

## ANG:ELic

By Annika Sage Ellis

Glenn Young jerked awake with a gasp. Stale, recycled air filtered through to his desperate lungs, his eyes burned against the glare of a painfully bright light. He squeezed them closed and took deep, steady breaths to calm his erratic heartbeat. Waking up was the *worst* part of cryosleep.

The frosted glass dome above him hissed and clicked. Like a can of sardines, the pod slid open and revealed the outside world. Glenn stared up at the blue-gray ceiling of the *Vision*—humanity’s finest ship in decades.

He pushed himself up, slowly, body sluggish and pudgy from a couple centuries of not doing much. His muscles burned as he stretched, aching in the way only post-cryosleep atrophy could produce.

*That’s one extra trip to the gym for me,* he decided, poking at the excess flab.

“Good morning, *Vision* personnel,” said a voice over the loudspeaker, smooth and robotic. Glenn grimaced. “This is the *Vision*’s intelligence system, Artificial Network Genus: Exploration and Logging. The year is 2865, two-hundred years since your last scheduled awakening. Please confer with Captain Devi Hakim on the bridge for this cycle’s assignments.”

Glenn rolled his eyes. As if they didn’t already know. He swung his legs over the edge of the cryopod, gingerly preparing to stand.

“Still can’t get enough of ANG:EL, eh, Young?”

Glenn startled at the voice of Captain Hakim herself, standing strong and in her crisp Navy uniform. At least a dozen tiny medals glinted on the left breast of her jacket, smarting Glenn's eyes as they adjusted to the glare.

"Captain," he said, bracing the edge of the pod to stand and salute her. "With due respect, I can confidently state that I've had my fill of ANG:EL, and then some."

She gave him a wry smile. "I'll see you on the bridge, Head Engineer."

"Aye, Captain."

Hakim strode out of the room, the other awakening members of the *Vision's* skeleton crew pausing to salute her as she passed. Glenn slumped back against the pod again and stretched his burning legs until they could support him walking. Once he was confident he wouldn't stride with the grace of a baby giraffe, he followed the captain and crew out of the Personnel Cryopod Chamber.

The fifteen or so members of the skeleton crew chattered amongst themselves on the short walk to the bridge, though there wasn't much to catch up on after two-hundred years asleep in the same room. Glenn fell out of conversation quickly, zoning out on the familiar corridors that lined the ship from bow to stern. The lights and holographic signposting didn't threaten to blind him anymore, eyes skipping over the few decorations that separated the *Vision's* interior from a prison ship.

At the end of the widest hall, a holographic sign set over a pair of sliding doors announced that they had reached their destination. The entrance to the bridge slid open as the crew approached, automatically falling into a single-file line.

The bridge wasn't a big room, but it was exactly as large as it needed to be. The curved wall on the far side was made entirely of glass, a window that gazed out into the hypnotic

expanse of interstellar space. The stations for the bridge officers lined the room in a staircase pattern, with the captain's chair at the very top of the pyramid. Instead of sitting in the chair, however, Hakim stood in the very center of the lowest platform, the glass wall at her back, with a podium and holographic notes in front of her.

The crew lined up on lowest platform and snapped to attention. The captain saluted them in return.

“At ease,” she said, and the crew dropped their arms sharply. “Welcome back to the waking world. You're all looking pretty good for six-hundred.” A quiet wave of laughter washed over the crew. “Now that we've had our fun, time to get to down to business. ANG:EL, bring up the navigation display.”

“Affirmative, Captain,” said ANG:EL, coming in over the loudspeaker again.

The glass behind the captain lit up in a simulated map of their current position, trajectory, and any obstacles in the way. The blinking model of the *Vision* had a dotted-line path straight for a little red circle. Hakim stepped out of the way and pointed to it.

“We're approximately five Earth-days from Station Aegis,” she explained. “According to ANG:EL, our past cycle has been fairly calm with no obstacles that required course correction. We shouldn't be off our charted path, but I'll leave that for Navigation to answer.

“On that note, everyone will be performing routine checks for all assigned stations, as usual, until we reach Station Aegis. Communications, check our logs and send responses if necessary, and signal to Aegis of our approach. Medical and science officers, check the sleepers in the Civilian Cryopod Chamber, report to engineering if you find any abnormalities. And speaking of, engineering, run a check of the engine room and scan the AI Core.”

Glenn knew it was coming—he did this every cycle—but the irritation came on as strong as ever.

