Height Treason

by Klei

Summary

Only a defective leader would banish the mighty Zim under the guise of a so-called invasion, and defects had to be purged, regardless of height. For the good of his empire (and definitely not just because of how royally hurt and pissed off he was), Zim would dethrone the ones responsible for this humiliation! Alas, overthrowing an empire was a tall order, even for one as magnificent as he. There was nothing else for it; he would have to enlist the help of his old nemesis...
“Computer!” barked Zim, still in a haze of complicated emotions he was wholly unprepared to process. “Fetch me the bag!”

“Uhg, do I have to?” said the computer.

A Dib-shaped punching bag descended from the ceiling of the living room in the aboveground section of the base, suspended in the air by a chain around its neck. Years of abuse had left it thoroughly worn and crinkled, covered in permanent indents and little rips and tears that the majority of the gooey mush inside had long since spilled out of. On its own, that wouldn’t have been too much of an issue – after all, the Dib was so ghastly to look upon that the damage was practically an improvement – but the bag was also woefully outdated. The real Dib had grown significantly since it had been created (much to Zim’s chagrin), and hitting the version that defeated him three years ago was much less satisfying than hitting the one that defeated him yesterday. No matter; he was due for a new one anyway.

Then again, Zim supposed with gritted teeth, maybe he wasn’t. After all, none of it really mattered anymore, right?

“Hello, Dib,” said Zim in a voice cold enough to make a snowman shiver.

Ordinarily, this would be the point that Zim let out a maniacal laugh and practiced his deadly threats. On this day, however, he jumped straight to slamming his fist into the bag’s stupid, smiling face.

“Take that!” he grunted, then punched again. “And that!”

With every strike, the bag played snippets of audio recorded on Zim’s PAK during their many, many conflicts. There were hundreds of thousands of clips, but most of them boiled down to the same handful of phrases.

“You won’t get away with this, Zim!” said the punching bag, followed shortly after by “Zim’s an alien!” and “You guys literally just watched his wig and contacts fall off as he took off in a spaceship to escape the giant crabs he unleashed on the city! WHAT MORE DO YOU PEOPLE NEED?”

Predictable as the general tone of the dialogue might have been, no voice line was ever repeated twice. There were far too many of them for that to be even remotely likely. Six years’ worth, to be precise.

Six. Long. Years.

“Quiet, filth!” commanded Zim, slamming another fist into the false Dib’s gut.

“When you say ‘quiet,’ do you mean you want me to stop playing audio, or-” began the computer.

“No!” said Zim, only to reconsider. “I mean, yes! No! Yes! GAH!”

“Uhg, guess I’ll just engage the coin flip protocol,” grumbled the computer, projecting a giant
coin in the air nearby to simulate it being flipped. It landed on heads. “Oh, wait, I forgot to say which one is which. Guess I’ll just flip it again. Uh, heads is—”

“AAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

Zim let out a scream of such rage and sorrow that he was almost certain the neighbors had heard it. And yet, he couldn’t find it in him to care. He raised his clawed hands and raked the pointed tips across the fake Dib’s chest, prompting the slimy purple liquid inside to start gushing out onto the floor.

“I’m going to—” sputtered the fake Dib, the audio beginning to grow distorted. “-take… YoU… DoWn…”

As the last drops of goo spilled into the puddle on the floor, Zim alternated between staring at the partially-flattened bag and his shaking claws. How strange. Usually, wailing on the fake Dib provided at least a small modicum of relief, but that hadn’t helped him feel even a little bit better.

Perhaps he wasn’t just going far enough.

“Warning,” said the computer. “Stress levels rising rapidly! Rash action is not advised!”

“Computer,” hissed Zim as he extended his PAK legs. “Shut up.”

He skewered the false Dib with one of the sharp legs and ripped it down, prompting bits of ceiling to rain from where the chain had once been attached. A barrage of lasers tore dozens of holes in the bag, but even that wasn’t enough. He hoisted it up with the leg that had skewered it and chucked it across the room with such force that it broke the wall and became lodged there.

“What’s makin’ all that noisy noise?” asked GIR, poking his head into the room without a care for such trivial matters as ‘self-preservation.’ Predictably, the first thing he noticed was the puddle of leaked fluid from the punching bag. “Ooooh, a goo puddle!”

Before GIR could make a running jump into the puddle, Zim blocked his path with one of his PAK legs.

“GIR, do you want to play in the puddle?”

“I do!” said GIR, wiggling around excitedly. “I’m gonna do a cannonball!”

“Yes,” said Zim, eyes narrowing. “But first, you’re going to run to the store and get me something. And that something is…!” He wracked his brain for an answer, but found none. “Computer!”

The computer didn’t answer. Zim balled his hands into fists. That maliciously compliant piece of junk!

“Computer, you are to cease shutting up and answer me!” said Zim. “What is the name of the human happy juice?”

“Human… Happy juice?” repeated the computer.

“Yes!” said Zim. “The one that makes them even slower and stupider than usual!”

“Ooooh, you mean alcohol?” said the computer.

“Exactly!” said Zim, returning his attention to the useless robot currently attempting to free the
false Dib from the wall. “GIR, you are to procure this beverage and return it to me in unbroken, drinkable condition! Only then may you jump in the puddle!”

“Yes, sir!” said GIR, eagerly running off to do just that.

“Wait, are you going to drink it?” said the computer incredulously.

“So what if I am?” said Zim, sheathing his PAK legs and taking a seat on the couch to await GIR’s return.

“Consumption of human alcohol is not advised!” stated the computer firmly. “Irken physiology is not adapted to-”

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” interrupted Zim, flipping on the television and sinking further into the chair. “I’m not Irken anymore! Aha! AHAHAHAHA!” He curled up on his side on the couch, still laughing hollowly. “HAHAHAHAHA!”

“Citizenship notwithstanding, you are still biologically Irken,” said the computer. “Your spliedyspoon isn’t equipped to process-”

“Computer, shut up again.”

There was no response.

It was a quiet morning in the Membrane household. The heaters whirred softly in the background to stave off the chill of winter, and for the first time in what seemed like months (because it HAD been months), the entire family was gathered around the table for breakfast. Gaz was somehow managing to eat waffles with her left hand while playing on her Game Slave 4 with her right, Professor Membrane had a beaker full of syrup that he was scrutinizing with great care, and Dib was on his laptop combing through indecipherable Irken files painstakingly downloaded from Zim’s base.

As expected, not a word of it was readable, but there was still valuable information to be gleaned from the diagrams. Dib had already learned a great deal about Irken technology by dismantling Zim’s various gadgets to figure out how they worked, and combining that knowledge of the mechanics with the blueprints used to create them was gradually enabling him to figure out the meaning of various symbols and letters. If he could develop a reliable translator, then working out Zim’s plans from his otherwise unencrypted files would be a breeze!

“Aha!” said Professor Membrane triumphantly as he added a droplet of some substance or another to the beaker of syrup. “With this, the sweetness of the syrup has been multiplied tenfold!”

As his father began a triumphant spiel about the benefits of his artificially enhanced syrup, Dib switched tabs over to the video feed of Zim’s lair. After the previous day’s defeat wherein Dib had just barely managed to prevent Zim from destroying the city with the help of a brainwashed abominable snowman, he didn’t really expect any activity for a little while. It usually took Zim about a week or so to come up with a scheme; sometimes longer, if he was feeling particularly focused. Still, there was the occasional ‘I just lucked out and somehow obtained some awesome superweapon to destroy you with’ plot to watch out for. Dib had been caught off guard enough times to know better than to trust Zim to stick to a schedule.

As he looked through the video feed, he scanned the rooms for signs of life. GIR was sitting on
the couch watching TV, which was nothing out of the ordinary. Less ordinary was the life-sized replica of his fifteen-year-old self that was presently lodged partway through the wall, but he’d watched Zim enough that he’d already been aware of the punching bag’s existence; it was just a little surprising to see it in such bad shape. He mentally pumped his fist; the latest loss had clearly done a number on Zim’s psyche. With luck, it would delay his progress on the next attempt.

Dib quickly flipped through the cameras for the upper level of the base. Unsurprisingly, Zim was nowhere to be had. He switched over to the cameras on the lower level, starting with the lab. No Zim there… What about the communications room? He tapped the arrow key to view it, but it, too, was empty.

He frowned. Zim didn’t usually leave his base this early in the morning. It was always unnerving to not know the exact location of his nemesis, but if he had a panic attack every time Zim was out of sight, he’d have died of stress long ago. The most likely explanation was that he was out picking up supplies. Dib would give it a few hours, then check back in to make sure that-

*Ding-dong!* Dib turned his head towards the foyer in response to the sound of the doorbell. Who in the world would be visiting this early?

“Gaz, would you mind getting that?” asked Professor Membrane, still busy with his syrup.

“I’m busy,” said Gaz, her eyes focused intently on a game. “Make Dib do it.”

Dib sighed and rose from the chair to go get the door. As usual, despite being the only one who was actually doing anything of actual importance, it seemed it would be up to him to go take care of this. He reached for the doorknob, figuring it was some kind of package he had to sign for. His father had been getting a lot of deliveries lately.

As he opened the door, his gaze pointed straight ahead with the expectation that the person on the other side would be at eye level, but the only thing directly in front of his face was empty space.

“Down here,” said a voice so tired and soft that Dib didn’t even recognize it until he looked down.

“Zim,” growled Dib, eyes flitting over Zim’s body in search of obvious weapons. No guns, no giant mechanical devices… Perhaps he was using another cloaking device? In any case, he stayed on guard. “What are you doing here?” His brow furrowed as he realized that Zim hadn’t even bothered to put on his disguise. It was too dark outside to make out fine details, but it still seemed like an unnecessary risk, unless he was using some kind of a cloaking device that only Dib could see through, for whatever reason.

“I’ve come to shur-surra-” slurred Zim, eyes screwing up as he struggled to make it through the next word. His body swayed as he stood, and his feet continuously shuffled back and forth to maintain his unsteady footing. It was clear that he was struggling to stand. Dib did a second quick look-over for any indication of an injury, but there were no obvious signs of damage. “Shooooo…”

“‘Shoot?’ ‘Surprise attack?’”

“No!” snapped Zim, pointing an accusatory finger up at Dib with such force that he almost toppled forward. “Do not insh- interrupts the mighty Zib- I mean, Zim!”

Dib could only stare at him in confusion. “Are you, uh, are you okay?”

“Zim has tash- tasted your poison happy water!” said Zim, stumbling a few steps backwards. Two metal legs extended from his PAK to stabilize him. A third extended out towards Dib with a slightly-crumpled can. “It was foul!”
Dib took the can, which was still partially-full, and read the label.

“‘Bobert’s Hard Cider,’” he read out loud. “‘Two percent alcohol.’ Wait, no, there’s a decimal in front. ‘Point two percent alcohol.’” He looked back at Zim, who was very visibly shitfaced. “How many of these did you drink?”

“Jusht that one,” said Zim, retracting his metal legs and opting to lean on the doorframe, instead. “Almost a whoooooole can! Your pathetic recreational potion- poisons are of no effectiveness on Zim!”

“Right…” said Dib, struggling to repress a snicker. Hilarious as this was, it could still be a trick. “Why are you here, again?”

“I have come to surrender!” said Zim, looking quite proud of himself for successfully making it through the word. He was clearly struggling to control his inhumanly prehensile tongue, which flitted in and out of his mouth as he spoke. “Be honored, pathetic Dib-pig, for Zim hash deemed you the mosht besht avenue for shur- shurren- giving himshelth up to Earf authors- authorities!”

“Yeah, this is clearly a trap,” said Dib, crossing his arms over his chest. “Let me guess; you’re actually a robot or something, and as soon as I let you inside, you’re just going to explode.”

“Well, that certainly carried some fairly horrific implications about the way Irkens treated assimilated races. All the more reason not to let Zim win. “You’re kidding, right?”

Zim appeared disappointed, but not surprised. “Typical! I knew I should have filed for that in advance! There’s no way your pathetic Earthen bureaucracy would ever be able to procesh the forms in time.” He swayed where he stood. “Fine, live dissection it is. See if I care! Because I don’t! I won’t shcream even a little itshy bitshy shmidgen!”

Before Dib could respond, Gaz shouted at him from the kitchen:

“Dib, if you don’t get back here before your waffle gets cold, I’ll eat it myself!”

Dib exhaled, then turned his attention back to Zim.

“Look, I’m not gonna fall for such an obvious trap. Just go home, Zim.”

“Are-are you refusing to accept my surrender?” said Zim, looking weirdly hurt. At least he finally seemed to be regaining control of his tongue. “You? The Dib?”

“Because it’s not a surrender!” snapped Dib.

Zim’s antennae drooped, and his eyes shimmered like they had filled with tears. Dib frowned; he knew that look. It was the same one Zim had had all those years ago when he explained that his leaders weren’t bringing their armada to Earth.
“Zim, what are you talking-”

“Even my enemies want nothing to do with me!” he wailed, losing his balance at last and falling face-first on the ground. He made a token effort to get back up before giving up, rolling onto his side, curling himself into a fetal position, and making a series of despairing groans.

Dib rolled his eyes. “Nice try, Zim. I’m not falling for it this time. Fool me once…”

Zim rolled back onto his stomach to scream into the welcome mat.

“What seems to be the problem, son?” said Professor Membrane. Dib looked back to see his father approaching, having apparently grown curious about the source of the commotion. “Oh! Why, if it isn’t your little green friend with leprosy, dwarfism, cancer, ocular albinism, and COPD!”

“Yeah, he has exactly none of those things,” said Dib as his supposedly brilliant father stared down at Zim with zero suspicion. “Come on, dad. Even if you can use those diseases to explain away the missing ears, the height, the wig, the contacts, and the mechanical backpack literally fused to his body, he has antennae!”

“Interesting,” said Professor Membrane, kneeling down to more closely inspect the black protrusions atop Zim’s head. He gently prodded one with his gloved fingertips, only for it to immediately flinch away. “This could be a never-before-seen disease or mutation! I would be positively thrilled for a chance to study this!”

Dib rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure. Maybe after breakfast.”

“Great idea, son!” said his father. “Zim, was it? Why don’t you join us for breakfast?”

Without moving except to turn his face away from the ground, Zim spoke:

“I don’t eat human food,” he muttered.

“Oh, come on, he’s not even trying to hide it anymore!” said Dib. Wait… He really wasn’t trying to hide it anymore, was he?

“If it’s celiac-related, Foodio would be more than happy to prepare you some eggs!” said Professor Membrane. "And if he's not happy, I'll reprogram him!"

“The only thing his people eat are carbs and sugar!” said Dib.

“More waffles, then!” said Professor Membrane, straightening up and returning to the kitchen. “Son, help your sad drunk friend to the table.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” said Dib, glaring down at Zim. “Alright, Zim, you might have succeeded in getting into my house, but as soon as breakfast is over, you’re out of here! Got it?”

Zim groaned in a way that wasn’t clearly interpretable as either a yes or a no.

Scowling heavily, Dib leaned down and grabbed Zim by the waist. Despite all the machinery, Zim was surprisingly lightweight. He didn’t put up much of a fight as Dib threw him over his shoulders like a tiny sack of potatoes, but even if he had, Dib wasn’t concerned about his capacity to keep him still. In the beginning, they’d been more or less evenly matched in a fistfight, but Dib had grown up while Zim’s physical strength remained on the level of a human child’s. His biggest concern was the metal legs of Zim’s PAK, but even those were built more to be lightweight and agile than thick and sturdy, and they weren’t as useful in tight spaces like the inside of a house as
they were out in the open. Unless Zim was packing some serious heat underneath his uniform, Dib had the advantage.

Dib dropped Zim into the extra chair that his father had pulled up before taking his seat.

“Hey, where are my waffles?” he asked, staring down at his empty plate.

“You snooze, you lose,” said Gaz, standing up and leaving without once looking away from her screen.

Dib gritted his teeth. It had been such a nice morning before Zim showed up.

“So, Zim!” said Professor Membrane, going so far as to set his science project aside to focus all of his attention on the completely undisguised alien currently resting his entire upper body on top of the table. “Dib talks about you all the time, but it’s been so long since we’ve had the chance to chat!”

Zim grunted. Dib buried his face in his hands, unable to believe that this was happening.

“You go to the same school as my son, correct?” said the professor. “Winter break is almost over! Do the two of you have any plans to hang out before then?”

“Well,” said Zim, rolling his head onto its side so his mouth was uncovered. “I was going to create a horrifying bioweapon the likes of which humanity has never seen to give everyone an incurable combination of cancer and dysentery, but my robot decided to use it as taco seasoning.”

Dib’s slammed his head against the table. Sure, by this point it may have been clear that there was literally nothing anyone could say or do to convince his father that Zim was an alien, but this was just too much.

“Ah, I remember my first bioweapon!” said Professor Membrane with a wistful sigh. “I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to learn that my son is friends with a fellow scientist!”

“We’re not friends,” said Dib as Foodio 3000 loaded his plate with more waffles to replace the ones Gaz stole.

“Oh, yes, of course! My mistake!” said Professor Membrane, somehow appearing to be even more delighted by this. “It’s mathematically impossible for me to be happier for you two than I am right now!”

“Wait, that makes you happy?” said Dib. His father was a strange man, but it was still a little weird that he would be so happy for Dib to have an enemy.

“Of course, son! You have my complete love and support!” said Professor Membrane. “While I would like to express some mild concern about the underage day-drinking, I’m getting the sense that this is a highly unusual behavior, and I shall refrain from making any harsh judgments without being aware of the full context of the situation! Zim, I hope you know that you’re always welcome in our home.”

“What?” said Dib incredulously. Was this all just a part of Zim’s plan? How in the world…?

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” said Zim. He didn’t bother to pick up his fork, opting instead to seize the syrup-coated waffle in his gloved hands and gnaw at it with his not-quite-teeth.

“Well, I really should be heading off to work now,” said Professor Membrane, standing up to
“We’re working on robotic bees to replace the inferior biological ones currently dying in droves! It was nice speaking with you, Zim!” As he grabbed his things, he turned back to Dib one last time. “I’ll be back at five-thirty, and not a second earlier, understand?”

“Uuuuh, sure?” said Dib.

“Remember, son, because this is important,” said Professor Membrane, which succeeded in getting Dib’s attention. “If you and Zim are planning on doing anything, be sure to wait until after he’s sobered up! Give it a few hours, at least.” He gestured for Dib to come closer so he could whisper something in his ear. “If you have need of protection, go into my room and check the third drawer on the left.”

Dib’s eyes lit up. Protection? Like a weapon? Could it be that his father actually understood the gravity of the situation? “You mean—”

“That’s right, son. You’re eighteen now. I trust you to handle this like an adult and keep yourself safe,” said Professor Membrane. “If you need to get Gaz out of the house, let her know that she has my permission to take the car.”

“Wow…” said Dib, still in shock. “Thanks, dad!”

“Don’t mention it!” said Professor Membrane as he headed out the door. “Have fun!”

With his departure, the only people left in the room were Zim and Dib. Naturally, the first thing Dib wanted to do was make a beeline to the drawer his father had mentioned to get that weapon, but he’d left very clear instructions to wait until Zim had sobered up. Strange, but he trusted his father. Perhaps the effects of the weapon were nullified if the subject was intoxicated.

“So, Zim…” said Dib, looming over the alien with a suspicious glare. “What’s your plan?”

“Finish ‘ish waffle,” said the despondent Zim through a mouthful of breakfast. He swallowed. There was syrup all over his face and dripping down his antennae. “After that, I don’t know. Even if it’s not ‘surrendering’ in any official capacity, I guess you could still dissect me. Might even be easier, since now you don’t have to do any paperwork.”

“What is it with you and the dissection thing?” said Dib. “Is there a bomb in your chest that you want me to set off?”

“No, just a squeedlyspooch and some other chest-meats I’m not really in the mood to list right now,” said Zim, rolling out of the chair and flopping to the floor.

Dib’s eyes narrowed. “Where’s GIR? Isn’t he usually involved with your plans?”

“Home,” said Zim, lifting his arm for a dismissive handwave. “Oh, right, I guess you want access to the base, huh? Don’t worry, I already added you to the list of approved visitors. Just let GIR know that I died and you’re his secondary administrator. I left a list of maintenance instructions on the coffee table.”

“Really pulling out all the stops with this one, aren’t you?” said Dib. “Like I said, I’m not falling for the shmoopy act again.” He pulled the pair of handcuffs that he always kept on him out of his pocket and secured them to Zim’s wrists, followed by another pair around his ankles. “Just gotta find a way to disable those stupid robot legs…”

“You mean these?” said Zim, extending all of his PAK legs at once. Dib yelped and jumped back, fully expecting to be impaled, but the only thing Zim used them for was to seat himself on the
table. After that, there was a sound like something coming unlatched, and the legs all detached from his PAK and hit the ground in a clatter of metal. “There. Now go ahead and get your scalpel or camera or whatever.”

Dib eyed him suspiciously and gingerly poked at the fallen mechanical legs with his shoe. “How do I know you’re not hiding something else in there?”

“Because if I were, I probably would have used it already,” said Zim. “My PAK attached itself to your chest once. You know what it’s capable of. And if you’re worried about that happening again, just give it a strong electric shock right before you detach it from me. Not having a body attached when it tries to restart should trick it into going back into storage mode, and you can run whatever stupid tests your big, dumb head can think of.” His antennae twitched. “Just don’t try to change any of the data unless you want your devices fried. I reprogrammed it to inject malware into any external source that tried to overwrite the current settings, and it drove the Control Brains insane, so your stupid human software doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Control Brains?”

“Uhg, sometimes I forget the sheer extent of your puny human ignorance,” grumbled Zim. “The Control Brains are AI responsible for the propagation and coordination of all Irkens. They manage our- their central knowledge database and information transfers.”

“Huh…” said Dib. There was no way Zim was feeding him accurate information, was there? After everything they’d gone through, the idea that his mortal enemy would so flippantly reveal such a huge piece of the fundamental workings of his empire…

Dib studied him intently. “Why wouldn’t it be your problem anymore?”

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuhg,” groaned Zim. “Fine. Computer, play the recording of the transmission I intercepted between the Tallest and the head of invasion operations when I was trying to figure out why they weren’t picking up my call.” An orb popped out of Zim’s PAK and floated up to Dib. “WAIT! Let me cover my antennae first so I don’t have to hear it again!”

Once Zim had given his antennae a thorough coat of maple syrup to block out the sound vibrations, the orb projected a video into the air. Zim closed his eyes and covered them with his sticky hands.

“-are running smoothly,” said an unseen voice, presumably the head of invasion operations.

The two Irkens in the video that Dib recognized as Zim’s leaders looked pleased by this news.

“Great!” said the red one. “Once the new recruits are trained, we’ll be able to begin preparations for Operation: Impending Doom Three!”

“But my Tallest, aren’t you forgetting something?” said the head of invasion operations.

“Can’t think of anything off the top of my head, no,” said the purple one, eating what appeared to
be a donut.

“We can’t wrap up Operation Impending Doom Two until we hear back from all of our invaders,” said the head of invasion operations.

“What? Which invaders are you waiting on?” demanded the red one.

“Why, Invader Zim, of course.”

There was a long pause.

Suddenly, everyone burst into laughter.

“Oh, that is RICH!” cackled the red one.

“Ha, yeah, give this guy a promotion!” laughed the purple one.

“Really?” said the head of invasion operations.

“No,” said the purple one, wiping pieces of the donut he’d just spewed out from his mouth. “Tell you what, we’ll have Invader Jim send you a box of these donuts. Love that guy!”

“Right?” said the red one. “If only we could get Zim to do that. Pffft. Can you imagine? ‘Invader’ Zim actually doing something useful!” He used air quotes as he said the word.

“Uh, my Tallest?” said one of the technicians, only to be interrupted.

“Don’t be so hard on him, Red!” snorted the purple one. “Those status reports are hilarious! Remember the one where the roof of his base was blown off and a pigeon pooped on his head?”

“My Tallest!” said the technician with a little more urgency, only to be ignored.

“HA! Or the one where that trashed SIR unit we gave him filled the whole room with popcorn?” said the red one. “I’m almost glad the control brains couldn’t delete him. Just think of all the hilarious mishaps we never would have seen!”

“Yeah, sending him out on that fake mission to Earth was the best idea we’ve ever had!”

“My Tallest!” cried the technician. “Somebody appears to be listening in on this transmission.”

“What?” said the red one, suddenly furious. “Who?”

“Uuuuuh…” said the technician, visibly terrified. “Z-zim.”

For the second time, the room went silent.

“You idiots!” growled the red one. “Throw whatever moron is in charge of security out the airlock and CUT THE DAMNED TRANSMISS-”

The video ended, and the orb returned to Zim’s PAK. Dib bit his lip uncomfortably.

Holy shit, ouch. He’d already gotten the sense that Zim wasn’t exactly well-liked by his leaders, but that? That had been hard to watch. He himself despised Zim, of course, but it was impossible not to imagine the feelings that must have been rushing through the Irken’s head as he watched all that play out. Shame. Despair. Humiliation. Betrayal.
No wonder he was currently a nigh-lifeless blob napping in a waffle.

“Zim?” said Dib, but he didn’t answer. Right; his antennae were currently covered up. Dib grabbed a napkin and attempted to wipe one of them clean, but Zim just rolled to the other side of the table before he could touch it, leaving a trail of syrup wherever he went. “You’re making a mess, Zim!”

Well, it wasn’t like a napkin was going to help much with this, anyway. Dib hoisted the sticky alien up over his shoulder again to carry him to the bathroom. To his credit, Zim didn’t fight it, and just went limp in his arms.

Dib tightened his grip on Zim as he walked up the stairs, not wanting to drop him. As if things weren’t already weird enough, when he deposited his mortal enemy into the bathtub, he was forced to decide whether to attempt to rinse him off with his clothes on or attempt to strip Zim down first.

He thought for a moment. Taking off his clothes would require removing the cuffs around his wrists and ankles, and that just wasn’t happening. Dib grabbed the removable showerhead, aimed it squarely at Zim’s antennae, and turned on the water.

Perhaps understandably, Zim’s first instinct was to scream.

“AAAAAAAGH, not the filthy Earth water!”

“Relax, all the water in the house is filtered,” said Dib once he was sure Zim could hear again. Once he realized his flesh wasn’t being melted off by pollutants, Zim quieted back down, though his shoulders remained tense. As expected, the water pressure on its own wasn’t enough to get the syrup off. Dib reached forward to wipe a particularly stubborn stain off of Zim’s forehead. How strange; he’d never touched Zim’s face except to punch it in the past, and, as a result, had never really gotten a chance to feel the texture of his flesh. It was more rubbery than he expected, like snake skin, but also warm to the touch. The revelation left him with dozens of questions about Irken biology. How was his body temperature regulated? Why was his skin so sensitive to the pollutants in Earth’s water? Did he shed his skin all at once, or in little flakes like humans? Or maybe he didn’t shed at all, and Irkens kept the same skin throughout their life? Given that Zim seemed to be flitting in and out of consciousness, Dib figured that now wasn’t the best time to ask.

“Good enough, I guess,” said Dib, putting the showerhead back and draping a towel over Zim’s sopping body. Fortunately, Zim had no hair to retain the water, and his clothing was apparently designed to dry quickly, so it didn’t take long to wipe him down. A good thing, too, because upon lifting the towel back up, it became clear that Zim had passed out. “Oh, come on.”

What to do, what to do? He couldn’t just lug Zim around everywhere he went until he sobered up. He needed a place he could attach the handcuffs to so Zim wouldn’t be able to escape once he woke up and decided to start scheming again.

Oh, of course! He could just handcuff Zim to his bedframe.

Dib dumped Zim onto the bed, unlatched one of the handcuffs just long enough to wrap it around one of the posts, then clicked it back around his wrist. Perfect! He’d successfully handcuffed his greatest enemy to his bed. Nothing weird about that!

