In Unison

August Grossblatt

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors

Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation
Grossblatt, August, "In Unison" (2024). WWU Honors College Senior Projects. 868.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/868

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors College Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.
In Unison

By August Grossblatt
The following collected personal logs belong to the Post-Earth Archive. They were recorded in the year 2705, during a galactic territory dispute. The logs originate from Earth native Philomena Moore, a technician living on human space habitat Poseidon.

At the time of recording, Poseidon’s internal metrics recounted that it was home to 2,106 humans. Poseidon was located in a then-unnamed star system that held an abundance of mineral resources. Poseidon was partially autonomous, led by an Earth-appointed representative who was loyal to the United Earth Governance.

The logs begin below.

Log 01—March 26th, 2705

Poseidon is in disarray. A radio communication came in from Madam President Mora, and Poseidon’s citizenry gathered in the plaza to receive it. Mora said that Earth had lost, and Poseidon now lay squarely in alien-controlled space. We were Earth’s, but Earth couldn’t protect us anymore. The crowd began to buzz. We were so far away from them, and there were so few of us. We were defenseless, unsure if or when Earth could take us back, unsure what we were worth to them. Poseidon’s Speaker, on his podium before the crowd, urged us to stay calm.
It’s been a few days, and nobody has any energy. We’ve been reduced to listless bodies moving back and forth, working, eating, sleeping, and nothing else. Quiet hangs over us, stifling our will to speak. We can’t think about anything besides what’s going to become of us. Poseidon feels like a cage, spinning and spinning in space, never escaping the orbit of this accursed star.

I think most of the others have it worse than me. I look into their eyes and see this sad resignation, like they think their lives are already over. The sadness is infectious, even if it hasn’t overtaken me yet.

When my shifts in the industrial arm end, I go to the orchards in Poseidon’s biodome. The grass there feels nice, soft on my skin, and the growth lights on my closed eyelids feel like Earth’s sun, an awful lot more than the cold ball of light outside Poseidon’s tinted windows does. I can close my eyes and feel like I’m back home. Poseidon is almost home, but I find myself longing for Earth.

Log 02 - 3/27/2705

I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and a lot of trying to look on the bright side. I’ve been trying to convince myself that everything will be alright, despite the spiraling disposition of every other poor soul on the habitat. We’ve heard a lot about the aliens who beat Earth but never seen one. Mora
said they were tyrants, but humans can be tyrants too. Maybe they’ll realize that we weren’t the ones fighting them out there.

Log 03 - 3/29/2705

I talked to Benjamin today. I’d been worried about him—he’s usually so bright and witty, but it seems like the gloom took that away from him. I met him in the cafeteria after my shift, but we couldn’t talk about anything other than the aliens. He thinks I’m naive. He told me that a grown woman should know better than to think what I think. They’re aliens, he said, they won’t have any concept of what it means to be humane. We’ll all be slaves, or get assimilated into some hive mind, or be used as hosts for their parasitic young. It’s only a matter of time.

I told him there’s no point giving up hope so soon, especially since there’s so little we can do about it. I realize that that wasn’t the gentlest way to say that, but I think Ben understood where I was coming from. It’s easier to have hope when it’s all you have. I talked a little too loud, though, because I heard Archie clearing his throat from behind us.

Archie is Poseidon’s war hero. He’s a veteran that fought on Earth, and it’s important to him that everyone knows it. He always wears the medallion that Mora herself awarded him, sparkling blue and silver, making it impossible for Poseidon to forget his rank and record. I guess he took it
personally that I felt how I felt, because decided that now was the time to speak up.

“I’m tired of hearing you run your mouth, Moore.” He knew my first name but using it would be too soft.

He didn’t let me get a word out before he continued. He’d been listening for a few minutes now, probably stewing in his seat.

“Nothing we can do? You think we won’t meet ’em at the docks with every man we’ve got? When they’re snarling at our throats, we snarl right back! We pick up arms! We don’t just sit there hoping all they want is to have a little tea party!” He spat on the ground in a show of disgust and gestured to the now-attentive crowd. He had a way of stirring people up.

I made eye contact with Benjamin, and he gave me a look of pained understanding. Neither of us shared Archie’s intention to go down swinging, but neither he nor his audience wanted to hear that. We let him continue his tirade, and he eventually ran out of breath, leaving the crowd to settle down.

Benjamin apologized for calling me naive, told me it was a bit of a knee-jerk reaction, told me he was scared. I told him I was too, and no flowery sentiment was going to change that. My side must have made more sense when Archie made the alternative sound so doomed. Whatever resistance Archie manages to cobble together would stand no chance against the aliens that beat Earth, but I don’t blame him for wanting to fight back. It’s his way
of being okay with things, no less naive than mine.