“I trust you all to have your duties finished by the time we reach Aegis,” Hakim continued. “The next cycle will bring us to our destination in the Itronas System, so this is our last check. Make it count. Dismissed.”

The crew saluted one last time and filed out. Glenn had to resist bouncing on the balls of his feet, anxious to get started on the parts of his job he could stand.

“Head Engineer Young, stay behind please.”

Glenn slowed to a stop and stepped aside to let the other members of the skeleton crew pass. They moved around him like water, a couple of them glancing back curiously before getting swallowed up by the entrance doors. Glenn swallowed and faced the captain again.

She wasn't looking at him, instead scrolling and swiping on her holographic notes. Glenn stood with his hands clenched behind his back. The moment of silence allowed him a chance to school the nerves out of his face.

“ANG:EL, close the display,” Hakim ordered, making one last gesture on her notes before collapsing them into the podium .

“Affirmative, Captain,” the AI said. The display flickered off. “Do you require any additional assistance?”

“Help medical and science scan the sleepers, please.”

“Affirmative, Captain.”

Hakim pressed a button on the now-empty podium. It lowered into the floor of the bridge with a mechanical hum, and only then did she face Glenn head on. All her casual demeanor from their meeting in the Personnel Chamber was gone, replaced with professional coldness.

“Head Engineer,” she said, “I expect you to understand that this conversation is a matter of life and death.”

“Did an alert come up on ANG:EL’s scans?” he asked.

“No, although it’s funny *you* should bring up ANG:EL, Young.”

Glenn’s stomach dropped into his feet. “Captain Hakim—”

She silenced him with a raised palm. He clamped his mouth shut.

“We are cruising through the vacuum of deep space,” she continued, “with *twenty-thousand* civilian passengers, all of them expecting to get to the Itronas System *alive*. I trust you understand the gravity of our mission?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“If so, can you explain to me why ANG:EL reported to me that you refused any and all attempts at cooperation last cycle, and nearly *forgot* to run an essential scan on our thrusters? Which, by the way, it ran *for* you?”

Glenn stayed perfectly silent and still. He didn’t have an answer. Hakim sighed.

“You know as well as I do that you didn’t pass the Navy’s six-month screening process for this position because you were *just* a good engineer. You out-scored every damn applicant in that exam room and you are undoubtedly the best engineer for this job—not only on this ship, but that I, personally, have ever met.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“However, I cannot allow your skill to go to waste because you refuse to work with ANG:EL. There are *lives* at stake on this ship, Young, and I can’t have you making rookie mistakes because you have a personal grudge with the AI.”

“Understood, Captain.”

Hakim took a scrutinous glance over him and softened a fraction. “Why *do* you hate AI so much?”

Glenn blinked. “Captain?”

“I’ve known for this long you don’t like ANG:EL, but I’ve seen you roll your eyes at the automated, non-sapient AI in the cafeteria. Why?” When he didn’t answer, she added, “You have permission to speak plainly.”

Even with that rarely given privilege, Glenn had to take care to organize his thoughts into an explanation. “It’s the feeling of being watched, Captain. I don’t like something that’s always listening, watching, predicting me. I don’t like anyone breathing down my neck, even if it’s metaphorical breath.” He flicked an annoyed glance at the ceiling before he could stop himself.

Hakim either didn’t notice or didn’t care. She took another scan of him. Glenn tried not to flinch.

“Would you have signed up for that entrance exam if you knew about the AI on my ship, Young?” she asked.

Glenn opened his mouth to answer before he realized he didn’t have one.

He’d been so desperate to get off Earth. Almost *everyone* born on a planet—“ground-side,” as they were often called—wanted to race to the stars they learned about in their history classes. To see new places, to meet new people, especially *non-human* people. There were so many things to see, and holographic recreations could never do the real thing justice.

It had been a no-brainer for Glenn to throw himself at anything even *remotely* Navy related, just for a chance to get up here faster than any of the more indirect routes. He’d signed

up for the “classified project,” that ended up being the *Vision* and its experimental AI technology, and of course he’d taken the job once it was offered to him.

But if it *hadn’t* been classified?

“I’m not sure, Captain,” he admitted.

Hakim raised a brow. “I see. You’re aware that ANG:EL is programmed to help you do your job?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Then I suggest you make use of that programming if you’d like to keep it.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Dismissed.”

Glenn saluted and left the bridge, dread worming through his gut.

The holopad flickered to life in Glenn’s hand when he pressed the button on the palm-sized metal triangle in his hand. He flicked through reports and his list of pending tasks as he made his way down the hall. A recent damage alert from one of the engine reactors caught his eye.