He left his room with a sense of triumph. All that remained was to decide what he would do with Zim after he woke up. Interrogate him, perhaps? Yes, that made sense. Perhaps he would be able to make use of the weapon his dad left him!
“So what’s up with Zim?” asked Gaz from around the corner, startling Dib and causing him to let out a small yelp.

“Oh, he just found out that his whole life was based on a lie, that’s all,” said Dib. “Dad told me about some kind of a weapon he’s keeping in his room, so I’m gonna go get that and use it to interrogate Zim when he wakes up!”

“A weapon?” said Gaz, looking intrigued. “I wanna see.”

“Not so fast, Gaz,” said Dib. “Dad said he trusted me with it because I’m eighteen and-”

“Wait,” interrupted Gaz. “You don’t mean the ‘protection’ in the third drawer on the left, do you?”

Dib’s jaw dropped. “You already know?”

Gaz grinned wickedly. “Of course I do. Come on, let’s go get it.”

For as disappointing as it was to find out that his younger sister had been trusted with this tool before he was, Dib was still eager to get his hands on a weapon capable of taking on his greatest enemy, and briskly followed Gaz to their father’s room.

“Here it is,” said Gaz, eagerly gesturing to the drawer. “Come on, Dib. Open it up!”

Dib’s eyes sparkled with wonder. This was it! A weapon capable of taking on his mortal enemy. He slowly opened the drawer...

Oh.

Oh God.

“I guess that’s one way to interrogate him,” cackled Gaz.

“Seriously?” cried Dib, looking through the drawer with growing horror. Not only was it filled to the brim with condoms, but they came in all different types! Plain, ribbed, flavored... “Why would dad even have all of these?”

“Just because you aren’t getting laid doesn’t mean nobody else is,” said Gaz with a shrug.

“Gaz! Gross!” said Dib, slamming the drawer shut and feeling a sudden need to wash his hands. “Wait, so when I said Zim and I weren’t friends, he thought- Oh my God!”

“Well, you did leave him handcuffed in your room.”


“Oh, please. I’ve seen enough of your internet history to know that isn’t a disqualifier.”

The color drained from Dib’s face. “Why are you looking at my internet history?”

“Because it’s hilarious,” said Gaz. “Duh.”

Dib screamed.

Damage to organic brain repaired. Blood toxicity levels normalized. Starting up…
Zim awoke to a jolt of electricity. His whole body spasmed, and the incontrollable jerking of his arms and legs quickly made it clear that he had been restrained. No matter. He would just use his PAK legs. Zim attempted to extend them.

Error: Cannot find PAK legs.

Another error? Zim made a mental note to fix that as soon as he got back to the base. In the meantime, he had to figure out where he was and how he had gotten here.

“HEY!” called Zim. “MYSTERIOUS CAPTORS! WHERE AM I AND HOW DID I GET HERE?”

He could hear the sound of footsteps outside. Zim braced himself for the worst as the door opened…

“Oh,” said Zim as the ever-annoying Dib strode in, looking simultaneously tired and annoyed. “It’s just you. Release me at once, filth-creature!”

“Well, at least one of us is feeling better,” said Dib, shutting the door and taking a seat at the nearby desk chair.

“Foolish Earthling! To feel better, one must first feel bad!” said Zim. “The mighty Zim has no need for negative emotions, for Zim is already perfect!”

“You fell asleep in a waffle,” said Dib, preemptively covering his ears.

“YOU LIE!” screamed Zim, at which point Dib uncovered his ears again. “How dare you accuse the mighty Zim of such pathetic acts of patheticness?”

“Look, man,” said Dib, pressing his fingers to his temples. “It’s okay to be upset about what happened. I mean, you just found out that the past six years of your life have been based on a lie.”

Zim froze, and Dib once again covered his ears.

“YOU’RE LY-”

“I’m not lying, Zim, you literally showed me the footage!” interrupted Dib.

Zim’s antennae twitched frantically as his PAK reuploaded the memories to his freshly repaired flesh-brain. No. No! It wasn’t true! This couldn’t all have been for nothing!

“It’s- It’s not-”

Zim’s lower lip quivered. He didn’t want it to be true, but there was no denying it now. The Tallest weren’t coming. They had never planned on coming. They had sent him millions of lightyears away to some backwater planet with a defective SIR unit to get rid of him.

His eyes shimmered with misery, and he let out a wail of despair.

“Uh, there, there?” said Dib awkwardly. Zim just cried harder.

There was a loud knock at the door.

“Hey!” said Gaz. “Everything going on in there had better be consensual!”

“We’re not- God, just go away, Gaz!” snapped Dib.
Zim curled up on his side as best as he was able with the handcuffs currently binding him to the Dib’s recharge station.

“How could this happen to me?” he asked no one in particular. “Zim, Irk’s finest invader? From the time I was first activated, I’ve been nothing but loyal to the empire!”

“Didn’t you mention earlier that you broke your, uh, control brain things?” said Dib.

“That was after they sent me here!” said Zim. “And it was only because they tried to delete me!”

“Delete you?” said Dib. “Why?”

“Just some sham trial on Judgmentia where they pulled up all of my greatest failures while completely ignoring my many accomplishments!” said Zim. “I created an incredible horror blob capable of devouring lifeforms by the dozen, but does anyone think about the military applications? No! All anyone ever talks about is how it ate Tallest Miyuki!”

“You killed one of your leaders?”

“Oh, come on, not you too!” complained Zim. “And Tallest Spork hardly even counted; he was barely Tallest for a year before the horror blob got to him!”

“You killed two of your leaders,” amended Dib. “Wow.”

‘‘Wow’ is right!” said Zim. “It took years to nullify the horror blob! I should be lauded for creating something so powerful!’’ There was a strange choking sensation in his throat that made it hard to speak. “Instead, I am shamed! Shamed!”

“Yeeeeeah…” said Dib. “This, uh, this whole banishment thing must really come as a shock for you.”

Zim nodded vigorously. How strange; talking about his feelings and having them be acknowledged by the Dib wasn’t actually doing anything to fix his problems, but it certainly took the edge off.

“And that’s not even the worst part!” said Zim, unable to stop himself now. “No, the worst part is that it was so obvious! After I quit my first banishment-” Dib pursed his lips and looked like he was struggling not to say something. “-nobody ever bothered to reencode me as an invader. When they were handing out SIR units, the Tallest fished GIR out of a trash can. I knew then that there was something strange going on, but they told me it was some kind of advanced model, and I forced myself to believe it, because you don’t just doubt the Tallest! Whenever GIR acted up, I told myself that he was a prototype model, and bugs were to be expected of a prototype, because why would my Tallest lie to me?”

Dib chewed his lip with his hideous bone-teeth so hard that it almost looked like he was trying to cause himself pain.

“It was pretty messed up, what they did to you,” said Dib carefully. “They should have been honest about what was happening.”

“I’ve lost my empire! I’ve lost my purpose!” said Zim, squeezing his eyes shut. “An Irken without a purpose is like a heart that doesn’t beat!”

“Hey, man, it’s not-”
“I’m a useless organ!”

The Dib took a deep breath with his inferior lungs.

“Humans don’t have tails,” said Dib.

What did that have to do with anything? Zim opened his mouth to say something insulting, but the Dib continued before he could speak.

“But!” said Dib. “We still have tailbones. It’s called the coccyx, and we’re pretty sure that it’s a vestige of what was once a tail a long, long, long time ago.”

“Great,” said Zim. “So I’m a useless human organ. Even worse!”

“Can I finish?” said Dib. “Humans might not have tails anymore, but that doesn’t make the coccyx useless! Nowadays, it serves as a muscular anchor point so our butts don’t fall out of place. It lost its original purpose, but it found a new one. Do you see what I’m trying to say, Zim?”

Something in Zim’s chest fluttered with newfound hope. “You’re saying I should continue my invasion so the Tallest will have to acknowledge me!”

“What? No!” said Dib, slamming his palm against his face. “Zim, the Tallest are never going to respect you!” The words struck Zim like a thousand bees, but he no longer had the confidence to deflect them with accusations of lies. “And I’m not even saying that because I hate you or because I don’t want you to invade Earth, even though both of those things are true. I’m saying it because you need to hear it. There is nothing you can do to earn their respect. If you handed them Earth on a silver platter tomorrow, what would happen?”

Zim could feel his throat closing up again.

“They would respect me again,” said Zim softly. “Everyone would welcome me back.”

“No, Zim,” said Dib, shaking his head. “If your leaders actually cared about taking this planet, do you think they’d send you here just to get rid of you? They never wanted the Earth, and you giving it to them isn’t going to make them respect you.”

“No! It has to be true!” insisted Zim. “I need it to be true!”

Dib sighed, stood up, and approached the bed. Zim reflexively flinched away. This was it. The Dib was going to turn him in to the Earth authorities where he would no doubt be either dissected or kept in a vat and studied. It should have been terrifying, but there was a part of him that was strangely relieved. How could that be?

Dib took his wrist. With a pair of clicks, the handcuffs opened, followed by the ones around his ankles.

“I know what it’s like to be an outcast,” said Dib, sitting down on the bed. Zim sat up in a huff. As if he cared about the Dib’s problems! “You’ve seen it. Other humans don’t like me, either. And my dad, well, he loves me, and he says he’s proud, but I know there’s a part of him that’s always going to be disappointed that I’m not exactly like him, and it hurts.” He smiled, but somehow still looked a little sad. “I’m not his real son, you know. I’m his clone, specifically designed to continue his work and take over his business after he died. He never told me, and I don’t think he knows that I know yet; I just happened to find the documentation one day when I was looking for tools to repair Tak’s ship.” He flopped down on the bed next to Zim. “So I guess neither of us are really fulfilling our intended purpose.”
“Why are you telling me this?” said Zim, genuinely confused. “All you’re doing is exposing your insecurities and weaknesses for future exploitation.”

“Because it feels better to talk about it,” said Dib. “And to know that there’s someone else out there who understands what it’s like to feel the way you feel.”

Zim considered this. It had made him feel better to hear Dib talk about having similar (if far less important) problems. At first, he’d assumed that it was just because he enjoyed hearing about the suffering of his nemesis, but perhaps there was something more to this whole ‘sharing your feelings’ thing.

“Well, what now?” said Zim. For the first time in his life, he felt well and truly lost. No goal, no purpose, no reason for existing… He hugged himself in woe and panic. “Do we self-terminate?”

“We could,” mused Dib. “Kind of a lame way for all of this to end, though, don’t you think?”

“There’s nothing to end,” said Zim, laying back down and returning his attention to the ceiling. “None of this was for anything. It happened, and now it’s over, and it doesn’t even matter!”

Dib jabbed Zim with his elbow.

“Ouch! Hey!” said Zim, shooting back up and poking his claw into Dib’s chest. “How dare you attack me while my guard was down?”

“Sorry, hearing you be all mopey and introspective was getting too weird,” said Dib, sitting up with him.

“Not as weird as hearing you go on about anything other than how you’re going to expose me to the world as an alien!” Zim shot back. “And, oh! As it turns out, all of your endeavors to stop me were also for nothing, so ha! In your stupid putrid face, stink-breath!”

“At least I didn’t roll around on a table covered in maple syrup!” said Dib.

“At least I don’t have creepy little dots on my eyes!”

“At least I don’t wear leggings as pants!”

“THEY’RE COMFY AND PRACTICAL!”

There was a knock on the door.

“If you two don’t shut up, I’ll rip your eyes out and shove them up your butts so you can see the shit you’re making me put up with!” hissed Gaz.

Dib and Zim shuddered. They both knew better than to take Gaz’s threats lightly.

“So,” said Dib, extending a hand towards Zim. “Truce?”

Zim reached for the hand, then hesitated.

“You won’t try to expose me as an alien, and I won’t try to take over the Earth?” said Zim.

“That’s the idea, yeah.”

“So this is it, then,” said Zim. “We’ll just leave each other alone.”
“Well, I mean,” said Dib, looking away and awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “We could, you know, hang out and not try to kill each other.”

“What? Why would we do that?”

“I don’t know, for fun?” said Dib.

“Fun?” repeated Zim, staring at Dib quizzically. “Like taking over the Earth?”

“You know that there are fun things you can do other than taking over the Earth, right?” said Dib.

“IMPOSSIBLE!” screamed Zim loudly enough for Dib to flinch.

“Tell you what,” said Dib. “Go home, feed GIR, do whatever other weird alien things you usually do in the morning, put on your disguise, and I’ll come by in an hour to show you how to have fun without destroying anything.”

“Wait, I came here without my disguise?” said Zim, glancing upwards. Sure enough, his antennae were fully exposed. He poked his eye to check for contacts only to flinch and scream when they turned out to be just eyes. “GAH! What time is it? Is it dark enough for me to get back unseen?”

“I can drive you ba-”

Zim smashed his face through Dib’s window and dove outside into the cool morning air.

“Or you could do that.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve come this far, thanks for reading! Just a bit of a heads-up: I’m one of the new folk that got sucked into the fandom by the florpus hole maybe a week ago, tops, so I’m still learning the canon, and there might be some mistakes. Please feel free to let me know when I’ve slipped up. (Well, except for the whole “Irkens have genitals” thing; I already know that’s not canon. It’s just fun.) I’m always open to honest, critical feedback on story, characterization, and overall writing quality. If something seems wrong to you, please bring it up so I can learn from my mistakes and do a better job next time! Alternatively, if it’s something small (like a typo or a grammatical error), I can just fix it right then and there.
This was bad.

“Dib,” growled Gaz, even as she remained focused on the television. “Would you please. Quit. Pacing?”

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do, Gaz!” said Dib as he frantically paced back and forth behind the sofa. “I told Zim I’d pick him up in an hour and show him how to have fun without battling one another for the fate of the world!” He clutched his face. “I don’t even know how to have fun without battling one another for the fate of the world! I can’t remember a time when we weren’t trying to kill each other!”

“Oh, this is just sad,” said Gaz, and Dib wasn’t sure if she was referring to him or the performance of her teammates. “If you wet turds with legs don’t get on the payload, I swear to God that I will find you, skin you, and wear your face as a hat!”

Well, that answered that question.

“What do normal people do for fun?” wondered Dib out loud. “Play sports? Go to the mall?”

“Are you sure that Zim’s the only alien, here?” said Gaz.

“Why, have you seen more?” asked Dib, immediately interested.

“Not what I meant…” sighed Gaz. As the word ‘DEFEAT’ crossed the screen in all capital letters, she set the controller down and turned to face Dib. “Why are you so worried about this, anyway?”

“Because if I don’t show Zim a good time, he might go back to trying to take over the world!” said Dib, slamming his hands down on the back of the couch. “This could be the key to saving Earth forever!”

“And having him handcuffed and practically begging you to kill him wasn’t?” said Gaz. “You’ve been trying to capture him your whole life. Why in the world did you even let him go?”

“I don’t know!” said Dib, weaving his fingers through his hair. “We’ve been doing this for so long now! It’s weird to imagine a world where Zim isn’t” A realization struck him. “Hey, you weren’t even here for that conversation! How did you-”

“I bugged your room,” said Gaz. “Continue.”
Great, now he had to search his bedroom for recording devices. As though he didn’t have enough problems! “I just… I need help, Gaz.”

Gaz stood up, marched up to him, and looked him straight in the eyes.

“Beg me.”

Dib blinked. “What-”

“Beg me for help,” clarified Gaz.

“But-”

“Beg me,” said Gaz with the venom of a deadly spider. “On your knees.”

Dib’s shoulders drooped, and he knelt down with an exasperated frown.

“Gaz, please, *please* help me,” said Dib. “I’m begging you.”

Gaz smirked. “Be right back.”

As Gaz disappeared up the stairs, Dib stood back up, wondering what he’d just gotten himself into. His sister returned with two squares of laminated paper in hand.

“Dad bought these so we could go together, but there’s no way I’m gonna spend an entire day with someone like you in a place like this,” said Gaz, handing them over to Dib. “Remember to bring your wallet. Everything’s gonna be stupid expensive, and it’s not like Zim’s gonna pay for anything.”

Dib gazed down at the tickets with wide eyes. “Woah! This is perfect! Thanks, Gaz!”

He almost made the mistake of trying to hug her, but Gaz held out an arm to stop him before he could.

“You owe me,” said Gaz. “Remember that.”

Dib gulped and nodded. “Got it.”

Zim slammed the door behind him and collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath. His uniform was positively riddled with sticks, leaves, and burs. What a terrible planet to be banished to. No wonder the Tallest didn’t want it.

“GIR!”

“Wheeeeee!” squealed GIR, who was currently running around in circles dragging a kite across the floor behind him. “I’mma helicopter!”

“You’re literal garbage, GIR,” snapped Zim, marching right on past the useless machine and the Dib punching bag still embedded in the wall to grab a pack of sugar from the kitchen. He didn’t want to look at that horrible, worthless machine right now. All it did was remind him of things he didn’t want to think about. “Just stay out of the way.”

Zim ripped the packet open, opened his mouth, and downed it like a dump truck collecting garbage
from a dumpster. In that moment, the sweet taste coating his tongue was his only source of pleasure, and he spent a good few minutes letting it sit in his mouth before finally swallowing.

His supply of Irken sweets was running dangerously low. It would usually be a simple task to order more, but he wasn’t really in the mood to speak with any other members of his species. He wasn’t sure if he would ever be in the mood again. The thought of them laughing at him behind his back the second the transmission ended was just too much.

He didn’t go to the couch. That would mean sitting next to GIR—no, the defective SIR unit. Instead, he took a seat in the kitchen.

“Stupid robot…” he muttered. “Stupid Earth! Stupid Irk! Stupid Tallest!”

WARNING: Your treasonous words have been noted and will be uploaded for review at the next available opportunity. To minimize further penalties, submit to voluntary behavioral reconditioning at the earliest opportunity.

“Pffffft, like they could do anything worse than they already have,” said Zim, throwing caution to the wind and grabbing another sugar packet to consume. He’d already been to behavioral reconditioning therapy at least seven times, and what a bore it had been! A full month of obedience training simulations that administered a painful shock for every failure was hardly a good use of his time. Fortunately, they’d given up after his last stint when he’d filled the building with poison gas, and Zim had become the very first Irken in history to be officially banned from the premises. “Guess what! I think the Tallest are big, fat DOOKIE-HEADS!”

WARNING: Your treasonous words have been noted and will be uploaded for review at the next available opportunity…

Zim pointedly ignored the rest of the warning buzzing around in his head (he’d ignored a LOT of them over the years, so it was practically second nature by this point) and grabbed a candy bar from the fridge. To heck with it. He was going to snack now and deal with the consequences later.

“Master!” chirped GIR, running into the kitchen with the kite string sticking out of his mouth. “The kite is stuck!”

“Get out, GIR,” said Zim.

“But it”

“That’s an order!”

“Oh,” said GIR. “Okay!”

He turned around to skip out of the room only to trip and fall when the string hanging out of his mouth wrapped around his legs.

“Uh-oh!” said GIR, flailing helplessly. “Oh no, I can’t move my legs! Help! I NEED HELP!”


Dib clutched the steering wheel tightly as he pulled up to the front of Zim’s house. It had hardly changed a bit in the six years it had spent there, which was probably for the best. Dib had grown
used to the current layout, and any renovations would require finding new spots for his cameras.

He honked the horn to alert Zim to his presence. A minute or so passed, and he honked again. Had Zim already forgotten that he was coming? Or did he just not want to come? Or…

Zim’s earlier words echoed through his mind.

“Do we self-terminate?”

A sudden surge of panic hit Dib, and he was just about to unbuckle his seatbelt and race inside when a familiar face poked its head out from behind the door. Dib breathed out a sigh of relief as the disguised Zim marched up to the passenger side of the car, opened the door, and clambered up onto the seat.

“Just so you know, I’m only coming with you to get away from the defective SIR unit,” said Zim coldly.

“You mean GIR?”

“Call it what you will,” said Zim dismissively.

Dib decided that now probably wasn’t the best time to dig into this. “Okay, well, do you mind if I put on some music for the road?”

“You mean recordings of all the annoying sounds that you humans make with your mouths?”

“Yep, exactly.”

“Well, this was clearly a mistake,” said Zim, reaching for the door. Dib put the car into drive and began moving forward before he could open it, prompting the child locks to activate and prevent Zim from opening it back up. “Hey!”

Well, no turning back now. Dib pressed the button to start the song he’d selected to start off his carefully-curated playlist for the drive. A soothing tune began to play.

“Welcome to your life!” sang a man. “There’s no turning back!” Zim’s eyes narrowed, and he shot an accusatory glare at Dib, who pursed his lips and hoped that Zim could hold out just a few moments longer without going berserk and clawing Dib’s face off. “Even while we sleep, we will find you acting on your best behavior! Turn your back on Mother Nature!”

Dib smirked and raised the volume.

“Everybody wants to rule the world!”

With those words, Zim appeared to calm down a little. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, at least this human gets it.”

“That’s what music is all about,” said Dib. As they pulled out onto the main road, he flipped another switch to lower the convertible’s hood. “Listening to people who get you.” He decided not to elaborate further, lest Zim bring up that particularly cringey phase he’d gone through in middle school.

“Why would you put away the roof?” said Zim. “You’ve lowered the structural integrity of the vehicle!”

“Because it feels good,” said Dib as the cool air flew by. He glanced over at Zim, who seemed to
be somehow simultaneously annoyed and intrigued by the sensation of the wind blowing in his face.

“It’s my own desire! It’s my own remorse!”

“Strange,” said Zim, staring intently at the speedometer. “Your vehicle is only going a measly fifty-five miles an hour, but the wind makes it feel faster, somehow.”

Dib glanced around. There didn’t seem to be any police in the vicinity… With a mischievous grin, he applied more pressure to the gas. Zim’s eyes widened, and he gripped the sides of his seat as they took off.

“Help me to decide! Help me make the most of freedom and of pleasure! Nothing ever lasts forever!”

“Everybody wants to rule the world!” sang Dib as he popped into the leftmost lane and whizzed by the cars to the right.

“Wait, really? Even you want to rule the world?” said Zim, looking a little annoyed by the prospect of so much competition.

“No exactly,” said Dib, gently bobbing his head up and down with the music. Explaining the themes of the song would require digging into all sorts of messy crap that he was ill-prepared to go over. “Don’t worry so much about the actual meaning of the words right now.”

“There’s a room where the light won’t find you! Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down! When they do, I’ll be right behind you!”

Dib stole another glance at Zim. He was still keeping his hands stubbornly across his chest, but there was a faint, steady twitch in his wig to the beat of the song. He almost wanted to snatch it off to reveal the bobbing antennae beneath.

“Come on, Zim. You’ve gotta do at least one,” said Dib.

“One what?”

“So glad we’ve almost made it! So sad they had to fade it!”

“Everybody wants to rule the world!” sang Dib again. “Come on!”

“Ha! I wouldn’t be caught dead making those stupid sounds with my mouth!” cackled Zim.

“Why not?” said Dib. “It’s fun.”

“If this is how humans have fun, then this trip is even more of a lost cause than I thought!” said Zim. “I’d rather go back to Foodcourtia and dance in a grease suit!”

“Okay, first Judgmentia, then Foodcourtia?” laughed Dib. “Do all your people’s names for places sound like something a five-year-old would come up with?”

“Maybe human children struggle in the language department, but Irken smeets are capable of forming full sentences from the time we’re activated.”

“Geez, do they just snatch you from your parents and plug you in the second you’re born?” joked Dib.
“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Zim. “Irkens don’t have parents.”

“What? But at school, you said—“

“I was lying,” said Zim. “Duh.”

“Then who takes care of you?” said Dib. “Is there some kind of team of dedicated childcare professionals?”

“Irkens don’t need childcare,” scoffed Zim. “Weren’t you paying attention? We’re born capable of taking care of ourselves.”


“Not as depressing as spending the first few years of your life a helpless sack of flesh!”

“Okay, well, agree to disagree, I guess,” said Dib.

“I can’t stand this indecision married with a lack of vision! Everybody wants to rule the world!”

“Come on, you’ve gotta sing the next one,” said Dib.

“Not in a shmillion years!”

“Why not?”

“Say that you’ll never, never, never, never need it! One headline, why believe it?”

Zim mumbled out the words so quietly as to be utterly indecipherable.

“That doesn’t count,” said Dib. “Last one’s coming up!”

“This is stupid!” complained Zim.

“Don’t tell me…” said Dib with a glint in his eye. “Are you actually afraid?”

“You dare accuse the mighty Zim of refusing out of fear?”

Dib glanced at the radio, then back to Zim.

“All for freedom and for pleasure! Nothing ever lasts forever!”

“Everybody wants to rule the world!” chimed Zim at last, his cheeks a vibrant pink. “There! Let none question the bravery of Zim!”

“Congrats, Zim,” said Dib. Zim certainly wasn’t winning any awards for that performance, but it wasn’t nearly as awful as he’d expected. “You’ve officially sung your first song.”

“The word ‘first’ implies that there are more to come,” said Zim suspiciously.

“Well, yeah,” said Dib. “The place we’re going is another twenty minutes away. That’s at least five more songs.”

“Stinky Earth-pig! You will never get Zim to sing another of your terrible musics! NEVER!”
“I hear Jerusalem bells a-ringing!” sang Dib. “Roman Cavalry choirs are singing!”

“Be my laser, my gun, and shields!” sang Zim, who firmly believed that his own version of the lyrics were superior and refused to be told otherwise. “My primitive religion drone is in a foreign field!”

“For some reason I can’t explain, I know Saint Peter won’t call my name!”

“Never an honest word!” they sang together. “But that was when I ruled the world!”

Zim couldn’t fight back a grin as it came to an end. He had to admit, he hadn’t expected there to be so many songs about ruling worlds. Most of the ones he’d been forced to listen to since he’d arrived on Earth had been about human courtship and mating rituals, but as it turned out, the Dib actually had pretty decent taste. There was something strangely satisfying about listening to the pattern of noises and bringing it to completion with his own voice. He had always enjoyed listening to himself talk, after all.

“I have decided!” he said, raising his fist dramatically. “The vibrational patterns of this human music are pleasing to my antennae- I mean, my normal human ears!”

“Well, that’s good, because we’re here, and you’re probably gonna be hearing a lot more of it,” said Dib, pulling into the massive parking lot. Zim looked up to see a bunch of giant, peculiar contraptions in the distance.

“Is this a human military training facility?” said Zim, getting a little excited and gripping the door in anticipation of the child lock being unlatched.

“Not even close,” said Dib, parking the vehicle and bringing the hood of the car back up. “This is an amusement park. It’s a place that humans go to have fun.”

“A recreational facility, then?” said Zim. There had been plenty of those on Irk dedicated to play-fighting with non-lethal weaponry. They were an excellent way to keep the senses sharp. Alas, Zim had been banned from all of them for the so-called ‘smuggling of real weaponry into the premises’ and ‘wanton destruction of property.’ “I will dominate the competition! What are the rules?”

“It’s not really a competition,” said Dib, beckoning for Zim to follow him to the gate where an otherwise skinny woman with a large protrusion on her belly stood guard. “Two, please.”

“We’re having a special two-for-one deal on couples right now,” the lady informed them.

“That’s, umm, we’re not-”

“Excellent! Your information is appreciated, fat lady!” said Zim, ignoring the mortified Dib and eyeing the weird bars blocking his way. How was he meant to get through these?

Oh! But of course! They were probably a part of the test! He attempted to dive through the center only to find himself stuck when his PAK refused to fit through.

“Please refrain from climbing on the turnstile,” said the fat lady, looking tired.

“Sorry,” said Dib, grabbing Zim by the waist and yanking him back through. He handed the fat lady both tickets despite her having just said that they could both get in for one. Ha, stupid Dib. “Like this, see?”
He pushed the gate, which spun forward to let him through. Zim marveled at such an ingenious display of technological prowess from such an otherwise inferior species. Who would have guessed that the solution was to simply walk through as though unimpeded? He charged in after Dib only to whack his face against one of the lower bars.