Log 04 - 4/05/2705

It’s been difficult to sleep. As Poseidon turns, I wait for a glimpse of the stellar lighthouse, the celestial anchor that provides passage into our system. Every turn, I dread seeing it light up, announcing an impending arrival. For now, it stays silent. Before, it was always so exciting to see it glow, shimmering blue and red, heralding guests or, better yet, goods from Earth. It was so easy to feel forgotten on Poseidon, so distant from everything, but those shipments were a sign that someone back home remembered us. Remembered us as people, not simply as a big metal satellite signifying a staked claim in a mineral system. We had everything we needed here, but it started to get tiresome eating the same biodome-grown vegetables and synthetic proteins for weeks and months on end. It was heartwarming that someone on Earth felt we deserved a treat. Sometimes it was mass-produced snacks straight from Earth, and sometimes it was a fresh selection of seeds to ensure that our next harvest would be more varied. The pilots would always be sent back with brightly-colored thank you cards from Poseidon’s children. Those gifts are a thing of the past, I guess. We’re happy to make do with what we have; we don’t want our complaints to invite guests to break up the monotony. That might
sound superstitious, but nobody wants to tempt fate.

Log 05 - 4/12/2705

They arrived during my shift. The radio crackled to life, and the speakers began playing an otherworldly harmony, almost like whale song. It wasn’t like anything I’d heard before. The industrial arm was brought to a halt as we all left our posts, still clad in grimy jumpsuits, to catch a glimpse of the ship before it docked. All of Poseidon, thousands of people, had gathered before the observation window, staring at the blinking lights of the distant stellar lighthouse. I found Benjamin amidst the masses. He still wore the orchard workers’ overalls and had dirty gloves sticking out of his pocket.

“They’re here, Philomena.” He had noticed me arrive beside him.

“What is this sound?”

“Maybe this is how they talk. Maybe it’s a greeting. Or a warning.”

“This doesn’t sound like the speech of a tyrant.”

“Maybe it isn’t.”

Another voice came to life, over the twisting hymn from the radio. Poseidon’s Speaker stood at the front of the crowd, microphone in hand. He told us that the song from the radio was received directly from our visitors, transmitted through the lighthouse’s frequency. They hadn’t arrived yet, but they were between systems, with ours as their destination. We likely had
hours to prepare for their arrival at Poseidon’s docks, as they would be entering our system within minutes. The Speaker did not know what the harmonic sounds from the radio meant nor why they were broadcast.

The song was beautiful. The crowd seemed enraptured by it. Where I would expect a descent into chaos there was instead a somber calm. Was it hope quieting Poseidon’s nervous energy, or was it resignation? I could see the Speaker’s austere expression soften as he turned from the crowd and gazed toward the lighthouse. The crowd’s quiet was interrupted only by murmurs. I spotted Archie and his ex-military compatriots, but even they, wearing what appeared to be makeshift protective gear, were given pause by the song. Slavering bug-beasts wouldn’t announce their arrival with a symphony, would they?

Space beside the lighthouse contorted, bulged, and tore, giving way to a sleek white vessel. Its segments undulated in the cosmic tide, the ship moving through space like a jellyfish drifts through ocean. They were here. The song continued. The white ship, harbinger of a new era for Poseidon, carved a path through space that led to our docks.

“I hope you were right,” Benjamin whispered. “I hope we’ll be spared.”

Log 06 - 4/12/2705

I cared not to watch the ship’s inexorable advance toward Poseidon’s
port. I would be there when it landed. I returned to my quarters, changed out of my work jumpsuit into something more presentable. It’s a bit silly how concerned I felt with making a good first impression on these aliens despite knowing nothing of their expectations nor customs, but it’s what I’d do if there were visitors arriving from Earth. I returned to the masses, who had congregated by the docks. The ship was growing ever nearer. Archie and his men were there, positioning themselves as a bulwark behind which Poseidon’s civilians could take shelter. They had taken what weapons were present on Poseidon for their generals and scavenged heavy implements to fill willing hands. They did not appear to be concealing their intentions. The Speaker awaited contact, standing with hands clasped behind his back at the forward-most position, poised to welcome our new guests. He wore his finest suit, adorned with the shining medallions that showed his experience and record. He was entirely composed, a visage of calm resolve.

The song began to slow and quiet over the radio as the ship loomed large before Poseidon’s dock. Hydraulics fired as the ship interlocked with Poseidon’s hull, and great doors opened between us. Stairways began to unfurl from the alien vessel, segments clicking into place. In that moment, Poseidon was mesmerized, holding its collective breath. In the silence after the song, tension and malaise had begun to claw their way back into our conscious minds. These could be our last moments as free citizens of Earth.

The first figure to step from the ship was humanoid. In fact, he was
human. Two arms, two legs, no compound eyes or sharpened fangs. He had a sense of gaunt sophistication about him, wearing his gray hair in braids. He wore a pristine, utterly unadorned white suit, contrasting his tan skin. He was flanked by around a dozen other humanoid figures, all masked and clad in white armored suits, yet unarmed. Their masks were white and uniform, giving the entourage a sense of monolithic elegance.