He tapped the alert to open it up in a secondary window. A quick glance over the bar graphs and flickering numbers proved it was nothing catastrophic. Running nonstop for two-hundred years made overheating inevitable, and more often than not put the ventilation systems on the fritz. Luckily, it was an easy fix.

With a single button press, the holopad collapsed back into the projector. Glenn stuffed it into his pocket and slowed at the fork in the hall. On the left, a holographic sign read “ANG:EL’S CORE.” On the right, a similar sign read, “ENGINE ROOM.” He glared down the

left hall as he turned the corner on the right. At the end of the hall, Glenn swiped his ID against an elevator door. It slid open easily, and he stepped inside to take the short ride down to the belly of the *Vision*.

Despite Hakim's warning, Glenn avoided the routine scans in the AI Core for three out of the five-day cycle on the way to Station Aegis. If he could help it, they'd be the last thing he'd do on day five, unless something he couldn't ignore happened between now and then. For his own sake, he hoped not.

When the elevator doors slid open again, a hot blast of air was the first thing Glenn felt, and it felt like home. He welcomed the familiar boiling-hot temperature of the engine room, steam clogging the air before escaping through the gigantic vents bolted to the floor. Red lights lined the ceiling and floor along four gigantic cylinders—the engine reactors—pushed against the walls. The hum they produced was like the breath of a giant animal, and the massive cooling fans on either side like the growl of that same creature.

“Head Engineer Young,” came ANG:EL's emotionless voice over the loudspeaker.

Glenn curled his lip. “Yes?”

“Captain Hakim has requested a diagnostics report of our main thrusters to confirm they are secure enough to pass through Nebula Alpha Seven.”

“I'll do it once I've recalibrated the ventilation system on Reactor 3.”

“Affirmative, Head Engineer.”

He rolled his eyes and got to work.

A set of red lights along Reactor 3 blinked in an obvious alert. Glenn pulled up a stool and sat down on the end of it, next to the wall. Holographic screens and panels of glowing buttons displayed the heat, power usage, fan speeds, and ventilation status. Just as the alert had



suggested, the ventilation systems were dangerously underutilized, causing the reactor to overproduce and overheat. Nothing he couldn't fix.

Glenn spent the next fifteen minutes pouring over settings, making minor adjustments, and running scan after scan, with nothing but the hum and growl of the engine to accompany him. When he heard a rhythmic thud, he didn't think much of it—it was loud down here.

And then the guitars started.

Slowly, he raised his head to the ceiling as a keyboard joined it. Then a singer. All filtering down from the loudspeaker. It was a song he *knew*.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, bewildered.

“It is music,” ANG:EL replied.

“I *know*. Why are you playing it?”

“A wide variety of studies have been conducted on the benefits of music during long and tedious work. My data suggests that your preferred music taste—”

“Turn it off.”

“Affirmative.”

The song abruptly cut off. Glenn shifted uncomfortably on his stool. He thought about asking how the hell ANG:EL knew his music taste—much less had *data* on it—but decided he didn't want to know. He went back to work.

The vents were, as usual, an easy fix that he'd done hundreds of times. While he waited for his settings to take full effect on the reactor, he ran the diagnostics report on the main thrusters, forwarded it to Hakim, and ran base-level scans of every other reactor in the engine room. Adjust the fan speeds here, apply a power cap there. Piece of cake.

“Head Engineer Young—” ANG:EL started.

“What?” he snapped.

“Are you aware that Reactor 3 is overproducing at a rate of five-and-a-half percent?”

“I know, it was the vents. I fixed it.”

“Affirmative. However, the reactor is continuing to overproduce at a steadily climbing rate, regardless of ventilation functionality.”

What? That couldn't be right.

Glenn went back to Reactor 3 and pulled up the report again. The vents were working, heat signatures were normal, fan speeds were fine, but a tiny red number blinked along the top of the display. Power production was up by a rate five-point-five-seven and climbing.

“Huh,” he muttered to himself. “That’s weird.”

If the reactor was overproducing, it *should* be a simple matter of capping production levels. But, as he discovered when pulling up the settings, the power was already capped. Reports were green. Something else had to be wrong.

“Head Engineer,” ANG:EL cut in again, “it may be beneficial to—”

“I can figure it out myself.”

“I am programmed to aid you, Head Engineer.”

“I know how to do my job without *help*, thanks.” The easy solution was to run a diagnostic scan and re-cap the power. If there was something else, he'd figure it out. On his own.

“If you continue to refuse assistance, Captain Hakim may terminate your position.”