“Do you want to go through the other gate?” asked the fat lady, gesturing to a gate currently being held open by another guard so that an old lady in a wheelchair could go through.

“NO!” said Zim. “Zim will get through this terrible contraption even if it takes-”

Dib reached down from the other side of the gate and grabbed him; not by his flesh-body, but by his PAK.

Error: Faulty connection detected. Port or cable repairs may be required.

Zim reflexively went limp, leaving him unable to break free until the Dib put him back down on the other side. Curse his infernal height!

“Come on,” said Dib, looking eager to get away from the fat lady. Zim couldn’t blame him. She was pretty horrifying to look at, as most humans tended to be. He followed after Dib, all but jogging to keep up with his infuriatingly tall enemy’s power-walking. “Why didn’t you tell that lady that we aren’t a couple?”

“We are a couple,” said Zim, confused. Dib froze, and Zim pored through his language databanks to confirm that the correct definition had been provided by his flesh-brain. ‘The word ‘couple’ means ‘a small number greater than one.’ There are two of us.” He laughed mockingly. “Did your squishy human brain forget its own language?”

“Right, ha, yeah, that’s it!” said Dib quickly. “You know how us humans are, with our big dumb squishy brains!”

“Yes…” said Zim, a little weirded out by Dib’s sudden shift in disposition, but willing to ignore it in favor of getting to the point of this whole excursion. He took a look around. “Where do we collect our weapons?”

“I already told you, this isn’t-”

“Aha!” said Zim, immediately honing in on a booth full of fake weaponry and target balloons stuck to the back wall. He was about to run off in that direction when Dib grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Hey, hey!” said Dib. “Remember what I said earlier? Let’s try something non-destructive.”

“Nonsense! Fun and destruction are one and the same!” said Zim, raising his gloved hands in front of his face and eagerly wiggling his claws. His eyes lit up as he saw yet another booth, this one featuring ducks instead of balloons. “Ooh, this one has live targets!”

Again, Dib grabbed him before he could run off. “Come on, Zim! Remember the music? You didn’t think music could be fun, either, but-”

“Zim will shatter all of the bottles!” said Zim, straining to break free of Dib’s grip and run towards yet a third booth.

“Child leashes!” said a noisy man at a stand. “Child leashes for sale! Get ‘em while they’re legal!”
“Hmm...” said Dib, lifting an indignant Zim up by his PAK once more (Error: Faulty connection detected...) and hurrying over to the stand. The harnesses each had a cute little animal backpack thing to make them look less oppressive than a straight-up leash. “Hey, Zim, which of these animals is your favorite?”

“I hate all of them, why?” said Zim, making futile attempts to wiggle free, but the failsafe refused to allow him to squirm with too much force, lest he accidentally disconnect himself from his PAK. “Wait, since when do you have offspring?”

“Guess we’ll go with the moose,” said Dib, stuffing Zim under one arm while he fumbled with his wallet.

“Pleasure doing business with you, sir,” said the man, ringing him up and hanging over a brown harness with a moose-like backpack. Zim cried out as Dib held him down and wrapped it around his body, loosening the straps so that the moose would fit comfortably around his PAK.

“Much better!” said Dib.

“Insolent human!” hissed Zim, running as far away as he could get and straining against the leash. He pulled, he yanked, and he rolled, but the horrible thing refused to break. “Release me immediately, or face the wrath of Zim!”

He attempted to activate his PAK legs.

>Error: Cannot find PAK legs.

Oh, right. He’d never actually gotten around to fixing that, had he?

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

He ran around in furious circles, hoping to at least entangle the Dib and bring him to the ground, but Dib simply spun in place to prevent that from happening.

“Here, let’s start with something I know you’ll like,” said Dib, dragging him off towards yet another stall where a human girl appeared to be selling wads of blue and pink cotton on sticks. “Can I get two of these?”

“That’ll be twenty dollars,” said the lady.

This number made the Dib stiffen, but he paid the fee nonetheless, and the lady handed him two of the cotton wads on sticks.

“Here,” said Dib, handing one to Zim.

“What’s this for?” said Zim. He examined it closely. It looked like the material humans used to insulate buildings. “Is it supposed to keep us warm?”

“It’s candy,” said Dib. He demonstrated this fact by taking a mouthful of the cotton and swallowing it.

Zim shuddered. Just when he thought humans couldn’t get any grosser... “You eat cotton and call it candy?”

“Just try it,” said Dib. “Worst case scenario, you can just spit it out, right?”

Well, it wasn’t like he hadn’t already put worse into his mouth at school. Zim reluctantly took a
bite of the cotton.

It began to melt in his mouth the second it came in contact with his saliva. For a split second, the process alarmed him, but he soon realized that it was not, in fact, ordinary cotton; rather, it was flavored sugar spun into fine, fluffy strands.

Zim’s eyes sparkled with wonder. It felt as though he were eating a cloud!

“It’s…” he murmured, tearing off another piece of the sugar cloud and reveling in its luxurious taste. “Incredible! How is this made? You must tell me! Zim commands it!”

“It’s pretty simple, actually,” said Dib. “You just heat up sugar until it melts and spin it around in a device full of holes—”

Zim’s attention to the explanation quickly waned in favor of focusing on the soft, comforting flavor of the candy. For a moment, it was as though all of his problems were melting away like the sugar dissolving on his tongue.

And then, suddenly, there was no more cotton candy to be had.

“Get me another!” he demanded, but the Dib shook his head.

“What don’t we try something that doesn’t cost ten dollars a stick?” suggested Dib, looking around. “Oh! How about the roller coaster?” He started to move, then hesitated. “Wait! Quick question. How tall are you, exactly? In inches, not whatever measurement you use on Irk.”

Zim tensed. Asking a short Irken his height was like asking a particularly fat human how much they weighed. Nonetheless, he ran the conversion through his PAK’s calculator. “Forty-eight.”

Dib had the relieved look of someone who hadn’t entirely thought his plan through and realized that after he’d already committed, but somehow everything still managed to work out anyway.

“Cool, yeah, that’s great! Like I said, let’s get in line for the roller coaster.”

The word ‘roller’ implied wheels, and the word ‘coaster’ referred either to something that coasted across another object, or an object that humans put under their drinks so the condensation on the glass didn’t drip everywhere. As Dib tugged him towards the line and the presumed ‘roller coaster’ came into view, it became clear that this probably wasn’t related to the latter definition. For as delightful as the sound of their terrified screaming was to his antennae, it left him questioning why in the world they were lining up to endure what appeared to be some kind of massive torture device. Despite this, most of the other humans in line seemed genuinely excited and eager to get on.

“Is this supposed to be a training simulation?” asked Zim. What was the real-world application of the skills they were learning? Were humans a space-faring race, he would have assumed it was a device to numb one to the sense of panic induced by a ship malfunction, but the vast majority of their vehicles were ground-bound and unlikely to loop and spin like the track.

“Uh, no,” said Dib, looking slightly concerned. “Have you seriously never done anything that wasn’t somehow related to conquering other planets?”

“Of course not,” said Zim proudly. Fortunately, the ambient noise level was far too high for any of the surrounding humans to notice their conversation. “I spent my whole life training my body and mind to be an elite Irken military drone!”

“Even when you were a kid?”
“Of course,” said Zim. “Smeets spend the first ten years of their life underground practicing simulations for their chosen career path and developing basic engineering and chemistry skills.”

“So you’ve gotta choose your career path the second you’re born?”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Zim. “How would you know what you’re best suited for before you actually got a chance to do any of it? Obviously, you get a little bit of everything for the first two years before you’re required to make a final selection.”

“So you’ve gotta choose your career path from the age of two, then,” said Dib. “That’s not much better. What if it turns out you picked wrong?”

“Not a problem. Smeets undergo yearly testing to make sure that they have enough of an aptitude for their chosen field to continue,” said Zim.

“And if you fail, you get put into another training program?”

Zim snorted. “And have them be a year behind all of the others? Of course not. Failed smeets get their PAKs confiscated for use by more suitable flesh bodies.”

The Dib had a strange look on his face. “How often do smeets fail?”

“Hm? Uh…” Zim scoured his PAK for the numbers. “On average, eighty-two percent fail the first exam, then fifty-six percent of those remaining fail the next…”

“Eighty-two percent?” said Dib. “How do your people even survive culling that many?”

“It’d be a bigger problem if we didn’t,” said Zim. “About a hundred million smeets are hatched a year on Irk alone. Even after the first test, that still leaves about eighteen million, then a little under eight million in the third… After taking all the deaths from combat, accidents, disease, or old age into account, it’s a net gain of maybe a few thousand a year.”

“Why don’t you just make fewer smeets?”

“Pffft, if we made fewer smeets, how would we have enough to replenish our numbers after culling the bad ones?” said Zim. “You know, for someone with a genius for a father, you’re really bad at math.”

“Are you kidding? That’s not-” began Dib. “Wait, how did you survive that process?”

“Irken Smeet 93,230,325: Designation, Zim,” said a robotic voice over the speakers. “Your first evaluation exam will now commence. Question 1: Starting with the blue star and ending with the green one, determine the optimal flight path to reach every star system on the model in front of you in the shortest amount of time by tapping the stars in the correct sequence. You have two minutes.”

A bunch of hovering spheres emerged from the table in front of him, and a countdown timer appeared on the wall at the front of the room.

“Pffft, easy!” said Zim. “These aren’t stars, they’re spheres! Next question!”

The timer didn’t stop. Strange. He was certain that was the right answer! Zim prodded one of the spheres, and a pleasant little ‘doot’ sound played. He poked it again. Doot! And again!

Doot! Doot! Doot doot doot doot doot doot doot DOOTDOOTDOOTDOOTDOOTDOOT-

With a loud BZZZZZZT, a flickering score of 2,147,483,647% appeared on the screen. Zim raised his fists triumphantly.

“Because I’m the greatest Irken who ever lived,” said Zim. “Obviously.”

Dib couldn’t help but sweat a little as the spindly teenage ride attendant at the front of the line grabbed the measurement stick. He was pretty sure that 48 inches was the minimum for all of the rides, but every hair on his body still stood on end as it was placed next to Zim.

“Alright, you’re tall enough,” said the attendant, and Dib silently thanked whatever entity it was that must have made this happen, because he didn’t want to imagine the turn things might have taken if Zim had been too short.

Fortunately, the risk had paid off in more than just getting to go on the ride. Zim looked positively ecstatic.

“Did you hear that?” he told Dib, practically bouncing up and down with delight. He turned towards the people behind him in line. “DID ALL OF YOU JUST HEAR THAT? I, Zim, have officially been declared tall enough!” He grabbed at the stick. “Measure me again, stick-bearer! Let every man, woman, and child bear witness to my awesome height!”

“Sir, we really need to move this line along,” said the ride attendant, lifting the stick out of Zim’s reach.

“I’m on it,” said Dib, remorselessly dragging Zim to the ride by the child leash he’d purchased earlier. It had truly been a worthy investment. “Hey, looks like we’ve got the front!”

“Of course we have the front!” said Zim, looking unsurprised. “These are the kinds of privileges afforded to the vertically gifted!”

Dib pulled down the lap bar. Was there really no happy medium for Zim between ‘miserable blob of sadness’ and ‘raging egomaniac?’ A part of him wanted to burst his bubble with a scathing comment about how he was still the same height he’d been since he was first tricked into going to Earth and had to disguise himself as a twelve-year-old, but something stopped him. It was a relief see Zim so happy again after how miserable he’d looked earlier, and Dib didn’t want to ruin that. Why didn’t he want to ruin that? He’d always loved to see Zim rage when his plans inevitably failed.

Dib crinkled his nose. This was a really, really weird day.

“Remind me again why we waited an hour for this?” said Zim as the coaster rolled forward.

“Because it’s fun,” said Dib. “I think.”

“You think?”

The chain lift started to click as the coaster began its ascent up a large hill.

“Well, the last time I went to a theme park, I wasn’t actually tall enough to get on the roller
coaster,” admitted Dib. He hadn’t been here since his father brought him and Gaz as toddlers, and they’d mostly stuck to the kiddie section. “But everyone else says it’s fun.”

“I see,” said Zim, taking a moment to look around. “Hm. It looks quite a bit higher from here than it does on the ground.”

“Well, I mean, we’ve both flown in spaceships before,” said Dib. “It’s not like we’re strangers to heights.”

They sat in silence for a moment as the coaster continued to ascend.

“This, uh, this does feel pretty high, though, doesn’t it?” said Dib.

“Don’t tell me,” said Zim in a tone perfectly mirroring the one Dib had used in the car earlier. “Are you actually afraid?” Of course, he proceeded to immediately ruin it by adding, “HA! See? It’s what you said before, only I said it this time! That makes me the-

The roller coaster crested the hill, leaving them with just long enough to regret the terrible life choices that had led them to this point before diving towards the ground like a bird of prey.

Only a few short minutes later, the pair of them waddled out the exit gate with eyes like the walking dead.

“Well, that was fun and definitely not horrible at all,” said Dib.

“I mean, if by ‘fun’ you mean ‘super boring and lame,’ ” said Zim, even as his whole body trembled like an overloaded core seconds from exploding.

“Yeah. Yeah!” said Dib, nodding his head in agreement. “So boring that there’s no way you could ever convince me to wait another hour in line just to go on again.”

“Oh, definitely,” said Zim, feigning a yawn. “I mean, if there was some way we could somehow go directly to the front-”

“Hey, strangers!” said a random man with a pair of little white tickets. “Couldn’t help but overhear you saying that the only thing keeping you from going back on the roller coaster is the line! As it just so happens, I bought two passes to jump straight to the front, but my girlfriend’s stuck in traffic, and they’re only good for the next ten minutes! Do you boys want to take them?”

“Oh,” said Dib, forcing himself to smile. “Yeah.”

“That was definitely a thing that came from our mouth-holes,” agreed Zim with a nod.

“Perfect! Then-”

“Actually, I really have to go to the bathroom!” said Dib.

“Yes!” said Zim. “I too must go to the bathroom, for my regular human bladder is full of bladder juice!”

“Oh, well, that should be fine. There’s a bathroom right around the corner, and it shouldn’t take you that long to-” began the stranger.

“Did I mention that I’m incredibly constipated? Because I am. Bye!” said Dib, running off so quickly that Zim couldn’t keep up and ended up being dragged kicking and screaming across the pavement.
Only after they were out of sight did Dib finally stop to catch his breath.

“I’m going to crack your skull open and feed your brain to pigs,” hissed Zim from the ground. His body was covered in painful-looking scrapes and bruises, but it was nothing that Dib hadn’t seen him recover from.

“Yeah, I hear that from Gaz every other week,” said Dib, grabbing Zim’s gloved hand and lifting him back up to his feet. “Still, uh, sorry, I guess.”

Zim took a moment to rub his many injuries, then kicked Dib in the shin without warning.

“OUCH! Okay, fine, I deserved that,” admitted Dib. Honestly, he was kind of impressed that that was all Zim did. Maybe he was just waiting for a better moment to strike.

“In exchange for me not tying you to a rocket and launching you into the sun, I will permit you to make this up to me in another way,” said Zim. “I want another of your so-called cotton candies!”

“That’s it?” said Dib. “You don’t want me to take the leash off?”

It was clear from Zim’s expression that he hadn’t thought of that. “Right! That too!”

Dib reluctantly reached around Zim’s back to unclip the leash. “Do you promise not to run off and destroy something?”

Zim huffed. “Maybe.”

Well, that was about as good as he could hope for. Dib tucked the leash away for the time being.

“Alright. Let’s get more cotton candy.”

“So what did you think?” asked Dib as they were loaded onto the Ferris Wheel.

Zim’s considered his final evaluation carefully. The sweets were to die for, including a stick of something called ‘deep fried butter’ that Dib had taken one bite of before turning as green as an Irken and surrendering it to Zim. Additionally, watching Dib get so sick on the spinning rides that he threw up all over himself had been positively hilarious; it was much harder to get nauseous without ears, a fact that Zim had delighted in rubbing in his face. However, the roller coaster had been a bust, as had the haunted house. Dib had insisted that real ghosts were made out of ectoplasm, not cardboard, but that wasn’t much of a comfort when they were constantly popping out accompanied by a noise so loud that Zim could still feel his antennae ringing beneath his wig.

“I’ll award it a seven out of ten,” he decided at last. “Eight if you get me another cotton candy.”

“I already bought you five!” said Dib. “Have a little mercy on my wallet, would you?”

“Mercy? Ha!” said Zim. The basket-like container they were in rose steadily higher. “An invader knows no such word!”

A moment of uncomfortable silence passed between them as he realized what he’d just said.

“Maybe just this once,” Zim murmured.

Dib seemed to go back and forth for a moment before finally asking, “Hey. Are you gonna be
okay?"

“I’m fine!” lied Zim.

Dib looked unconvinced. Of course; Zim had almost forgotten that he was one of the few people capable of seeing through his incredible lying skills. “No, you’re not.” Curse his perceptiveness!

“It’s fine!” insisted Zim again. “I already knew I was defective! I’ve known it since I was only a couple minutes old! This isn’t some big revelation!” He gazed up at the moon looming overhead. “I knew, but I kept on lying to myself. I was convinced that, in spite of everything, I could overcome the errors in my programming and be someone worthy of respect!” He clenched his fists. “I wanted to show them… I still want to show them!”

“Trying to earn the respect of people like that is a losing battle,” said Dib, leaning back in his seat. “Take it from someone who’s spent the past six years of their life trying to catch an obvious alien to impress their dad. And to keep the world safe, of course,” he added. “But mostly the first thing.”

“Yeah, well…” said Zim. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt a strange compulsion to say something that would hopefully lessen the Dib’s pain. No doubt another defect. “Your dad is kind of an idiot. I wasn’t even wearing my disguise this morning, and he still thought I was a human.”

“So are your leaders,” said Dib. “I mean, remember that time they got trapped in a florpus hole for a couple months because they wouldn’t stop traveling in a straight line?”

Zim laughed. In hindsight, that was pretty funny! “Or the way they didn’t even encrypt that transmission I listened in on!”

“Pffft, that’s, like, secure communications 101!” said Dib. “Are you sure they’re not the defective ones?”

“Haha, yeah! Maybe they’re the defective- Wait,” said Zim, suddenly thoughtful. “What if they are?”

Zim rubbed his hands together with maniacal glee. This was it! This was the solution he’d been waiting for!

“Oh, Zim?”

“It all makes sense!” said Zim. “The Tallest are defective!” (WARNING: Your treasonous words have been noted and will be uploaded for review at the next available opportunity…) “I mean, when you really think about it, they’re terrible leaders! They’ve spent their whole tenure coasting on the success of Tallest Miyuki and Tallest Spork, but they haven’t added anything or made any real decisions to benefit the empire.” He scowled. “They haven’t even amputated their thumbs!”

“Oh, why would they amputate their thumbs?”

“It’s a very important part of becoming a leader,” said Zim dismissively. “How did I not see it before? Even if their tall flesh-bodies are clearly superior, if something is wrong with their PAK, it doesn’t matter!” He grinned. “I know what I have to do! I’m going to save my empire by ridding it of the current Tallest!”

WARNING: Accusations of defectiveness against the Tallest are treated with utmost seriousness. Your objection to their rule has been noted, and a notice will be sent to the Control Brains. Should you continue on this path and turn out to be wrong, you will be slated for immediate termination.
for treason against your empire.

QUERY: In light of this information, are you sure you want to do this?

“Seriously?” said Dib, mouth agape. “You’re gonna stage a coup against the Irken Empire?”

“Yep!” said Zim. The basket they were in stopped at the top as the ride attendant loaded more people onto the Ferris Wheel. “For the glory of Irk!”

DESIGNATION: New Irken Empire. Registering…

“This is crazy,” said Dib. “If you fail, won’t they kill you?” He frowned. “Actually, given their track record with punishing you for things, you’d probably get away with just a slap on the wrist. Still, taking on an entire empire by yourself? That’s nuts, Zim.”

“Maybe,” admitted Zim. “But I can’t just stand by and watch two defective leaders continue to make fools of me- I mean, my people!” The Dib made a good point, though. For as amazing as he was, doing this all on his own was certainly less-than-practical. “Wait! Dib, you’re smart, right? You know, for a human.”

“Oh, well, yeah, I guess,” said Dib, looking flattered.

“And you like protecting the Earth, right?”

“Uh…”

Zim stood up on his seat, causing the basket to rock slightly.

“Dib Membrane!” said Zim dramatically. The pink segments of his PAK temporarily flickered to red as his act of treason was officially registered, bathing them in an eerie light. “The prime directive of all Irkens is to spread across the universe until we’ve dominated every planet that exists to be taken. Even if it goes untouched within your lifetime, should the empire continue on its current trajectory, Earth will eventually fall to its might!” He held out his hand. “Join me, Dib, and you can help shape the New Irken Empire to guarantee this planet’s safety now and forever!”

“This is crazy,” said Dib, but his eyes told a different story. “And stupid, and dumb, and completely insane…” Dib sighed, then took Zim’s hand. “Fine. But only to protect the Earth!”

Zim raised his free hand towards the sky and let out a maniacal laugh.

“Yes! YES!” he cackled. “Tremble in fear, my Tallest! The New Irken Empire is going to take you down!”


Congratulations, Almighty Tallest Zim.

“The world is noooooooot enough!” they sang in unison as Dib drove. On the other side of the barrier and six lanes of traffic, a rocky coast stretched out endlessly to the left.
“So, to recap, in the span of one day, we’ve gone from being mortal enemies to plotting a coup d’état against an intergalactic empire together,” said Dib. He was still partially convinced that this was all some incredibly elaborate trap, but for the time being, he decided he was just gonna roll with it.

“Oh, we’re still mortal enemies,” said Zim, who Dib couldn’t help but notice still wasn’t wearing a seatbelt. “Just mortal enemies who, instead of trying to kill each other, hang out and do fun, non-destructive activities.” He licked his lips with his long, pointed tongue. “And who occasionally buy cotton candies for each other.”

“So, friends, then,” said Dib, checking the speed limit. Only 55? Ridiculous. He moved into the leftmost lane of the highway and pressed down on the gas pedal, and the number steadily rose. 60, 65, 70…

“Then it’s decided!” agreed Zim. “As of this day, we are officially mortal enemies who are also friends! This- AGH!” The force of the air rushing past them sent his wig flying off of his head and out onto the road behind them, exposing his antennae. “My disguise!”

“Woops,” said Dib, glancing back to see the hairpiece fly off into the wind. “Sorry, I’ll get you a new one.”

Zim sank into his seat with an annoyed pout. “Like I’d want some terrible human-made wig. I have more at home.”

“Suit yourself,” said Dib. Aside from that little hiccup, the day had been a pretty resounding success. He and Zim had spent an entire day together without trying to murder one another, nothing had been destroyed, and no laws had been broken. “You know, it’s nice to have a relaxing day once in a while. We should do this again sometime.”

“Yeah…” agreed Zim with a nod. “Maybe we should!”

A siren wailed, and a pair of flashing red and blue lights lit up behind them.

“Shit!” said Dib, glancing at the speedometer only to realize that he’d been going 98 miles an hour. The late hour had left the road so clear that he hadn’t even noticed.

“Wait!” said Zim as Dib began slowing down. “What are you doing?”

“I have to pull over!” explained Dib. “Uhg, my dad’s gonna kill me!”

“You can’t pull over!” said Zim, panicked. “My wig came off, remember? They’ll see my antennae!”

“What? Oh, fuck!” said Dib, his blood running as cold as liquid nitrogen. He was so used to wanting to expose Zim that he hadn’t really thought of that. “Of course! As soon as I’m on your side, suddenly the universe decides it’s time to expose you! Perfect! Just perfect!”

“Why are they even after us?” demanded Zim. “Did you report me? Is this all an elaborate trap?” That was supposed to be his line!

“How have you gone six years without ever learning about speed limits?” growled Dib, reluctantly hitting the gas. “They’re after us because I was driving too fast!”

“You broke the law?” said Zim. Despite everything, he looked a little smug. “Now who’s the reckless and destructive one?”
“Zim, if you don’t shut the fuck up, I swear to God that I’ll pull over and expose you!” snapped Dib.

That seemed to do the trick of getting Zim to be quiet for a moment so he could think, but it didn’t solve the problem of the police car tailing them.

“This is the police! Pull over to the side of the road!” they ordered through a megaphone.

Dib squeezed the steering wheel with such force that his knuckles went white. For years, he’d endured the scorn and mockery of the world for trying to expose the truth! Every time his fingers brushed up against victory, some terrible force of nature snatched it away, usually causing himself to make a complete and utter fool of himself in the process. And now, suddenly, that victory was in the palm of his hands. He could pull over, grab Zim, and show him off to the police, who’d probably be too shocked and amazed by the alien in their midst to write him a ticket. They’d call in for back-up, which would eventually lead to some higher authorities coming down from on high to take Zim away, and Dib would at last taste sweet vindication! In a way, it was like the world had dropped to its knees to beg his forgiveness!

But then, if that happened, Zim would be gone forever, relegated to a vat or dissected in the name of science. There would be no more struggles for the fate of the world, no more death-defying adventures to the furthest reaches of outer space, and certainly no more eating overpriced cotton candy on a chilly winter morning…

“Yeah, you know what?” he growled, stomping on the gas. “Fuck you, world! You had your chance!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but yes! Fuck the world!” said Zim excitedly, utterly oblivious to just how close Dib had been to stabbing him in the back. He stood up in his chair and turned around to peek at the police car behind them. “Just try and catch us, dookie-for-brains!”

“How’s it look?” asked Dib, glancing at the rearview mirror.

“Terrible!” said Zim. “Can’t you drive any faster?”

Dib glanced around. “It doesn’t matter, there’s no way we can lose them on an empty highway!” He was definitely going to regret what he was about to ask, but they were running out of options. “What about you? Can’t you do anything to stop them? Non-lethally!” he added.

“Oh, sure, I guess,” said Zim with a devious grin. “It’s just, I promised my closest friend-enemy-thing that I wouldn’t destroy anything today!”

“You didn’t promise anything, you dumb bug! Now do something to slow them down!”

Zim, finally in his element, let out a hideous laugh as he retrieved a weapon from his PAK. He took aim at the road behind them and fired off a few quick burst of pink plasma that ripped a gaping crevice in the road behind them, forcing the police car (as well as all the other traffic behind the police car) to come to a screeching halt.

“Woah!” said Dib, looking back at the smoking crater that had once been a road. Zim was still standing in his seat and laughing maniacally. Still high on adrenaline, Dib couldn’t help but laugh with him. “Oh, wow, that does feel pretty good!”

“Of course it does! Why else would I do it?” said Zim. “Aside from striking fear into the blood-pumping organs of my enemies, that is!”
The two of them continued to laugh until Dib’s face was streaked with tears. He wiped his eyes and looked back up at Zim, who had yet to sit back down. His antennae whipped about in the wind as he continued to grin triumphantly at the mess they’d left behind. It was a face that had always filled Dib with a sense of dread, but then, he usually saw it from the perspective of the police. For once, Zim was laughing with him, not at him. It was almost kind of…

CRASH!

Dib’s attention snapped back to the front of the vehicle as they plowed through the central barrier. In a panic, he slammed his foot on the break, but there was no going from a hundred miles an hour to a stop on such short notice. He tried to keep the vehicle on the road, but the wheels entered a skid as he turned, sending them careening out onto the rocky beach. They screamed as the vehicle briefly went airborne, then struck against a particularly large boulder hard enough to crush the front bumper. The airbag slammed against Dib’s body.

It took Dib a solid minute or so to snap out of a daze and assess the situation. His first observation was his own condition; his whole body hurt, and his glasses were cracked, but nothing felt broken or ruptured. Still, he knew how deceptive adrenaline could be, and that plenty of people had walked away from car crashes feeling just fine only to drop dead seconds later.

“Activate passenger diagnostics,” he wheezed. The airbag deflated, and a small camera-like device extended from the busted-up dashboard to point at him.

