

by Shane NORWOOD

# The Diss 8.

## Part 1. The Book of Genetics.

### Chapter 1.

“It’s important,” A Plus said

“What is?” Power Cut wanted to know.

“Vital even,” A Plus continued.

“What’s vital?” asked Cayenne, with just the slightest edge of testiness in her otherwise melodic voice.

“Crucial in fact,” A Plus simpered, trying to be coy but only succeeding in being annoying.”

“What’s crucial?” said Moontide, impatience beginning to undermine her customarily calm demeanor.

“I would even go as far as to say it’s critical,” said A Plus milking it for all it was worth and enjoying the limelight.

“What is?” the Geep demanded, “Speak!”

“Out with it, man!” exclaimed Warhead “What the hell are you talking about? What’s critical?”

“Fundamental, really, if you think about it.”

Captain Oz had heard enough.

“Oi, Dickhead,” he shouted, “What’s fucking fundamental?”

A Plus pouted at him.

“There’s no need to get personal, Captain. I’m only trying to help.”

“Well get on with it then,” said Cayenne.

“A name,” announced A Plus, with that slight undertone of perpetual exasperation he had that suggested that he thought everybody else was slow witted.

“Huh?” said Pillbean Beanpill, looking around at the others through his curious star shaped sunglasses, so you could never be quite sure where he was looking.

“A name,” said A Plus, “If we’re going to be taken seriously as superheroes we have to have a really cool name. It’s key to our success. Like a rock group. Image is everything. How far do you think the Rolling Stones would’ve gotten if they’d decided to call themselves the Deptford Tunnel Boys?”

“So you mean like the Astonishing Eight or something?” said Cayenne.

“Well I was hoping for something a little more imaginative,” said A plus looking down his nose at her, “But yes. That’s the general idea.”

“How about the Octo Goons?” suggested Captain Oz.

Everybody laughed. Except A Plus.

“Or we might be Despair 8,” said Cayenne, with a giggle.

“We could be Oppose 8,” said Moontide, with her smile that was ever ravishing whether she wanted it to be or not.

“I vote for the Cream 8,” said Captain Oz.

“Oh wait. Wow!” A Plus said, “I must admit Captain. That is rather apropos. I mean, we are the Crème de la Crème are we not?”

Captain Oz looked at him.

“What I meant, mate, was that if we all get killed, we could be cremated,”

A Plus tried to combine contempt and consternation into one facial expression. He failed so he settled for pique.”

“Yes, well that’s very witty, I’m sure, Captain. “But I’m trying to be serious.”

“You’re trying alright,” said Cayenne, “No question about that.”

“Well if you think you can do any better, Miss Carrot, go right ahead.”

Cayenne got to her feet. Moontide put her smooth hand on Cayenne’s shoulder. She sat back down, glowering at A Plus through her fierce beautiful eyes.

“Come on everybody,” Power Cut said, “This won’t get us anywhere. Maybe A Plus has a point. Let’s try to put our heads together. No offence Geep. He said this because the Geep didn’t actually have a head as you or I would understand it.

“Thank you, Power Cut,” said A Plus, “Ever the conciliator. Now let’s all attempt to use our imaginations, shall we? The problem is that all the best names have already been taken. Although I did think the A Plus 7 might be nice.”

A stony silence and some hard stares greeted his words.

“Well you see, A Plus, which is me, plus you 7 equals 8 of us. Get it?” he said, digging himself deeper into it.

More silence.

“We’re supposed to be superheroes, not a fucking boy band,” Captain Oz said.

“Oh really? Thanks for keeping me informed.”

“This is getting silly,” said, Cayenne.

“We’re behaving like children,” said Moontide.

“Exactly,” said Warhead, “Come on. Let’s get it together.”

“Well, he started it,” said A Plus pointing an accusing finger at Captain Oz.

Power Cut stood up.

“You know what guys. Maybe this is all a mistake. It’s never going to work. How are we supposed to team up to fight the bad guys if we can’t even agree on a simple thing like a name?

“Power Cut might be right,” said, Captain Oz, “I mean just look at us. We’re just too diverse. Philosophically, linguistically, genetically, biologically. Pick any bloody ‘cally that you care to name, and we differ. Where’s the common ground? Let’s face it. We’re dysfunctional.”

“I say. That’s excellent,” said the Geep.

“What is?” said Power Cut.

