

3 Come Cruise With Us !

Episode Three... You May Call Me By My Issue...

Behind the door, beyond the Delta deck, I found I was at the base of a spiral stairway. From the bottom steps, I couldn't see what lay above me, but I knew I had to climb to the top. All apprehension was gone now. I knew there was a reason for my existence on this vessel.

Even the name of the ship, *ATTIS*, seemed familiar.

The metal steps rang out like church bells, as my foot trod on them. I climbed up and up to a height that surely had to be the next deck of the ship.. As my foot touched the last tread, slowly a door opened and a hand beckoned me to come inside.

I stepped into a large open room, brightly lit with soft background music playing. Several hundred people, in groups of a dozen or so individuals, stood against the sea green walls of the room. Quiet chatter was coming from each group. I walked forward as if I knew where I was supposed to be. Finally stopping near the center of the hall, I waited there expecting, I knew not what.

The whispering voices from the groups continued, but none of the individuals looked at me. After a few moments, I spoke to the crowd. "I believe I am supposed to be here, but I don't know why. Can any of you help me? ". The level of the chatter increase in volume, and they turned toward me talking in a tongue I couldn't understand. "Does anyone here speak English ? " lifting my voice's volume in an effort to get attention. There was an immediate reaction from the groups. The babble became excited in manner. Then, as if a curtain had been drawn, the voices quieted. There was a ripple of quiet applause as an individual came from one of the groups and slowly walked toward me.

He looked older than me. His manner and appearance made me think that he might be in his late middle aged....Except, there were no wrinkles or puffiness visible on his face or hands. His skin was devoid of blemishes and was an odd golden tan. White hair, fashionably trimmed, pale blue eyes, vacant and dilated . Light reflecting in them, made his eyes look like mirrors. He had an air of command about him. He bowed to me, straightened up and in a quiet formal English voice, spoke.

"Sir, let me be the first to welcome you aboard the wind powered cruise ship, *ATTIS*. I and my companions do indeed speak English or any other language or dialect you wish to use. We are here to serve you, to answer any question you may have about us or our various duties and to give directions when requested."

He stopped speaking, bowed in a mechanical way, took one step back ..and smiled. The smile was cold and insincere. Without emotion , as if it had been programmed,

I looked into those vacant eyes and said, "Thank you for your explanation , but I must ask, who are you? What is this place? What ARE your duties ? " .

The individual bowed again and answered. "We are the ship's staff charged with providing services to the passengers. You are currently in our Stasis Lounge. We wait here until we are required to execute our tasks. May I introduce you to our members ? Each duty group has a supervisor that will be happy to explain that cadre's assignment. "

He turned and pointed to the group closest. With a dignified stride, he moved toward the gathering he'd indentified. I followed.

In a few moments I stood before the first group. They came to attention as I neared them. All in single file, all smiling that same cold smile I'd seen on my guide. Each individual in the group, male or female had the appearance of my "host". White hair, vacant blue eyes and oddly tanned skin. They were clothed in formal wear. The men in Tux and black tie, the females in black tailored suits and wearing white blouses. Each had a carnation in the lapel of their coat.

One of the men came out of the group and stood at attention before me.

"Good day Sir, " His type of speech was identical to that of my guide's.

"Good day to you as well" , I responded. "Please tell me your duty on this ship"

"I am Maitre D' of the first class dining deck, Sir".

I heard a scuffling of feet among the other group members.

"Then who are the others "? I asked.

"Sir, we are the Maitre D' cadre. We serve the many dining areas "

He took a step backwards, still smiling, and joined his group. They greeted him with a polite round of applause.

This scenario was repeated at each group I visited. My host in an insistent way , guided me to every single one of the cadres. Each had its spokesperson. A woman or man would step out from its group, respond to my questions and then step back into the cluster. There would be a pattering of applause, then my host and I would move to the next group.

I saw and talked to probably 15 such groups. The only thing different about them was their dress, or uniform as was required by their job.

I met Servers, House Keepers, Chefs, maids and man servants , as well as several entertainment cadres. There were chorus dancers dressed scantily in bright colors and sequins , vocalists and a large group that made up the ship's band.

After the second or third visit to each gathering, I realized that the individuals were the exact copy of each other. I first suspected, then confirmed, that these individuals were... Androids.

The robotic equivalent of humans. They acted like humans. They breathed and moved as humans, but they were machines.

Finally, we reached the last of the groups. Their leader, a female, stepped forward. "Good day , Sir" she whispered.

"And to you", Please tell me what are your duties on the vessel?" in my bored response tone.

" Sir, I and my cadre are the passenger's Social Services hosts. We plan daily activities, all of the social affairs including dinner arrangements. we also answer most of the questions about our cruise. We also receive and process any comments, good or negative that a passenger might wish to pass along."

Here finally, I may be able to fill in some parts of the "jigsaw puzzle" taxing me.. Quickly I asked the female, " How would I know who to ask. Who,..if you are among the passengers. You are dressed in everyday clothing". How could I tell whether or not I was speaking to a Social Service Host? " A polite giggle came from all cadres.