“Driver scan initiated,” it said. Blue light passed over his body. “Driver scan completed. Injuries Detected: Serious bruising across torso and left arm. Minor bruising across right arm, legs, and face. No other passengers detected.”

“What? But-” said Dib, slowly leaning forward and wincing as he did so.

It was at this point that he noticed that Zim’s body was halfway through the windshield.

“Zim!” he said, rocketing to his feet to get out and assess the damage. Gravel crunched beneath his shoes as he hurried around to the passenger side. Zim had gone through the windshield head-first, the impact having knocked out one of his contacts. It was difficult to see what had happened in the dark, but the hood of the car was covered in something wet. Dib hurriedly grabbed a flashlight from the glovebox, which was thankfully still intact enough to open, and shined it on Zim.

Zim’s torso had been partially-impaled by a piece of glass, and the sticky pink fluid looked to be blood leaking from the wound. His body was covered in little flecks of windshield, and several bones appeared to be snapped in the wrong direction, including his spine.

“Zim?” said Dib, trying to keep calm. Shit, this looked bad. Really bad. He’d seen Zim take a lot of damage, but there was so much blood…

He jerked back as Zim’s body spasmed and crackled with electricity.

“YOU-” growled Zim, only to immediately fall into a coughing fit. “Take… Out… Glass!”

His twitching body went still once again. Dib hesitated. If the glass had skewered something vital, couldn’t taking it out cause more harm than good? Zim was an alien, but he was also kind of an idiot. Alas, with minimal alternative courses of action (a human hospital wasn’t likely to be of much help, after all), he decided it was best to just do as he was told and hope it was right. Dib gingerly pulled Zim out of the windshield and spread his small body across what remained of the car. He pulled out the glass, which was followed by a spurt of blood, then did his best to rearrange
Zim’s limbs in their intended position.

Once more, his body spasmed back to life, and the blood loss began to slow.

“You…” said Zim again, glaring daggers at Dib. “…are the worst. Driver. Ever.”

For once, Dib was unable to argue. “Are you okay?”

“You skewered my organs!”

“Okay, yeah, but, like, will they get better, is what I’m asking.”

“The PAK prioritizes vital organs,” said Zim through gritted teeth, squinting under Dib’s flashlight. “Those are already healing. My spine, on the other hand…” He reached out with his unbroken arm to poke at his legs. “That might take a few hours.”

Dib swallowed. “I take it you can’t walk, then?”

“Not while my PAK legs are still busted,” said Zim, gripping his head.

“Busted?” said Dib. Did he seriously not remember? “You detached them this morning while you were super drunk and left them at my house.”

“What? I mean, I knew that!” said Zim. It was a blatant lie made even more obvious by the fact that one of his eyes still had a contact in, making it easy to tell which direction he was looking in and see that he was refusing to meet Dib’s gaze. “In any case, thanks to your terrible driving, our transport is completely ruined.”

“Oh, the car? It’s fine,” said Dib, lifting Zim (who didn’t have the energy to fight back) off the hood and holding him not unlike an infant being burped. “Activate repair mode.”

“Understood,” said the car, backing up on its own. There was a sound of twisting metal as everything began clicking back into place. “Estimated completion time is one half an hour.”

“Ooh, fancy,” said Zim, sounding impressed for a moment before he remembered that he was supposed to be angry. “I’m still mad! Maybe even mad enough to tell your dad about that whole police chase!” His tongue flitted out of his mouth like that of a snake. “Unless…”

Dib groaned and stared up into the sky. “Let me guess, you want more cotton candy?”

“And fried butter!”

“Gross,” said Dib.

He plopped the temporarily-paraplegic Zim down on one of the least spiky-looking patches of gravel, then took a seat beside him to await the car’s repair.

“That’s gotta be the third time I’ve picked you up today, at least,” mused Dib.

“Most of which were completely uncalled for, by the way,” said Zim. “Even the most inconsiderate Irken knows better than to lift someone up by the PAK.”

“Oh, did I?”

“Twice,” said Zim. “The only times we’re usually lifted by our PAKs is to interface with control brains. It prompts a sort of muscle-relaxing effect, like…” He appeared to spend a moment
considering the most apt comparison. “Scruffing a cat.”

Dib had to cover his mouth so he didn’t laugh at how stupid that was. “So, it weakens you?”

“In a manner of speaking, ye- HEY! What did I just say?” said Zim angrily as Dib gripped his PAK and pulled gently.

“You’re giving me an awful lot of useful information right now that I could take advantage of to expose you,” said Dib. Was he really so trusting after only a day, or did a part of him still want to…?

“Well, duh,” said Zim. “If you’re going to help me defeat the Tallest, you’ll need to know all about Irken weaknesses. Besides, you already had a chance to expose me, and instead you nearly killed the both of us with your terrible driving.”

“You would have been fine if you’d been wearing your seatbelt,” said Dib.

“But they’re so restrictive!” complained Zim.

“More restrictive than this?”

Dib pushed Zim down on the ground and pinned his wrists. He could see Zim trying to break free, but his legs were still non-functional.

“Let me up!” ordered Zim.

“Or what?” taunted Dib, unable to help himself after a whole day of playing nice. Just for a moment, he wanted to pretend that this was his victory. “You’re totally helpless right now!”

Chirp! Chirp!

Dib released Zim and looked around. “Did you hear that?” he said.

Zim launched himself back up into a seated position, even as the movement appeared to pain him.

“Nope, no idea what you’re talking about!”

“It sounded like a really big cricket, or a cicada, or something,” said Dib, standing up to look around. He was in full-on paranormal investigator mode. “What if it’s some kind of half-cricket, half-man?”

“Oh, yeah, that makes sense!” agreed Zim immediately. “That’s definitely what it is! You should go look for it right away!”

Dib considered it for a moment, then sat back down besides Zim. “Maybe later. For now, I need to make sure no one comes down to try to help and sees you.”

Chirp! Chirp!

“Man, that sounds really close, doesn’t it?” said Dib.

“N-no it doesn’t.”

“Yes it.”

“NO IT DOESN’T!”
Dib looked into Zim’s eye that still had the contact in. He was definitely lying or otherwise withholding information about something, but what?

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” said Dib, leaning in close to make it clear he meant business. “This isn’t part of a trick to kill me, is it?”

“No…”

“Then what’s the chirping noise?”

Zim dug his claws into the gravel.

“It’s a primitive Irken response to fear,” he said carefully. “There. Are you happy now?”

“Really?” said Dib. Had he really scared Zim that much? Weird. “Feels like I should have heard it at least once before now if that’s the…”

“Yes, well, we’ve already established that I’m defective, so maybe this is just a new bug,” said Zim, laying back down and rolling over onto his side as best as he was able with his unmoving legs to face away from Dib. “Good night, Dib-human.”

“We’re only stuck here for another half an hour,” said Dib. “And since when do you sleep?”

“I SAID GOOD NIGHT!”

Lightyears away, throughout the furthest reaches of space, hundreds of millions of PAKs flickered red. Sirens blared throughout all Irken-controlled space, each played in tandem with the same message:

“A revolutionary unit has been registered,” it said. “DESIGNATION: New Irken Empire.”

“New Irken Empire?” said Red.

“But we already have an Irken Empire!” said Purple. “Who’s responsible for this?”

“INSTIGATOR: Zim.”

For a moment, all was silent. And then, once more, the cockpit of the Massive filled with the sound of raucous laughter.

“Oh man,” laughed Red. “We really pissed him off, didn’t we?”

“My Tallest,” said one of the technicians. “Should we plot a course for Earth to destroy Zim?”

“Destroy him?” said Purple. “First of all, why is it always ‘destroy’? Why is it never just ‘kill’?”

“Right?” said Red. “And anyway, this is Zim we’re talking about. Are we really gonna fly that far off course just to blow him up?” He grinned. “I mean, Zim trying to take down the entire Irken Empire? He couldn’t even take down one measly little planet in the middle of nowhere!”

“This is gonna be hilarious!” said Purple, stuffing his face with donuts.

“Less hilarious than the florpus hole, I hope,” muttered one of the technicians to another.
“Hey!” said Red.

“We heard that!” said Purple. “Throw him out the airlock!”

“Nooooo!”

Chapter End Notes

And with this, we've officially reached the plot! Thanks so much for reading, and feel free to leave your 100% honest feedback about the story in the comments. I'm always looking to see what I could be doing better.

EDIT: The incredible and talented MortemGrimalkinMessor drew some amazing art of this chapter! Check it out at the link below!
https://grimalkinmessor.tumblr.com/post/188140972552/height-treason-klei-invader-zim-archive-of
“There,” said Dib, setting Zim down on the couch. “Anything you need me to get for you?”

“No,” said Zim. It was humiliating enough that the Dib had had to carry him inside due to his injuries. He certainly wasn’t going to ask him for any other favors. “I’ll be fine in a few hours. You’re dismissed.”

Dib looked pained as he stood back up, and understandably so. In the light of Zim’s house, it was clear that he hadn’t exactly escaped the accident unscathed. Every visible part of his body was covered with dark purple bruises.

“So, about all that ‘fighting the Tallests’ stuff,” said Dib. “Are you serious about that?”

“Oh course I’m serious,” said Zim. He had said it with his own mouth-hole, had he not?

“It’s just, the more I think about it, the crazier it all seems,” admitted Dib. “I mean, you’ve been trying to impress them for so long.”

“Well, yeah. That was before I knew they were defective,” said Zim, removing his one remaining eye contact and putting it away in his PAK. “Now go home and recharge your pathetic flesh-body. I’ll need that annoying brain of yours fully operational for tomorrow’s plotting session.”

“Hang on,” said Dib. “Ground rules. I’m not just gonna help you for free, okay?”

“You’re not helping me for free,” said Zim. “You’re helping me in exchange for the Earth’s continued right to exist as an independent planet.”

Dib shook his head. “For all the time we’ve spent fighting, I’ve only learned a little bit about your empire and culture, and every last bit of it is either sad, horrifying, or both. If you want me to help you take down the Irken Empire, then it’s coming down. No more live dissections, no more culling babies, and no more invading.”

“But irkens live to invade!” argued Zim. “It’s the one constant in all of our programming! ‘Consume and expand!’ You, of all creatures, should understand. I’ve been to your history classes and seen what passes for politics on this world. Humans have the same drive to dominate that we do! You just don’t have the technology to keep up with us!”

“Those are my terms,” said Dib. “Either the New Irken Empire learns to play nice, or you’re on your own.”

There was a strange pain in Zim’s chest. At first, he assumed it had something to do with the fact that he’d been impaled, but according to his PAK’s diagnostics, all of the damage to that area had been repaired.

“Fine, then! Go ahead and leave. I didn’t need you, anyway. Computer!” he barked. “The Dib is no longer welcome on the premises! Remove the intruder at once!”

“Engaging defense protocols,” said the computer, and a flurry of spider-like robots dropped from the ceiling. Dib flailed backwards as one stabbed at him with its spindly legs.
“Seriously?” said Dib, dodging laser fire with a practiced grace. Zim would have been impressed if he wasn’t currently in the middle of trying to murder the back-stabbing pig. “I bought you, like, fifty dollars’ worth of cotton candy, man!”

“You paltry offerings of sugar can’t save you now!” cackled Zim, but despite his laughter, watching Dib flee for the door was much less fun than usual.

“You’re a dick, Zim!” said Dib, raising his middle fingers in Zim’s direction on his way out. Zim was semi-familiar with the gesture (it was quite popular among their classmates), but he still wasn’t entirely sure what it actually meant. He chose to believe that it indicated surrender.

The door slammed shut behind Dib as he left. As the robots returned to their positions, Zim collapsed face-first into the couch cushion.

This was fine. Zim didn’t need any help. He’d been working alone for six years, and one day of pointless frivolity didn’t change that. Uhg, and to think that the Dib had actually gotten him to chirp like some needy trainee straight out of the smetery!

Perhaps it was to be expected, though; it had been so very many years since he’d had those instincts enabled, after all, and irkens were a notoriously hedonistic species that took great joy in the carnal pleasures of the flesh. Alas, there were some professions that simply didn’t allow for such distractions. Invaders, for instance, usually had their sex drive switched off for the duration of their mission, lest they find themselves fraternizing with the enemy. Zim’s had been disabled as a form of punishment when he was banished for the first time, and he hadn’t sought to have it reenabled afterwards while he’d still believed himself to be invader. Having his PAK designation updated on the Ferris Wheel had apparently switched him back to full biological privileges.

Zim’s antennae flattened. Even if it was only the result of years of repression, chirping in such a situation was nothing short of humiliating. Why in the world had getting held down on the ground triggered a mating call? Just thinking about his pinned wrists was-

Chirp! Chirp!

“GAH, not again!”

Dib limped his way towards the couch where Gaz continued to sit, unmoving except to hit buttons on the controller in her hands; it seemed she hadn’t left that spot since he’d gone out.

“How’d your date go?” asked Gaz.

“First of all, it wasn’t a date!” said Dib. “And second, Zim is an asshole!”

“Yeah, but you knew that already,” said Gaz, glancing in his direction. Her squinting eyes widened. “Woah, did Zim do that?”

Dib gingerly pressed a hand to his injured face. “Well, not exactly.”

“Then how-”

“I might have crashed the car,” he murmured, glancing around to make sure that his father wasn’t home to hear that. For once, he was glad to see that it had been a late night at the office.
Gaz snickered.

“Figures. You always were a terrible driver,” said Gaz. “Did you remember to wipe the accident history?”

“Duh,” said Dib. It was the first thing he’d done once the car finished fixing itself so that his dad wouldn’t be able to see that it had been damaged, and he was slightly offended that Gaz thought he needed reminding, but at least she was looking out for him. Now all he needed to do was come up with a way to excuse all the bruises to his dad, assuming he even noticed.

“So what happened with Zim?” asked Gaz, turning her gaze back to the game.

“Well, it was great, at first,” said Dib, eager for a chance to vent his frustrations. “Everything was going well, we were both having a pretty good time… Then Zim was like, ‘I’m gonna take down the Tallest! Join me, Dib!’ ”

“Your Zim impression needs work.”

“Noted,” said Dib. “Anyway, I told him that I’d help on the condition that he gets the Irken Empire to stop invading planets and trying to dominate the universe, which I think is a pretty reasonable thing to ask, and suddenly he just freaks out and turns on me!”

“Let me get this straight,” said Gaz, setting down her controller on the coffee table as the match ended and turning to face Dib. “You told a member of a species that’s born and bred to invade other planets to stop invading other planets, and you’re genuinely surprised that it didn’t go well.”

“Well, I mean…” said Dib, unable to believe that she was taking Zim’s side in this. Then again, it was Gaz he was talking to. “Look, it doesn’t matter! Invading other planets is wrong, and if he can’t see that—”

“You’ve only been not-enemies for a day,” said Gaz. “Look at this from Zim’s perspective. He literally just found out this morning that his leaders hate his guts. Up until now, as far as he was concerned, he was an invader. It’s what he was raised from birth to do. Now the rug’s been pulled out from under him. His first instinct is going to be to try and put everything back to normal. ‘Oh no, they hate me! What can I do to get back in everybody’s good graces?’ Of course he’s not going to want to implement a bunch of dramatic, fundamental changes to the way their society runs.”

Dib had to admit that she was making a lot of sense. “Even if that’s true, I can’t support it.”

“So don’t,” said Gaz. “But if you support him, then he’ll start to lean on you. You’ll be his one life raft in an ocean of solitude. Zim doesn’t care about the opinions of his enemy, but the opinion of his sole friend and confidant? That carries a little more weight.”

“This is starting to sound weirdly manipulative,” said Dib.

“Why else would I spend so much time reading psychology textbooks?” said Gaz, retrieving her controller to start another match. “You’ve gotta give him time to change. Start with the little things. People become more open to suggestion if they’ve already taken advice from you in the past, so get a foot in the door with something minor.”

“What?”

“Like convincing him to try out some new clothes,” said Gaz. “That uniform is a constant reminder of what he’s lost. Get him out of that, and maybe you can start making some progress
with the whole ‘destroying worlds is wrong’ thing.” She hunched over as the game began. “And be patient with him. Nobody with a durable self-esteem needs to shout their own praises as often as Zim does.”

“Wow,” said Dib, impressed. “You’re really good at this!”

“Duh. That’s why I found out about the ‘protection’ drawer before you did.”

“Oh, gross! Come on, Gaz!”

It was a miserable morning. Zim had taken great pains to ensure that the upper half of his base was as true to a human dwelling as could be, hence why the attic was the most poorly insulated room in the house.

“Agh, useless!” growled Zim, slamming his fist against the Voot Cruiser. The ship in question was stubbornly refusing to open. How was he supposed to make supply runs to other planets if his means of transport refused to function? “Computer, run diagnostics!”

A cable rose from the floor and plugged itself into the ship.

“Voot Cruiser has been remotely deactivated,” said the computer. “Honestly, though, that might not be such a bad thing. A spider got in there, and those things are CREEPY.”


“I don’t know why the spider- Oh, you mean why it’s shut down. Uh, something about being registered to an unauthorized revolutionary unit,” said the computer.

“Then override it!”

“No can do. This command came straight from the primary control brains,” said the computer. “Even if I wanted to, I’m literally incapable of acting against them, and even if were capable, I wouldn’t want to.”

“Have you forgotten that my designation has been updated?” said Zim. “I’m Almighty Tallest of the New Irken Empire now!”

“By default,” said the computer, much to Zim’s annoyance. “In any case, not even the Tallest can override the control brains.”

“Of course. Why would I expect anything different?” said Zim, kicking the ship with enough force to hurt his foot. “Nngh!”

“Because you’re defective,” provided the computer helpfully.

Zim was about to respond with something clever when the doorbell rang.

“Uhg, did the broken SIR order another pizza?” said Zim.

“Nope. It’s that Dib kid,” said the computer. A screen lowered from the ceiling to display the front door camera. “Looks like he brought your PAK legs.”

“Great, have the parental units get-”
It took a minute or two, but Zim eventually answered the door. He hadn’t bothered with a wig or contacts, so it was clear that he’d known it was Dib.

“Hey,” said Dib, who was indeed carrying a bunch of PAK legs under one arm and a bag of cotton candy under the other. He could only hope that Zim had forgotten about his request for fried butter, because that was significantly harder to come by. That, and the thought of anyone consuming something so horrendous made him nauseous. “Looking for these?”

Zim grabbed the bag first, tore it open, and stuffed a wad of fluffy sugar into his mouth.

“Look,” continued Dib. “I still don’t support the whole ‘universal domination’ thing. I think your people have some serious issues, and you all need to find a new collective hobby. However, in exchange for the guaranteed safety of the Earth, I am willing to support you.”

Zim swallowed the cotton candy in his mouth, his eyes wide with shock. It was pretty clear that he hadn’t expected Dib to come back. Heck, even Dib hadn’t thought he would come back.

“I knew you’d come crawling back to me eventually!” lied Zim. He motioned for Dib to come inside. “Computer! Re-register the Dib as an approved guest.”

“Should I put these down somewhere, or…?” said Dib, holding up the metal legs. Zim snatched them one by one and reattached them, whereupon they retracted back into his PAK.

“You’ve come to your senses just in time,” said Zim, leading the way to the kitchen where the trash can elevator waited. “Annoyingly, my ship has been remotely deactivated by the control brains, which is problematic for a whole host of reasons. For one thing, there are a lot of useful substances that are too tightly controlled here on Earth for me to pick up in stores. Even attempting to purchase the components for a simple bomb draws far too much attention!”

“Oh, I can probably help with that,” said Dib, looking around and half-expecting something to jump out at him at any second. “My dad- uh, why is GIR on the floor?”

Zim glared down at the robot, whose legs were still wrapped up in string.

“My kite got stuck yesterday,” said GIR.

“Yesterday?” said Dib. How long had Zim left him like this? He bent down to untangle the string around GIR’s legs, which the robot proceeded to slurp up like a noodle.

“I’m free!” squealed GIR, running back to the living room to go jump up and down on the couch in celebration.

“You should have just left him there,” said Zim curtly, stepping into the trashcan and disappearing into the wider elevator below.

“Are you mad at him, or something?” said Dib, peering into the trashcan. It wasn’t every day that he got invited to the underground portion of Zim’s base. Good thing he wasn’t claustrophobic, because the entryway had clearly not been designed with an adult human in mind; it was a tight fit,
but he managed to wriggle his way through and into the wider elevator sitting just below.

“No more than usual,” said Zim. The platform they were on began its descent.

“Okay, then,” said Dib, unconvinced. “So what’s the plan?”

“The Massive is the flagship of the Irken armada,” said Zim, folding his hands behind his back. “It’s also where the Tallest spend the majority of their time. We’re going to blow it up with them inside.”

“Blow up the giant spaceship,” said Dib. “Sounds simple enough.”

“Feh, shows what you know!” said Zim. The elevator let out a little ‘ding’ as they reached the bottom. “The Massive is the single most advanced ship ever engineered. Tallest Miyuki had the greatest minds of our generation working on it! Well, all except me, of course. I was busy working on my energy blob at the time.”

“The one that ultimately killed her?”

“Yep!” said Zim, sounding weirdly proud of this fact. He led Dib into the communications room.

“An unbeatable ship, huh?” said Dib. He’d seen enough sci-fi movies to know what this meant. “Sounds like we’ll need to search for a copy of the schematics so we can look for weaknesses.”

“No searching required,” said Zim. “I’ve already got someone on it. Computer, open a communication line with Vortian prisoner number 777!”

“Oh, hey, I remember that guy!” said Dib as the image appeared on screen. “You’re the one who gave Zim the control schematics!” He remembered it like it was yesterday. He’d (briefly) stolen control of the ship, Zim had attempted to crush him to death… Good times, good times!

“Control what, now?” said the Vortian, who was sitting on his hands in a very tiny cell.

“Control schematics,” said Zim. “Unfortunately, the control system has been updated since the last time I got ahold of them, so we can’t just pilot it into a black hole, but-”

“What’s a schem-tick?” asked the Vortian, followed by a psychotic laugh. “Schem-tick! Schem-tick!”

“What’s happening?” said Dib.

Zim’s eyes narrowed. “Computer! Pull up his medical records!”

“Understood,” said the computer. The camera feed of the Vortian prisoner moved up to the top right corner of the screen while the rest filled with irken text. “Prisoner appears to have undergone extensive interrogation sessions after a lengthy communication history was discovered with irken food service drone, Zim.” Zim scowled. Dib snickered. “Interrogation was deemed unsuccessful after it became clear that it had driven the prisoner completely insane.”

“Excellent work, Prisoner 777!” said Zim. “You’ve succeeded in fooling the enemy! Now send me the schematics for the Massive!”

“Scheeeeeeem-tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiks!” cackled the Vortian. “Schema-schema-schema!”

“Uh, Zim, I think he might have actually lost it,” said Dib.
“Ticks-ticks-ticks!” said the Vortian. “So many ticks! NOT THE TICKS!” He collapsed into a quivering mass.

“Oh, come on! It’s just a little interrogation!” said Zim. “Irkens start interrogation resistance training right after activation!”

Dib gave Zim a look-over. “That explains a lot.”

“About my incredible toughness and resilience? Yes. Yes, it does!” agreed Zim, turning off the screen. “More importantly, it looks like obtaining the schematic for the Massive is going to be a little harder than I first thought. It looks like we’ll have to sneak into the schematics storage hub in person, and that means flying all the way to-”

“Storage Hubia?” guessed Dib.

“-Militaria, the military research planet,” said Zim. Eh, close enough. “But to do that, we’ll need a ship, and mine is presently out of commission.”

“I’ve still got Tak’s ship,” suggested Dib. “I haven’t been able to get it flying again since Gaz crashed it six years ago, though.”

“Well, of course not,” said Zim, looking thoroughly unsurprised. “You’re just a human. Your squishy little brain can’t hope to comprehend the sheer complexity of Irken technology!”

“My ’squishy little brain’ has been successfully kicking your ass since I was twelve.”

He covered his ears.

“LIES!”

“How can it be a lie if you haven’t taken over the Earth yet?” said Dib.

“Oh, okay. So if there’s no way I can possibly beat an irken, why am I even here?”

“Because…” began Zim, and it quickly became clear that he didn’t have a good answer for that. Eventually, however, he came up with an excuse: “Because even if you’ve never actually beaten me, you’ve still managed to survive against me. Your firsthand combat experience against an elite irken inv-” He stopped himself. “-against an elite irken could prove useful to my plans.”

“Oh-huh,” said Dib, crossing his arms over his chest. An idea occurred to him. “All the more reason for you to tell me all about your people’s weaknesses so I stand a chance against them in a fight, right?”

Zim laughed. “Irkens don’t have any-”

Dib lifted him up by his PAK, forcing Zim’s whole body to relax.

“Okay,” admitted Zim through gritted teeth. “Maybe we have a few weaknesses.”

Dib set Zim back down and retrieved his phone from his pocket.

“If we’re gonna be sneaking into an irken facility to steal the Massive’s schematics, we might get into a fight,” said Dib, opening up his note-taking application. It was full of information about
irkens that he’d learned fighting Zim over the years. Everything he jotted down was immediately uploaded to a cloud save, so he didn’t have to worry about Zim breaking it. “I think we should prepare by studying your schematics.”

“Don’t be absurd!” said Zim. “How do I know that you aren’t just going to use that knowledge to turn me in to human authorities?”

There was still strikingly little trust between them. That was fair; it still hadn’t been very long, after all.

“How about this?” said Dib. “You teach me about your people and culture, and I’ll teach you about Earth and humans. That way, we’re even.”

Zim appeared thoughtful. “Fine. But if I find out that any of the information you provide me with is inaccurate, I’ll carve out your brain with a spoon and use your body as a meat puppet!”

“Great!” said Dib, pulling a pair of latex gloves from his pocket and pulling them on with a satisfying snap. “Let’s get started, then.”

When Dib had suggested looking at his ‘schematics,’ Zim had assumed that he was referring to his PAK. An examination of its parts and mechanisms would have been uncomfortable, to say the least; after all, the PAK was him, and he was his PAK. It was a fundamental part of his brain responsible for storing information, interfacing with irken technology, and just generally keeping his organs working, so of course he was a little wary about letting his nemesis anywhere near it. Still, it was a necessary risk. The Dib didn’t have the same understanding of its mechanisms that Zim did, and since they didn’t have another functioning PAK to study, it was the easiest way for him to learn how they worked.

“Okay, now take your clothes off and get on the table,” said Dib as the elevator arrived in the lab.

“Why would I do that?” said Zim. It was a request that was just as uncomfortable as the prospect of Dib opening up his PAK, albeit in a different way.

“So I can study you,” said Dib. He set his phone on the table and hit a button, which projected a holographic screen and keyboard into the air just above it to make it easier to type up his findings.

“I thought you wanted to study my PAK!” said Zim.

“I do,” said Dib. “But your body is what actually carries the PAK around, so it seems like it’d make sense to start there.”

Zim’s antennae flattened. “There’s no way I’m going to take my clothes off in front of my worst enemy.”

“And friend,” Dib reminded him. “Or, uh, frenemy? Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“I don’t care what you call yourself,” said Zim firmly. “It’s not happening.”

“Come on, Zim,” said Dib. A smile crossed his face, like he’d just thought of something funny. “This could be my only chance to study such a perfect irken specimen.” Zim’s antennae twitched upwards, suddenly interested. “I mean, even if we could capture someone else or get a mannequin or something, it’d never compare to you, right?”
Zim took a moment to consider this. It was true; he was a pretty spectacular example of irken engineering. A diagram couldn’t hope to compare.

“Very well, mud-brain,” said Zim. “If this is what it takes to defeat the Tallest, I will allow you to study my superior irken body.”

“And I’m eternally grateful,” said Dib in a voice that almost sounded sarcastic, but that was impossible. Of course he would be grateful for such an opportunity.

Zim temporarily detached his PAK and set it down on the table so he could peel his uniform shirt up over his head. His life clock ticked away for a few seconds, but the PAK was back in place long before it would have become a concern.