The man dressed in white walked silently up to Poseidon’s Speaker. They were both tall men, but the man from the ship seemed to tower over the Speaker. When he spoke, his voice was underlaid with harmonic tones that shifted with his words. It was almost like he spoke with two voices. It was captivating.

“Greetings, Poseidon. We are the Unison. Thank you for welcoming us.”

The man in white bowed ever so slightly, displaying his gratitude, then spoke again.

“I am Prosper, one of the Unison’s magistrates. I have been given the great honor of accompanying the first ship to greet Poseidon. I see you may have your apprehensions,” he said, nodding to Archie and his men. “But be assured that we intend no harm—in any form. You are in Unison space now, and we are here to greet you. To belong to the Unison is to know peace, to know prosperity, and to understand one another. I am now your magistrate, your leader. And as Poseidon’s magistrate, I would like my first act to be an invitation of thanks for your Speaker, for his dutiful service.”
The crowd was quiet. There were some mumbled thanks, but louder than that was the hum of confusion.

“Allow me to clarify, Citizens of Poseidon,” Prosper continued. “Your Speaker has performed admirably in his role as a governor and messenger in the service of President Jane Mora, but Mora is no longer your master. As such, I ask that you honor my predecessor, your Speaker. You may bow, applaud, cheer, or otherwise express your gratitude however you wish. We may not be of Earth, but we understand etiquette and decorum.” His voice was genuine and gentle, underlaid by low, soft melody.

The Speaker, ever the diplomat, turned to Poseidon. His face did not betray fear, nor resentment—only duty. He nodded to the crowd. The audience erupted into scattered applause at this sign of his approval. Prosper smiled and looked at the Speaker, who was straight-faced. These are not the circumstances under which he wanted to resign, that much was clear. The masked Unison figures who stood behind Prosper began to clap, too, in a subdued show of solidarity. More of them had disembarked from the ship since the ship’s landing.

As the applause died down, Prosper cleared his throat again.

“The Unison is here to stay. But know that you are not our subjects, but our equals, compatriots, brothers and sisters. I hope you can accept us.” He stepped back. His introduction had concluded. Poseidon’s citizens began to disperse. A few had filtered forward, eager to talk to the strange visitors.
“Not what I was expecting,” I said to Benjamin.

“I know it could be a lot worse, but that doesn’t mean I trust them. They’re too. . . clean.”

“I just hope things can go back to normal. Well, they can’t, I guess, but at least we aren’t all just lying here waiting for death to come like we were before they showed up.”

I saw, in the corner of my eye, Archie and his men talking with a couple of the masked Unison men. Archie still had his hackles up, still had a weapon in hand, but his finger was off the trigger. The body language of the Unison men was calm, nonconfrontational. I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Archie was puffing up his chest, hardening his gaze. The Unison masks were inscrutable, betraying no malice. After a minute or two, Archie turned to his men. He gestured, shook his head, and they all lowered their weapons and began to march away from the docks. I wonder what the Unison told him.

Log 07 - 4/16/2705

So far, I don’t think I mind them. I felt like things should be different, but it was almost like nothing had changed, aside from Poseidon being filled with song. I had nothing to do come morning besides don my jumpsuit and return to industrial. Beside me, at my station, was a woman clad in the
Unison suit and mask. The suit made it difficult to differentiate gender, but she spoke in a higher-pitched voice. Maybe I should have asked. She told me her name was Sage. The harmonies that accompanied her speech were airy and flowing. I still don’t understand why the people the Unison sent speak the way they do, but it’s pleasant to the ear. Sage picked up the basics of my tasks quickly, though I had to repeat myself a few times. I couldn’t see her face, but she sounded embarrassed when she asked me to repeat myself. I felt a little bad for her. When my shift ended, I invited her to accompany me to the cafeteria. I still wasn’t comfortable enough with the new visitors to be looking for something like friendship, but I felt that if we were working together it was an appropriate gesture. She declined graciously though, citing a Unison obligation.

I met up with Benjamin in the orchard after the orchard’s workers were dismissed for the day. He says the Unison still give him the creeps. He says they just aren’t like us. I disagreed with him: of course they’re different—they’re from another system, after all—but he just has to get to know them better. Sage was a sweetheart, and Prosper had an air to him that reminded me of Earth’s great orators. Benjamin would get it eventually.

Log 08 - 4/19/2705

I caught Archie alone on the observation deck, in what seemed like a rare
moment of quiet solitude. I wasn’t sure whether he’d be displeased at my interruption of his reverie, but it was a good opportunity.

“What did they say to you, Archie?”

