

The record-breaking winner of the Hugo, Nebula, Arthur C. Clarke and British Science Fiction Association Awards for her debut novel, Ann Leckie lives in St Louis, Missouri, with her husband, children and cats. You can find her website at www.annleckie.com or chat to her on Twitter at [@Ann_Leckie](https://twitter.com/Ann_Leckie).

CHAPTER 1

“There were unexpected difficulties,” said the dark gray blur. That blur sat in a pale-blue cushioned chair, no more than a meter away from where Ingray herself sat, facing, in an identical chair.

Or apparently so, anyway. Ingray knew that if she reached much more than a meter past her knees, she would touch smooth, solid wall. The same to her left, where apparently the Facilitator sat, bony frame draped in brown, gold, and purple silk, hair braided sleekly back, dark eyes expressionless, watching the conversation. Listening. Only the beige walls behind and to the right of Ingray were really as they appeared. The table beside Ingray’s chair with the gilded decanter of serbat and the delicate glass tray of tiny rose-petaled cakes was certainly real--the Facilitator had invited her to try them. She had been too nervous to even consider eating one.

“Unexpected difficulties,” continued the dark gray blur, “that led to unanticipated expenses. We will require a larger payment than previously agreed.”

That other anonymous party could not see Ingray where she sat--saw her as the same sort of dark gray blur she herself faced. Sat in an identical small room, somewhere else on this

station. Could not see Ingray's expression, if she let her dismay and despair show itself on her face. But the Facilitator could see them both. E wouldn't betray having seen even Ingray's smallest reaction, she was sure. Still. "Unexpected difficulties are not my concern," she said, calmly and smoothly as she could manage. "The price was agreed beforehand." The price was everything she owned, not counting the clothes she wore, or passage home--already paid.

"The unexpected expenses were considerable, and must be met somehow," said the dark gray blur. "The package will not be delivered unless the payment is increased."

"Then do not deliver it," replied Ingray, trying to sound careless. Holding her hands very still in her lap. She wanted to clutch the green and blue silk of her full skirts, to have some feeling that she could hold onto something solid and safe, a childish habit she thought she'd lost years ago. "You will not receive any payment at all, as a result. Certainly your expenses must be met regardless, but that is no concern of mine."

She waited. The Facilitator said nothing. Ingray reminded herself that the gray blur had more to lose than she did, if this deal didn't happen. She could take what was left of the payment she'd brought, after the Facilitator's commission--payable no matter what happened, at this stage. She could go home, back to Hwae. She'd have good deal less than she'd started with, true, and maybe she would have to settle for that, invest what she had left. If she lost her job she could probably use what connections remained to her to find another one. She imagined her foster mother's cold disappointment; Netano Aughskold did not waste time or energy on unambitious or unsuccessful children.

And Ingray imagined her foster brother Danach's smug triumph. Even if all Ingray's plans succeeded, she would never replace Danach as Netano's favorite, but she could walk away from the Aughskolds knowing she'd humiliated her arrogant

brother, and made all of them, Netano included, take notice. And plenty of other people with power and influence would take notice as well. If this deal didn't go through, she wouldn't have that, wouldn't have even the smallest of victories over her brother.

Silence still from the gray blur, from the Facilitator. The spicy smell of the serbat from the decanter turned her stomach. It wasn't going to happen.

And maybe that would be all right. What was she trying to do anyway? This plan was ridiculous. It was impossible. The chances of her succeeding, even if this trade went ahead, were next to nothing. What was she even doing here? For an instant she felt as though she had stepped off the edge of a precipice, and this was that barest moment before she plunged downward.

Ingray could end it now. Announce that the deal was off, give the Facilitator eir fee, and go home with what she had left.

The blur across from Ingray gave a dissatisfied sigh. "Very well, then. The deal goes forward. But now we know what to think of the much-vaunted impartiality and equitable practice of the Tyr."

"The terms were plain from the start," said the Facilitator in an even tone. "The payment was accurately described to you, and if you did not consider it adequate, you had only to demand more at the time of the offer, or refuse the sale outright. This is our inflexible rule in order to prevent misunderstandings and acrimony at just this stage of the proceedings. I explained this to you at the time. Had you not expressed your understanding of and agreement to that policy, I would not have allowed the exchange to go forward. To do otherwise would damage our reputation for impartiality and fair dealing." The gray blur did not reply. "I have examined the payment and the merchandise," said the Facilitator, still calm and even. "They are both as promised."

