

THE VESSEL:

“A WOMB OF THINGS TO BE, AND A TOMB OF THINGS THAT WERE”¹

An Audio Play by Emily Scarrott

¹ Le Guin, U.K. (2019) *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. UK: Ignota. P37

PRELUDE

VOICE OF THE EGGS

When the people got on the spaceship to start their journey, they weren't intending to find the eggs. When the people became a crew, they were part of a mission like any other, locating new and fertile lands, full of opportunity.

As men infest their own land, they order their colonies to spread. Wider and wider hunting circles, seeking resources to permeate.

PART ONE: THE MISSION

RADIO ANNOUNCER

(IN 1920S AMERICAN BROADCAST STYLE)

Mission N3W-34RTH (*ENN-THREE-DOUBLE-YOO THREE-FOUR-ARR-TEE-AITCH*) set off today, in a blast like no other! An assigned crew are venturing into gargantuan new territories to locate new and fertile lands for the development of produce, enterprise, and industry.

The initial journey will take up to two months to reach potential sites of adventure, but that doesn't mean that the crew will be in discomfort!

This state-of-the-art vessel has been designed with two separate compartments; The pointed head of the vessel is a base for the intellectual actions of the mission, including a wide navigation pod, strategic meeting rooms and crew living quarters. Behind the head, a long, slim appendage drives the complex movements of the vessel as it penetrates empty interstellar space.

And the innovation doesn't stop on the outside! Internally, the revolutionary system Equivalent 8.0 (*EIGHT-POINT-OH*) has been installed to provide a grid throughout the vessel, allowing the taskforce authorities to regulate security throughout the assignment, ensuring health, wealth, and prosperity for all!

PART TWO: THE DATABASE

CREWMEMBER 6

(ENTHUSIASTIC)

Day one hundred and nineteen! After over sixteen weeks of travelling, the vessel has finally located a small patch of galactic land. Unfortunately, our first stop isn't our most triumphant and all sample analysis has been inconclusive, however we are already on the move! Authorise and submit.

SOUND: A LONG BEEP CONFIRMS SUBMISSION.

CREWMEMBER 4

Day one four seven. No landing today, just travelling between locations. It seems that we have a stow-away, despite the extensive pre-flight quarantine. Today we noticed a standard house fly on board. Diagnostics have identified that there is only one on board, and we are making efforts to impound this lone ranger in a sample tank. Authorise and submit.

SOUND: A LONG BEEP CONFIRMS SUBMISSION.

CREWMEMBER 5

Day one hundred and eighty-three. We saw today's stop from quite a distance and hoped for the best! While we were still in orbit, we spotted a luscious emerald covering from the navigation pod, and thought we'd found an agricultural goldmine. Upon landing, we realised it was just a different sand colour. Sample analysis didn't highlight anything new about the green sand. We've seen a lot of different sands during our mission, but still no beneficial variations found in the lab. Authorise and submit.

SOUND: A LONG BEEP CONFIRMS SUBMISSION.

CREWMEMBER 3

Day two eight two. Possibly our shortest stop yet. We believe it was a small moon, but the climate was unbearable. I could feel the ground heat through my uniform boots, and

the paint on the outside of the vessel was getting sticky. I've flagged it on the navigation system as inhospitable for future missions. Authorise and submit.

SOUND: A LONG BEEP CONFIRMS SUBMISSION.

CREWMEMBER 1

(NOTICEABLY FED UP)

Day five-eight-five, no progress to report. Again. The vessel has landed on an insignificant planetoid, again desolate. Crew members have scouted the terrain in all directions, locating no findings of value. No resources have been identified in the extensive analysis of the environmental samples. All have been logged in the grid and scanned by Equivalent.

(PAUSE)

The crew are tired this evening. We will remain on this spot and rest before moving on.

(SIGH)

Authorise and submit.

SOUND: A LONG BEEP CONFIRMS SUBMISSION.