“The Dysfunctionals,” said Pillbean Beanpill.

“Oh yes. That’s great,” said Warhead “I’ll go with that.”

“I like it,” said Moontide, “But it’s a bit of a mouthful, don’t you think?”

“It is a bit long,” Cayenne agreed.”

“Yeah,” said Captain Oz, “But suppose we shortened it to the Diss. We’d have heaps of street cred with the young people.”

“I love it,” said Power Cut, “Punchy and loads of attitude.”

“Or what about if we make it The Diss 8?” said Cayenne.

“Brill.” said Captain Oz.

“Are you people serious?” said A Plus, “We can’t call ourselves the Diss 8. It’s nonsensical. We’d be a laughing stock.”

“No we won’t.” said Pillbean Beanpill, “We’ll be super cool superheroes. I say yes.”

“Me too,” said Cayenne.

“Well I say no, so there,” said A Plus.

“Alright then. Let’s put it to a vote,” said Power Cut.

“It doesn’t count unless it’s unanimous,” said A Plus.

“Who says?” said Captain Oz.

“I do,”

“Bollocks. We’re not a fucking jury you twat. All in favor raise your hand. No offense Geep. Motion carried 7 to 1. The Diss 8 it is.

There was a general cheer, and the best round of hugs and high fives they could manage given their respective physiologies. All except for A Plus. He went off by himself to sulk.

Finally the hatch opened. Even the starlight hurt his eyes and the man had to close them for a moment. When he opened them again and gazed at the scintillating heavens, he began to cry. It was so beautiful. The red light next to the hatch turned to yellow and he went through the checklist. Tubes properly connected, helmet in place, pressure and humidity gauges normal, tank at 200 bar. He double checked the cables and waited. The light turned green and he lifted himself through the hatch and out into space.

He breathed deeply as he shuffled along the walkway. At the end of it was a transparent globe twenty feet in diameter. It was attached to the walkway by a triple air lock. The outer door was a reflective bronze color. The slid through it into the first chamber. It slid closed behind him with a soft breathy hiss. He walked over to the panel and carefully checked all the readings. Satisfied, he began the laborious task of removing his cumbersome space suit. He placed each item its allotted place as he removed it, moving systematically along the bench like a careful mechanic disassembling an engine. Helmet, tanks, gloves, boots, monitors. When he had finished he was standing in a grey complete one piece suit that covered his body and face entirely. Even his eyes were covered by blue UV lenses sewn into the fabric. There were no holes for his nose and mouth. The suit was made of ultra-light high tech material that allowed him to breathe and sweat but maintained his body temperature regardless of conditions. The second door was burnished silver. He slid it open and waited for it to swish closed behind him. He carefully undid the small triple fastened vent on the top of his head. It created an opening about three inches wide. Because of the extreme elasticity of the material, he was able to squirm out of the suit like a snake shedding its skin.

He stood naked before the mirror that was attached to the wall and stared at his naked reflection. It was repulsive. Disgusting to look at. He was disgusting. His skin was that of a pale bloated worm, vaguely and nauseatingly translucent. And everywhere, crisscrossing his body and winding and twisting around him like vines, were thin black lines, like the work of a blind and insane tattoo artist. His body itself was flaccid and flabby, almost totally devoid of muscle. His skull was stark and hairless. He looked at his eyes, his pupils tiny black dots in the irises of such a pale grey as to be almost white, barely distinguishable from the surrounding sclera. He bared his teeth and looked at his pale bloodless gums. It was like looking at a corpse. A corpse in the early stages of decomposition.

He turned his face away. This was the price. This the cost he must pay. A body slowly being destroyed by lack of sunlight, lack of real air, lack of exercise. And what of his mind? Was that being destroyed too? No. The answer was no. The mind was keen and sharp. And suffering. Suffering the terrible loneliness. No touch. No warmth. No companionship. Only the endless solitude. And the struggle. The bitter never ending struggle to keep it at bay. The thing. The thing within.

The man approached the third door. It was shiny metallic black. He watched the distorted image in the door as the pale shuffling creature that was him approached and slid it open. He stepped through into the globe. The door closed behind him with a small click. A blue light next to it came on. The gravity turned off and the man floated up into the center of the bowl and began to spin slowly. From a spigot in the floor, a jet of water frothed out. It dispersed and formed a warm dense mist. The man floated in the mist, scrubbing his tormented and body and his face with his bare hands. He was crying again. But this time with joy. The pure unadulterated pleasure. The one time, once every month, when he could feel like a human being. The steam cloud thickened and then began to disappear. A fan blew a warm breeze up from the floor and it circulated, a blessed wind caressing and drying the man as he gently revolved.