Now was Ingray's chance. She should escape this while she still could. She opened her mouth. "Very well," she said.

Oh, almighty Powers, what had she just done?

The assigned pickup location was a small room walled in orchids growing on what looked like a maze of tree roots. A woman in a brown and purple jacket and sarong stood beside a scuffed gray shipping crate two meters long and one high, jarringly out of place in such carefully tended, soft-colored luxury. "There is some misunderstanding, excellency," Ingray suggested. "This is supposed to be a person." Looking at the size and the shape of the crate, it occurred to her that it might hold a body.

Utter failure. The dread Ingray had felt since the gray blur had demanded extra payment intensified.

Not moving from her place at the far end of the crate, not looking at it, not even blinking, the woman said, primly, "We do not involve ourselves in kidnappings or in slave trading, excellency."

Ingray blinked. Took a breath, unsure of how to continue. "May I open the crate?" she asked, finally.

"It is yours," said the woman. "You may do whatever you wish with it." She did not otherwise move.

It took Ingray a few moments to find all the latches on the crate lid. Each came apart with a dull snap, and she carefully shoved over one end of the heavy lid, wary of sending it crashing over the back of the crate. Light glinted off something smooth and dark inside. A suspension pod. She pushed the lid a few centimeters further over. Reached in to pull back the cover over the pod's indicator panel. Blue and green lights on the panel told her the pod was in operation, and its occupant alive. She could not help a very small exhalation of relief.

And maybe it was better this way. She could delay any awkward explanations, could bring this person to the ship

she'd booked passage on without anyone knowing what she was doing. She pushed and tugged the crate lid back into place, re-latched it.

"Your pardon," she said to the woman in the brown and purple sarong. "I didn't anticipate that...my purchase would arrive packaged this way. I don't think I can move this on my own. Is there a cart I can borrow?" How she would get it onto a cart by herself she didn't know. And if they charged for the cart's use, well, she had nothing left to pay for that. She might have to open that pod, right here and now, and hope its occupant was willing and able to walk. "Or can it be delivered to my ship?"

With no change of expression, the woman touched the side of the crate, and there was a click and it shifted toward Ingray, just a bit. "Once you have claimed your purchase," the woman said, "it is no longer in our custody and we will not take any responsibility for it. This may occasionally seem inconvenient, but we find it prevents misunderstandings. You should be able to move this on your own. When you are clear of our premises and have re-enabled your communications you'll be shown the most efficient passable route for objects of this size."

There must have been some kind of assist on the crate, because although it had to be quite heavy it slid easily, though it swung wildly until Ingray got the trick of moving it forward without also sending it sideways. And she almost lost control of it entirely when, coming out of a nondescript doorway into a broad, brightly lit black and red tiled corridor, she blinked her communications back on and a long list of alerts and news items suddenly appeared in her vision. A surprising lot of news items, when Ingray had set her feed to winnow out local news, all but the most urgent. Though the largest and brightest of them--large enough that she couldn't help reading it even as she desperately swung the shipping crate away from crashing into a wall--was definitely of more than local interest. GECK

DIPLOMATIC MISSION ARRIVES IN TYR SPACE it read, and smaller, beneath that, TYR SIILAS COUNCIL APPROVES REQUEST FOR PROVISIONS, FUEL, AND REPAIRS. Well, of course they had approved it. The Geck were signatories to the treaty with the dangerous and enigmatic Presger, and whatever anyone felt about who had made that treaty and how, no one was fool enough to want to break it.

Her attention to the headline brought up a cloud of more detailed information, and opinion pieces. CONCLAVE A BLATANT RADCHAAI POWER GRAB shouted one, and CONSCIOUS AI MAKES ITS MOVE AT LAST – IS THIS THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR HUMANITY? asked another. A quiet voice whispered in her ear that a noodle shop she'd eaten at six times since she'd arrived here was open and nearby, with a relatively short queue--a personal alert Ingray had set days ago and forgotten to turn off. She hadn't eaten breakfast, or the cakes the Facilitator had offered her. But suddenly noodles sounded very good.