“Moore?” He looked startled, but quickly regained his composure. “You mean, down by the docks when they got here?”

“Yeah. One moment it looked like a stand-off, the next you were leaving.”

Archie chuckled. “They weren’t really givin’ me a choice in the matter, much as it looked like a friendly conversation. Any violent resistance, Prosper said, and they’d have to—” Archie leaned forward and lowered his voice in a mockery of Prosper’s tone, “Reciprocate.”

“I see.”

“Now, I still don’t trust ‘em a bit, but I don’t want Poseidon to be in any more trouble than it already is. I might be an old dog, but it’s an old trick: roll over.” He looked down, disgust showing plainly on his face. With himself, more than with the Unison, if I had to guess. It’s always difficult when backing down is the best decision.

“You might have been right, though,” he continued. “They didn’t kill us, enslave us, or lay eggs in us. It’s a bit more like a tea party, ain’t it?”

Log 09 - 5/08/2705
There has been shockingly little to report until now. Weeks have passed since the last log entry. Of course it’s been tense, but I think people are accepting that the Unison aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. Sage and I have continued to work together, though she stopped shadowing me after she learned how my tasks are done. I think we’re friends. She calls me over when the industrial arm’s windows face toward the gas giant beside the lighthouse, pointing out storms and colorful patterns in the planet’s swirling atmosphere. It had been years since I’d found such wonder in the sights that returned every time Poseidon revolved, but seeing Sage’s enthusiasm reignited my own.

I still have yet to see any of the Unison remove their helmets, though I’m still just as puzzled by their speech. Unconventional customs regarding clothing and modesty weren’t uncommon within the realm of Earth culture, but speech like this isn’t something that Earth has ever seen. I suppose I shouldn’t be expecting them to be anything like the humans of Earth, given that they aren’t from anywhere near us.

I digress. This entry is meant to report a major development, not pontificate on the enigma that is the Unison. Last evening, I was approached by Prosper with an offer. I hadn’t seen him speak with ordinary citizens of Poseidon individually, so I was taken aback. But nonetheless, he appeared at the door to my quarters. He looked so out of place in the hallway. He seemed like a man meant for podiums and red carpets, not dingy hallways
with buzzing lights. I let him in after he told me he had something he wanted to discuss, and he took an awkward seat at my table. He motioned for me to join him, so I sat down across from him.

“You are Philomena Moore, yes? Employed in the industrial arm?” The bass in the harmonies beneath his voice reverberated in the small room.

“Yes, sir.”

“No need for the formality. I am not your superior; I simply inhabit a different role. Regardless, I have an offer to extend to you: following our arrival, the docks have been attended largely by Unison workers. Our vessel is precious, and there were concerns that scared or reckless Earth-loyal Poseidon citizens would do something to upend the careful balance we’ve managed to build together since we came. I don’t think we need to maintain that division, and so I would like to ask you to apply your talents in the docking bay that holds the Unison vessel.”

“Why me, sir?” I stumbled over the last word, not quite succeeding in shaking the reflex to honor his rank. The last Speaker always preferred honorifics.

“You know your way around machinery, judging by the performance reviews you’ve received in the industrial arm. And, more importantly, you received a glowing recommendation from one of our own. You’re a model citizen.”

It must have been Sage. I honestly wasn’t aware that she thought that
highly of me.

“That’s an honor.”

“Indeed, though I cannot offer a promotion unconditionally. The Unison are not all accustomed to Poseidon’s speech and have some difficulty in communication. If you were to be working amidst Unison workers and with Unison technology, I would ask that you undertake the task of learning to speak as we do.” He must have seen the look of confusion on my face, so he continued: “Don’t fret; I know it’s something you aren’t capable of yet. There is a procedure that can alter your vocal organs and add to your abilities. This would be a requirement for your new position. It does not take long, nor does it hurt, and it is not invasive.”

“That’s a lot to consider. I didn’t expect the requirements to include surgery.”

“I understand. Take as much time as you need to contemplate your decision. Though, keep in mind that the rewards go beyond my gratitude; the position is highly paid.”

He pulled himself up from his seat, once again assuming his almost-regal stance.

“Thank you for the offer,” I told him. “I’ll think about it.”

He nodded. I opened the door for him and he departed, gentle footsteps echoing down the hall.
Log 10 - 5/09/2705

I didn’t know how to think about Prosper’s proposition. I wanted the position, certainly; the salary of an industrial worker is fairly small, and the engineer in me was dying to see how the Unison’s beautiful white vessel looked beneath the gleaming exterior. I was given some pause by the procedure, though. It was scary to think about some part of me being changed, but thinking about being able to sing with my speech lifted my spirits somewhat. To talk like them and better talk to them was promising in itself, both for my own curiosity and the benefit of those I work with, like Sage. I haven’t told Benjamin yet, though I feel I have to before I give Prosper an answer. Benjamin won’t like it; he still thinks the Unison have something unscrupulous up their sleeves. Before the Unison arrived I was used to being the pessimist, but now I feel like the believer to his skeptic. The Unison are people, little different from us. It’s not that I don’t understand where Benjamin’s hesitations come from, but I can’t share them anymore. There’s no need for him to keep himself so removed from them. I’d introduce him to Sage, but she wouldn’t be able to change his mind either. This is the way things are now.