When he was dry, the light turned off, and the gravity slowly returned, softly laying him down on the glass floor of the globe. He slid through the black door and retraced his steps, donning the grey bodysuit and replacing his space suit with precise practiced movements. Then he lumbered back along the catwalk, looking at the still silent stars, shining with no atmosphere to make them glitter. He gazed at the great black golden rimmed disc, a two hundred meter circle incised out of the sky like a huge black hole. It was there to block out the sun, to keep it from ever touching him. The sun behind it burnished its edges and made it appear like a great inexplicable circle of fire in space. Or an eye. The blind eye of something unknown and unknowable.

The man entered the module and again repeated the slow removal of his space suit. He lay down on his bunk and looked around at his surroundings. Functional and featureless. Joyless. He looked around at the machines designed to provide him with everything he needed. Everything except the thing he needed the most. And knew that he could never have.

And the most awful part of it was that he had done this to himself. Condemned himself to a life of loveless solitude. The module was his idea. His design. Floating in orbit. In the vacuum. In the cold sterility of space. No viruses. No bacteria. Nothing that could touch him.

But it wasn't because he was sick. He did not fear disease. He WAS the disease. He was Plague.

Technically, the uniform wasn't cheating, and strictly speaking it didn't contravene the rules of the game, but no one could deny that it bestowed an advantage on the wearer. Whether that advantage was unfair or not depended upon your point of view. Opinion was divided. Some felt that although it wasn't illegal, its use wasn't entirely in keeping with the spirit of the game. Other's thought it was gamesmanship at worst. Some thought it was a good tactic, and argued that that there was nothing to stop anyone else wearing one. The counter argument to this was that if everybody wore something similar they would all end up looking like a set of embarrassing clowns. There was another more forthright opinion which stated that it was only a fucking game and who gave a rat's ass what anyone showed up wearing.

The one thing that everybody did agree on, though, even those who were opposed to it, was that it was seriously cool. It was like some kind of combo between a psychedelic wetsuit with luminous go faster stripes and a zoot suit, set off by circular kaleidoscope spinning shades and some kind of groovy metallic beanie hat. The overall impression was of a red electric zebra with a bad attitude. It was outrageous. But to Herman, that was the whole point.

Under normal circumstances Herman was so inconspicuous as to be practically invisible. He was ordinary. An average kid in every respect. Average height, average weight, nondescript features, mousy hair. Nothing whatsoever to distinguish him or make him stand out from the crowd. He was a kind quiet soft spoken boy, with good manners, but even that only served to reinforce his ordinariness. It wasn't that he was bland and uninteresting if you got to know him. It was just that his personality was so understated that nobody bothered to take the trouble.

Secretly, it bothered him. He saw the other kids, popular kids with loads of friends, and good looking kids who were always the center of attention, and kids who were always winning things and were always in the spotlight, being invited to this and invited to that. Herman wasn't jealous. It wasn't in his nature. He just wished that he could just stand out a little more. He wished that he could participate in things, join in instead of being always on the outside. Observing but unobserved.

It started to change one windy day when he was in the park, by himself of course, playing with his Frisbee. He was spinning it up into the wind and making it loop around a tree and then come whizzing back down to hover right above him and slowly float down. He's done it five times straight when a very pretty girl about his own age came up to him smiling.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," said Herman.

"I'm Lilly."

"Pleased to meet you," said Herman, holding out his hand rather formally, "I'm Herman."

Lilly looked at his outstretched hand. She giggled and took hold of it.

"Wow," she said, "I didn't think anybody did that anymore."

"Did what?"

"Shake hands like that. It's kind of old fashioned."

"Is it?" said Herman, softly.

Lilly laughed. It was a pleasant laugh.

"Yes it is," she said, "But you know what? I like it. I've been watching you."

"You have?"

"Yes. With your Frisbee. You're really good. That trick is amazing. How did you learn that?"

"Practice," said Herman, "I spend a lot of time by myself."

"Can we play together a little bit?" she said, "Would you mind?"

"No. I mean yes. Er. No. I mean no I don't mind and yes we can play. I'd love to."