There wasn't time. The ship she'd bought passage on departed in three hours, which meant she had to be aboard in less time than that. And even if she'd had time--and any money at all--she could hardly queue for noodles with this body-sized crate in tow, that she could barely steer. She thought away every message except the route to her ship, and kept going. She could eat on board.

The route she'd been given kept her mostly out of the station's busiest areas, though on Tyr Siilas "less busy" was still quite crowded. At first she was self-conscious, afraid she'd attract unwelcome curiosity pushing a suspension-pod-sized crate through the station's thoroughfares, but the crowds split and streamed around her without contact or comment. And she was hardly the only person pushing an awkward load. She had to swerve carefully around a stack of crates full of onions, apparently trundling along under its

own power, and then found herself stuck for a few frustrating seconds behind what at first she took to be a puzzlingly tall mech, but when it finally moved she realized it was actually a Human in an environmental support suit, someone from a low-gravity habitat, to judge from their height and need to wear the suit.

At one point she had to wait a half hour for a freight lift, and then spent the ride pinned against the lift's grimy back wall. She regretted wearing her stiff, formal sandals and the silk jacket and long, full skirts that she'd kept when she'd sold the rest of her clothes, with the intention of looking as seriously businesslike as possible. Very probably pointless--the Facilitator likely didn't care so long as her money was good, and the other side of the deal she'd made couldn't see her anyway.

As soon as she was off the lift she girded up her skirts, and took off her sandals and set them on the crate along with the small bag that held everything else she owned now--her identity tabula and a few small toiletries--and then set out on the long stop-and-start trek through the docks, swerving around inattentive travelers when she could, the time display in her vision reassuring her, at least, that she still had plenty of time to reach her ship which was, predictably, in the section of the docks farthest from where she'd entered.

She arrived at the bay tired, frustrated, and anxious. The bay was much smaller than she'd expected, but then she had only ever taken the big passenger liners between systems. Had taken one here, but she could not afford even the cheapest available return fare home on such a ship. She'd known this ship was small, a cargo ship with a few extra berths for passengers, that her trip home would be cramped and unluxurious, but she hadn't stopped to consider what that would mean now she was bringing this crate with her. If this had been a passenger liner, there would have been someone here she could turn the crate over to, who would make sure it got to Ingray's berth, or to

cargo. But the bay was empty. And she didn't think she could get both herself and the crate into the airlock.

While she stood thinking, a man came out of the airlock. Short and solid-bodied, and there was something undefinably odd about his squarish face--something off about the shape of his nose, or the size of his mouth. His hair was pulled back behind his head, to hang behind him in dozens of tiny braids. He wore a gray and green striped lungi, and a dark gray jacket, and he was barefoot--less formal than what nearly everyone here wore for business dealings or important meetings, but still perfectly respectable. "You are Ingray Aughskold?"

"You must be Captain Uisine." Ingray had booked this berth through the Tyr Siilas dock office, days ago, before this ship had arrived here. "Or is it Captain Tic?" Somewhere like this, where you met people from all over, it was difficult to know what order anyone's name was in, or which one they preferred to be addressed by.

"Either one," said Captain Uisine. "You didn't say anything about oversized luggage, excellency."

"No," Ingray said. "I didn't. I wasn't expecting it, myself."

Captain Uisine was silent a moment. Waiting, Ingray supposed. Then, "It's too large for the passenger compartments, excellency. It will need to be loaded into cargo. That's accessed on the lower level. But it's sealed up at the moment. And I'm not opening it before I see a duly registered Statement of Contents."

She didn't even know there was such a thing, or that she might need it. Then again, she'd never expected to have to deal with cargo at all. "I can't..." she really ought to have eaten something that morning. "I can't leave it behind. Is there time to open the cargo access?" She thought she was standing quite still, but she must have moved the hand that rested on the crate, because now it slid forward. She grabbed for it.

Captain Uisine laid a hand on it to stop and steady it. “Plenty of time. Departure’s delayed. Have you not checked your notifications? We’re here another two days.”