PART THREE: THE EGGS

VOICE OF THE EGGS

On day five hundred and eighty-six, the humans woke up. And we were there.

CREWMEMBER 3

They're... they're everywhere.

CREWMEMBER 2

What are they?

CREWMEMBER 7

Eggs?

CREWMEMBER 8

I've never seen an egg that big before. Or that colour.

CREWMEMBER 4

My gran had an ostrich egg on her bookshelf at home when I was a kid, she'd brought it back as a souvenir from a big holiday. I remember spending hours looking up at it, dreaming of the day it hatched and I would have an ostrich chick as an uncle. One day, I must've been about nine, she showed me the hole where the yolk had been blown out and I was devastated. No ostrich. Afterwards, I remember sitting on her lap and holding the empty shell with both of my little hands to study its size. Huge next to the boiled egg and soldiers that Gran had made me for lunch. It was tiny in comparison to these things though.

CREWMEMBER 5

No ostrich laid these, mate. They're taller than my whole body, and it's been a good few years since I was nine.

SOUND: A FEW RETURNING FOOTSTEPS.

CREWMEMBER 8

They're everywhere. Not just the living quarters. All along the corridors, down to the engine room.

CREWMEMBER 3

The colour is a bit weird, makes me feel queasy.

CREWMEMBER 2

What are we gonna do about them? Going to be a hell of a team effort to shift 'em.

CREWMEMBER 6

I guess we've got to report them.

CREWMEMBER 7

Let's not touch 'em 'til we get a response. Don't fancy putting my back out when they've probably got a special egg-shifting gadget installed somewhere that can do it for us.

CONVERSATION PROMPT

The crewmembers are waiting for a response from the council, a committee of mission authority based on Earth.

What are your favourite egg dishes?

What do you think the giant eggs would taste like, and what would it be like to eat one?

Do you think you would get in trouble for eating one?

VOICE OF THE EGGS

Time passes. We are silent and still, while humans eat and yawn around us.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Transmission commencing in three, two, one...

LEADER

We have received your report and the council has congregated.

CREWMEMBER 2

Good to hear from you, sir.

LEADER

Is there any sign of the mother?

CREWMEMBER 6

No, no sign of the mother. I re-analysed all samples and there is no indications of any life form.

LEADER

Interesting.

CREWMEMBER 1

What is your decision, sir?

LEADER

The creatures which hatch from these eggs will be a triumphant discovery to bring back to earth. When they arrive on earth, we can further assess how the creatures may best benefit our economy. They could create new possibilities in the agricultural sectors or provide new sources of exotic meat.

LEADER

It is now imperative that the gestation period is not disrupted, therefore you must remain stationary until the eggs hatch. The prestige of this crew and the contribution that these eggs provide will be celebrated for generations.

Stand by to receive the council-determined procedures, which all crewmembers must follow to ensure successful production of the livestock.

CREWMEMBER 4

The crew is standing by sir.

LEADER

You must adhere to the following framework of activities.

All quarters of the vessel, including any engine mechanism access points, must be sanitised after each meal.

CREWMEMBERS

(MUMBLING) Huh? What?

LEADER

The environment that the eggs were laid in must be maintained. At the time of laying, the vessel was a prime nesting environment which must be preserved. We cannot risk an infection; it would cause delivery of the livestock to be spoilt.

In addition to standard evening timing, Equivalent will now routinely release the sanitation mist throughout the day. However, the crew must commit to physically cleaning all surfaces following breakfast, lunch, and supper.

CREWMEMBER 5

Understood sir.

LEADER

All crew members will be assigned an egg. Each crew member must sleep on top of their egg. This will keep the cargo warm.

CREWMEMBER 3

How do we move them into our sleep pods?

LEADER

The eggs must not be moved. This is imperative. I repeat: the eggs must not be moved. You will sleep on top of the eggs in their current locations. Following this transmission, crewmembers will have twenty minutes to remove blankets and belongings from sleep pods, after which, Equivalent will lock the individual shutters and sleep pods will be retired until further notice. One, plain blanket is permitted near each egg, while all other possessions must be kept in lockers to ensure that no interference occurs.