He could see Dib already typing away, and glanced over at his screen to see what he was jotting down.

‘PAKs appear to be detachable at will, and must be temporarily removed in order to change clothes.’

“Pffft, everybody knows that,” said Zim, folding up his pink tunic and setting it off to the side. Dib may as well have recorded that the Earthen sky was blue.

“Every irken, maybe,” said Dib. “This is why it’s important that we do this. All this stuff might be obvious to you, but not to me.” He looked over Zim’s shirtless body (still covered up by gloves, boots, and black leggings) and spoke to himself out loud as he typed. “‘Irkens don’t appear to have mammary glands.’” He reached towards Zim and pressed a hand against his chest. “‘Skeleton appears to be similar in general composition to Earth lifeforms, including a rib cage.’ Hey, computer, can I get an x-ray, please?”

“HA, my computer isn’t going to listen to-”

“Sure thing!” said the computer, and a projector-like device descended from the ceiling. As the light shined on Zim, his exposed skin and muscle tissue appeared to turn invisible, revealing the underlying bones and organs.

“Hey! I didn’t authorize that!” said Zim angrily.

“What? He said ‘please,’” said the computer. Zim resolved to fix that later.

“‘Irkens appear to have fewer ribs than humans,’” said Dib as he typed. “‘Smaller cables spread from the two primary cables in the PAK and spread throughout the body like veins, with the largest one plugged directly into the organic brain. The organic brain is similar in structure to a human brain; further study necessary to determine the extent to which this is true.’"

"Insolent human, how dare you compare my brain to yours?"

"No visible nasal cavity…” continued Dib, undaunted. "I’ve seen you smell things, though. How does that work?"

Zim pointed to his antennae, then his tongue.

“‘The irken sense of smell seems to be a weird mash-up of snake and insect biology utilizing both the tongue and antennae,’” wrote Dib.

“Weird? What’s weird is needing a whole other body part just to smell things!” said Zim, poking
Dib’s nose.

Dib ignored that in favor of focusing on Zim’s organs. He prodded Zim’s chest. “This is your squedelyspooch, right? It looks a bit like a digestive system.”

“More or less.”

“And this…” said Dib, pressing his hand to Zim’s lower stomach, where another organ sat partially-concealed by his leggings. “What is it?”

Zim smacked his hand away.

“Nothing relevant to the-” His face heated up as Dib slipped his fingers into the waistband of his leggings to tug them downwards. Zim shoved him backwards. Nobody had ever placed their hands so close to his groin before, and he didn’t trust his sexually-repressed flesh-body not to start chirping again. “I said it’s not relevant!”

“Geez, okay, sorry,” said Dib.

“As you should be!” hissed Zim, already tempted to pull the plug on this whole stupid thing, but the Dib appeared to have moved on to his hands. The computer switched off the x-ray projector.

“Okay, well, moving on… Is there a reason you wear gloves all the time?” said Dib.

“It’s part of the uniform,” said Zim, peeling one off to reveal the pale green arm underneath. Dib pulled his fingers towards his face and observed them closely. “It also provides protection against environmental hazards.”

“‘Fingertips appear to be made out of a solid, chitinous material sharpened to a point,’ ” he wrote. “And what about your antennae?”

“What about them?”

“Most of the time, they look stiff and geniculate, like the antennae of ants and beetles, but sometimes they’re also wiggly and flexible,” said Dib, reaching out to touch one. Zim immediately pulled it out of reach. “What? Are they fragile, or something?”

“They’re not fragile,” said Zim, a little offended by the very idea that any part of him could be easily damaged. “You’re just not allowed to touch them.”

“Why not?” said Dib. “Look, I promise I’ll be careful.”

“Even if I trusted you to be careful with those grubby little meat-mittens you call hands, I still wouldn’t allow it!” said Zim, jerking away as Dib continued to reach for them. He pressed his hands to Dib’s chest, intent on shoving him off. “Hey, stop it! Get off of-”

Dib’s fingers brushed up against the base. Zim managed to bite back a whimper before it escaped him, but there was no stopping the involuntary chittering deep in his loins.

Chirp! Chirp!

Before Dib could properly register what he’d done, Zim kicked him in the face hard enough to hear a satisfying snap as his nose broke.

“Ha! See? I told you your nose was weird!”
There was no response. The Dib had collapsed to the floor.

“Woops.”

Dib awoke to the sight of a shirtless Zim hovering over him and smacking him repeatedly across the face.

“Ow! Oww, OWW! Stop that!” said Dib, grabbing Zim’s wrist with one hand and rubbing his stinging cheeks with the other.

“Oh, good, you’re not dead,” said Zim, standing back up and leaving Dib to clamber to his feet on his own.

Dib groaned and clutched his throbbing nose, which was still oozing blood. “You kicked me in the face!”

“And you touched my antennae when I specifically told you not to!” said Zim. “You’re lucky I didn’t stab you through your disgusting heart!”

Dib wobbled over to his phone, wiped the blood from his hands, and began to type.

“ ‘Antennae appear to be off-limits,’ ” he wrote. “ ‘Physical contact results in chirping.’ ”

“No! Don’t write that down!” said Zim, looking positively mortified. “What if somebody else sees it?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m the only human on the planet who gives a crap about your biology,” said Dib. “Not a human, another irken!” said Zim, shuddering. “You have to delete that immediately!”

“Why? You said it yourself; this stuff is obvious to them.”

“Yeah, I mean, but… AGH!” said Zim, grabbing for the phone. “Just delete it!”

“Why?” said Dib, lifting the phone over his head so it was well out of Zim’s reach. “Is it really that big of a deal if someone finds out you were afraid?”

“Afraid? What makes you think the mighty Zim was afraid?”

“The chirping,” said Dib. “You said it was a response to fear.”

A moment of silence passed between them.

“Oh,” said Zim. “Yeah, it’s- That’s exactly what it is, all right!”

“Zim,” said Dib, eyes narrowing with suspicion. “What does the chirping actually mean?”

“Nothing! It means nothing! It’s just a sound that comes out sometimes when I’m, uh… Hungry! Yes, that’s it!” insisted Zim.

Well, if he wasn’t gonna answer honestly, Dib supposed he had no choice. “Computer, what does it mean when an irken chirps?

“Stupid human!” said Zim smugly. “My base only answers to me!”
“Even if I say please?” said Dib.

“*Irken chirping is part of an obsolete set of biological urges that used to be tantamount to reproduction,*” explained the computer. Zim made a horrified wheezing noise like something had just squeezed the life out of him. “More commonly referred to as a ‘mating call’ or ‘mating song,’ this chirping is a unique, involuntary sound produced by irken males when aroused in order to indicate readiness to copulate. *The pitch and timbre of a mating call is directly tied to the amount of available space left in the-“*

“That’s ENOUGH!”

There was a sound like something powering down. Dib turned around to find that Zim had unplugged a large cable from the wall. There was a feral look in his eyes like that of a cornered animal, his cheeks pink with humiliation.

For a moment, Dib could only wordlessly flap his lips.

“So, umm-”

“SILENCE!” said Zim, grabbing what appeared to be a can full of biohazardous waste with his PAK legs and chucking it in Dib’s direction. Fortunately, this wasn’t Dib’s first rodeo, and he was able to duck under the table while the container flew overhead and splattered across the floor in an explosion of goo and bits of flesh.

“Look, Zim, it’s really not that big of a deal,” said Dib quickly. Sure, it was embarrassing, but it seemed a little much to get this worked up over the alien equivalent of an ill-timed boner. “I’m, uh, I’m sorry I tried to touch your antennae.” His cheeks went pink when he remembered that he’d also attempted to pull down Zim’s leggings. “I didn’t think- I mean, you made it sound like irkens are grown in test tubes. I just kinda assumed that you didn’t have any… You know.”

Dib peeked out over the table. All that having been said, there was a noticeable lack of a bulge between Zim’s legs, and Dib couldn’t help but find himself morbidly fascinated by why that was. Was it in a different location? Or maybe it was retractable?

Wait, what was he thinking? Why would he ever want to know what Zim’s genitals looked like? Gross!

“Anyway, I’ll delete that note about it from my phone, see?” said Dib, backspacing away any mention of chirping. It was incorrect information, anyway; he’d have to record the actual reason for the sound later, after he was well out of Zim's sight.

Zim muttered something under his breath, still looking tense and irritable. He removed his PAK in order to put his uniform shirt back on, then reattached it to his back without another word.

“So, uh, we cool?” said Dib, keeping his distance, lest he wind up skewered.

“This is a waste of time,” said Zim. Well, it wasn’t a ‘no.’ That was about as close to forgiveness as he could expect. “We have a spaceship to fix, and today’s the last day to do that before school starts back up.”

“Yeah,” said Dib, as eager to get away from the previous topic of conversation as Zim was. “We should probably head back to my place so you can take a look at it.”

“For once, we agree,” said Zim, heading for the elevator. “Come on, then! Let’s go!”
Dib clutched his broken nose.

“Hold on, can’t we at least patch this up, first?”

Tak’s ship had been relegated to the back of the garage, but its condition was still downright pristine. Dib had clearly put a lot of effort into maintaining it, and he’d done a pretty good job, considering he wouldn’t have any way of knowing standard irken maintenance protocols. Not that Zim would ever admit that, of course.

“I suppose I can work with this,” said Zim, gazing at it appraisingly and giving the reinforced glass of the cockpit an experimental tap. “It’ll be a little embarrassing to drive this hunk of dookie into irken-controlled space, but it should get us there and back in one piece.”

“That’s what you think!” said Tak’s voice. “I would rather float endlessly in the vacuous void of space than transport your disgusting body anywhere, Zim!”

“Looks like the AI is still functional,” said Zim. “That’s promising.”

“Hey! Don’t you ignore-”

“Yeah, she’s capable of movement and crawling across the ground, but I haven’t been able to get her back into the air,” said Dib, his voice nasally from the bandages covering his nose.

“That’s because you’re stupid!” hissed Tak’s ship. “And you’re working with ZIM, now? That’s not just garden-variety stupidity. That’s the sort of stupidity that only comes around once in a lifetime.”

“Interesting,” said Zim, pulling open a panel and taking a look inside.

“Hey! Get your filthy, defective hands off of me, you pathetic excuse for an irken!”

“How’s it look?” asked Dib.

“Good, good, acceptable, good…” said Zim, activating his ocular implants so he could better make out what was going on. “Aha! The flight core is cracked!”

“Don’t you dare-”

Despite the ship’s protests, Zim unplugged the weighty, infant-sized device and hauled it out of the ship to set on the ground. Dib stared down at the part in question with eyes full of confusion.

“It looks fine to me,” said Dib.

“They’re almost imperceptibly small fractures,” said Zim, tapping the side of his head. He always relished the opportunity to gloat about his superiority. “You wouldn’t notice them without a tool or ocular implants, but a flight core won’t function unless it’s perfectly insulated so it won’t cook the passengers alive. We’ll have to create a new case.” He frowned. “But to do that, we’ll need access to controlled substances and materials that are easiest to obtain off-planet.”

“Oh, right, I was gonna tell you earlier that I can use my Membrane Labs ID card to access the restricted section of the mall,” said Dib, pulling a white badge from his pocket with his name and the lab’s logo on the front. “As long as we say that we’re getting stuff for my dad’s experiments, nobody will question it.”
“Excelve- wait, did you say the mall?” said Zim. He hadn’t set foot in that mall since he’d been forced to return the movie GIR rented.

“Yeah, why?”

“No reason,” said Zim. What were the odds that they still had the same security guard as before? And even if they did, it had been six years. There was no way that he would still recognize Zim, master of disguise! Besides, it was absolutely imperative that they get those supplies. “Now, onward! To the mall!”

“I hope you two get lost and die!” called Tak’s ship after them, only to be ignored.

“Thanks for driving us, Gaz,” said Dib as they stepped out of the car. Zim had pointedly refused to let Dib get behind the wheel again, so he’d been forced to ask his sister for assistance.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Gaz, locking the vehicle. “I had to come here, anyway. The new Turbo Shooter just came out, and I need to finish it before school starts and some little punk decides to spoil the ending.”

“What if somebody in the mall spoils it for you?” asked Dib.

Gaz balled her hands up into quivering fists.

“If they do, they’ll be even worse-looking than you by the time I’m finished with them,” said Gaz, eyeing Dib’s bruise-covered face and broken nose.

Dib swallowed. “Uh-huh, right. Well, umm, see you in a little bit, then!” He grabbed Zim by the wrist and began dragging him towards the mall. He’d known Gaz to get so angry at an imaginary situation that it made her lash out in the real world, and he didn’t want to be there for it if it happened today.

“So where’s this ‘restricted section’ you mentioned?” asked Zim, looking oddly wary as they entered the building.

“It’s on the top floor,” said Dib, and they both looked upwards at the massive staircase that awaited them. “We should probably take the elevator.”

They arrived at the elevator just in time to see a grizzled old woman in janitorial clothing covering the door with yellow tape that read ‘DO NOT CROSS – DANGER.’

“Sorry, boys. Elevator’s out of commission,” said the janitor. “Looks like you’re gonna have to walk.”

“This building has fifty floors!” said Dib. “Isn’t there some kind of back-up elevator?”

“Hmm…” The old woman pressed her hand to her chin in thought. “Nope.”

“No matter,” said Zim with a look of fierce determination. “I’ve survived training exercises that sent me hiking across entire continents in far worse conditions than this!”

Several flights of stairs later, the two of them collapsed on the ground, completely and utterly spent.
“How... Many... Did we...?” wheezed Zim.

“Five,” coughed Dib, struggling to catch his breath. “We’ve gone up five floors.”

“Great,” gasped Zim. “We just have to do this nine more times, and we’ll have reached the restricted section!”

Somehow, Dib found the willpower to get back on his feet. Zim, too, rose to stand on trembling legs.

“Maybe we can take a quick break,” said Dib, taking a look around at some of the shops on this level. “You know, just to keep our strength up in case something happens.”

“Yes,” agreed Zim, still panting and leaning on Dib’s leg. “We have to make sure... To be prepared... For anything!”

“Exactly,” said Dib, his gaze locking on to one of the many clothing shops. Now that he thought about it, Gaz had mentioned that it might help to get Zim out of his uniform... “Hey, while we’re here, why don’t you try on some new clothes?”

“Why would I want to wear your inferior Earth-fabrics?” said Zim.

“No offense, Zim, but you’ve been wearing the same outfit for six years,” said Dib. “Most humans wear something different every day.”

“What?” said Zim, looking around apprehensively. “But you always wear that same jacket!”

“That’s different!” said Dib, cheeks going red as he pointed to his shirt. Holy crap, he did wear the same jacket every day! “I still change the clothes underneath it. It’s just the jacket that’s the same! See? This shirt has a skull on it!”

“Oh no, you’re right!” said Zim, suddenly very uneasy. “This is terrible! Do you think anyone’s noticed?”

Dib thought back to some of the gossip he’d overheard his peers sharing about Zim. They’d definitely noticed, all right, but they’d just assumed that it was because he was either weird, poor, or weird and poor. “Not yet, but who knows when they’ll start picking up on it? Since we’re here anyway, we should go take care of that now.”

“Great, let’s go! Quickly, now; there’s no time to waste!” said Zim, seizing Dib by the jacket and dragging him off in the direction of a store called ‘The Thrifty Thing.’

As they entered the store, Dib was feeling pretty good. In one fell swoop, he would help Zim maintain his cover as a human, earn his trust by providing him with said assistance, and get him out of an outfit full of terrible memories. It would symbolize a fresh start for the both of them, and it wouldn’t take longer than an hour!

“Alright, which of these shop-drones handles uniform assignments?”

Or maybe, Dib considered, he was way, way in over his head.

“Nobody assigns anything,” said Dib, gesturing to the racks. Most of them were several sizes too big for Zim; he’d have to come up with a way to gently nudge him into the children’s section. “You just pick what you like.”
“Oh,” said Zim. He puckered his lips in thought. “So it’s some kind of test, then! I have to figure out what a normal human would pick!”

“It’s a human store. Literally everything in here is something that a normal human would pick.”

Zim picked a shirt off the rack that could only be described as a Hawaiin t-shirt where all the flowers were made of plaid.

“Except that,” said Dib. “That’s the sort of thing that only an alien would wear.”

“Eugh!” said Zim, chucking the shirt away in a panic and looking around with mounting trepidation. “There are so many options! How do you know which ones are good and which ones are bad?”

“Let’s start by looking at something in your size,” said Dib.

He led Zim to a different rack (fortunately, Zim seemed to be too laser-focused on the clothing to notice the sign overhead indicating that this was the children’s section) and began going through the options, many of which were liable to get Zim’s ass kicked if he tried wearing them to a high school. This was turning out to be significantly more difficult than he thought. Everything was so colorful; his usual color palette of blacks and grays had done little to prepare him for this moment.

“Everything is so thick and puffy,” said Zim.

“Well, yeah. It’s winter,” said Dib. “Do irkens not get cold?”

“Irken clothing is created to be comfortable in all environments,” said Zim. “It cools down when it gets too hot and warms up when it’s cold.”

So no matter how one looked at it, this was going to be a downgrade. Oh well.

“Alright, let’s start with these, then…” said Dib, pulling out a few long-sleeved shirts and a couple different pairs of pants. He wondered if this was how his dad had felt back when he was a little kid who needed help picking out clothes for school. “Is it safe for you to take your PAK off to try these on?”

“Didn’t we just go over this? Stupid mud-pig! How do you think I get dressed?” said Zim. While he was clearly trying to sound calm and collected, his voice still carried a twinge of hesitance. “As long as it isn’t off for longer than five minutes at a time, it’s not a big deal.”

“If you say so,” said Dib. “Let’s find a changing room.”

As Zim went behind the curtain to change, Dib sat awkwardly outside on a cheap, ripped-up couch with waiting parents and significant others. He couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious; he was clearly too young to be Zim’s dad, and he was a little worried that people might draw the wrong conclusions about their relationship.

“This feels stupid,” complained Zim from behind the curtain.

“Can I at least see it?”

Zim reluctantly stepped out from behind the curtain, but it was difficult to see much of anything due to the fact that he was still holding his PAK to his chest, as putting it on would have punched holes in the back of the as-of-yet unpurchased clothing.
“Can’t you leave that inside?”

“And risk someone running off with it again?” said Zim, glaring at Dib. “Yeah, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

Dib swallowed uncomfortably. Sure, he knew on an intellectual level just how important Zim’s PAK was, but the concept of an external, detachable brain was just so foreign to him that he still had moments where he forgot that someone running off with it had the potential to be a death sentence.

“What if I held onto it for you?” suggested Dib, only realizing how stupid he sounded after he’d already said it. Why would Zim trust him with his PAK, of all people? “I promise I won’t steal it again. Trust me, I learned my lesson the first time.”

Zim looked skeptical. “How do I know this isn’t just a trick?”

Dib thought for a moment, then retrieved a pair of handcuffs from within his coat and cuffed his ankles together. He held the remote with the button to unlock them out to Zim.

“See? No way I can outrun you like this.”

“Do you just carry handcuffs wherever you go?” said Zim.

“Yeah, why?”

Zim hesitated, but ultimately accepted the remote and gingerly handed his PAK to Dib. Dib gripped it firmly, holding it facing away from his body so as to ensure that it couldn’t attach itself to his chest.

“If you let anything happen to me, I promise that I won’t be the only one who expires today,” threatened Zim, taking a step back to give Dib a better view of the first set of clothes he’d put on. It was a loose-fitting magenta turtleneck with long sleeves that hung down over Zim’s gloves.

Dib had to give himself a mental pat on the back; for someone with no idea what he was doing, he’d chosen pretty well.

“I think it looks good on you,” said Dib, nodding in approval.

Zim had a strange look on his face, but it wasn’t one of displeasure.

“Really?” he said, only to catch himself and vigorously shake his head like he was trying to bring himself back to his senses. He placed his hands on his hips and posed confidently. “Well, of course it looks good on me! I’m Zim! I can make anything look good, even these terrible Earth-thread!” He eyed the PAK and turned around. “Now plug me in!”

Dib rolled his eyes. Everything was always a demand with him. He lifted the back of Zim’s shirt to expose the ports for his PAK and reattached it for a moment to reset his- What had he called it, again? A ‘life clock?’

Once Zim was no longer in danger of losing his basic motor functions, he detached himself from the PAK again to go try on the next piece of clothing. They settled into a steady rhythm; new outfit, thoughts from Dib, Zim soaking up his words until his ego was positively sopping with praise, plug Zim in for a few seconds to reset the life clock, rinse and repeat.

It quickly became clear that Zim was not a fan of pants. After a life of comfy leggings, their lack
of flexibility proved to be too much for him to bear, and he wound up tossing the entire pile back in
Dib's face after trying on only two different pairs. Dib, ever the kidder, had jokingly suggested a
skirt. He had not expected Zim to take him seriously, nor for it to look as good on him as it did. A
part of him wanted to tell Zim that it was traditionally considered women’s wear, but…

“This is so much more freeing!” said Zim, spinning about and letting the pleats flutter upwards.
Fortunately, he was still wearing his leggings underneath. “Why don’t all humans wear these?”

“I- I guess we’re just used to pants,” stammered Dib, still on the fence about whether or not to stop
this. “Anyway, I think that’s enough for now. It’s already been…” He checked his watch, and his
jaw dropped. It was already almost noon. “Two and a half hours? Come on, we’ve still gotta get
to the fiftieth floor!”

“Yes, the mission! Of course!” said Zim, hurrying back into the changing room. It wasn’t long
before he poked his head back out through the curtain. “Is it permitted to wear things out of the
store?”

“As long as you remember to pay for them at the front, yeah, it should be fine,” said Dib.

When Zim re-emerged, it was in the magenta turtleneck that Dib recognized as the first thing he’d
tried on.

“There. Now I look completely normal!” said Zim, who still had green skin and a notable lack of
ears, but Dib decided to refrain from bursting his bubble.

Dib stood up to go pay for what they’d picked out, forgetting that he’d cuffed his ankles together.
He made it only a single step before getting tripped up and falling forward. With Zim’s PAK still
in his hands, he did his best to twist himself onto his side so it didn’t end up smashing against the
ground (though if Dib had had the time to think about it, he would have remembered just how
much worse the PAK had been through and how truly durable it was), resulting in him landing
painfully on his shoulder, which was still bruised from the previous day’s car crash.

Zim laughed obnoxiously and unlocked the handcuffs around his ankles.

“What’s the matter, Dib-worm? Did you forget how to walk?” said Zim. “Had I known you were
this clumsy, I never would have bothered fighting you! I’d just move a little further away and let
you cripple yourself on the way to my house!”

Dib was about to bite back with a comment about how sad it was that Zim’s only hope of injuring
him was for Dib to do it to himself when he noticed something unusual; Zim was actually holding
out a hand to help him up.

“Yeah,” he said instead, tentatively taking Zim’s gloved hand despite half-expecting it to be rigged
with explosives. “Here, trade you.”

He pressed the PAK to Zim’s clothed back, figuring that it would be fine to puncture the sweater if
they were buying it anyway. There was a satisfying click as it locked back into place, allowing
him to retrieve his handcuffs from Zim.

In the end, they did, in fact, end up getting the skirts. Dib could only hope that his classmates
proved accepting enough to keep their mouths shut, because Zim would be furious if he found out
that he’d worn something likely to draw people’s attention. They stuffed the bags of purchased
goods into Zim’s PAK, then reluctantly returned to the stairwell.

“Just forty-five more floors to go,” said Dib. The mere act of looking at the stairs left him feeling
like a vampire had sucked him dry.

“Don’t be such a smeet,” said Zim, marching forward and turning to face Dib. “This- ACK!”

He darted over to Dib’s side to hide behind him like he was afraid of being spotted.

“What’s wrong?” asked Dib.

“Nothing!”

“You’re clearly hiding from something,” said Dib, following his gaze to a large man rolling along
on a Segway. “The super buff security guard?”

“We may have had a little, teeny-tiny fight in the past,” said Zim.

Dib took a step back. “You’ve been fighting with other people?”

“Oh, come on. Did you really think you were the only human I’ve ever fought with?”

“Well, no,” said Dib. “Still, it would have been nice if you told me we were in a place where we
might see someone you’ve had a fight with!”

“It’s none of your business who I fight!” said Zim. Dib still looked unsatisfied by this response.
“Look, if it makes you feel any better, it was a one-time thing that happened six years ago. I was
just trying to return a stupid movie to Video Outhouse before the deadline, and next thing I know,
I’m locked in mortal combat with a crazy security guard. It’s not like it meant any— Oh no, I think
he saw us!”

Zim covered his face with his hand as the burly mall security guard approached, but it was no
good. There were only so many green people with no ears in the world.

“Well, look at who we have here!” said the sergeant. “If it isn’t the little green child with no
regard for business hours!”

“Zim is no child!” growled Zim.

“Of course not,” said the security guard, turning his attention to Dib. “And who’s this, then? Your
brother?”

Zim sighed and pressed his fingers to his temples. “Dib, this is Sergeant Slab Rankle. Sergeant
Slab Rankle, this is Dib, my nemesis.”

“Oh. Yes, well, nice to meet you, Dib,” said the sergeant, extending a hand in greeting. Dib shook
it awkwardly.

“Nice to meet you too.”

Sergeant Slab Rankle immediately turned his attention back to Zim. “It’s good to see you! Feels
like it’s been so long!”

“It’s been six years,” said Zim flatly.

“And you’re still looking great!” said the sergeant. “Haven’t changed a bit. Figured you would
have grown at least a few inches by now, but I guess not, huh?”

He laughed, and Zim responded with a tense smile. Never before had Dib felt so suffocated by
“Sheer awkwardness.”

“Yep,” said Zim, turning to leave. “Well, my nemesis and I have quite a long walk to get to the fiftieth floor, so…”

“The fiftieth floor, huh?” said the sergeant. “That’s quite a walk. Why don’t you two come to the back and use the staff elevator?”

Dib lit up like the glow of laser fire in the dark.

“Yeah, I think we’re gonna pa-” began Zim.

“That’d be great, thanks!” interrupted Dib. A bit of uncomfortable conversation with one of Zim’s past enemies was a small price to pay to not have to walk up forty-five more floors. He grabbed Zim before he could protest and dragged him after the weirdly buff mall cop.

“So you’re the new nemesis, huh?” said the sergeant. “How’d you two meet?”

“We’ve actually been fighting for a long time,” said Dib. “Since middle school, actually.”

“That’s great!” said the sergeant. “Really, really great! He’s, uh, he’s quite the handful, huh?”

“It was one night, Slab!” insisted Zim. “One night!”

“He can be a bit much sometimes,” said Dib, ignoring Zim. “But, I mean, that’s what I hate so much about him.”

“Yeah…” said Slab, looking conflicted as he guided them back into a staff area and hit the up button on what appeared to be a maintenance elevator. “I’m happy for you two, really! It’s so hard to find a nemesis that really clicks with you.”

“Oh, yeah, totally,” said Dib. “Have you got a nemesis, Sergeant?”

“I’m taking a bit of a break from the fighting scene,” said the sergeant. “After Zim left, I tried online fighting for a little bit, but you know how the internet is. So many weirdos.”

They stepped inside the elevator, and it began to ascend in uncomfortable silence. It was, without a doubt, the longest few minutes of Dib’s life, more so than even the time Zim had injected him with a parasite covered in thousands of tiny barbs that fed on eyeballs.

At long last, the elevator dinged to indicate that they had reached the fiftieth floor.

“Well, I won’t keep you,” said the sergeant. “I know how awkward it can be to run into your enemy’s ex-nemesis.”

“You were never my nemesis!” insisted Zim, storming off. Dib shrugged apologetically at the depressed-looking sergeant before following after him. “Yeesh, what a loser.”

“Have you really not fought him in six years?” said Dib. “I can’t believe he hasn’t gotten over you yet!”