“Two days!” It didn’t seem possible. She summoned her notifications to her vision, and saw what she would have seen immediately if she’d checked her personal messages—a brief, bare note about the delay, from Captain Tic Uisine. “Unavoidable delay” the note called it, “due to current events.”

Current events. Of course. Ingray pulled up the news, looked closer at the information about the Geck diplomatic mission. Which mentioned, quite clearly but further in than she’d bothered to look, that arrivals and departures were being rearranged to fit the Geck in as quickly and safely as possible.

There was no arguing with that, no recourse. Even if Ingray had been traveling with Netano Aughskold, who had herself not infrequently demanded (and received) such priority, it wouldn’t have done any good, and not just because this wasn’t Netano’s home system. The Geck were aliens, not human. They almost never left their homeworld, or so Ingray understood, and had done so now only to attend to urgent matters regarding the treaty with the alien Presger. Before the treaty, the Presger would tear apart Human ships and stations—and their passengers and residents—seemingly at a whim. Nothing could stop them, nothing except the treaty, which the Radchaai ruler Anaander Mianaai had signed in the name of all Humanity; the Presger apparently did not understand or care about whether there might be different sorts of Humans, with different authorities. But no matter how anyone felt about the Radchaai taking on that authority, no one wanted the Presger to start killing people again.

Eventually the Geck had also become signatories, and much more recently the Rrrrrr. And now there was a potential third new non-Human signatory to the treaty, and a conclave, called by the Presger, to decide the issue. Probably everyone

anywhere in the unthinkable vast reaches of Human-inhabited space was aware of it, had opinions, wanted to know more, wanted to know how this conclave would affect their futures.

Ingray couldn't bring herself to care just now. "I can't wait two days," she said. Captain Uisine said nothing, didn't make the obvious comment--there was no avoiding the wait, and he had no control over it. Didn't take his hand off the end of the crate. Probably wise--Ingray didn't know how to turn off the assist. "I just can't."

"Why not?" he asked. Serious, but not, it seemed, terribly invested in Ingray's particular problems.

Ingray closed her eyes. She would not cry. Opened her eyes again, took a breath, and said, "I spent everything I had settling up at my lodgings this morning."

"You're broke." Captain Uisine's eyes flicked to Ingray's bag and jacket and sandals still perched on top of the crate.

"I can't not eat for two days." She should have had breakfast that morning. She should have eaten some cakes, when she was dealing with the Facilitator.

"Well, you can," said Captain Uisine. "As long as you have water. But what about your friend?"

Ingray frowned. "My friend?"

"The person you're traveling with. Can they help you out?"

"Um."

Captain Uisine waited, still noncommittal. It occurred to Ingray that even if Captain Uisine charged for carrying the crate in cargo, it would likely be less than a passenger fare. Maybe she'd have enough to at least buy a meal or two between now and when the ship finally left. "And while you're thinking about that," the captain added before Ingray could speak, "you can show me the Statement of Contents for the crate."

For a panicked moment, Ingray tried to think of some way to argue that she shouldn't have to show one. Then

she remembered that so far the facilitator seemed to have anticipated what she would need to bring the crate away with her. She pulled her personal messages into her vision again, and there it was. “I’ve just sent it to you,” she said.

Captain Uisine blinked, and gazed off into the distance. “Miscellaneous biologicals,” he said after a few moments, focusing again on Ingray. “In a crate this size and shape? I’m sorry, excellency, but I didn’t hatch this morning. I’ll be exercising my right to examine the contents myself, as outlined in the fare agreement. Otherwise that crate is not coming aboard.”

Damn. “So,” said Ingray, “the person I’m traveling with is in here.”

“In the crate?” He seemed entirely unsurprised.

“In a suspension pod in the crate, yes,” Ingray replied. “I didn’t expect em to come this way, I thought I would just, you know, meet em and bring em here, and...” She trailed off, at a loss how to explain any further.

“Do you have authorizations permitting you to remove this person from Tyr Siilas? And before you mention it, I am aware that such authorizations aren’t always legally necessary here. I, however, do always require them.”

“An authorization to take someone on your ship?” Ingray frowned, bewildered. “You didn’t need one for me. You didn’t ask me for one, for...my friend.”