Log 11 - 5/12/2705
Benjamin and I had an argument. I knew it would happen, saw it coming—knowing him as well as I did, it was bound to. It was after I’d left, upset and not wanting to cause a further scene, that I made up my mind. I was sick of the paranoia that seemed to engulf him, the unwillingness to accept that things might be alright, that we might be able to have our lives and live them with grace and happiness. I would go through with it, accept Prosper’s offer. I would work in the docks, alongside the Unison, and learn about them and their machine.

I don’t hate Benjamin. I couldn’t hate him, not after knowing him for so much of my life and knowing that he’d always be there for me. He’ll be there for me still, after I go through with it and my voice is rich with the Unison’s harmonies. I know he’s upset, but he’s not mad; he’s scared, and maybe disappointed. He wants me to be safe, that’s all. It’s just become clear that our respective feelings have us at an impasse. We’ll lie together beneath the shade of the orchard’s trees again. I know we will.

Log 12 - 5/15/2705

I found Prosper again and told him I had made up my mind and I was ready.

“Thank you,” he said, a small smile gracing his lips. “Your willingness tells me you bear a conviction that will enrich all that you touch.”
“Am I the only one?” I asked.

“No, Philomena. There may not yet be many, but you are not alone. There are Earth-born Poseidon men and women already working with the Unison across the habitat. Poseidon’s best. And you will number among them.”

Prosper motioned for me to follow him, and I did. He directed me to a chamber in the arm of Poseidon that had been designated Unison quarters, where a masked Unison man was waiting beside a medical table.

“I will leave you with my compatriot Stern.” He looked up at the man. “This is Philomena. Take good care of her.”

“Yes, magistrate. Of course.” Stern’s voice was rough, but the harmonies beneath it were tempered and still, like the slightest ripples on a placid sea.

Prosper looked to me and smiled, and then nodded to Stern and me before turning and exiting the room. Stern motioned for me to lie atop the table, and I did so.

“What I am to give you is called the Coda. It is a synthetic language organ. It is what will bridge the gap between Earth-born Poseidon and the Unison.”

Stern busied himself with preparation, gathering tools and adjusting equipment.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

“A little bit,” I admitted. “Should I be?”
“The last man I helped was too. You need not be. Nothing to fear.”

“Will it take long? Will I be awake?”

“Not long. You will be conscious. You won’t be able to talk, of course. If you wish, I can talk, to take your mind off the sensation.” His voice was lacking energy, but the expression of care seemed genuine. He took cotton swabs and began brushing my throat with disinfectant and what I guessed was an anesthetic. It was cold, and the area grew numb.

“That would be nice, thank you.” I thought for a second. “Would you tell me about where you’re from?”

“Yes. Hold still.” He reached for a tool. “I, like most of my peers, come from a planet that orbits a distant star. It has deep oceans and opalescent shores. Melody travels far across the water. Prosper has said that nothing can possibly match its beauty.” I couldn’t feel anything on my neck besides a slight pressure.

Why is he telling me what Prosper thought about a place that he so clearly has his own attachments to? Perhaps Prosper was from somewhere else and was amazed by the sight. It was clear that his words had left an impact on Stern, regardless.

There was a feeling like something was sinking into me, thin fibers weaving into my skin. I winced.

“Remain still. It is nearly done,” Stern said. “Earth has oceans, too, does it not? Do you listen to the sound of the tides lapping at the coast’s edge?”
Does it bring you calm?”

The threads continued their weaving. I felt a constriction that made me uneasy. Stern seemed lost in thought.

“I do so long for the touch of the waters of my home. Alas.” He held up a gloved hand, pensive. The weaving slowed, the threads loosened.

“It is done, Philomena. You may speak. In both your language and that of the Unison.”

Thank you, I meant to say. As the words began to leave my mouth, they were accompanied by a cacophonous mess of tones. I stopped, shocked at the gross incongruence between my intention and the sound that came out of my mouth.

“Do not be alarmed. Nobody begins a master. It will become easier with time. Easy like breathing.”

“Thank you,” I repeated, whispering. The disharmony was present still, but quiet. “I never lived by the sea, though I would have liked to. When I was a girl, my father always said he wanted to take me sailing.”

Stern nodded. I couldn’t see his face, but I hoped that I made him smile.

“Stern, may I ask you something?” I kept my voice low.

“Yes.”