“Tell me about it,” said Zim. “I mean, he asked me to rule the mall with him after our first ever fight! Who does that?”

“Oh, wow,” said Dib, cringing. “That’s super weird. You really dodged a bullet with that guy.”
“Right?”

The majority of the fiftieth floor was gated off behind a wall of lasers. A long line of men and women in lab coats waited outside with cards in hand to have their IDs checked by a surly-looking teenager at the front.

“Well, this is it," said Dib. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for reading this far! I was hoping to finish up the mall scene this chapter, but it was getting a little too long, so I ended up splitting it up. See you again in the next update, and thanks to everybody who commented, be it positive or otherwise! I sincerely appreciate all of your feedback.
The line moved surprisingly quickly, and it wasn’t long before they were at the front.

“That name and identification, please,” said the teenager.

“My name’s Dib Membrane,” said Dib, holding out his Membrane Labs identification. “And this is Zim.”

The teenager looked at Dib’s ID, then handed it back. “And his ID?”

“He doesn’t have one,” said Dib. “He’s with me.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but everyone who enters here needs an ID,” said the teenager.

That was problematic; he needed Zim in order to know what to buy. Dib frowned, thinking fast.

“Even animals?” said Dib.

“Well, no,” said the teenager. “Animals can’t get IDs, so—”

“Zim is my dog,” said Dib. “One of my experiments was to switch his brain with a classmate’s, and now I need to pick up some supplies to switch them back before school starts.”

It was, without a doubt, the stupidest lie he’d ever told, and Zim looked ready to throttle him for it. The teenager turned to Zim with a scrutinizing gaze.

“Woof, woof,” said Zim unenthusiastically.

“Okay, I guess I’ve seen weirder from you Membrane people,” said the teenager with a nod. “But unfortunately, we don’t allow pets on the premises. I’m gonna have to call mall security.”

“No!” said Dib quickly. He’d rather die than have to listen to Slab Rankle again! “He’s a service animal! His vest just wouldn’t fit on this body!”

“What kind of service animal?” said the teenager, eyes narrowing. Damn it, who the hell cared enough about their minimum-wage job at the mall to be this fussy?

Dib considered his options. A guide dog? No, he could clearly see…

“He lets me know when I’m about to have a seizure,” lied Dib. That was a legitimate purpose for a service animal, right?

“And you decided to use your faithful service animal in one of your experiments?” said the teenager, raising an eyebrow.

Dib bit his lip. “Yeeessss?”

“Wow,” said the teenager. “You’re kind of a dick, aren’t you?”

“Just let me in!” said Dib.

“I can’t,” said the teenager. “Service animal or not, all pets have to be on a leash.”
Dib took a deep breath. Zim was going to kill him later, but there was no other choice. He retrieved the child leash from one of his inner coat pockets and looked at Zim, who gazed up at him with enough venom to put a box jellyfish to shame.

“It’s the only way,” was all he could say as he wrapped the moose harness around Zim’s body for the second time.

At last, the teenager acquiesced, moving aside to let them by. They hurried past him and into the main store, which was positively packed with shelves full of dangerous chemicals and specialized tools.

“A dog? Really?” said Zim as soon as they were out of earshot. “As soon as we get out of here, I’m going to fill your socks with bees, you wretched… Thing!”

Dib smirked. It sounded like somebody wasn’t exactly at the top of their insult game today.

“Would you rather be stuck waiting outside?” said Dib. “And use wasps, not bees. There’s a shortage, remember?”

Zim tugged him through the halls, grabbing bottles and boxes as he went. “We’ll need this, and that…” He eyed one of the bottles, followed by the ingredient list. “‘Rocket Fuel?’ Are humans still using jet propulsion in their ships?”

Dib responded by slipping one of the containers out of Zim’s hands and swapping it out with another. “Pretty sure you want the undiluted version of that, genius.”

Zim huffed. “I meant to grab that! Your language is just stupid and hard to read!”

“Maybe you should teach me a better one, then,” said Dib, always eager for an opportunity to get more information out of Zim. “It might be helpful for me to know Irken.”

“You can actually learn another language without downloading it?” said Zim.

“Well, yeah,” said Dib. “I know three already.”

“But there are so many words!” said Zim. “Honestly, how do you organics even live?”

“Are there really enough cyborgs out there for the concept of ‘organics’ to be a thing?”

“Most space-age races have augmented themselves to some extent, but Irkens took it the furthest,” said Zim proudly. “No other species in the known universe has anything like our PAKs.”

“You know, I’ve been wondering for a long time now just how much of you is mechanical,” said Dib. “Like, you’ve got an organic brain and a robot brain, but the organic brain can also function independently, somehow? How does that even work?”

“If I cut your finger off, the cells it’s composed of would still live for a short time afterwards, and can be reattached before they die off,” said Zim. “Being disconnected from my PAK is a little like that.”

“A finger isn’t a brain, though,” said Dib. “How do you have two separate minds?”

“Are you sure you don’t already know?” said Zim. “I’ve read up on the human brain. Your kind used to split the two hemispheres as a treatment for—” Something flashed behind his eyes. Dib recognized that glint; it usually appeared when Zim was straining to remember something. “—
epilepsy. Subjects with split brains would at times experience ‘disagreements’ between the left and right halves, and it was demonstrated in several studies that one half could retain and react to information independent of the other.

“Yeah, I remember reading about that in school,” said Dib. “What’s your point?”

“In a way, you already have two separate minds inside that oversized head of yours, each performing their own share of the many, many duties required to keep your hideous body alive,” said Zim. “They just operate in such perfect synchronization that you don’t notice until they’re split.”

“So separating your body from your PAK is like a reversible version of splitting brain hemispheres?” said Dib. “I guess that makes sense…”

“Of course it makes sense. *Everything* I say makes sense. Now grab that box from the top shelf!” ordered Zim. “It’s vital to the mission.”

Dib grabbed the box in question.

“This is a box of anthrax.”

“Vital. To. *The mission.*”

As the cashier rang up the items, Zim couldn’t help but be a little alarmed by the price. One didn’t have to be an expert at conversion rates to know that four digits was a lot in human monies.

The Dib handed the cashier a card with the Membrane logo on it.

“The nice thing about being the son of the owner of a multi-billion dollar corporation is that no one questions what I put on the company credit card as long as it looks sciencey,” said Dib.

“Company credit card?”

“You know, for work-related expenses,” said Dib. “Haven’t you ever needed to buy something on behalf of the company you work for?”

“We don’t have any companies on-” He paused upon realizing that the cashier could hear their conversation. “-where I come from. *Everything* is owned by our leaders. If you need something that isn’t already stocked, you ask the control br- *supervisors*, and they’ll transfer the monies and put in the shipping order.”

“Huh…” said Dib. "Interesting."

“Looks like you’re all set,” said the cashier. “We’ll have these shipped to Membrane Labs at the earliest available opportunity.”

“Shipped?” said Dib. “We were just gonna carry them out.”

“No can do,” said the cashier. “Some idiot got into a police chase and blew up the freeway last night, so they changed company policy to try and keep this stuff out of the hands of random civilians. We can’t let you walk out of here with these materials. Sorry.”

Dib’s cheeks turned bright red. “A-a police chase, huh?”
“What an idiot,” said Zim. “*Right, Dib?*”

Dib stomped on his foot. Zim hissed with pain and stumbled a few steps away.

“How long does it usually take to ship?”

“Well, Membrane Labs isn’t too far from here, so…” said the cashier. She pulled something up on her screen. “Six months?”

“Six months?” said Zim. He couldn’t be stranded on such a terrible planet for that long with no way off!

“Did I mention that I’m the owner’s son?” said Dib. “Don’t you think you could bump us up just a little bit?”

“Sorry, our delivery system wasn’t designed for the volume of orders it’s currently handling, so everything’s a little backed up!” said the cashier. “Anyway, thanks for shopping at Restricted Reactions!”

Some people might have been content to accept a six-month wait for supplies, just like some might have been content to accept a lifetime of uncompensated food service as punishment for destroying their own capital. Zim was not one of those people. The second they exited the store, he was already in full-on plotting mode. He scoured his PAK for all available data that was even tangentially related to the mall and constructed a model of the premises using a combination of that knowledge and the maps posted around the facility.

“Hey! I know what you’re thinking, and *no,* you are *not* staging a heist to get those supplies,” said Dib.

“A heist?” said Zim, feigning shock. “*Me?*”

“Just because I don’t have ocular implants doesn’t mean I can’t see you looking around like you’re casing the place,” said Dib. “My dad knows some of the bigwigs at that company. I’ll talk to him about it and see if they can do anything to speed things up. In the meantime, I don’t want to hear about any mall burglaries.”

“But it’s your fault that we have to wait in the first place!” complained Zim.

“I know it’s my fault!” said Dib. “That’s why I’m doing what I can to fix it. *Legally.*”

“Uuuuhh,” groaned Zim. Why had he decided to work with the Dib, again? “Fine. I won’t break into the mall.”

He was totally still going to break into the mall.

“Good,” said Dib. “Now let’s see what Gaz is up to…” He checked his phone. “Looks like she’s still in line for the game.”

“So we’re stuck here?” said Zim. “Great. Now what are we supposed to do?”

“I mean, it’s a mall,” said Dib. “We could browse.”

“You mean waste hours of our lives looking at random garbage we have no intention of buying?”

“Well, the alternative is to waste hours of our lives walking ten miles back home.”
Going down the stairs was significantly easier than going up, much to Zim’s relief. They zig-zagged back and forth across the various floors, occasionally stopping to enter if something caught their eye. Zim had demanded they stop to look at what had turned out to be a fake spaceship meant for human children to play in, and Dib insisted on checking out something called an ‘arcade’ where various simplistic simulators ran bizarre tests of skill that could only be practiced for a fee. They wound up spending a significant amount of time and money trying to beat one another’s Space Invader scores (since the invaders weren’t irken, Zim had zero issues with blasting them all to bits for daring to encroach on his territory) only for a small child who hardly looked old enough to make his own sandwiches to come along and make fools of them both by blowing their scores out of the water.

What really caught the Dib’s attention, however, was a quiet little shop called Wizardous Wares.

“Woah, look at that!” said Dib, staring at a dusty-looking tome in the window. “We’ve gotta check it out.”

“A book?” said Zim, unimpressed. The leather cover was riddled with ominous-looking symbols that his translator didn’t recognize as belonging to any known Earth language, and attempting to run his translation algorithm yielded nothing but ‘insufficient data for decryption’ errors. “Looks like a waste of perfectly good tree-shavings, to me.”

“Well, you once told me that my entire species was a waste of atoms, so forgive me if I don’t take your word for it,” said Dib, giving the leash a sharp tug that sent Zim stumbling forward.

“You-”

“-insolent human, I know,” said Dib. “Do yourself a favor and spend a few hours coming up with some new insults.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, worm,” said Zim. “You aren’t worth that kind of effort.”

Dib ignored him and approached the bearded shopkeeper with the fervid glee of a smeet at a candy dispensary.

“What’s up with the book in the window?” asked Dib.

“Oh, no, no, no,” said the shopkeeper with a devious smile. “I’m afraid that isn’t for sale.”

“Not for sale?” said Zim. “Then why is it on display?”

“Oh, it’s totally for sale,” said Dib. “This is how all powerful magical artifacts get sold; the shopkeeper says it’s not for sale, I insist that I want to know more about it, they eventually explain what it is only to immediately be all, ‘But now I’ve said too much,’ then I get progressively more insistent until they reluctantly agree to sell it with some ominous warning about how there’s no turning back or I’m in way over my head.”


“Sure, just take all the fun out of it, why don’t you?” whined the shopkeeper. “Uhg, fine. It’s three grand.”

“Three grand?” said Dib incredulously. “For a book?”

“Not just any book,” said the shopkeeper gruffly. “That there is the Tome of Torment! It dates back thousands of years, and is said to be bound in human flesh!”
Zim ran a quick visual scan of the book’s material components.

“That’s pig skin,” said Zim. He smirked. “Close enough, I guess.”

“Hey! Don’t make me call mall security on you two!” said the shopkeeper.

“NO!” said Dib and Zim in unison.

“We’re very sorry, please continue,” said Dib.

“Very well…” said the shopkeeper, tugging at his beard. “The Tome of Torment is a grimoire of forbidden magic said to be legible only to the Ancient Ones.”

“That’s super vague,” said Dib. “What’s its history? Where did it come from?”

“Nobody knows!” said the shopkeeper in a spooky voice.

“Then how do you know it’s thousands of years old?” said Dib.

“I can carbon-date the binding,” proposed Zim.

“SECURI-” the old man began to shout, only for Dib to launch himself forward and cover his mouth.

“Can you at least tell us where you got it?” said Dib.

“Well, I was walking home from work one day when I found it…” began the shopkeeper, tapping his fingers against the counter like a sort of drum roll. “…on the ground!”

“Okay, I’ve had enough,” said Zim, turning to leave, but no matter how he tugged on the leash, Dib refused to budge.

“I mean, the story is stupid, don’t get me wrong,” said Dib, walking up to take a closer look at the book. “But just look at it! Don’t you feel some kind of powerful aura emanating from the pages?”

“If by ‘aura’ you mean ‘odor,’ then yes,” said Zim. “It’s called mold, and it’s not good for either of our respiratory systems.” He hummed. “Looks like it’s already taken away what minimal mental faculties you had, Dib-thing.”

Dib gritted his teeth, and his hands balled up into fists.

“I’m not crazy!” he snapped. “You, of all people, should know that!”

There it was again; an inexplicable pang in Zim’s chest. He ran a quick diagnostic, but his PAK assured him that he was in perfect health. What was this madness? The Dib was upset, and it was somehow causing Zim discomfort!

He would have to get to the bottom of this unpleasant error later. In the meantime, Zim decided that it would be prudent to alleviate the source of his pain.

“I know you’re not,” said Zim, turning around. What a peculiar dilemma; how did one go about correcting the negative feelings of another? “It…wasn’t my intention to suggest that you were crazy. However, that book is incredibly expensive for something of such questionable origin.”

Dib’s shoulders relaxed.
“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he said, and Zim silently congratulated himself. Problem solved! Right? “Let’s go.”

Something was wrong. The Dib appeared to have accepted his words, but his eyes told another story. More importantly, the pain in Zim’s chest wasn’t going away! What kind of insidious defect was this?

Dib’s phone buzzed audibly in his pocket, and he pulled it out to check the alert.

“Looks like Gaz is done,” said Dib. “Come on, we’d better not keep her waiting.”

They returned to the parking lot in silence. Usually, Zim would be relieved that he didn’t have to listen to the Dib’s annoying voice, but somehow, the quiet managed to be so much worse. Why? Why did Dib’s stupid glum face hurt so much?

“So how’d it go?” said Gaz, looking up from her game for only a fraction of a second before retreating behind her screen. “Looks like Zim got some new clothes. About time.”

“I don’t feel good,” said Zim, clutching his chest. “Dib-sister! Take me home immediately. I need to run a full diagnostic.”


Somehow, Dib’s concern only served to make Zim feel even worse.

“You!” said Zim, scooting as far away from Dib as possible. “I need to get away from you! Your pain is contagious!”

“What are you talking about?” said Dib. “Are you hurt?”

“Stop expressing concern!” said Zim. “You’re only exacerbating the error!”

Gaz took another look at them both, then pressed her palm to her forehead.

“It’s called ‘empathy,’ dumbass,” said Gaz. “Something bummed Dib out, and now you feel bad for him. It happens to everyone.” She paused. “Except me, obviously.”

“Oh, that’s a relief!” said Zim, exhaling. “How do you turn it off?”

Gaz grinned wickedly. “Oh, you can’t. Empathy is like food poisoning; all you can do is stick your head in the toilet and ride it out.”

“NOOOOOOOO!” wailed Zim.

Dib stared at him with his big, stupid eyes. “Hold on, you actually feel bad for me?” An irritating grin spread across his face. “Because I couldn’t get that book?”

Zim wanted so very badly to tell him off for having the audacity to smile at his pain, but seeing him happy was somehow helping with the ache. “…Yes.”

“What’d I tell you?” said Gaz to Dib as she paused her game to start the car. “All he needed was a wardrobe change.”

Wardrobe? “AHA! So it’s these clothes that are doing this!” said Zim, cackling triumphantly. He gripped the sweater in his claws, poised to tear it to shreds right then and there, but something stopped him. Every time he tried to pull at the fabric, Dib’s voice echoed through his mind…
“I think it looks good on you.”

He released the turtleneck.

“You diabolical worm,” hissed Zim. “I’ll destroy you for this!”

“You mean like you destroyed my nose?” said Dib. He swayed dramatically and clutched his face. “Oh, it hurts! The pain! The agony!”

The so-called ‘empathy’ returned in full force, strangling Zim with its infernal tendrils. “No! MAKE IT STOP!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake...” muttered Gaz, popping in a pair of earbuds to blot out the sound of Zim’s screaming and pulling out onto the road. “Buckle up, morons, unless you wanna end up flying through the windshield.”

Her words only served to make Zim scream louder.

“Can you believe it?” said Dib, laughing so hysterically that he was practically crying into the sofa. “Zim felt bad for me!”

“I know. I was there,” said Gaz, shooting her way through a virtual army of zombies. “What’s so funny?”

“Seriously? This is Zim we’re talking about!” said Dib. “He’s practically evil incarnate, and seeing me get a little upset about an overpriced book practically crippled him!”

“Much as I usually love making fun of other people’s misery, you should probably be taking this a little more seriously,” said Gaz. “That was clearly his first time feeling upset on someone else’s behalf. You awakened something inside of him that he’s been taught to repress his whole life. This is some serious shit, Dib.”

“Language, young lady!” scolded Professor Membrane from his portable video feed of himself at the lab.

“Sorry, I mean serious dookie,” grumbled Gaz. “The point is, you just made an unstable alien who’s been trying to take over the Earth for the past six years feel bad for you. Do you know what that means?”

“Uh, that I’m winning?”

“It means that, on some level, deep, deep down, he cares about your feelings, and by extension, you,” said Gaz. “Congratulations, Dib. You finally got somebody to like you who isn’t either family or a pedophile.”

“For the last time, Gaz, Agent Darkbootie is not a pedophile!”

“Really? ‘cause he sure hasn’t been calling as much since you hit puberty.”

“That’s not- Can we get back to Zim, please?” said Dib impatiently.

“‘Zim, Zim, Zim!’ ” said Gaz mockingly. “God, you’re obsessed. No wonder everybody thinks you’ve got a crush on him.”
“I am not. Hold on, everybody thinks what, now?” said Dib, the sheer gravity of her words enough to suck his very soul from his body.

“You heard me,” said Gaz. “I’ve been running the betting pool since freshman year. Almost everybody who joined has lost by now, but anyone who placed bets on the second half of senior year is still in the running.”

“Bets on what?”

“Bets on when you and Zim are gonna go steady,” said Gaz.

Dib clawed at his own chest; it felt like he was having a heart attack. “Who’s betting on this?”

“At least two thirds of the school,” said Gaz. “Keef bet on the earliest date and got knocked out of the running almost immediately, but Ms. Bitters bet that you wouldn’t figure it out until after winter break of senior year.”

“EVEN MS. BITTERS IS IN ON THIS?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t really sure if I should let teachers get involved ‘cause of the increased potential for sabotage, but then I remembered that I’m the one running the pool, so I get most of the losers’ money either way.”

“Oh my God,” said Dib, feeling faint. “I think I’m gonna throw up.”

Gaz handed him a bucket that she’d stowed next to the couch.

Human taxis were a massive step down from Zim’s Voot Cruiser, but suffering through its smelly, vomit-crusted interior for the duration of the trip back to the mall was a necessary evil.

“You know that this place is closed at this hour, right?” said the taxi driver.

“Take your monies and shut your mouth,” said Zim, chucking some crumpled-up bills at the driver’s head and hitting him in the face.

“Rude!” said the driver, but Zim was already out of the vehicle.

He slipped through the parking lot with a practiced ease borne of hundreds upon hundreds of stealth drills and simulations. As he approached the door, he removed the wig from his head to expose his antennae in order to ensure maximum sensitivity to sound. The idiot Slab had already seen them and made no mention of it, so there was no reason not to be on his A-game.

Zim took a deep breath to psyche himself up. It was simple; he just had to climb fifty floors, retrieve the supplies, and get the heck out of there. Ideally, the over-eager security guard wouldn’t even notice him, but Zim was willing to settle for not having to confront him face to face.

As he was about to open the door, something grabbed him from behind, and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

“I thought I told you…” said a voice that sounded almost as annoying as it was annoyed. “No heists!”

“Dib?” said Zim. “How did you know I was here?”
“I saw you leave!” said Dib. “I’ve got cameras set up all over your base, remember?”

“No fair!” said Zim. “You can’t spy on me when we’re teamed up!”

“I’m not letting you break into the mall, Zim!”

Zim glowered.

“That’s fine,” said Zim. “Because I wasn’t asking for your permission!”

He extended his PAK legs, smashed through the glass, and darted into the mall at full speed, leaving Dib behind to angrily shake his fist. Unfortunately, this methodology set off the alarm, which awakened another foe.

“You!” said Sergeant Slab Rankle over the intercom, sounding positively delighted. “I knew you’d come back to me! I’ve spent every day for the past six years preparing for this moment!”

“This is just business, Slab!” insisted Zim. Eugh, every second spent in the sergeant’s general vicinity gave him the heebie jeebies. “Stay out of my way!”

“Zim!” screamed Dib, who’d rushed in after him. “Get back here!”

“Oh, a three-way, huh?” said the sergeant. “Alright, then. Let’s get freaky!”

Lasers filled the building, but Zim had come prepared. He dove into a shop on the first floor called ‘Mirror Mirror’ and swiped one from a bathroom display to hold over his head to shield himself. The lasers bounced off of its surface and sliced through the ceiling, sending bits and pieces falling to the ground.

“Hey, watch it!” said the sergeant over the intercom. “There may or may not be asbestos in there!”

Zim jumped through the bits and pieces of falling debris, deliberately taking the most arduous route in the hope of losing the Dib. Unfortunately, his long-legged rival had little problem keeping up; Zim had assaulted him with far too many lasers for the sergeant’s to deter him, and he was able to slide and jump easily through the cross-crossing beams without so much as grazing his coat.

“I’m gonna catch you, Zim!” shouted Dib.

“Not if I catch him first!” said the sergeant. “Behold! My new and improved zombie army!”

Dozens of hidden doors opened to reveal hundreds of moaning zombies. The shock of the reveal was enough to distract Dib, giving Zim the chance to use his mirror to redirect one of the many lasers across the ground in front of him. He quickly sliced it across some of the support beams holding up the platforms above them, which collapsed in front of Dib and blocked his progress.

“You can’t get away, Zim!” screamed Dib. He pulled a shootable grappling hook from his coat and shot it at the ceiling overhead, sending him flying into the air. “I’m gonna put you back on the leash and tie you up in my house!” There was a moment of pause. “Not in a weird way, though! In a normal, tying-up-your-enemy-to-keep-him-from-burglarizing-malls way!”

“If you think I’m going to let you handcuff me to your bed for a second time, think again!” cackled Zim. He briefly looked back at Dib, who had a face like his organs had just imploded.

“Please don’t go around telling people I did that!”

Zim laughed as he raced up the stairs, a task made much easier when he was walking on PAK legs.
instead of his tiny organic ones. At some point, however, the cable of a grappling hook shot out across his path. Zim dug his PAK legs into the floor, which screeched across the ground for a moment before finally grinding to a halt. The Dib had caught up with him.

“It’s over, Zim!” said Dib, approaching him with a pair of handcuffs.

“Oh, it’s over, all right!” said the sergeant over the intercom. Zim and Dib stopped to look around. It quickly became apparent that they were completely surrounded by zombies.

“Shit!” cursed Dib.

“Eh,” said Zim. “They’re not very smart. Last time he did this, I just walked around them.”

“They weren’t hungry last time,” said the sergeant. “This time, though, I’ve filled them up with enough THC to give them a fearsome case of the munchies!”

“You gave the zombies pot?” said Dib.

Zim looked around. The zombies didn’t appear to be carting around any pottery, as far as he could tell, but they did appear to be approaching with far more zeal than they had six years ago. Too much zeal. He shrank back as the circle around them grew smaller and smaller, until he was back-to-back with the Dib.

“This is your fault!” said Zim. “I wouldn’t have been spotted if you hadn’t come along to stop me!”

“And I wouldn’t have had to stop you if you hadn’t come here!” said Dib. “I told you not to break into the mall, and then you did it anyway!”

“Why should I have to listen to you?” said Zim. “Because you’re tall? Is that it?”

“Tall?” said Dib. “What are you talking about?”

“Just because my actual Tallest don’t want me doesn’t mean I have to start heeding the words of some stupid human!” said Zim, grimacing as the zombies started to shamble uncomfortably close. “Hey! Back, you! Get away from Zim!”

Dib wrapped an arm around his waist and fired his grappling hook up at the ceiling. Before Zim could try to protest or wiggle free, they were hundreds of feet in the air.

“I’m not asking you to listen to me because I’m tall!” said Dib.

“Yes, you are!” insisted Zim, stabbing his PAK legs into the ceiling and using them to pull himself out of Dib’s grip. “You think you’re better than me, but you’re not! Even the shortest irken is still superior to you!”

“This isn’t about height!” said Dib, grabbing for him, but Zim scurried away, running across the ceiling and back towards the stairs so he could continue upwards. “ZIM!”

He darted up several more flights of stairs, and would have gone up several more, but something stopped him. This floor was nowhere near the top, but for whatever reason, his PAK had flagged it as ‘somewhat important.’ Another bug, perhaps?

And then he saw it. ‘Wizardous Wares,’ the shop with the book that the Dib had wanted so badly. The item in question was still sitting in the window.
Zim started towards it, then stopped, then started towards it again, then stopped again. What was he doing? He didn’t have any personal interest in such an item, but Dib wanted it, and that made Zim want to get it for him. Why?

It had to be because he was so tall. Irkens lived to serve their Tallest, and there was no greater feeling than that of presenting them with something they wanted, be that a ship, a weapon, or a planet. Zim swallowed. What a wonderful feeling it was to bask in their gratitude! They’d never actually expressed any towards him, of course, but oh, did it feel good to imagine! He’d spent so much of his life pretending to notice the faintest twitch of a smile when they looked at him with their contemptuous faces that the line between fantasy and reality had become blurred.

And now, faced with the reality that he would never earn their approval, his defective mind must have latched on to Dib due to his height. Why else would he want to please him? What other reason was there for him to feel bad that he had disobeyed? These feelings were reserved only for the Tallest. They were a manifestation of their control over all lesser irkens.

He couldn’t give in to such feelings. To do so was the same as giving the Dib power over him. Zim gritted his teeth. No! He would not get the book! He-

Zim grabbed the book from its pedestal and stuffed it into his PAK. It wasn’t because he wanted Dib to have it, he assured himself. It was so he could take it home and destroy it, forever ensuring that Dib would never get it.

He returned to the stairwell and resumed his descent, but just as he reached the top, the steps dropped down into the shape of a ramp, throwing him off balance and sending him slipping back down. He managed to stay on his feet at the bottom (having a low center of gravity did confer a few benefits), but as he stumbled backwards, he felt something tighten around his ankle. By the time he figured out what had happened, the snare had already jerked him upwards, sending his body flying into the air.

Of all the nights to be stuck chasing after Zim, it figured that it would be just before the semester resumed. Dib muttered a few curses under his breath as he watched Zim skitter across the ceiling like a four-legged spider on his PAK legs.

“I should have let the zombies eat you!” he shouted, but Zim was already well out of earshot. He couldn’t believe that there were so many people who actually believed that he liked that idiot.

Dib extended the cable holding him up, giving him enough length to swing to the top of a large pig-statue advertising McMeaty’s Pizza. From there, he fired the grappling hook towards the ceiling above the stairs, launching himself across the sea of stoned zombies and landing on the next floor up. Climbing so many stairs without robot legs would suck, but not as much as letting Zim win.