Still not changing expression, Captain Uisine said, “I don’t transport anyone against their will. I say that specifically in the fare agreement.” Which Ingray had read, of course, she was no fool. But obviously she hadn’t remembered that. Hadn’t thought, at that point, that it would be an issue. “I can ask you right now, do you want to leave Tyr Siilas and go to Hwae...”

“I do!” Ingray interjected.

“...and you can tell me that.” His voice was still serious and even. “This person cannot tell me if e wants to go where

you are taking em. I don't doubt there's some very compelling reason you are bringing em aboard in a suspension pod. I would like to be sure that compelling reason is eirs, and not just yours."

"But..." But he'd already said that this wasn't a matter of Tyr Siilas law. And if he refunded her money, she might be able to find another ship for the same fare, but if she went through the dock office again she'd have to pay another fee, which she didn't have. She might be able to find passage on her own, but that would take time. Maybe a lot of time. She sighed. "I don't know why e's in a suspension pod." Well, actually, she had some idea. But that wasn't going to help her cause with Captain Uisine, plainly. "I went to pick em up, and this is how I found em."

"Is there some medical reason this person is traveling in a suspension pod?"

"Not that I know of," she said, quite honestly.

"E didn't leave you any message, or any instruction?"

"No."

"Well, excellency," said Captain Uisine after a few moments, "I suggest we open the pod and ask em. We can always put em back in if e prefers that."

"What, right here?" The bay wasn't really closed off, not at the moment, and coming out of a suspension pod was uncomfortable and undignified. Or so Ingray understood. And in the time it had taken to push the crate here, she had decided that maybe she preferred things this way, preferred to delay introducing herself to this person and explaining just why she'd brought em here.

"I don't have oversize luggage regulations for amusement's sake. The only way that crate is coming on board is through cargo access. And for what I hope are obvious reasons I'm not going to agree to that happening."

If Ingray's mother Netano were doing this, she'd have somehow obtained whatever authorizations she would need to

satisfy this ship captain. Or she'd have bought passage on some ship where the captain or other crew owed her favors, or were in her power for some reason. Danach--Ingray's foster-brother Danach would probably find some way to threaten Captain Uisine, or charm or bribe him into doing what he wanted. Maybe she could bluff her way through this. Maybe tears would do it, they would certainly be easy to produce right now. But judging from the Captain's reaction on hearing she wouldn't be able to afford to eat for two days, she didn't think that would work.

She had to do something. She had to get herself--and the person in this suspension pod--onto that ship. She had no other option, no other available course, beyond staying on this station, broke and starving, for the rest of her life.

She was *not* going to cry. "Look," she said, "I need to explain." Captain Uisine had already put the worst possible construction on the situation. It wasn't going to look any better once the suspension pod was opened. She looked behind her, through the entrance to the bay, but no one was passing in the corridor beyond. Looked back at Captain Uisine. Sighed again. "I paid to have this person brought out of Compassionate Removal." No glimmer of recognition on Captain Uisine's face. She'd used the name most Bantia speakers would have used, on Hwae, maybe he didn't recognize that. She tried to think what the word might be in Yidir, which she had been using here, had used in all her brief dealings with Captain Uisine so far. She didn't think there was one--here on Tyr Siilas nearly every crime was punishable by a fine. All the language lessons and news items she'd run across discussed crime and its consequences in those terms. She called up a dictionary, tried searching through it, without success. "You know, when someone breaks a law, and either they've done it over and over again and you know they're just going to keep doing it, or what they did was so terrible they're not

going to get another chance to do it again. So they get sent to Compassionate Removal.”

“You’re talking about a prison,” said Captain Uisine.

In the corner of Ingray’s vision, her dictionary confirmed and defined the word. “No, it’s not a *prison*! We don’t have prisons. It’s a *place*. Where they can be away from regular people. They can do whatever they want, go wherever they like, you know, so long as they stay there. And they have to stay there. Once you go in you don’t come out. You’re legally dead. It’s just, it would be wrong to *kill* them.”

“So you paid everything you had--which to judge from the clothes you’re wearing, and your manner, was quite a lot--to have your friend broken out of a high-security prison with a name that sounds like a euphemism for killing vermin. What did e do?”

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