“Forgive me if I misunderstand, but how do you tell your compatriots apart when you all dress alike, masks and suits?”

“We can tell by voice. Everyone sounds unique, with their own perfect
timbre. I await the fruition of yours.”

I left Stern’s chamber and traversed the corridors to return to my own, scared to run into someone I’d recognize; I didn’t want to speak with them like this when I didn’t know what sounds would come out of my mouth. When I caught my reflection in a window, I nearly jumped. There was a dark shape on my neck, a triangular metallic patch. The Coda. It was what I had felt weaving into my skin, wrapping itself around my vocal cords. I reached up to touch it, still looking into the mirror-dark window before me. It was so light, and I was still numb; I hadn’t noticed it. It was cold to the touch.

Log 13 - 5/18/2705

I have spent some time alone with the Coda, with my own speech. Opening my mouth and attempting to speak to myself in the mirror. I felt things slowly improving, the tones growing closer and closer to alignment with every discordant word. I hope that soon I’ll be able to take my place at the docks, but for now I don’t want to show my face. The Unison have been nothing but compassionate, but I feel that even they would judge me. It’s only human, no fault of theirs, but still. I feel like a child fumbling its way through its first words. To Poseidon, my voice is defaced by arbitrarily pitched noise, and to the Unison I am in a state of nascent competency (if I
am comprehensible at all), still yet an outsider to be pitied.

But nonetheless, I can feel things changing. I am getting it, though it’s slow. Stern was right: it’s not something I can think my way through; it’s something that I have to feel. It’s a natural process, like breathing. The beauty of Unison song-speech is there, just unrefined.

Log 14 - 5/21/2705

I went to the docks today, having mustered up the will to put aside my insecurities. I was so sure that my speech must still sound infantile to the Unison, but I had put out of my mind the thought of caring.

I was met by a small group of workers in technicians’ jumpsuits. As the day went on, I began to work alongside a pair of engineers: an Earth-born woman named Ruby and a Unison woman named Zeal. I’d spoken with Ruby before, though only in passing—Poseidon was so small that everyone has met everyone, after all—and she and I have a lot in common. We had overlapping areas of expertise that made it surprising that we’d never found ourselves working together before. She seemed far more comfortable with the Coda than I did. She hadn’t mastered it yet, but at least she wasn’t doing the melodic equivalent of tripping over one’s words. I’m sure I made her look like a natural by comparison.

Zeal told us that while she wasn’t at the helm of this ship when it
arrived, she’d served as a pilot for the Unison for many years. Never in combat, but usually in an official capacity. Zeal was the first of the Unison I spoke to that seemed to have a sense of humor, passing the time by regaling us with amusing tales of her adventures (often of dubious veracity).

The two of them didn’t comment on how I sounded, but I could have sworn I heard Zeal stifle a laugh once or twice. The masks give the Unison excellent poker faces, as I was discovering.

The ship itself was fascinating. We were working entirely on the exterior of the ship, though there were all-Unison crews working inside as well. I recognized some of what lay beneath the bright white outer panels that the three of us were to inspect; parts of the Unison ship looked very similar to the ones made on Earth. Though there were some parts that were completely alien to me, unlike any ship (or other technology) I’d worked on in the past. Zeal would point out a part and explain its function and how it was to be maintained, and we would move on from piece to piece of the gargantuan vessel. The way some of the parts moved, despite the ship being at rest, was so bizarre. Lights coursing through circuits and segments expanding and contracting... It was almost like the ship was a living thing. Seeing such a masterwork of craftsmanship so completely divorced from the technologies that made up the entirety of my experience elicited in me a sort of reverence. I wanted so badly for Zeal to explain how it worked, how something like this could be put together, but she told me that her only
training was in servicing and piloting ships; she didn’t know how exactly the technology worked. Maybe with enough time I could figure that out for myself.

Log 15 - 5/26/2705

The song-speech is getting so much easier so quickly. At the docks, Zeal and Ruby hardly use words anymore; they just sing harmonies. And the amazing part is that I can understand them perfectly fine! The way their meaning flows through me is fantastic. It’s nothing like the other languages I’ve spoken. It’s like it follows a completely different path to arrive at the part of my brain that makes meaning out of it, but it’s a shorter path, more direct. Poseidon doesn’t have any biologists (the habitat isn’t near any life-bearing planets, after all,) but I’m positive that this is the kind of phenomenon that would have hordes of them rushing to scan our brains. I’m curious enough that I’d let them! I’ve attempted simply allowing the harmonies to speak for me, like Ruby and Zeal do, but I usually use English too, in case they can’t understand what I sing. I’ll work my way up to it.

I continue to yearn for the secret of the Unison ship’s technology, but no matter how many times I ask Zeal she still doesn’t want me to take the thing apart and look for myself. Someday.
I spoke to Benjamin again today. I kept putting it off; I really didn’t want to meet with him just to see him upset again. I was pleasantly surprised, though, because he seemed happy to see me even knowing that I had gone through with the procedure and adopted the Coda.