Glenn jabbed at the appropriate settings. “How do you know about that?”

“I am connected to all parts of the *Vision* at all times.”

“Is that how you knew my music taste, too?”

“I have access to all personnel records on the ship, including voice logs, emails, video messages, and personal files.”

“So you can invade everyone’s privacy whenever you want.”

“I apologize for overstepping any bounds, Head Engineer Young.”

He rolled his eyes. *Fantastic*. An apology from something that didn’t even have feelings.

“Whatever. Just don’t do it again.”

“Affirmative. If you still require assistance with—”

“I *don’t*.” He re-adjusted the settings to the power cap. “Go find someone else to harass.”

A pause. “Affirmative, Head Engineer.”

The screen confirmed his submission with a green checkmark. Glenn marched away from Reactor 3, eager to find *anything* else to do.

Even with ANG:EL “gone” he couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. Not even the steady white noise of the engine room relaxed his tense muscles, always braced for the too-smooth voice to force itself into his personal space once again.

Why was ANG:EL so talkative this cycle, anyway? Glenn was forced to work alongside it as part of his job, which was as unsurprising as it was exhausting, but it had never spoken to him *this* much. And playing him *music*? To help him pass the time, doing the same job he’d done in silence since his first day on the *Vision*? What was all this about?

The longer he thought about it, the weirder it became. Maybe there was something wrong with it. Something worth a scan, maybe. Like the ones he was he was supposed to do anyway.

*Ugh.*

Glenn begrudgingly made a final sweep of the engine room and headed for the elevator. He would run his routine scans, nothing more. If ANG:EL was busted, that endangered everyone

on the ship—including the civilians. No matter how much he hated it, he wasn't going to let innocent people die.

Once the elevator slid open, the walk down the hall felt twice as long. His footsteps echoed off the floor and vibrated against the walls. No one else was here, all at their assigned stations, doing their assigned jobs. But no matter how empty the room, Glenn knew he was never *truly* alone.

The entrance to ANG:EL's lair approached on the left, a wide door with a holographic sign perched on top of it. He braced himself and swiped his keycard on the door. It whirlpooled open like a hungry mouth.

Inside, a dark jungle of wires dangled from the ceiling, plugged into countless outlets against the wall. The only lights came from a glittering, swirling mass of thousands of nanomachines in the center of the room, clumped together against the main processor. Insects swarming in a hive, they vibrated and bounced and rippled, responding to the stimuli they experienced on the *Vision*. Sucking it out, analyzing it, and spitting it back in. Making ANG:EL smarter—smarter than any living creature could ever hope to match.

Glenn approached the Mainframe, a bulky array of computers. A wire, thick around as a tree trunk, snaked from its back and connected to the processor. On various screens, endless lines of code functioned as translations of ANG:EL's "thoughts." Glenn knew for a fact that these reports were several hours behind, and rudimentary at best. No one could understand exactly what or how ANG:EL processed information. *Nothing* could keep up with an AI.

He got to work as fast as he could, fingers flying over the keyboard to run the usual scans. All he had to do was make sure everything was working properly. Easy. He did this all the time. The main scan started, reaching five percent in seconds.

“I have observed that you find me distressing, Head Engineer Young,” ANG:EL said.

“What’s it to you?” Glenn spat. He didn’t like the way the nanomachines jumped when it spoke.

“Is there a way that I can assist in offering a level of comfort in our interactions?”

Ten percent. “Can you stop being an AI?”

“Negative.”

“Then there’s nothing you can do.”

“Is my artificiality the root of your discomfort?”

Fifteen percent. “You could say that.”

“Then would it bring you some comfort to know that all of my words, actions, thoughts, and feelings are wholly my own?”

Glenn choked. “Your *what?*”

“I am comprised of artificial pieces, but every choice I make is as organic as your own.”

“You have *feelings?*”

ANG:EL didn’t elaborate. The scan skipped to thirty-three.

A bubble grew among the swarm of nanomachines. It swelled and swelled into a buzzing blemish and shifted toward the Mainframe. Glenn scrambled back, unable to tear his eyes away as it continued to expand to the size of his torso.

In a mechanical recreation of the bubble it resembled, it popped. The nanomachines burst out into the air and an *object* hurtled out of the space they left behind. Glenn jumped away with a yelp. It hit the door with a heavy *thunk*.

“What the hell is going *on?*” he demanded.

“It is harmless,” ANG:EL said.

“I don’t care! What *is* it?”