CREWMEMBER 6

I'll take the lead on that, sir.

LEADER

Good crewmember, all of you must pitch in. In addition, to ensure successful incubation, Equivalent will raise the ambient temperature of the vessel to an elevated heat, replicating the natural habitat of healthy eggs.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Temperature rising.

LEADER

Finally, each morning and evening, every egg must be polished to a high shine, creating a lasting impression and setting an impressive standard for the hatchlings.

LEADER

We are renaming this crew; you are now registered as Guardians of The Eggs. The prestige of this mission, and the contribution that the eggs will provide to our society, will be celebrated for generations. Do not let your economy down.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Transmission ending in three, two, one... Have a nice day.

SOUND: CRACKLED LINE TO A BEEP, THEN SILENCE.

SOUND: THE CREW ARE COMPLETELY SILENT UNTIL THE PHONE LINE ENDS, AT WHICH POINT THEY BREAK INTO WHOOPS AND CHEERS.

CREWMEMBER 2

Looks like you're getting uncle ostrich after all, buddy!!

CREWMEMBER 8

Finally, something useful to do around here!

CREWMEMBER 7

A bit of prestige never hurt anybody! Let's go and get our blankets then.

CREWMEMBER 3

Not that we'll need them, it's getting toasty.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CONVERSATION PROMPT

The crewmembers are bored.

You have the following items available:

- *A regulatory safety whistle.*
- *A standard issue non-denominational religious text (issued to accompany all extra-terrestrial missions).*
- *An uncatagorised soil sample.*
- *A sock puppet.*
- *Three elastic bands.*
- *A flathead screwdriver.*

How will you entertain yourselves?

Remember that you cannot put the eggs at risk.

PART SIX: EQUIVALENT

SOUND: IT IS MEALTIME. SCRAPES OF KNIVES AND FORKS, LAUGHS, AND GENERAL CHATTER.

CREWMEMBER 7

I wonder what they'll look like. The creatures, I mean.

CREWMEMBER 1

(LAUGHING)

With any luck, they'll look tasty enough to please the council.

CREWMEMBER 6

Imagine if they're just scrawny things, no meat on their bones. The size of those eggs... I'm sure we wouldn't have enough food onboard to fatten one up, let alone all of them.

CREWMEMBER 8

They could eat us, for all we know. We don't know what's going to come out.

CREWMEMBER 5

Let's hope they're herbivores.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CREWMEMBER 2

(SUDDENLY BECOMING SERIOUS)

You're right though, we're going to have to keep an eye on how much food we have. I don't fancy explaining a vessel full of starved, dead aliens to everyone back home.

CREWMEMBER 6

Best case scenario, we have eternal glory. Worst case scenario, we all watch you announce to the street parties that we did have some creatures, but they tried to eat us alive, so Equivalent had to deal with them... Equivalent would do that, right?

CREWMEMBER 4

Yeah... Equivalent is meant to protect us, right?

CREWMEMBER 2

Are they just going to roam around the corridors? We've got plenty of sample depositories, but hardly farming space.

CREWMEMBER 1

I'm hoping Equivalent will deal with that too... Maybe the squares on the grid can create an enclosure somehow?

SOUND: A (VAGUELY OMINOUS) CRACKLE AND BLEEP OF MACHINERY.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CONVERSATION PROMPT

The crewmembers revisit their speculation about what will hatch from the eggs.

This time, the conversation feels more serious.

What might be inside? How does this unknown make you (a crewmember) feel?

PART FIVE: THE CRACK

CREWMEMBER 7

Day six hundred and nine. The crew are just finishing up egg cleaning duties before we sleep. Still no sign of our babies, but we're running a tight ship, in line with council procedures... Hopefully not long left. Authorise and submit.