"Great," she said, smiling brightly, "Come on."

Lilly led him over to a place on the other side of the trees where there was a big expanse of grass. He got ready to throw her the Frisbee.

"Wait," she said, "Move further back."

Herman looked uncertain. He shuffled back a few steps.

"No," she said, "Further. Way back. What, you think because I'm a girl I can't throw far?"

"No," said Herman, "No, not at all. It's just that I erm I...."

Lilly giggled.

"Shut up and throw," she shouted.

Herman floated the Frisbee gently towards Lilly. She caught it effortlessly and gracefully and fired it back. It came like an arrow. Fast and straight. Herman barely caught it, and it stung his hand.

“Wow,” he said, “You’re strong.”

“Throw it harder,” she said.

So he did. He whizzed it low and swift. She deftly caught it and did a kind of pirouette and used the spin to put power into the throw. It came flashing back to him even faster than the first time. And so it went. They played for half an hour or so, firing the Frisbee backwards and forwards so it almost got to where they were throwing it at each other instead of to each other.

Finally Lilly caught it and walked over and handed him the Frisbee.

“I have to go now,” she said, “Thanks for the game. That was fun.”

“You’re very good,” said Herman.

“So are you,” she said, “I’m really impressed. Listen. I’m a member of a club. I’m on a team. Would you like to join?”

“What kind of a team?”

“A basketball team.”

“Huh?”

She giggled.

“No. A Frisbee team, silly. We play competitive Frisbee. It’s where we line up in teams of 10 and the idea is to get the Frisbee past the other team. Someone left and we need another team member. What do you think?”

“Well, yeah. Sounds great.”

“Excellent. We play at the Municipal Sports Hall every Friday from 6 ‘til 8. Can you make it?”

“Sure. I’ll be there.”

“Good then.”

She held out her hand.

“You know that’s old fashioned?” Herman said.

Lilly smiled and punched him on the shoulder.

“See you Friday, smarty pants,” she said.

Herman stood there for a long time, watching her go until she had disappeared around a corner. Then he turned and walked slowly home.

Meanwhile, in another part of the multiverse, Deeboob Domeek was sitting at the bar in her favorite watering hole, the Reverse Osmosis Lounge, idly sipping her third Permanent Perception Scrambler, for which the Reverse Osmosis Lounge was rightly famous throughout all known dimensions, and contemplating the fact that her nails needed doing. All 147 of them. She sighed at the thought of having to sit still for the equivalent of 4 earth years while her friendly but tiresomely garrulous manicurist gabbed on incessantly about the inconsequential details of her mundane existence.

Deeboob glanced around. It was still early and quiet, and she could see through the plasma that there was no queue in front of the molecular ship shrinker which allowed you to reduce your vehicle down to the size of a house key and put it in your pocket, conveniently permitting drunks to lose their whole spaceships instead of just their keys. Out of portals she could see that the 14 moons were still green and spiraling counter clockwise. Give it a day or two and the place will start filling up she thought.

Just then, there was a brief radiant flash of pinkish light, and Skrimbim Krorkup materialized next to her, flashing his impressive array of 4,000 teeth, his 82 multicolored eyes sparking. Skrimbim puckered up his lips for a welcome kiss. Deeboob wasn't sure which pair of lips to choose, so she planted a big wet one on the ones in the middle. As always she found the experience sweet and sexy but somewhat unsettling as Skrimbim was a Bootarseian, and they have 27 lips, arranged in asymmetrical groups of 3. An embrace was out of the question. Bootarsians are 18 feet in diameter.

"Skrimbim," she cried, "What a pleasant surprise. How nice to see you. I haven't seen you for eons. Where have you been?"

"I've been on vacation."

"How marvelous. You must tell me all about it. But dearie me, where ever are my manners. First things first, what will you have to drink?"

"Oh, the same as you. What else?" said Skrimbim, winking 41 of his eyes.

"Right you are," Deeboob said with a smile.

She turned to the bartender.

"Oh Fast Eddy darling, could I trouble you for 9 Permanent Perception Scramblers, please."

"Coming up," said Fast Eddy.

"Thank you sweetie," said Deeboob, batting her eyelashes at him, which caused a minor atmospheric event because they were three feet long.

