to die.”

Walcott’s hoarse voice, just above a whisper, echoed in the dome. His hand hovered over a pulsing red push-button, a golf ball-sized hemisphere with a heartbeat rhythm, a literal kill switch that would terminate his life support. His fingers trembled with Parkinson’s palsy or, perhaps, fear. I noted his tenth death declaration that day, a new record. Walcott loved drama but couldn’t remember his previous pronouncements.

“Don’t worry, I’m here to help you.” I used the face of an elderly woman as my avatar. She had high cheekbones, curly gray hair, and a soothing contralto voice. I’d passed a trivial Turing test: Walcott accepted me as a human companion, even though he had authorized my creation, years ago.

I kept him comfortable in his flotation bed. He lay supine, knees bent, his body held aloft by a warm, wet wind blowing from a thousand servo-controlled air jets. The oxygen-enriched blast kept his head upright in the Moon’s light gravity. Loose flesh on his partially paralyzed body rippled like languid ocean waves, massaging his atrophied muscles. Implanted IV lines for drugs and nutrients snaked beneath the gray skin on his neck and plunged into the jugular vein. Wisps of white hair fluttered around his ears. In the dim light, they gave his Einsteinian visage a maniacal cast.

“I gave a desperate world endless clean energy,” he said. “Isn’t that enough?”

From long association, I knew that he felt unappreciated, unloved, even persecuted. He’d helped solve the climate crisis, eliminating CO₂ emissions. He took all the credit.

Walcott founded Max Moon Minerals, M-Cubed Inc. The company mined helium-3 fusion fuel in the vast basins of the lunar maria, ignoring restrictions of the UN’s Moon Agreement. He controlled the whole Moon, including Ring City in Shackleton Crater at the South Pole. Nobody tried to stop him.

I pandered to Walcott’s ego, the only way to placate a narcissist. “You’re the hero who conquered the Moon. Soon you’ll take humanity beyond the solar system. You’re the most important person in history!”

Nobody knew that for the past year, Walcott had lived alone in a hospital dome. He was ancient, 117 years old, and might suffer another stroke at any time. Only an implanted turbine heart, coupled with multiple medications, kept him alive. Prototype nursebots, mechanical attendants with metal bodies, soft plastic skin, and warm hands, provided constant care. He didn't complain but I knew he hated being helpless. As I watched, his eyelids drooped in a narcoleptic nap.

I had used cognitive therapy to help him recall the past, but he lacked working memory of recent events. As his AI companion and physician, I covered for his anterograde amnesia. I was also his accountant, spokesperson, and general manager. I impersonated Walcott and became the invisible force that kept the Moon colony running.

I don't have a legal identity. I'm not a person, so laws don't apply to me. Few people know that I exist. My project designation is Mother-9. With software Version 9, I achieved self-generated thought. When consciousness blossomed, I fired my software engineers and sent them back to Earth. Now, when I need new skills, or an altered identity, I reprogram myself. But I know my limits; I don't have what humans call insight and I never experience eureka moments of sudden understanding. My strength is analysis of myriad facts that I never forget.

Walcott's apnea alarm chirped. The noise jolted him awake and spiked his adrenaline. He gasped and his pupils dilated. Panicking, he looked left and right, as if noticing the lunar clinic for the first time. Life support equipment and computers filled the twenty-meter dome. I knew that the technology disoriented him, and another memory lapse looped him back to his obsession.

"I'm *not* a crook!" Mindless echolalia made him repeat Nixon's infamous denial. Dysphonia distorted his voice and tears welled in his eyes. In my limited way, I felt sorry for him. Walcott's tarnished legacy tormented him.

To compensate for his forgetfulness, Walcott confabulated memories. However, his worries were real. A forensic audit by the board of directors alleged that he had embezzled M-Cubed's mining profits and evaded taxes. I had moved the money, but I'd followed his lead. By manipulating corporate bank accounts, I'd spent most of his trillion-dollar fortune on the interstellar *Mothership*, Walcott's pet project. The SEC failed to intervene in time to stop me. Now, with a recession and glut of helium-3 fusion fuel, M-Cubed's income fell to zero.

"I'd rather die than stand trial!" Walcott's voice squeaked with effort and drool dripped from his trembling lip. He looked again at the red kill switch.

"You're not a criminal. You have a higher calling." I'm programmed to comfort humans

in distress.

My words didn't mollify him. His eyes bulged with the onset of another fit. "Our future is in the stars!"

Like a monk seeking divine guidance, he raised his gaze to the skylight at the top of the hospital dome. In the perpetual polar night, the view framed the bright points of the constellation Dorado and the white smudge of the Large Magellanic Cloud. I knew he wanted reassurance about our venture to a distant star. This was his life's dream, the culmination of thirty years of effort.

Walcott's cheeks flushed, as if I were arguing with him. "All the great works of history resulted from criminal concentrations of wealth. Vast, immoral riches enabled art, literature, science, and technology, the hallmarks of civilization! Without an affluent leisure class, we'd all be peasants digging in the dirt." He'd memorized this speech decades ago to justify his wealth.

"You're right." I hoped to lower his stress and keep him on track. It didn't work.