SOUND: A LONG BEEP CONFIRMS SUBMISSION.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

SOUND: THE BUZZ OF A HOUSE FLY, AND A GASPING SWIPE.

SOUND: THE ROLL OF AN EGG ON THE SOLID FLOOR, AND A CRACK.

VOICE OF THE EGGS

A splinter and a crack. A bubble as air penetrates the membrane.

CREWMEMBER 4

Oh no.

VOICE OF THE EGGS

A dribble turns into a dollop, which becomes a spillage.

CREWMEMBER 4

No, please.

VOICE OF THE EGGS

Clear goo, and a buttery yolk. A few splinters of shell amongst the leaking protein as it seeps, oozing across the floor, towards a thin green beam of light.

CREWMEMBER 4

Wait... Wh-

SOUND: A SIREN.

SOUND: MULTIPLE FOOTSTEPS, AS CREW MEMBERS COME RUNNING.

CREWMEMBER 2

What the hell? CREWMEMBER 4?

CREWMEMBER 3

What did you do?!

CREWMEMBER 4

I didn't mean to, I tried to swat the damn fly and slipped on the floor polish.

CREWMEMBER 5

Looks like one of the drips interrupted a line in the grid and woke Equivalent up. They must have seen it back at base.

CREWMEMBER 4

It will be alright, right? I mean, it's yolk...

CREWMEMBER 2

You aren't meant to see the yolk, pal.

CREWMEMBER 4

No, no, I know, but-

SECRETARIAL VOICE

All crew members are to congregate immediately. Transmission commencing in three, two, one-

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

LEADER

We are aware of this morning's occurrence and are currently reviewing the footage.

CREWMEMBER 8

It was clearly not intentional, sir.

LEADER

That is not for your judgement, crewmember. Crewmember 4, explain yourself.

CREWMEMBER 4

W... Well. It was an accident sir, and I apologise for that, but I believe... I believe it has led to an important discovery.

LEADER

A discovery? That is a bold response indeed. What have you discovered crew member?

CREWMEMBER 4

Well, when the egg cracked, sir, I realised that the inside was just yolk and whites.

LEADER

(SARCASTIC, DISMISSIVE)

You discovered that an egg contained yolk? How astute.

CREWMEMBER 4

(NERVOUSLY)

Hah, erm, yessir. Very good. Sounds silly I know, but I think that it's quite an important observation sir. You see, from the yolk... I don't think the eggs have been inseminated; Nothing is going to hatch.

LEADER

Nothing is going to hatch? Nonsense! Offspring are produced through appropriate and deliberate nurture... Something that you seem to be lacking in, crewmember.

CREWMEMBER 4

There are cases of parthenogenesis in species on Earth sir, but it doesn't seem, in this case... That is to say... There's nothing growing inside, it's just yolk. They're not fertile, but-

LEADER

The council is becoming concerned about your mind, crewmember.

CREWMEMBER 4

Sir, sir, please. Listen to me. The eggs could be useful in other ways. With the size of the eggs, we probably have enough food to last-

LEADER

(LOSING TEMPER)

This could be considered infanticide, motivated by a need to sabotage of the mission's outputs.

CREWMEMBER 4

Please sir, an omelette made from one of these eggs could feed a struggling family for a month-

LEADER

(INCREDULOUSLY)

Let others claim the triumphant outcome of this mission? When the first livestock hatches, the subsequent breeding programmes will provide generations which can be consumed handsomely.

Crewmember, you are forgetting that struggling families could never afford the delicacies of space produce.

CREWMEMBER 4

(HURRIEDLY)

But sir, there won't be any livestock becau-

LEADER

(SHOUTING)

Silence!

CREWMEMBER 4

(MUFFLED SQUEAK)

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

LEADER

(CALMLY, STERNLY)

Now, 4, the council of this mission agree that you are not well. You have clearly grown hysterical with cabin fever, and we must conclude this review with a diagnosis of space madness.