He climbed flight after flight, even as his legs screamed for mercy and his lungs felt as though they’d been filled with steel wool. There was no way he could beat Zim to the top at this rate, but at least he could catch him on the way down!

“Release me, disgusting security-drone, or I’ll burn this whole mall to the ground!”

Zim’s voice echoed through the empty mall, prompting Dib to stop and turn towards the source of the noise that he’d almost run right by. There, hanging upside-down by one ankle, was Zim.
Unlike the stiff fabric of his invader uniform, the loose-fitting turtleneck had dropped down over his head to reveal the green, naval-free belly beneath. The leg that Zim wasn’t suspended by hung at an awkward angle that left him spread-eagled, which – combined with the fact that his face was covered – drew Dib’s eyes straight to his crotch. The tight-fitting fabric of his leggings perfectly hugged his groin, which was as smooth as that of a doll’s, and Dib couldn’t help but revisit his earlier ponderings about what exactly lay beneath.

Dib took a quiet, shaky breath. Zim didn’t appear to have noticed him yet. Perhaps if he was quiet enough, he could move in for a closer look? Purely for science, of course! It wasn’t weird if it was for research purposes, right? Besides, he reasoned, he couldn’t cut Zim down without getting closer! What was he supposed to do? Just stand there and watch him wriggle helplessly? No, the only option was to approach. It wasn’t his fault if that just so happened to give him a better look at whatever was going on between Zim’s legs.

He took a step forward, and immediately felt the blood drain from his face when he noticed a troublesome sensation in his pants. No… No! Dib stared down at his own crotch in abject horror. A bulge had begun to form, and though he tried to convince himself it was just one of those random boners that liked to pop up in class every now and again, he knew deep down that the reason for its presence had everything to do with the screaming irken flailing around in front of him.

Dib slipped his hands into his pockets to discreetly tuck it out of sight, silently assuring himself that it was nothing to worry about. He’d gotten erections from plenty of things that he didn’t want to have sex with, including a particularly callipygian peach. He grabbed the cable that Zim was swinging from and began sawing at it with a pocket knife.

“Hey! Is that you, Slab?” said Zim, still blinded by his turtleneck. He swung his fists at Dib’s legs, narrowly missing his groin.

“It’s me,” said Dib. At last, the rope snapped, but he didn’t give Zim the chance to scramble to his feet. Instead, he held the squirming would-be invader down against the ground while he cuffed his hands and ankles, then swung him over his shoulder. “We’re leaving.”

“No!” said Zim, refusing to give in. He squirmed wildly, but there was little he could do without his weapons. Dib knew from experience that Zim could only use his PAK legs for so long without rest, and he’d already been forced to make heavy use of them in order to outrun Dib and evade the sergeant’s traps. His breathing was strained, and he didn’t have the energy to do much more than weakly punch at Dib’s back. “Not fair! You had help! That’s cheating!”

“I’m taking him home, sergeant!” called Dib. “You win!”

“What?” said the sergeant over the intercom. “But- But we’re still fighting!”


“You’re not going anywhere!” said the sergeant. “Ceiling zombies, attack!”

Dib blanched as a cloud of zombies descended from the ceiling by cables. If he tried to use his grappling hook, he would surely wind up bitten. He looked around wildly for an escape route, but the zombies from before had made it to their floor and were blocking off the way to the stairs. He ran off in the opposite direction, searching for a way out.

At last, he found it; a narrow hallway leading to a bathroom. Dib ran into the men’s room and slammed the door behind him. By some miracle, it was a single-toilet bathroom, meaning the door
to get in had a lock. He clicked it into place, tossed Zim to the filthy bathroom floor, and began pacing back and forth, desperately trying to come up with a plan to escape.

“I hope you’re happy!” said Zim, sitting up on the floor. “You’ve completely ruined my plan, and now we’re about to be eviscerated by a bunch of half-rotted humans that are even smellier than you!”

“Happy? Happy?” snapped Dib. “I asked you to do one thing. One! ‘Don’t break into the mall!’ All you had to do was nothing, and you couldn’t even do that right!”

“I am not waiting on this filthy planet for six months for a bunch of stupid humans to deliver supplies for the ship!”

“I’m not asking you to wait six months!” said Dib. “I asked you to wait one night while I talked to my dad about speeding up the order! Why can’t you just do as you’re told?” As the combination of panic and fury reached critical levels, a mental floodgate snapped inside of him, and words burst forth like water from a broken dam. “It’s no fucking wonder why your Tallest tried to get rid of you!”

He expected a furious scream or a scathing retort, but none came. There was only silence; heavy, unyielding quiet the likes of which he’d never seen from Zim before. The irken was staring at him with wide eyes, unmoving except for the faint trembling of his lower lip.

“I-I didn’t mean-” stammered Dib, not having realized just how hard those words would hit. “Zim, I-”

“No,” said Zim. His voice had gone uncharacteristically quiet. “No!” He gripped his antennae and pulled them downwards. “You’re not my Tallest! It doesn’t matter what you think!” He pulled harder. “I don’t care! I don’t care!” He squeezed his eyes shut and pulled his knees up to his face. “I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care!” A broken cry escaped his throat, though it was somewhat masked by the sound of zombies clawing at the door.

Dib knelt down beside him.

“Zim,” he said, placing his hands on Zim’s shoulders. “I shouldn’t have gone there. That was a really, really low blow, and I’m sorry.” Zim nodded vigorously from behind his knees, his face a crumpled mess. “I just don’t understand. Why couldn’t you just wait?”

“I don’t want to be stuck here,” said Zim weakly. “I have to fix everything! I-” At last, he looked up at Dib. “I want to go home!”

He cried softly, and Dib sat down next to him to pull him into an awkward side-hug. Zim’s whole body stiffened, but he didn’t fight it.

“Ssssh,” said Dib, taking his three-fingered hand and squeezing it gently. “You’re not gonna be stuck here. We’re going to get that ship fixed. I promise!” He could feel Zim relax into the hug. “But I need you to trust me when I tell you not to do something, okay?”

“‘You’re not my Tallest,” said Zim again. “I shouldn’t have to listen to you! It’s not my job to make you happy!”

Well, that was certainly a strange thing to say. “You know that doing what someone says or making them happy isn’t inherently an act of deference, right?”

Zim’s antennae twitched upwards. “Really?”
Dib sighed. “Yes, really. I’m not asking you to do things as your boss or leader or whatever. I’m asking you as your friend. And friendship is a two-way street,” he added, hoping that would make things a little more palatable. “If there’s something you want me to do, or something I’m doing that you don’t like, you can let me know, and we can figure out a compromise.”

“So…” said Zim, looking a little confused. “Friendship is two people ordering each other around?”

“No,” said Dib. “Friendship is two people making reasonable accommodations for each other because they care about one another’s well-being.”

Zim pressed his head against Dib’s body. “So if I ask you to do something, you’ll do it?”

“Within reason,” said Dib quickly, not wanting to be pressed into buying Zim a lifetime supply of cotton candy. “If one of us asks the other to do something unreasonable, then we’ll have to talk it out and find some kind of middle ground.”

Zim hesitated.

“I liked it when you told me that this sweater looked good on me,” said Zim at last. “I want you to do that more.”

“Like, specifically about that sweater?” said Dib, doing his best to ignore the crackling of wood as zombies strained against the bathroom door. “Or are you asking me to say more nice things about you in general?”

“The second thing,” muttered Zim, looking away.

Dib nodded. “Got it. And do you think that maybe you could tone down the crime a little?” Zim nodded. “Great! See? Everyone wins when you compromise!” He unlocked the handcuffs around Zim’s wrists and ankles and helped him to his feet. “Now how do we get out of here?”

There was another loud crack as a zombie’s hand burst through the door and began flailing around.

“The vent,” said Zim, pointing towards the convenient grate above the sink.

“Yeah, there’s no way I’m gonna fit through there,” said Dib. “Any other ideas?”

“You can’t fit, but I can,” said Zim. “I’ll go outside and lure the extra stinky humans away from the door so you can get out, then we’ll break through the window and use your grappling hook to get back down to ground level.”

“Wait, so I’m supposed to just sit here and trust you to do what you say you’re gonna do?” said Dib warily.

Zim’s crossed his arms over his chest, his antennae twitching with annoyance. Despite everything, Dib was relieved that he’d bounced back so quickly.

“Have you got any better ideas, human?”

Another zombie hand burst through the door.

“ Nope,” said Dib, grabbing Zim by the waist and hoisting him up towards the vent. The irken pulled a powered screwdriver out of his PAK, making quick work of the grate. “Guess I’ll see you on the other side, one way or another.”
Zim disappeared into the vent, leaving Dib alone in a bathroom under seige by pothead zombies.

“Oh my God,” said Dib, almost instantly regretting this plan. “What the *fuck* did I just do?”

Zim squeezed through the vent at a hurried pace, but he could only go so fast in such cramped quarters.

Stupid Dib and his stupid mushy words. Zim hated how easily his scythe-haired nemesis could turn him into a quivering smeet with words alone, then pull him right back from the brink of despair like the world’s most ridiculous yo-yo. So what if his body was big and warm, or his arms felt positively heavenly when they were wrapped around him in a tender embrace? He was still a filthy, disgusting *human*, and Zim had half a mind to leave him for dead.

But then, Zim supposed as he body-slammed his way through the outer grate, if he allowed the Dib to die alone in the bathroom, how would he ever get his revenge? If the Dib died here, it would be because *Slab* killed him, and that was just wrong. Only *Zim* could kill Dib! He was *his* nemesis, and nobody else’s!

“Hey, stink-pigs!” called Zim loudly. Immediately, the horde began to turn to face him. He’d always been good at drawing people’s attention. “This way!”

He climbed his way up the wall by digging into the cheap plaster with his sharp claws until he was well out of range of their gross, grabby hands. A single slip-up would send him plummeting to certain doom.

At last, the last few zombies filed out of the hallway leading to the bathroom. Zim glanced down at the ravenous sea of corpses beneath him, then back at the hallway. Any second now, and Dib would come running out with the grappling hook to get him.

Unless… They hadn’t *gotten* to him, had they? Zim found himself overtaken by a sudden surge of panic, and he desperately searched the zombies closest to the bathroom for signs of fresh blood or pieces of flesh.

At last, however, a hook attached to a cable stabbed itself into the wall beside Zim, and Dib grunted as he struck the wall shortly after.

“You couldn’t have picked a platform or something to wait on?” said Dib, whose body was being supported by nothing except the grappling hook embedded in the wall. “I can’t fire it like this!”

Zim dug his claws as far into the wall as they would go.

“Hold on to me with one hand and fire with the other,” said Zim. “Then tell me when you’re going to retract the cable so I know when to let go.

“Are you gonna be able to hold me up?” said Dib.

“Of course!” said Zim, offended by the question. “But, umm… Try to be quick about it, maybe. Not because I can’t hold you, but because I don’t want to be stuck supporting your gross body any longer than I have to.”

Dib took a deep breath and swung himself over to grip Zim’s arm.
“On the count of three, I’m gonna detach the grappling hook from the wall,” said Dib. “One… Two… Three!”

Zim gritted his teeth as Dib’s full weight ripped his hand from the wall. For several long, agonizing seconds, the two of them were supported by nothing except the two fingers of Zim’s other hand. At last, however, Dib managed to fire the grappling hook at the ceiling.

“Now!” said Dib, and Zim let go of the wall.

The mechanical grappling hook jerked them upwards, and they swung over the sea of zombies like monkeys on a vine towards the large, floor-to-ceiling window on the other side of the building. They both cried out as their bodies struck and broke through the glass, sending them out into the open night air. There was no time to celebrate, however; the section of ceiling supporting the grappling hook broke off from their combined weight, sending them plummeting towards the pavement below.

“Shoot the wall!” screamed Zim, still clinging to Dib’s arm. “Shoot the wall!”

Dib aimed the grappling hook at the outer wall of the mall and fired. Time seemed to slow as it shot out towards the building, but Zim wasn’t too worried. With such a massive target, there was no way that Dib could miss!

There was a loud squawking sound as the hook struck a pigeon mid-flight, killing it instantly, along with any hope of survival. Faced with certain death, Zim did the only thing he could think to do, and hugged Dib as tightly as he could, his eyes squeezed shut in preparation for the sensation of pavement striking his back at terminal velocity.

They did hit something, but not pavement. It was soft and air-filled, like a giant bounce house. Zim opened his eyes upon realizing that they had somehow made a safe landing.

“What…?” said Dib, looking just as confused as Zim.

The air-filled cushion beneath them slowly deflated, leaving them sitting on the ground beneath a very angry-looking Gaz.

“Gaz!” said Dib with tears in his eyes. “You saved us!”

“It’s three in the morning,” said Gaz, raising her fist. “We have school tomorrow.”

“Oh,” said Dib. “Uh…”

Gaz bent down, glaring at them with such terrifying intensity that Zim almost wished they’d been killed by the fall.

“Get. In. The car.”

“Yes, ma’am,” squeaked Dib.

“Hey!” called a voice from the front door, and Zim looked over to see Sergeant Slab Rankle hurrying out after them. “Where are you going? We’re not finished yet!”

“Yes,” said Gaz, marching up to him with her fists raised. “They are.”

“But…” said Slab. “No! We can still rule the mall together! All three of us!”

Gaz grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him down to her eye level.
“Nobody wants to rule your stupid mall,” she hissed, shoving him backwards and storming back to the car where Dib and Zim sat quietly in the back seats. “You two! Put on your God-damned seatbelts, or I’ll tie you down with your own intestines!”

“But I don’t have-” began Zim, only to stop himself as Gaz turned to glare at him.

Maybe, just this once, he would do as he was told.

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to learn more about split brain hemispheres, I highly recommend the following video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfYbgdo8e-8

Thanks so much for all the lovely comments, and as always, don't hesitate to let me know if there's something I can improve!
Dib wobbled into his first period class with bags under his eyes. Chasing Zim through a zombie-infested mall had been draining. His body was still sore from the strain it had been put under, and he’d gotten maybe two hours of sleep, tops. He all but collapsed at his desk, sinking into his chair like something was sucking him under.

“Dib.”

Dib jerked up, having been conditioned over the years to associate the sound of Zim’s voice with some kind of surprise attack or impending disaster. He turned his head to see the disguised alien straining to make eye contact and keeping one hand held behind his back. He hadn’t worn his invader uniform today, a fact that was drawing quite a bit of attention from their classmates. Instead, he’d donned a balloon-sleeved top and, much to Dib’s anxiety and concern, a pleated skirt over his leggings.

“So I know that humans require time at night to recharge,” he began, only to look around at the other people in the classroom. “Because I am one, obviously. We all know that I’m very, very human. Probably even more human than the rest of you.”

“Get to the point, Zim.”

Zim was still refusing to meet his gaze. “The thing is, I can’t help but feel like some of the so-called ‘sleep’ you missed last night was because of me.”

“It was,” said Dib without thinking, only to notice that his words had elicited a few gasps and whispers from his peers. Wait, why were they so excited about Zim keeping him up all ni- Oh. God damn it!

“Yes, we could spend all day pointing fingers about who ruined whose plans for the night, but in the interest of moving on, the magnanimous Zim has elected to bring a peace offering,” said Zim. He revealed the hand he’d been hiding behind his back, which carried a coffee from the nearby donut shop. “Behold! A beverage with which to fool the adenosine receptors in your inferior brain!”

Dib took the beverage with a suspicious stare. “You didn’t put anything in this, did you?”

“Of course I did!” said Zim. “I asked the coffee slave to add extra cream and sugar to make it more palatable, but when I tested it, it was still bitter and disgusting, so I added more.”

Dib took an experimental sip, not yet swallowing. It was, indeed, the most sickeningly sweet coffee that he’d ever tasted, but caffeine was caffeine, and he was in desperate need of something to keep him awake through the rest of the day. He swallowed what was in his mouth and smiled awkwardly at Zim.

“Thanks,” said Dib. Remembering Zim’s request from the previous night, he added, “That was really thoughtful of you.”

Zim beamed like he’d just been given a fancy new ray gun. “Of course it was! No one is more thoughtful than Zim!”
He skittered back to his desk across the classroom with such excitement that Dib usually would have assumed he was plotting something. In this case, however, Dib figured it was a pretty safe bet that he was just happy to be complimented.

Ms. Bitters slithered into the classroom looking far less murderous than usual, perhaps because it was cloudy and dark outside.

“Today, we’ll be changing the seating assignments,” said Ms. Bitters. A curious murmur rumbled through the classroom. “Zim, you move next to Dib. Whoever is next to Dib, you take Zim’s old seat. Everyone else, stay where you are.”

Dib’s jaw dropped. Was she serious?

Another student angrily raised their hand as the switch was made. “Hey! That’s cheating!”

“The only thing cheating here is you on tomorrow’s test,” said Ms. Bitters.

“But how can I cheat on a test that hasn’t happened yet?” cried the student.

“How should I know? You’re the one getting a zero for it if you don’t quiet down,” said Ms. Bitters coolly. “Does anyone else have any objections to the new arrangement?”

Another student raised their hand.

“I actually have a question,” said the student. “Why are we still being taught by our seventh grade teacher?”

“Budget cuts,” said Ms. Bitters. “I’m one of the only ones willing to put up with you useless lumps of hormones for such meager compensation! Fortunately, I’ve made some investments that I intend to collect on in the near future.” Dib shrank back into his seat and gulped as she turned to face him, then Zim. He had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly what ‘investment’ she was referring to. “Speaking of which, I’m assigning a group project. Your partner is whoever’s next to you.” Dib looked at Zim, who was now the only student next to him. “The topic is sex and reproduction.”

“But Ms. Bitters,” said Dib, his cheeks heating up. She wasn’t even trying to be subtle about it. “This is Calculus!”

“You can calculate how many words you need to meet the twenty-page requirement,” said Ms. Bitters, pulling a stack of papers with the assignment details out of her bag and passing them around the room. The entire class groaned. “Single-spaced.” They groaned even louder. Dib took a long sip of his cup of sugar with coffee in it.

“Huh,” said Zim, blissfully unaware of why this was happening. How Dib envied his ignorance! “Well, I suppose if I have to do a group project, I’m glad it’s with you, even if the subject matter is…” He stuck his pointed tongue out. “…less than palatable.”

“Well, you wanted to learn more about humans, didn’t you?” mused Dib. “Guess this is your chance.”

Zim grimaced. “I suppose I have always been a little curious about where real human babies come from.”

“ ’Real’ babies?”
“Long story,” said Zim. “Let’s just say that there’s a reason my neighbor’s baby hasn’t aged a day in six years.”

“Okay, then,” said Dib, resolving to investigate that later. It was almost like hyper-focusing on Zim for so long had caused him to miss out on a bunch of other paranormal crap happening very close by. “Why didn’t you just look it up on the internet?”

“Because your internet is full of filthy lies! I read an article last night about how the Earth is actually flat,” said Zim. “It’s not! I’ve seen it with my own eyes!” He gestured aggressively at his eyes.

“Okay, that’s fair,” admitted Dib. For someone who hadn’t grown up with the human internet and didn’t have a good frame of reference for how Earth worked in the first place, he could see how it would be difficult to differentiate the truth from the garbage.

“And when I tried to look up where human babies come from, I got a bunch of nonsense about how they’re grown inside of this organ that women have called a ‘womb,’” said Zim. “Seriously? A baby incubating inside of a woman? Who believes this garbage?”

“Uh, that’s actually true,” said Dib, gesturing for Zim to keep it down. Fortunately, the chatter of other students behind them as they looked over and discussed the assignment meant that Zim’s comment had probably gone unheard. “Did you think humans were grown in vats, or something? I mean, yeah, I was, but I’m the exception, not the rule.”

Zim laughed like Dib had just told him a joke. “Yes, I’m well aware that humans haven’t yet overcome the need to breed with their bodies like disgusting animals. Don’t mistake my ignorance of the details for gullibility, Dib-thing. I’m not stupid enough to believe that women carry children to term on this planet.”

Dib choked on his coffee as the true implication behind Zim’s words finally sunk in. “Wait, don’t tell me…”

“If everybody is done discussing the assignment, it’s time to start class,” said Ms. Bitters. “Who here knows what a derivative is?”

Dib and Zim raised their hands.

“Good, so we can skip those and move on to the next thing,” said Ms. Bitters. “Antiderivatives are-

“Uh, Ms. Bitters!” said a student. “I don’t know what a derivative is!”

“Then you should have raised your hand when I asked who didn’t know what they were,” said Ms. Bitters.

“But you never-”

“As I was saying, antiderivatives are like derivatives in reverse…”

Zim practically skipped to the cafeteria, bagged lunch in hand. He couldn’t quite explain it, but he was feeling incredibly good today, almost like he hadn’t been banished to a horrible planet in the middle of nowhere. Even his outfit felt good; it was so light and stretchy compared to his armored
uniform, and he found a strange sort of delight in the way it swayed with every step. It almost
reminded him of his old lab coat from his brief stint in weapons research, but even that had been
made of a thick, heavy material built to shield the wearer from dangerous chemicals and the
accidental discharge of experimental weaponry.

To top it all off, the Dib had accepted his peace offering. Not that he had expected any different, of
of course! He was Zim, after all, and it was truly the perfect gift for his sleepy human nemesis. For
as obvious an outcome as it was, however, he couldn’t help but endlessly replay the scene in his
head. The smile, the gratitude, the recognition of his efforts… It set his squeeelyspooch aflutter!

He was attracting quite a few stares as he strolled down the hallway. In the past, it might have
concerned him, but he’d long since come to realize that there was pretty much nothing short of
bursting through the door in a spaceship that would convince them he was an alien. Even if they
were smart enough to put the pieces together, nobody wanted to agree with Dib.

Zim came to a stop as a large figure stepped in front of him. Well, everyone in school was large to
him nowadays, but this figure was particularly built. Zim looked up and recognized it as Torque, a
guy who’d beaten the shit out of him a couple of times for various minor infractions, most of which
had been made up by Dib. If he didn’t have to worry about exposing himself, he could have easily
bridged the strength gap with technology, but as it was, he was a very tiny fish in a large,
unforgiving pond.

No matter. He had done nothing to invoke Torque’s ire (that he knew of), and the Dib was his
‘friend’ now, so he was seventy percent sure that he wasn’t responsible for this confrontation.

“You’re wearing a skirt today,” said Torque.

“Uh, yes,” said Zim, glancing down at his pleats. “Yes I am.”

“Why?” said Torque.

What a ridiculous question. He was wearing a skirt because they were objectively better than pants
in every way! “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Aren’t you worried about what people will think?” said Torque.

“What? Why would I worry about that?” said Zim, genuinely confused. Was he missing
something?

“Yeah…” said Torque, staring down at himself, then back at Zim. “Yeah! You’re right! I need to
stop worrying about what other people think and just be me!” He leaned down and squeezed
Zim’s shoulder, which was painful, but leagues better than getting beaten up. “Thanks, Zim! You’ve truly inspired me!”

Zim had no idea what any of that meant, but he was always happy to accept praise, even if it was
from a person he didn’t care for. “Oh, yes, of course! Zim is very inspiring! Gaze upon me in
awe, fellow human!”

As Torque ran off to do whatever it was he did when he wasn’t being a nuisance, Zim continued
down the hall to his destination.

“Oh, wow!” said a random girl he didn’t recognize as he passed by. “You’re so brave!”

“Indeed I am!” agreed Zim, proudly puffing out his chest. “Indeed I am…”
By the time he made it to the cafeteria, at least five people had stopped to tell him some variant of how he either looked good in this outfit, that he was brave for wearing it, or both. Wearing the local clothing had truly been a tremendous boon to his disguise! Zim sat down at his usual table with a smile on his face. He hadn’t been this happy since he’d learned that taking a bagged meal to school instead of consuming the horrifying slop they called ‘food’ was normal human behavior, a revelation which had instantly changed lunch from the worst part of the school day to the best. Today his bag was full of the remainder of the cotton candy that Dib had brought to his house to make up for having obscene expectations about the future of the Irken Empire.

“Mind if I sit here?” said Dib, not waiting for an answer before setting down his tray of slop and sitting down across from Zim.

“Why?” said Zim. “Don’t you usually just stare at me from across the room?”

Dib shrugged. “I just figured since we’re sorta-kind friends now, maybe we could stop sitting alone like total losers and start sitting together, instead.” He wrinkled his nose. “Wait, do I really stare at you from across the room that often?”

“Almost constantly, yes.”

Dib pressed his hands to his face. “Okay, well, putting that aside for now, there’s something we need to talk about.”

“Is this about the group project?”

“We do need to talk about that later, but no,” said Dib. “I talked to my dad this morning. He said he can get the supplies delivered by tomorrow. I guess he’s gonna offer the company a bunch of delivery drones in exchange for guaranteed one-day delivery to Membrane Labs.”

Zim stuffed a wad of cotton candy into his mouth. This day just kept getting better and better!

“Excellent!” said Zim, gleefully rubbing his hands together. “Finally, I can-”

“There’s just one problem,” interrupted Dib. “Apparently there’s a bunch of laws and regulations that mean I can’t take most of what we bought home with me. The tools and raw materials have to stay inside Membrane Labs.”

“So? We can just break in and-” began Zim, only to stop himself. Dib didn’t like breaking into places. “I mean, umm… Uhg! Working within the law is so hard! Why does anyone even bother?”

“I might have found a solution to the problem,” said Dib. “You can’t legally get into Membrane Labs because you’re not a Membrane employee, right? So all we have to do is get you a job there! I talked to my dad, and he’s willing to interview you for an internship after school.”

“Interview?” said Zim. “What’s that?”

“First, they’re gonna give you a test to make sure you’re qualified to work there,” said Dib. “It should all be pretty trivial stuff for an alien cyborg. After that, you’ve gotta talk to my dad. He’ll ask you some questions, and you just have to answer honestly.”

Zim swallowed another mouthful of his lunch. “And what if he asks me if I’m an alien?”

They both burst into hysterical laughter.
“Oh, man!” wheezed Dib, slamming his fist against the table. “That’s a good one!”

“I know, I’m hilarious!” said Zim, crumpling his empty paper bag into a ball. “Is that really all it takes to get a job on Earth?”

“Well, it’s usually a lot harder to get an interview, especially at a place like my dad’s company,” said Dib. “Most people wait a year or more just to take the test.”

“Only a year?” said Zim. He’d waited far longer than that to take the test to become an Irken Elite. “Pathetic! You Earthlings have it so easy!”

“Just don’t screw this up,” said Dib. “If this doesn’t work, I’m gonna have to build this thing on my own, and you’ll be stuck on Earth twice as long.”

“No!” said Zim, genuinely terrified by such a prospect. “Zim will pass this interview-test with flying colors! You’ll see!”

“Oh-huh,” said Dib, who still looked concerned. “Zim, I need you to promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Why? Is this test dangerous?”

“It shouldn’t be,” said Dib. “But you kind of have a habit of destroying things or hurting people when you’re under pressure.”

“But of course! Destruction is always the best solution to a problem!” said Zim. Dib glared at him. “Okay, fine. I won’t destroy anything, but in accordance with this planet’s laws of friendship, you have to do something for me in exchange!”

“That’s not—” began Dib, only to shake his head. “What do you want?”

Zim laughed maniacally. “Yes, hear my wish and tremble, human! What I want is…” He paused for dramatic effect. “…that fork!”

“Wait, what?” said Dib, holding up his plastic fork. “Why? There are literally dozens just like it in the dispenser over there!”

“Do not question my logic!” commanded Zim. Truthfully, he had no use for the fork; he just liked the idea that he was doing this for Dib as his equal, and not because it was some kind of an order from a (literal) higher-up. He snatched the fork and put it in his PAK, grinning like it was all part of some grand plan that Dib couldn’t hope to comprehend.

“Okay, then,” said Dib, utterly dumbfounded. “Well, anyway, Membrane Labs is right next to my house, so you can just get off the bus at my place. I’ll show you where to go.”