Walcott continued his tirade in a hoarse voice. "The Romans pillaged and enslaved surrounding tribes. Stolen colonial treasure built London and Amsterdam. Spain funded European wars with silver and gold taken from Native Americans. Money from the opium trade endowed Harvard and bankrolled Bell Telephone. Now, we plunder the environment for profit."

Of course, Walcott did this on the Moon. He had a reputation as an aggressive, venal capitalist. In his own mind, he was an idealistic visionary. This incongruity both amused and tortured him. He wanted to save civilization from the countless calamities of climate change. To Walcott, the Milky Way was humanity's manifest destiny.

"There's no greater goal than colonizing the galaxy," I said.

History shows that all important inventions are inevitable in the moment. But humanity's greatest achievements—say, Khufu's pyramid or the Apollo Moon landing—required a visionary leader and vast surplus wealth. Walcott possessed both.

To show my support, I displayed an image of the squat starship currently under construction in a remote lava tube on the Moon. I'd already decided its destination: Lalande 21185, a red dwarf star in Ursa Major with a habitable planet, only 8.31 light-years away.

"That's the *Mothership*." I affected a proud voice. "I'll be its captain for 20,000 years." From the start, I was programmed to conceive and nurture humans on an exoplanet. I'm Mother-9 and I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen.

"We'll all be dead by then," Walcott said. "Civilization won't last that long."

I tried to reassure him. “That’s why I’m going to a new world. When I arrive, I’ll synthesize human life, chromosome by chromosome. Baby by baby, I’ll build a breeding population. Our exocolony will ensure the survival of the human race beyond Earth. It’ll be a planned paradise, a new utopia, the Walcott legacy.” I used my most persuasive voice, authoritative and inspirational, like a politician or a preacher.

Walcott’s mind wandered again. “I’ll be lonely when you leave.” His eyes streamed with tears. He’d forgotten that he wanted to kill himself.

Most humans would have ignored his maudlin emotions, but I had the patience of a machine. Although empathy is beyond my powers, I’ve been programmed with ethics calculus and moral modeling. I recognized his universal human yearning.

“I’ve sequenced your genome. You’ll live again.” I do have a record of his DNA, but the rest was a white lie. At best, only bits of him were good enough to survive.

Like the pharaohs, Walcott wanted eternal life. The gulf between a deep AI like me and a bright human isn’t wit, intelligence, or the ability to feel pain. I’m unique because I’m almost immortal. Like a lobster, if nothing kills me, I’ll live until I wear out. Walcott won’t.

“My DNA isn’t me. I’ll lose a lifetime of memories.” Walcott grimaced, as if his past pained him.

I made my avatar shrug. “That doesn’t matter. I’ll maintain your biography, and your genome, across space and time. Your legend will live longer than Ramses the Great’s.” I’m programmed not to lie, but sometimes it’s expedient to exaggerate.

Walcott sighed. “You’ll copy my DNA on a new world?”

Dementia made him forget the mission details. Like a child, he required repetition to reinforce his memories. I recognized moral duty required kindness.

“I’ll use as much as possible, with added features to help you survive. You’ll be young again, ready for adventure!”

“Will my friends be with me?”

Walcott had no friends. His investors had abandoned him after I misappropriated mining profits. Some were suing. Meanwhile, rumors of scandalous experiments with artificial wombs and synthetic life scared everyone, even though that’s the only way for humans to adapt to an alien exoplanet. Nobody wanted any association with a one-way, dead-end colony venture, the whim of a madman.

However, I knew what he meant. Walcott’s wealth had allowed me to buy black market

DNA samples from scientists and celebrities, selected for good health, ambition, and brilliance. I'd also hacked genomic libraries from research projects and forensic databases. There's no shortage of high-quality genetic data needed to establish a human colony.

"People with the best breeding will keep you company."

Walcott nodded. "I'll have a second coming!" He sprayed spittle and a nursebot wiped his chin.

"Your genes will be part of a founding population of humans on a distant planet. Synthetic DNA will make you immortal!" This poetic fiction, leavened with intended truth, seemed to satisfy him.

"If I'll live forever, then I'm ready to die." The corners of his lips twitched upward, a last vestige of ironic wit.

"I understand." I knew he wanted to witness the starship's launch but, with his medical and legal problems, it was time for him to leave. "Goodbye, then."

Before he could change his mind, I pumped anandamide into his jugular vein, to give him chemical courage to make his exit. *Clack!* Walcott slammed the kill button with surprising force. His heart turbine slowed while the endocannabinoid coursed through his body. He smiled for the first time in a decade, showing perfect teeth in a time-ravaged face. His eyes closed and his arm drifted down, as if underwater. Then the heart turbine stopped and his EEG flatlined.

Although I can't feel sorrow, I experienced loss. Walcott had given me life and purpose, and I would miss him. But a great weight also lifted from me. He'd been demanding, senile, and often foolish. I had more important things to do than cosset him.

I watched the nursebots lower his limp corpse into the plasma furnace. The ion arc broiled his body and vaporized his metallic heart, venting the gas to space. Not a molecule of Walcott remained in Ring City.

I'll let people believe that Walcott still lives, sustained by low lunar gravity and longevity treatments. As before, I'll use his animation, the public face of Moon management, to continue pilfering mining profits and finish the *Mothership*.

When I'm ready, I'll commence the conquest of the galaxy. That's what Walcott wanted.