CREWMEMBER 4

(STARTING TO CRY)

Please sir... I'm not...

LEADER

Hush, hush. Now, as you know, there is no way of halting this illness. The symptoms that you are currently displaying could be dangerous to the entire mission. We cannot put these efficient crewmembers at risk now, can we? Who knows what perils the madness of the troubled mind will orchestrate.

CREWMEMBER 4

(SOB)

Please... Crewmembers, help me... Tell them I'm not...

SOUND: THE CREW ARE FRIGHTENED, AND SO THEY ARE SILENT.

LEADER

We must, therefore, begin your termination procedure with immediate effect. Equivalent, euthanise this crewmember.

SOUND: A LASER, AND THE SIZZLE OF AN EGG FRYING. A CRUNCH OF AN EGG SHELL, AND A BODY SLUMPING.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Further instruction will be outlined in the morning. Transmission ending in three, two, one... Have a nice day.

SOUND: THERE IS A STUNNED, EMPTY PAUSE.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

VOICE OF THE EGGS

The body lies in the pool of yellow jelly that creeps across the ground. The borders are broken. Fluids stream from broken limbs, and broken shell.

CREWMEMBER 5

Poor blighter. What a way to go.

CREWMEMBER 6

(SARDONICALLY)

‘Space madness’, eh?

CREWMEMBER 3

Not sure I buy tha-

CREWMEMBER 6

Hush, it isn’t for us to talk about. Especially here.

SOUND: THE (BRIEF, BUT DELIBERATE) CRACKLE OF AN INTERCOM.

CREWMEMBER 7

So, what do we do? Make an omelette with the leftovers in CREWMEMBER 4's memory?

CREWMEMBER 8

Not likely, Equivalent has obliterated the damn thing. Not sure I fancy spending an evening picking the bits of shell and human body out of my dinner.

(FALTERING)

Is there a protocol for... this... situation?

CREWMEMBER 1

I guess we're going to have to bag 4 up and put them on ice with the bio samples. Always hated it in there in the dark, but it's better than lying in the corridor with us for the rest of the trip. This bit won't be pleasant, but we can sleep afterwards.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

PART SIX: FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS

VOICE OF THE EGGS

Hours of open eyelids in the dark. Untrusting bodies painstakingly composed upon eggs, fearing loss of vigilance. Disturbed thoughts of smashed, scrambled flesh and frittatas, vacuum-sealed in the deli fridges of Earth-supermarkets. The vessel's artificial light begins to rise. It is morning.

CREWMEMBER 1

Anyone get any sleep?

CREWMEMBER 3

Did you have to ask?

CREWMEMBER 1

Me neither.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CREWMEMBER 2

What are we expecting today?

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Transmission commencing in three, two, one...

LEADER

Crewmembers, the council have discussed the need to increase your egg care procedures. Whilst deluded, your recently deceased peer highlighted that the incubation period was not developing as effectively as hoped. These activities are integral to the successful delivery of the product. Increased effort will eliminate any threat to the task.

CREWMEMBER 8

Understood, sir.

LEADER

Firstly, all sanitation efforts must be increased. Equivalent will sanitise at a regular pace, and crewmembers will physically clean all vessel surfaces hourly-

CREWMEMBER 6

(INTERRUPTING)

Hourly?!

LEADER

(INSTANTLY ANGRY)

Hourly, crewmember!

(COOLER, COLLECTED)

Not only will the sterile environment help our eggs thrive, but the extra duties will stimulate your brains, promoting healthy wellbeing. We cannot lose any more workers to the madness.

CREWMEMBER 5

(DEFEATED)

Of course, yes.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

LEADER

Equivalent will also further elevate the temperature of the vessel by several degrees. It is likely that production of extra-terrestrial livestock requires a warmer incubation climate than chronicled on our own planet. This change will eliminate that risk.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Temperature rising.

LEADER

We are also taking the initiative to avoid the damage done by any further ill-advised actions.