“Philomena! It’s nice to see you.” He gave me a brief hug.

“It’s been too long,” I sang. “How have things been in the orchards?”

He said something, but I couldn’t quite parse the words. I saw his lips moving and heard sound come out of his mouth, but no words were contained within.

“One more time?” I asked.

“Oh, okay, sorry—things have been fine.” He spoke carefully. “The Unison have been staying out of my work. Doesn’t seem like it’s something they’re interested in, I guess. How’s your new job?”

“Fantastic. The ship is so magnificent up close. Learning their way of talking was hard, but I think I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Sounds like it.” There was poorly concealed bitterness lurking in his tone.

“Phil,” he continued, “I have something I want to talk to you about, and I want you to hear me out.”

Words continued to flow from his mouth, and they began to glide past
me. I only heard the emotion in his voice, saw the expression on his face. It was that same paranoia. It had never left him. Not since the day Mora got on the radio to tell us we didn’t belong to Earth anymore. The sounds he was making may have been words, but I only perceived them as the same tired incomprehension.

“Listen to me, Phil.” I snapped back into focus, really hearing him now.

“I know you hate how I talk about them, but there’s a reason I’m saying what I’m saying. It isn’t just to make you upset. People have been saying that the Unison aren’t human, and I don’t know whether to believe them. I don’t want to, for your sake and for everyone’s, but I— Have you ever seen any of them besides Prosper? Like, really seen them?”

“Why—why are you telling me, then?” I could feel the pitch of my harmonies trembling.

“Because you might have a shot at finding out for real. You can get into their ship and see what it’s like on the inside.” He exhaled.

“Ben, did you want to see me so we could talk and catch up, or... did you just want to ask me this favor?”

“It’s not like that, Phil. It’s both. I missed you, I really did; I almost didn’t want to ask, it’s just— you’re our in. I had to ask you, for Poseidon.”

“This could ruin things for me, you understand? If I did what you wanted?”

“I’m sorry.”
I shook my head in disappointment and frustration.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated.

His words began to pour forth again, but I didn’t comprehend them. I only saw a sad and desperate man, a soul lost to discord. I didn’t want to speak to him anymore, not now at least. I left.

Log 17 - 6/06/2705

I thought I had nothing but faith, but what Benjamin told me has been ever-present in the dark corners of my mind, gnawing at my sanity. I don’t know what the Unison are. I don’t. They’re good to me, good to us, but that’s no longer enough for me to trust them. I asked Zeal when we’d be working on the ship’s interior, but she told me that my and Ruby’s talents are best suited for the work we’ve already been doing. Before I spoke to Benjamin I wouldn’t have given that any mind, but now I can only hear it as a deflection. I can’t shake the feeling of dread whenever I return to the docks. I stare at Zeal, suddenly unsure what lies behind her white mask. I sing to her and she sings back. I still don’t know whether a song can be a lie. I resent that Benjamin’s paranoia has wormed its way so deep into my mind, but it’s true that I’ve never been shown what lies beneath the Unison’s sleek exterior, never seen them vulnerable. They always hide behind a pristine veneer of kindness and beauty. Nobody is that simple, that
genuine. I can’t accept that the Unison are any different.

Log 18 - 6/07/2705

I returned to the docks at night, after the maintenance crews had been dismissed. There were Unison standing guard idly at the gates. They knew me, so I told them I had forgotten some supplies within that were needed in another wing, and they let me pass. They had no reason not to trust me, after all. I spoke their language; how much more devotion could someone show?

I climbed the magnificently unfurled stairs that led to the ship’s entry portal, which opened like an aperture before me. The ship’s interior was bizarre, spacious, and as intricately machined as the exterior. The ceiling towered above me, a great difference from Earth vessels that prioritized extreme efficiency over nearly all else. The architecture within was so un-Earthly that it made traversing the ship more difficult. Chambers connected to each other in unexpected ways, with entry portals in unexpected places. The construction was more elliptical than rectangular, in great contrast to Poseidon’s design. I also couldn’t identify common ship components that were so standard in Earth design that I thought them ubiquitous to space-faring vessels as a class. I wandered for some minutes, constantly conscious that I had told the guards outside that I was running a quick errand. Surely
there had to be something here that would tell me something, I thought. Something here to confirm or, I still hoped, deny my suspicions. Crew quarters with photographs of a Unison member’s human family, a cabinet where masks were put away when it was time to convene in the mess hall, anything.

Instead, I came upon a doorway much larger than any I had encountered previously. It opened to reveal what almost looked like a hangar, lined with many, many empty bays. I walked down the length of the room, transfixed.