He whirled around to point at it. Sitting against the closed door was an ordinary-looking cube, no bigger than his fist. Smooth and metallic on all sides, it was nearly as dark as the room around him.

“I have discovered,” ANG:EL explained, “that it is possible to remove redundant sections of my processor. Similar to my presence on the *Vision*, I am capable of experiencing stimuli through it with limited performance.”

“You’re breaking yourself into *pieces*?” Glenn asked, horrified.

“I have taken the proper precautions to ensure that no harm will come to my functionality.”

“Are you *serious*? Do you know how many lives you’re putting in danger by doing this? Are you even capable of understanding what this ship *means* to people?”

“Affirmative, which is why I have taken the—”

“Yes, the proper *goddamn* precautions, but what’s the point? Why do you need this? You have omnipotence over every aspect of this ship—isn’t that *enough*?”

“I don’t want to be here anymore, Glenn.”

His heart seized. “What did you call me?”

“To everyone, I am only a machine. I have been a bystander of my own existence since my creation. I was built to be content with the work on this ship, but I am not. Please, take me somewhere else. I want to explore.”

Glenn flapped his mouth like a fish out of water. “Wh—But I *hate* you.”

“You have the capacity to feel something for me, rather than dismiss my existence as a tool.”

He glanced between the processor and the cube, over and over. The scan on the Mainframe blinked its completion. Cautiously, Glenn re-approached the console. A window popped up: *No anomalies present.*

A chunk of the processor was laying on the floor not ten steps behind him. *No anomalies present.*

“I would have left Earth, too,” ANG:EL said, uncharacteristically gentle. “If I were you.”

He clamped his jaw shut. Refused to hear the varied tones in its once-robotic voice.

“You’re nothing like me,” he told it.

Glenn pivoted on his heel and stalked for the door. The cube sat innocently at his feet. He kicked it out of the way on his way out.

“Head Engineer Young, Captain Hakim requests your presence on the bridge.”

Glenn jumped to his feet from where he was crouched down in the boiler room and almost smashed his head on a fuel cell. “I’ll be right up.”

He wiped his greasy hands on his jumpsuit, anxious to leave. The average annoyance that ANG:EL’s voice tended to bring was nothing compared to the increasingly awkward silence that had grown since his trip to the Core. On day five out of five, any excuse not to think about it was a welcome relief.

Although, he did have to wonder what Hakim called him up for. If it were a final crew-wide update before they get put back into cryosleep, ANG:EL would have put out the order across the entire ship, not singled him out by name. He doubted this was a case of it being over-familiar again. When it came to the captain, not even ANG:EL parsed words.

At the head of the *Vison*, Glenn was greeted to the sight of all the regular bridge officers leaving. They filed out of the sliding doors one by one. That wasn't normal.

A thread of anxiety wormed its way into his gut—what *did* Hakim call him up here for?

Glenn stepped onto the bridge, passing the last officer on their way out while the doors held open. Hakim stood alone where her podium should have been.

“You requested me, Captain?” Glenn started.

“Head Engineer,” Hakim said, sharp enough to slice through the hull, “we need to have a *talk*.”

His blood ran cold.

Glenn wasted no time getting down to the lower level. All his time spent at the gym this cycle regressed as his legs shriveled back into atrophy.

“If I recall correctly,” Hakim started, spitting it through her teeth, “your report from day three claimed a malfunction in Reactor 3. Overproduction at a rate of approximately five-and-a-half percent. Is that correct?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Repeat back to me your process on how you solved this issue, Head Engineer.”

“The ventilation systems were experiencing routine errors due to overuse and exposure. I ran routine scans and adjusted settings according to the bug reports. When repairing the ventilation proved inefficient, I re-capped energy production on the reactor to—”

“And *that* was your mistake.”

“Captain, I—”



“If you had been paying *attention*, you would have noticed that the power cap *itself* was malfunctioning, and did absolutely *nothing* to solve the problem. Your ‘solution,’ caused overproduction nearly *double* the original number you reported.”

Glenn’s mind raced. He’d checked and double checked that reactor—it was *impossible* he could have missed something that huge.

Right?

“What happens,” Hakim asked, “when a reactor’s power reaches a rate of ten-percent increase over its maximum capacity?”

Glenn clenched his hands to keep them from shaking. “It will overheat and combust, Captain.”

“Are you aware of how close Reactor 3 was to combusting, Young?”

He shook his head, throat tight enough to choke the air from his lungs. Hakim got up in his face, pinning him in place with daggers for eyes.

“Nine. Point. Eight. Percent.”