For a brief moment there was a slight frown on the face of the Social Services Hostess. In a moment it changed back into that cold little smile, and then "she" spoke. "Sir, I am 'Charlie/ Kilo Plus/ 137 ' Your question can be better answered by the gentleman standing beside you." At those words, "she" stepped back into her group to yet another flutter of applause. Then the whole room went quiet.

"If I may Sir, You can identify ANY of us simply by looking at our Left arm. Each of us has our model, status level and serial number there".
`With those words, he rolled up his tuxedo sleeve.

On his left arm, below the elbow, was a blue green tattoo. the Block lettering spelled out , "Charlie / Beta Prime/ 010 "... As you can see, Sir, I am a Beta Prime of the Charlie issue. If you wish, you may ask the identity of any member of the cadres you have visited. I slowly walked back along the path I had taken a few minutes ago. Each cadre leader I had spoken to earlier , stepped forward, bowed and stood motionless. "Please Identify yourself", I would demand of each group, That group leader would roll up the sleeve on the coat or uniform it wore. There on each left arm was that same blue green tattoo with the preceding "Charlie" followed by other identities and numbers.

I asked each leader if I could read the identification of some other members of that cadre. Each time, without further direction, the cadre would display their tattoos. All were "Charlie's" but most had different designators than was on "Charlie/Beta Plus" s my guide, who I now knew, was the Supervisor of the Android population.

I saw every imaginable type of "Charlie" designator . There were a few "Charlie/India's ", some " Charlie/Lima's".. and many "Charlie/Zulu's" Even among these different individuals, there were the occasional " Plus or Minus " label. It was plain to see that not everyone held the same level of responsibility.

I walked back to the center of the hall. "Charlie/Beta Prime" walked with me. I watched as several of the groups drifting away, disappearing into side rooms I hadn't noticed before.

"Charlie/Beta Plus, What is happening to those cadres? "

"Sir, you may refer to me in a short fashion such as "Beta Prime" if it pleases you. As to where some of the groups are going, they have been called to their duty stations. You may notice that the Band cadre has left. They are scheduled to perform the hour before and then during the evening meal. They must leave to prepare".

After experiencing the population of the Charlie Androids, I was eager to leave. Maybe the next part of my journey would tell me what I, now, was beginning to feel, I deserved to know.

I spoke to my guide, "Beta Plus", I require you guide me to my next destination!" He bowed again, paused a second, then responded.

"Sir, I believe that our director of Social Services, Charlie/Kilo Plus One Three Seven, would be happy to escort you to the passenger deck above us. With your permission, I will instruct her to do so. But, before you leave, it would be our pleasure to fit you with a new suit of clothes. One befitting your status".

I hadn't noticed before, but I was in, what is called, "Scrubs". Loose fitting Pajamas. I had slippers on my feet. For a moment I was confused. Then I remembered when I first became aware. I must have been in a hospital or medical facility before I started on this, my, trek.

I was unaware that one of the Man Servant cadre members, was standing behind me. In "his" hand, he held some kind of uniform on a hanger. I was escorted into a small room off the main hall and there, the man servant Android helped me into a set of dark blue pants, black shoes, white shirt, dark blue tie and a white blazer. On the shoulders of the blazer, were flat boards inlaid with curling, twisting geometric patterns of golden threads. I felt as if I had been born into this uniform. Clothes DO indeed, make the man. A surge of importance swept over me.

Waiting for me as I stepped out of the dressing room, was the Social Services leading Android, Charlie/Kilo Plus/137. "She" beckoned me forward and together we walked to a shined copper sliding door.

"She pressed a button next to the door. It slid open to an elevator whose walls were covered in breath taking copper and silvery reliefs. Before I could digest all of the symbolism of those artful images, the door Swished open.

We stepped into a veritable crystal palace. Dozens of chandeliers three stories high, hung on thin silver chains, The walls were lined by glass statuary, all seeming to reach out to the passerby. Hundreds of tables each with its own crystal candelabra. Seated at every table were.... People. Hundreds of people.

Tall, short, old, young, thin, overweight, skins of so many different shades. Lively conversations and laughter, much laughter, came from the people.

My "Charlie/Kilo Plus" guided me toward a raised dais at one end of the room. Seated at a long table I spotted numerous uniforms similar to the one I was wearing. My guide left me and the men and women at the dais stood and saluted. I returned the salute. The people all stood and applauded..... Me!

One of the uniformed officers, descended the dais step, stood alongside of me, and said,

"It's my honor to escort you to your chair, Sir. Please follow me".

I followed the young man until he stopped at the center of the table. Pulling a chair away from the table, he bid me sit.

The room hushed its chatting and laughter, as the uniformed young man raise a hand.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, guests, I have the honor to present to you, our CAPTAIN".

The crowd erupted in cheers and shouts. Some rushed forward to stand and cheer.

At every table, people stood to applaud.

I sat Stunned !

Suddenly, I knew what I had travelled so far for..I was this ship's Captain.

I belonged here. But, there was that voice still inside of me, pleading.....

"Why ? "

End Three

r. ahseln 10/2016