As I continued, some bays were occupied. There were humanoid shapes within. Unison suits, in a state of partial disassembly. I stepped closer and peered between the cracks in the Unison’s inscrutable armor. The interior of the suits was mechanical, intricately machined like everything else the Unison brought, but something was off.

Deep within the belly of the Unison ship, away from prying Poseidon eyes, something became clear to me. Whatever inhabited these suits was not shaped like us. They were not suits; they were person-shaped shells.

Worse than I had ever felt it in my sleepless nights alone with Benjamin’s paranoia, I began to feel like something was wrong. Something was really wrong. Irrevocably wrong. I ran, breathing heavily, out from the hangar and through the convoluted passages of the ship. I took deep breaths and tried my best to muster a smile as I prepared to walk past the guards. As soon as I was out of their sight, I began to run again. By the time I had
returned to my room, I could barely breathe.

Log 19 - 6/07/2705

I still don’t know what they want. I can’t know what they want. All I know is that they have deceived me, deceived us. Every time Sage exclaimed brightly that the planet had a new storm, she had not been smiling, her eyes had not lit up with joy. When Stern told me of his homeland, reminiscing about the sound of the waves, there was no expression of wistful wonder behind his mask. There was no smirk on Zeal’s face, either, when I made a fool of myself with the song on my first day at the docks. What was there I did not know, but it was not a smirk. Not a smirk on a human face.

And what of Prosper? Was he a collaborator sent to mislead us? If I hadn’t found out, when were they planning to tell us?

I feel sick. It’s only a matter of time before Benjamin asks me. What will happen when I tell him? I can’t lie to him, but what happens when I tell the truth? What happens if Archie finds out? Will Prosper finally have an excuse to “reciprocate”? Will he do so with glee?

Log 20 - 6/10/2705

I couldn’t stay away from the docks much longer. I dreaded going back; I
knew I couldn’t look Zeal in the eyes without showing her that something was wrong. If she even has eyes. More than likely I’d just be looking at the mask that she wants me to think hides a face. But if Zeal senses that something is wrong, I don’t know whether she’d keep it quiet. Then, maybe the Unison would try to do something about me so I couldn’t reveal their secret. Would it be better to let that happen, save Benjamin and the others the blood and death that could come from throwing Poseidon into chaos? Not that that would work; I’d just become a martyr. Benjamin would know what happened to me, and then it’s the same story. Every time I thought of returning to the docks, I felt like a dead woman walking.

So, I dragged my feet. If I stayed away, they’d be sure to notice, but if I went, I’d have to talk to Zeal. In the plaza beside the cafeteria, I saw a growing crowd. I gave in to the pull of curiosity, a pull strengthened by my desire to linger, to be anywhere other than the docks. As I got closer, I could hear Archie’s voice. I couldn’t make out his words, but I heard his anger.

“A terrible accusation!” a Unison voice sang. I pushed my way through the crowd, eager to get a view.

Archie spoke again, raising his voice, sound that I could not make sense of pouring from between his lips. I could see them now. Archie stood before a half dozen Unison, flanked by ten or so of his men. He brandished an old Earth firearm. His men, standing behind him, were all armed. The Unison had drawn weapons too, crackling batons. I saw one of them draw the baton
out of their suit and realized that those batons had always been hiding in plain sight, sheathed in white ceramic plating. At no point were the Unison unarmed.

“They have done so of their own volition; it was not bribery! They only wish to help us, to live in peace and harmony, to speak and to be understood! It is noble!” The melody rang out beneath the words. This was the first time I’d heard any of the Unison raise their voice.

As Archie yelled back, red in the face, I caught just a few of the words he hurled at the Unison: Liars, tyrants, filth.

He raised the hand that held the gun, and three Unison men swarmed forward. A baton connected with Archie’s bare skin before he could pull the trigger, and his legs began to buckle and collapse. From behind Archie, another man thrust a sharpened blade toward the neck of one of the Unison holding his leader. The blade connected with the Unison suit, a shower of sparks erupted, and the suit was punctured. The human tore further, opening a gash that spanned most of his target’s torso before the other Unison assailed him, pinning him down. The crowd began to panic and scatter, but I found myself frozen in place, transfixed by the violent spectacle. In that moment, I hoped I would see blood pour from the wound, proving me wrong.

But no blood came. Instead, clear liquid began to forcefully spray from the tear in the suit. Water. The silhouette of the injured Unison man almost
began to deflate as water poured out of the suit, covering the floor. The
melee continued around him as he lay motionless on the ground. From the
suit, along with the water, came something that looked like it would wash
up on a beach. Flowing tissue and tendrils, luminous white, splayed across
the ground as it lay there. Suffocating, probably, in the air. Human bodies
began to join the deflated Unison suit on the ground, unconscious. Blood
began to mix with the water from the suit, clouding it with red.

The Unison-thing on the floor sang one last time, a keening wail.

Poseidon shook.