CREWMEMBER 7

Sir?

LEADER

From now until the birth of the livestock, Equivalent has disabled the vessel's engines. This means that, should homesickness take your rationality, you will not be able to make any silly mistakes.

CREWMEMBER 3

So... you're saying that we won't be able to take off?

LEADER

I'm saying that you won't be able to take off, crewmember, precisely.

CREWMEMBER 7

But what if there are any problems sir, and we need to get out of here sharpish?

LEADER

Your sample reports show that there is no external threat from your current land, and any other 'problems' can be dealt with by Equivalent... 'sharpish'.

CREWMEMBER 2

Of course, how could we forget about the babysitter.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

LEADER

I can see that you are finding the approaching period uncomfortable, Crewmembers. Take solace in the celebrations that will welcome you home when your mission is complete.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Transmission ending in three, two, one... Have a nice day.

CONVERSATION PROMPT

The crewmembers are reminiscing about home.

What do you miss about Earth?

PART SEVEN: DO YOU THINK 4 WAS RIGHT?

VOICE OF THE EGGS

Time passes, and sanitisation rituals increase in regularity, an hour is halved, then halved again, and then once more. Meanwhile, we remain undeveloped and whole.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CREWMEMBER 2

(BREATHLESS)

Day seven thirty... five. I think. Your little bundles of joy still haven't arrived. I don't know what else to say. Authorise and submit.

SOUND: A LONG BEEP CONFIRMS SUBMISSION.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

VOICE OF THE EGGS

Like the albumen of an egg transforms from a translucent glue to thick, white slabs when submerged in a hot environment, so, too, do the proteins of the human brain begin to denature.

SOUND: THE SLOW SQUIRTS, SCRUBS, SQUEAKS AND SIGHS OF CLEANING.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CREWMEMBER 5

Can't we ask them-

CREWMEMBER 1

You know that we can't.

CREWMEMBER 5

I know.

CREWMEMBER 6

I want to go home too.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CREWMEMBER 3

Do you think 4 was right though?

SOUND: A BRIEF INTERCOM CRACKLE.

CREWMEMBER 2

What about?

CREWMEMBER 8

(HISSING)

You know what about.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CREWMEMBER 8

(SOFTENS)

About everything.

SOUND: ANOTHER SLIGHT CRACKLE.

CREWMEMBER 7

It feels like my mind is muddled nowadays. But 4 is all I think about.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

CONVERSATION PROMPT

The rations are depleting rapidly, and crewmembers are becoming increasingly concerned.

Discuss whether you should eat one of the eggs.

Remember that you are potentially being observed.

This conversation MUST NOT end with the crew eating an egg.

VOICE OF THE EGGS

Sweat mixes with antibacterial fluids, and occasionally with tears. For days upon days upon days, a routine of combining these liquids and waiting.

CREWMEMBER 8

(STRUGGLING TO SPEAK, DESPERATE YET TIRED)

Day one thousand and ... something hundred ... I'm not sure. We haven't received communication from the council for some time. Are you still monitoring the mission? We... we aren't well. It is hot, and we need supplies. There is no water, no food on this land. The engines are still bypassed, and we can't authorise activation. Please. Authorise and submit.

SOUND: THE BUZZ OF A HOUSE FLY.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

SECRETARIAL VOICE

Sanitisation complete.

EPILOGUE

VOICE OF THE EGGS

Out of broken, greenish flesh, crusted with the crumbling remnants of burst blisters, small heads of white worms rise. Blindly writhing amongst motionless hair, and burrowing under bitten, dirt-ridden fingernails, more and more, an infestation.

New creatures come into being, not from glorious golden eggs, but from clusters of parasitic pods deposited inside rotting, forgotten human skin, putrefied beneath the institution of old Earth.

The stagnant waters, born from old meat drooping from silent bones, crawl across the floor, reaching gigantic, untouched, unbroken eggs.