Fast Eddy set to it with a will. Fast Eddy was a silicon based multipode from Gruggriggible. Fast Eddy was not his real name, of course. His real name is unprintable. Not because it's rude, you understand. It's unprintable because the names of Gruggriggibilliards are so long that there's not enough paper in the universe to print them. Fast Eddy chose the name because a friend told him it was a really cool name for a bartender. Which it is. Appropriate too, because fast Eddy dished up the Permanent Perception Scramblers in the blink of 41 eyes.

"So," said Deeboob, "Tell me all the lurid details. Where did you go? Somewhere exotic?"

"Yeah, you could say that," said Skrimbim, "I went to Earth."

"Earth!" exclaimed Deeboob, "Really? Why? What a shithole!"

"You've been there then?"

"Yes. I went three hundred thousand moons ago. I didn't even stay for one rotation of that feeble star they call the sun. It stinks."

"Well, yes and no. You have to admit, it's pretty."

"Oh yes. Absolutely. There's no denying it's one of the most beautiful planets in the universe. Or was, before those fucking humans evolved!"

"I know what you mean. My friend told me he was there just before that happened and it was magnificent. Pristine. Blue oceans and vast virgin forests and clear rivers and glistening ice and snow, and rolling savannahs. And such a marvelous diversity of life. But now? Fuck me. The air is practically un-inhalable, and you can see the pollution from light years away. Rivers clogged with shit, half the earth concreted over, trees all scythed down, oceans filled with garbage. And the plastic? You wouldn't believe the plastic. The whole planet is choked with it. I mean, talk about shitting on your own doorstep. Those humans are a right bunch of twats if you ask me."

"Oh you poor thing. It must have been such a disappointment!"

"Well actually no. The craic was fierce."

"What language is this?"



“Oh sorry. Something I picked up while I was over there. It roughly translates as the situation is essentially un-improvable. You see, I thought, since I’ve travelled all this way, I’m going to try to make the best of it. So I did some asking around, and my mates told me my best bet was to use a quantum temporal spatial transformation firkin to change myself into something called a Mad Paddy, and go to a place called Dublin. So I did. And it was brilliant. They have this drink called Liffey Water. It’s fantastic.”

“As good as these?” Deeboob smiled, holding up her glass.

“Well, believe it or not, better actually. I drank shitloads. And I went to see a band called Thin Lizzy and I went into this pub and a big fight started and a man came up to me and asked me if I was Protestant or Catholic and I didn’t know what he was talking about so I decided to follow what appeared to be the social convention and I stuck the crust on him.”

“The what?”

“Well humans have these things they call heads. They contain their brains. These brains contain everything they know which explains why they’re so fucking stupid. Anyway, apparently, when humans displease each other, they crack heads together. It’s called getting the nut in. I have to admit, it’s ridiculously entertaining.”

“Hmnnnn,” said Deeboob, somewhat dubiously, “Well I’m glad you had a good time, but it doesn’t do much to improve my opinion of humans, I’m afraid.”

“Well,” said Skrimbim, “I wouldn’t let it bother you. From what I hear, they’re on borrowed time.”

“What do you mean?”

Skrimbim leaned forward conspiratorially and flicking his 82 eyes from side to side, said in a whisper.

“Ever hear of Polymarion?”

Deeboob leaned closer.

“No, I can’t say that I have. Why?”

“Well the word is, this gal is straight out of the box new and nasty. A big style bad ass. And she has her sights set on Earth and the humans.”

“I like her already. But why?”

“The plastic. She eats plastic. And in the whole multiverse, the only species who have ever invented plastic and not realized how toxic it is and refused to produce it are those Einsteins, the humans.”

“The who steins?”

“Oh yeah. Well, while I was there, I discovered that they’re not all complete imbeciles. One or two of them were actually highly intelligent, and close to figuring it all out. A guy called Albert Einstein. Another one called Nicolai Tesla. And a really cool, kind caring and conscientious dude call Sir Richard Attenborough. And there was this one guy who had wheels instead of legs called Stephen Hawking who was brilliant, and some guy called Grass Neil, or something like that.”

“Well if that’s the case, how come the planet is so fucked up?”

“Why do you think?”

“I don’t know. Tell me.”

“Nobody wanted to listen.”

“Well that makes sense,” said Deeboob, scrunching her protoplasm and changing color for emphasis, “Or rather it doesn’t. Hey Fast Eddy, any chance of another 10 Permanent Perception Scramblers sweetie?”

“Coming right up,” said Fast Eddy, his multicles a whirling blur of whizzing wizardry.