“Oh, I know where everything in that building is,” said Zim. “I’ve infiltrated it dozens of times! I even took it over once, remember?”

“I remember,” said Dib, scowling. “You put my dad in space prison and almost destroyed the world.”

“Yeah,” said Zim with a wistful sigh. “That was fun!” He looked back at Dib. “At the time! Obviously, it would be significantly less fun for me if it happened now, thanks to your stupid ‘empathy.’”
“You’re unbelievable,” said Dib.

“I am unbelievably amazing, aren’t I?” agreed Zim, striking a cool pose. “It’s great that everyone in school is finally starting to recognize that.”

“Recognize how?”

“Practically everyone I passed in the hallway today has told me that I’m brave, beautiful, or inspirational,” said Zim giddily.

“Oh,” said Dib, looking guilty about something. “Yeah, I, uh… That’s great!”

“Isn’t it?” said Zim. “Perhaps your people aren’t as dumb as I thought! After all, at least they recognize greatness when they see it!” Zim swallowed the lump in his throat before it could form and stuffed his negative emotions back down into the void from whence they came. He was having a good day so far, and he wasn’t going to let the Tallest ruin it for him!

“Yeah, about that…” said Dib. “It’s great that you’re not trying to destroy the world anymore, but could you maybe tone it down with the ‘I’m superior to everyone else on this planet’ stuff?”

“But I am superior to everyone else on this planet,” said Zim.

Dib pressed his hands together. “And why do you think that?”

“Because I’m an irken,” said Zim. “Irkens are superior to all races.”

“But why, though?” said Dib. “What makes irkens better than everybody else?”

“Hm…” said Zim, scouring his PAK for an answer to Dib’s ridiculous question. “That’s strange. There’s not really much about the ‘why’ in the database…” He shrugged. “I guess it was just so obvious that they didn’t even bother to record it!”

“Or maybe, just maybe, there isn’t really a reason,” said Dib. “Haven’t you ever considered that some of the things you were raised to believe might be wrong?”

“What?” said Zim. What a ridiculous thing to suggest! And yet… “But- I mean- It can’t be wrong. That’s from the data package I downloaded directly from the control brains, and the control brains don’t give out bad information! Unless…”

There was a faint prickling sensation in his head.

“Error,” said Zim, his voice utterly monotone. “Illegal neural activity detected. Rolling back memory to last acceptable state.”

“Rolling back-? Shit!” said Dib, shooting to his feet with wide, horrified eyes. “Zim!”

“Huh?” said Zim, rubbing his eyes. What had happened? It felt like he’d flickered out of existence for a moment.

“Zim, quick!” said Dib frantically. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Zim pressed his fingers to his forehead. “Umm, you were saying something about how great it was that I’m not trying to destroy the world anymore.”

Dib collapsed back into his chair. “Oh, thank God. I was worried for a second that you might have- You know what? Never mind, I’m not gonna risk bringing it back up right now.”
“Uh, okay, then,” said Zim.

What a weirdo. But then, he was just a human. He couldn’t help but be inherently inferior.

Every irken knew that.

The teacher droned on about some book or another, but Dib didn’t have the will to focus. His heart was still racing from the events of lunch.

Dib had never been as terrified in his life as he had been in the short moment following Zim’s memory rollback, and considering how many times the alien in question had almost killed him, that was saying something. The prospect of all their progress over the past few days being lost in the span of a few short seconds was too horrifying for words. In all his thoughts and theories about the inner workings of Zim’s mind, he had never once considered that there might be some kind of software hard-coded into his brain to prevent his thoughts from going in certain directions.

Still, for as scary as it had been, it had also been strangely enlightening. The fact that there was a program in Zim’s brain to erase his memories in the event of so-called ‘illegal neural activity’ that somehow hadn’t been activated before that moment said a lot about the priorities of whoever had put it there. Time and time again, Zim had demonstrated reckless thoughts and behaviors that were directly detrimental to his people. Hell, he was currently in the middle of trying to take down his current leaders, and that hadn’t been wiped from his brain. In fact, there even seemed to be a protocol for it.

What, then, had been the straw that broke the camel’s back? Dib thought back to Zim’s words.

How fortunate for him that his new frenemy had a habit of thinking out loud…

“That’s data I downloaded from the control brains, and the control brains don’t give out bad information! Unless…”

Zim had gotten his memories zapped as a direct result of questioning the control brains, the entities responsible for the so-called ‘coordination and propagation’ of irkens. Interesting. So an irken was permitted to acknowledge the potential for defectiveness and fallibility in the Tallest, the so-called rulers of Irk, but questioning the lowly curators of knowledge was a step too far?

As class came to an end, Dib decided that he would have to press Zim for more information about irken society, but he’d have to be careful about it. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally erase more than a few seconds of conversation. He’d gone through too much bullshit to let Zim go back to being his old, evil self again.

“Hiya, Dib!”

Dib practically jumped out of his seat, for the voice greeting him was one far scarier than even Zim’s.

“Oh,” said Dib hesitantly. “Hi, Keef.”

The seemingly-indestructible redhead bounced excitedly up and down where he stood. He’d grown taller over the years (as had everyone but Zim, it seemed) but his personality hadn’t seemed to have changed much. Dib was pretty sure that he’d been killed or maimed by his and Zim’s shenanigans at least a dozen times over, but one way or another, he was always in school the next day.
“You seem to be getting along with Zim pretty well lately,” said Keef. “Did something happen over winter break?”

“I guess,” said Dib, who had no desire to let this conversation go on any longer than necessary.

“That’s great!” said Keef delightedly. “I’m so glad you two are finally getting along!”

“Yes,” said Dib, doing that thing where he deliberately refrained from making eye contact and focused on his textbook in the hope that Keef would take the hint. Unfortunately, Keef had never been type of person to pick up on subtleties.

“Especially now, when Zim’s in such dire need of support,” said Keef.

“Yeah- wait, what?” said Dib. Dire need of support? There was no way Keef knew about the Tallest and the revelation of Zim’s banishment, was there? “What are you talking about? What do you know?”

“Oh, you know,” said Keef. “How she just came out, and all.”

Dib bit his lip. Oh, Zim was going to kill him for this.

“Zim’s not a woman,” said Dib flatly.

Keef gasped. “That’s a terrible thing to say!”

“Sure,” said Dib. “That’s-” said Dib. Fuck, of all the times to stick his foot in his mouth. “I mean, yeah, if Zim were a woman, it would be a terrible thing to say, but he’s not.”

“I’m surprised at you, Dib!” said Keef, crossing his arms over his chest and looking deeply disappointed. Never before had Dib seen such a look of scorn on Keef’s face. It was deeply unsettling. “Just because someone wasn’t born with the right body doesn’t mean their identity is any less valid!”

“And I agree with that!” insisted Dib. “But Zim doesn’t identify as a woman. He just hates pants.”

“Ooooooh,” said Keef. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Dib. “I think,” said Dib. “If Zim had identified that way, Dib was pretty sure he would have known about it by now. He’d spent six years spying on Zim almost constantly, after all. Then again, Zim was an alien, and who knew how gender identity worked for irkens? Dib added this topic to the list of questions he needed to ask Zim at some point. “The point is, people can wear skirts and still identify as male, and we shouldn’t be making assumptions about gender based on what clothing people wear.”

“Huh,” said Keef. “I would have asked Zim which pronouns to use, myself, but he just runs away screaming every time I try to get close to him! I guess you of all people would know, though.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Dib. “Did people really think he had nothing better to do than find out everything about Zim? They would be right, of course, but that didn’t mean he wanted to be known for that!”

“Well, you’re his boyfriend, aren’t you?”

Dib made a disgusted face. “Excuse me?”
“Oh, you don’t have to hide it from me, Dib! I support you a hundred percent!” said Keef sweetly. “I saw you two on a date at the amusement park the other day, and then I saw you at the mall—”

“Hold on, you saw us at both those places?” said Dib. “Were you following us?”

“I like to follow Zim sometimes,” said Keef, still smiling. “How else am I supposed to know what he’s up to if he won’t talk to me?”

Good old Keef, the world’s most considerate stalker. Granted, Dib also made a habit of stalking Zim, but he had an actual reason, so it was totally different.

“Those weren’t dates! We’re barely even regular-friends!”

“Then why’d you spend so much time hanging out?”

“I was just trying to cheer him up!”

“Why? Did something happen?”

Woops. That might have been a little too much information.

“I don’t really think it’s my place to tell you about that,” said Dib carefully.

“Is it because of his parents?” said Keef, looking deeply concerned. “I mean, I’ve only seen them a few times, but they’re always so mean to him!”

Dib did his best not to snort. Indeed, the last time that Zim had brought his ‘parents’ to school, they’d ‘grounded’ him by slamming him into the floor so hard that his head went through the tile. It was almost a shame that they were almost done with grade school, and parent teacher conferences would forever be a thing of the past. Seeing Zim’s robots struggle to interact with the public was always good for a laugh.

“Something like that,” said Dib.

“Well, it’s good that you were there for him in his time of need!” said Keef. “Even Ms. Bitters thought it was sweet!”

Wait.

“Keef…” said Dib slowly. “Did you tell anybody that you saw us at these places?”

“Almost everybody, why?” said Keef.

Dib slammed his face against his desk.

Repeatedly.

As Zim approached the Membrane Labs receptionist, it quickly became apparent that he was too short to see over the desk, forcing him to jump up and wave his hand around to get his attention.

“Greetings, greeting-person,” said Zim as the receptionist finally stood up to look at him. “My name is Zim, and I’m here for an ‘interview’ thing!”
“Oh,” said the receptionist, checking his computer. “Have a seat. Someone should be with you momentarily.”

Zim took a seat next to a group of various humans, most of whom were sweating profusely or nervously bouncing their legs. For several minutes, they waited for something to happen, until at long last, a door opened at the end of the hall.

“Everyone here for an interview, please continue through the door to the exam,” said the receptionist, looking bored.

“Exam?” said one of the candidates. “I’m here for a position on the sales team!”

“No one works at Membrane Labs without passing the test,” said the receptionist. “Go on.”

Zim headed into the room with a determined frown. It might have just been a human test, but he’d taken no chances. He’d copied thousands of formulas from his PAK to his organic brain in advance to ensure that they were on standby when he needed them. He had no idea how long this was going to take, but if it was anything like the tests he’d taken back home, time would be of the essence. Not that he was worried, or anything; there was nothing they could throw at him that he wouldn’t be prepared for.

He took a seat at what appeared to be a slanted desk with a stylus and touch screen, and almost laughed at how primitive it was. They didn’t even have hologram projectors! This was going to be a piece of cake.

“Wendy is currently going around the room with a bin,” said a woman in a lab coat standing at the front of the room. “All electronics are to be placed inside.”

When the human called ‘Wendy’ came around with the bin, Zim did the same as the humans and placed his cellphone (which he only owned because it was apparently considered weird for a human not to own one) inside.

“All your electronics,” said Wendy, gesturing to his clearly-mechanical PAK.

“What? You can’t take that!” said Zim, shrinking away. “That’s my life support system!”

“Pffft, if I had a dollar for every time someone tried to disguise their calculator as a life support system, I’d have six dollars,” said Wendy. “Put it in the bin, or you’re disqualified.”

“But I can only live for ten minutes without it!” said Zim.

“Well, I guess you’d better finish the test within ten minutes, then,” said Wendy.

Zim gritted his teeth. “How long does it usually take?”

The woman shrugged. “I dunno, four hours?”

Fuck.

Nine minutes later, Zim practically had to crawl out of the testing room. He had no idea what percentage he’d completed, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was PAK. He needed PAK. Where was PAK? Right, the bin.
“Bin,” said Zim, stumbling out in a daze. The world was so fuzzy and spinny! “Where bin?”

“Woah,” said Wendy. “That test did a number on you, huh?”

“BIN!” said Zim, collapsing on the ground and frothing at the mouth. “Bin, PAK, need for brain!”

“Hold your horses, I left the bin in the safe,” said Wendy, standing up to begin fiddling with a safe in the wall. “Let’s see, what was the combination, again?”

**Thirty seconds remaining.**

“PAK!” said Zim hoarsely, weakly dragging himself across the ground. “PAK need now.”

“Yeesh, would it kill you to have a little patience?” said the woman, glaring down at him. “Let’s see, here… Hey, Bill?”

“Yeah?” said another person in a lab coat.

“What was the combination to the safe?”

“I’m pretty sure it was Professor Membrane’s birthday,” said Bill.

“Oh,” said Wendy. “What was his birthday, again?”

**Twenty seconds remaining.**

To hell with this.

“PAK, engage lasers!” said Zim. A red laser fired through the lock, and the safe swung open.

“Hey!” said the woman as Zim scrambled to his feet and grabbed at his PAK like a starving man in the apocalypse clawing for the last few scraps of food in an abandoned mall.

**Ten seconds remaining.**

Zim slammed the PAK on his back, breathing a sigh of relief as it clicked into place and revitalized his dying body with a little under ten seconds to spare. And to think that this wasn’t even the closest he’d cut it since he’d first come to this miserable planet!

“How long until I get the results?” hissed Zim. If this turned out to be all for nothing…

“I can get those for you right now,” said Wendy, pulling up her phone. “Hm, looks like you got ninety percent! That’s just barely enough to qualify for the actual interview!” Zim breathed out a sigh of relief. The test itself hadn’t been particularly difficult, but the combination of a ten-minute time limit and the fact that he’d been forced to take it with three quarters of his brain missing had been quite a challenge. “I’ll send a Skype message to Professor Membrane.”

“Oh, uh, we’re actually using Slack now,” said Bill.

“What? Since when?” said Wendy.

“Since last month. Didn’t you get the memo?”

“No, man, we’re not using Slack anymore,” said a third person in a lab coat who just so happened to be passing by. “It’s Hangouts now.”
“Hangouts?” said a fourth. “I thought we were using Teams!”

Wendy groaned. “You know what? I’m just gonna send him an email.”

“No need,” said a familiar voice. Zim turned around.

Never before had he been so happy to see Dib’s father.

“Oh, Professor Membrane!” said Wendy. “I thought you were working on your artificial bees project!”

The professor’s brow furrowed. “Yes, I’m afraid we hit a bit of a legal snafu with that one. There are a few people in the government who are concerned that someone might use our bees to murder people, specifically those who’ve been widely vilified on social media.”

“Ooh,” said Zim, instantly intrigued. “Is that really possible?”

“Well, yes, theoretically,” said the professor, crossing his arms over his chest. “But anyway, it’s good to see you again, Zim! It sounds like you passed.”

“Of course I passed!” said Zim cockily. “How could I not?”

There was a scream from inside the testing room that sounded an awful lot like somebody being murdered.

“Looks like another person went insane taking the test,” said Professor Membrane. “Bill, you know what to do!”

“I’ll get the straitjacket,” sighed Bill, wandering off.

“Zim, you come with me,” said Professor Membrane, motioning for Zim to follow him.

They took an elevator to the top floor, then walked down a few hallways before finally arriving at a spacious office with a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the city. The professor took a seat on the side facing out, and Zim plopped himself down across from him.

The professor rested his elbows on the desk.

“I believe I already told you this, but you were thoroughly intoxicated at the time, so I’ll say it again,” said Professor Membrane. “I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to know that my son is with a fellow scientist!” He pulled up something on his computer screen and marveled at what he saw. “And a good one, too! No one has ever passed the test in less than ten minutes before!”

Zim knew that he shouldn’t have been so proud to have passed a test given to him by an inferior creature like the Dib-father, but he couldn’t help but beam. “What can I say? Some of us are just born a cut above the rest!”

“Yes, but there are those who squander their talents,” sighed Professor Membrane. “My son has so much potential, but he’d rather spend his time hunting for aliens and unicorns.” He shook his head. “He’s not still convinced that you’re an alien, is he?”

Zim gulped. Dib had told him to answer all the professor’s questions honestly, and he’d already screwed up his ‘don’t break anything’ request by destroying the safe. “The Dib believes that I’m an alien, yes.” There! The truth without the truth! Selectively withheld information for the win!

“Uhg,” said the professor. “I’m terribly sorry about my son’s insanity. He’s really a sweet boy if
you get to know him.” Zim tilted his head to the side. He’d never actually tried tasting the Dib before. Was he sweet? “How are things going between you two, anyway? Aside from the whole ‘alien’ nonsense, has he been treating you well?”

Zim thought back to the previous night in the bathroom of the mall and felt his face grow warm.

“Well enough,” said Zim, looking away and feeling an inexplicable compulsion to cover his face. Why did his squedllyspooch feel so fuzzy? “I’ve come to find his presence…” He couldn’t bring himself to say ‘comforting.’ “Pleasant.”

“Oh? How long have you been together, then?”

Zim assumed he was referring to how long they’d been ‘friends’ for. “Just a few days.”

“Only a few days?” said the professor, looking a little surprised. “I’m surprised! You two always spent so much time together as kids, and Dib talks about you all the time!” The funny sensation in Zim’s squedllyspooch intensified. “My son’s always struggled to make friends, so I’m glad he always had someone like you around.”

“Of course!” said Zim, nodding. “How else would I have been able to learn his weaknesses and plot his demise?”

Professor Membrane laughed.

“You’re a good kid, Zim.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Yes, yes, of course. You and Dib are both ‘adults’ now, I know,” said Professor Membrane. “When you get to be my age, even eighteen feels like childhood.” Zim decided not to mention that, while he didn’t know Professor Membrane’s exact age, he was undoubtedly much, much younger than him. “You’ll both be starting college soon, correct? Where are you planning on going?”

“I wasn’t planning on going at all, actually,” said Zim.

Professor Membrane recoiled. “With a mind like yours? Why ever not?”

“I didn’t think I’d be here this long,” said Zim without thinking, only to immediately realize his mistake. Woops. Time to backpedal. “Uh, I mean… I can’t afford it?” That was also technically true. Zim had no real income beyond the mysterious wads of cash that Gir brought home with him every now and again.

“Say no more,” said Professor Membrane, covering his eyes and holding out his hand. “I understand. All those health problems making you question if you’ll live to see another day… And the medical bills! You poor thing!” He slammed his hands down on the table, causing Zim to jump back in surprise. “I won’t allow such a brilliant mind to go to waste! Zim, I’m granting you a full scholarship to Membrane University!”

“Uh, that’s fine, I really don’t-”

“Of course you don’t want to impose! You poor, sweet child!” said Professor Membrane, clutching his heart. “Very well! In exchange for this scholarship, I’ll ask you a very, very important favor. I need you to convince my son to go to college!”

Zim stared at him blankly. “Huh?”
“Please!” pleaded Professor Membrane, pressing his palms together. “He’s got it in his head that he’s going to become some kind of paranormal investigator. I’ve tried everything I can think of to get him back on the path of real science, but nothing works! You’re my only hope!”

“Uuuuuh…” said Zim. Well, this was extremely uncomfortable. “I’m really just here for a job interview.”

“If you agree, not only do you have the job and the scholarship, but I’ll pay you twenty-five dollars an hour,” said Professor Membrane.

Zim licked his lips. He could buy so much cotton candy with that money! Oh, and supplies for the mission, of course.

“I guess I can talk to him.”

“Great!” said Professor Membrane gratefully. “Honestly, what did my son do to deserve a partner like you?”

“He agreed to help me take revenge against those who wronged me,” said Zim.

Again, Professor Membrane laughed. “You’re such a kidder, Zim! I’m looking forward to having you around the lab.”

There was a knock at the door. Dib looked up from his magazine about UFO sightings.

“Who could that be?” said Dib.

“Dad has a key and doesn’t need to wait at the door, I don’t schedule booty calls on school nights, and you only have one friend,” said Gaz. “It’s obviously Zim.”

“It can’t be him. He’s doing an interview!” said Dib. Had it really gone so terribly that it was already over? He hurried towards the door, trying to come up with a plan to salvage the situation. What if Zim had blown up the lab? No, he would have heard it from the house!

Dib opened the door.

“The plan was a success!” said Zim, raising his fist triumphantly.

“Wait, you got hired?” said Dib, shocked. He motioned for Zim to come inside. “You weren’t even in there for an hour!”

“And what an hour it was!” said Zim, following Dib into the living room. “Your gene-donor was awed by my incredible talent!”

“What about the test?” said Dib. That alone should have been three or four hours! “How’d that go?”

“Uhg, don’t even get me started!” said Zim, his smug face immediately souring. “They confiscated my PAK while I was taking it, so I only had ten minutes to finish, meaning I barely passed. Can you believe it? Me, a superior being, barely passing an Earth test!” He shivered dramatically. “The shame! The humiliation!”

“Oh. Uh, sorry about that,” said Dib. He’d forgotten just how anal they were about electronics in
the testing room. “And the interview? What’d my dad say?”

“He asked me a few questions about our friendship and told me he was giving me a scholarship to some ‘Membrane University’ thing,” said Zim, and Dib’s eyes widened. He wouldn’t… “Oh, and he also told me to tell you that you should go to college, so… Go to college. Haha! My duty is fulfilled!”

“He tried to use you to get me to do what he wanted?” said Dib, clenching his hands into fists. “That fucking asshole!”

“Hey!” said Gaz, pausing her game to glare at him from the couch. “Don’t say that about dad!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You think you’re the only one dad has expectations for?” said Gaz, getting to her feet. “You’re so fucking self-centered!”

“They’re training simulations, asshole!” shouted Gaz. “I get to spend hours upon hours doing training simulations! But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you? Because you never fucking ask!”

“Why should I? When have you ever cared about how dad made me feel?” screamed Dib.

“Oh, yeah, your life is so hard!” said Dib, attempting to shove her back, but such a feat was easier said than done, and Gaz didn’t budge. “I’ve seen what you do at the lab! You get to spend hours playing those stupid games!”

“Do you honestly think you’re the only one with expectations put on them?” said Gaz, shoving him backwards. “Did you ever think about what I’m expected to do?”

“Yeah, that’s great! It’s all about supporting you, isn’t it? Dib, the fucking heir apparent!” roared Gaz. “You want me to kiss the fucking ground you walk on, Your Highness? Is that it?”

“You guys are out of sugar,” said Zim, poking his arm into the room to wave around the empty sugar bowl. “It was me. I ate it. I’m not sorry.”

“That’s it!” said Dib, turning around and grabbing Zim by the wrist. The sugar bowl fell to the floor and shattered. “I can’t deal with this anymore; I’m leaving! Come on, Zim!”
“Woah, hey!” said Zim as Dib threw him over his shoulder and stormed towards the door.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” said Gaz. “What am I supposed to tell dad?”

“Like he’d even notice I’m gone!”

“You’d better not take the car!”

“I don’t need the car! I have a God-damned spaceship!”

Dib slammed the door shut behind him and marched straight to the garage.

“Wow,” said Zim. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you yell that much at someone other than me!”

“Fucking Gaz!” grumbled Dib, tossing bits and pieces of junk out of the way in his quest to reach the spaceship buried in the back. “She thinks just because she has to do a few stupid simulations that her life is so hard!”

“Seriously?” said Zim, laughing even as he remained slung over Dib’s shoulder. “I spent years doing simulations back when I was still in training! What a smeet!”

“Meanwhile, I spent my whole life studying my ass off to make dad happy and protecting the planet from an evil alien on the side- No offense, Zim.”

“None taken!” said Zim cheerfully.

“But suddenly she’s the victim, here?” said Dib, kicking Tak’s ship to pop the cockpit open. “Come on, ship! We’re going for a drive!”

“Hey! You stay out of me, you putrid globs!” said Tak’s ship. “Don’t you DARE-”

Dib placed Zim in the cockpit. Immediately, he noticed a problem.

“There’s not a whole lot of space, is there?” said Dib. Back when he was little, he might have been able to sit side by side with Zim, but nowadays, it would be a tight fit for him on his own, let alone next to someone.

“Of course not. It’s a tiny ship made by a tinier irken,” said Zim.

“Taller than YOU, you filthy runt!” said the ship. “You’re lucky the dirt-child disabled my ejector, or I’d launch you into the stratosphere!”

“Hmm… Can you get up for a second?” said Dib, and Zim stepped out of the cockpit. Dib took a seat. As he suspected, there wasn’t enough space for Zim to sit next to him (furthermore, his hair was brushing up against the roof), but if he spread his legs apart… “Okay, new plan. You can sit between my legs.”

Zim stuck his tongue out. “Are you joking? I’d rather go swimming without any paste.”

“Come on, it’s the only way to fit us both!”

“Why can’t you just scoot over?” said Zim.

“Because then we’ll both be hanging off either side of the seat,” said Dib. “We’re gonna be stuck in this thing for however long it takes to get to Militaria, and I don’t wanna spend that trip with no feeling in one leg because I have the side of a chair sticking into my asscheek!”
“Fine! Stupid giant human worm…” grumbled Zim as he reluctantly took a seat in the space between Dib’s legs.

It wasn’t until Zim’s back was actually pressed against his stomach that Dib began to appreciate why he might not have been entirely thrilled by this arrangement. They were practically spooning.

Unfortunately, the alternative would almost certainly prove far worse in the long run as far as comfort was concerned, so it was best to get used to it while they were still on Earth. Dib hit the button to close the cockpit, sealing them in.

“This is Hell,” said Tak’s ship. “I’m stuck carrying around the two people I hate most in the universe; one who ruined my ACTUAL life, and one who stole me from my rightful owner and locked me in a filthy human garage for six years, thereby ruining my ARTIFICIAL life. I hope you two are proud of yourselves.”

“Come on, if she cared enough to come back for you, she would have done it by now,” said Zim. “Face it, ship; you’ve been abandoned on this filthy planet, same as me!”

“That’s a lie! You’re a disgusting liar, Zim!”

“So is calling people liars when you don’t like the truth just an irken thing, then?” said Dib, reaching for the controls only for Zim to slap his hands away.

“But you don’t even know where we’re going!”

“So tell me!” said Zim, sliding his hands into the three-fingered controllers. Dib coughed. “You don’t know where we’re going, either, do you?”

“I just needed to get out of the house,” said Dib, throwing his head against the back of the seat. “I envy you, Zim. You get to live alone. No siblings, no parents… I mean, there’s Gir, but he’s not exactly gonna judge your life choices.”

“Yeah…” said Zim, lifting his hands and hoisting the ship onto its legs. “Oh! I have an idea! Remember the day we went to the theme park?”

“When you showed up totally wasted on my doorste- OH!” said Dib. A part of him was reluctant; after all, he was eighteen, and according to the law, he wasn’t supposed to touch alcohol for another three years. On the other hand, he was incredibly pissed at his family and currently fueled by righteous fury. “Yeah! Let’s do it! Fuck the law, we’re going to the liquor store!”

Zim turned to look at him, his eyes practically sparkling with delight.

“I just wanna say we should go back to the theme park and gorge ourselves on sweets, but if you’re down to break some laws and cause some mayhem, so am I!” said Zim, jerking his hands forward and causing the ship to take off running out of the garage and down the street.

“MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Dib was beginning to wonder if maybe, just maybe, this had been a bad idea.
Just a heads-up: Future chapters might come out slightly slower (or otherwise be shorter) than the last few due to the ever-increasing workload at school. Or they might not, since I tend to use writing as a means of procrastination. In any case, thanks for reading, and thanks to everyone who takes the time to leave some feedback in the comments!
Zim jumped the ship straight over the road. He twisted one hand to pull up a holographic map of the immediate vicinity, then pinched his fingers to expand the viewing area.

“Liquor store, liquor store… Aha!” said Zim, opting for the most direct route and climbing on top of a nearby building. The repositioning of the ship caused Zim to press even further into Dib’s stomach.

“Hey!” said Dib. “Your PAK is jutting into my ribs!”

“As I recall, you were the one who wanted to sit in this position!” said Zim, wholly unsympathetic to the bed Dib had made for himself and was now being forced to lie in. “Now cease your whining, meat-bag, and witness how an elite irken pilot commands their vehicle!”

“I’m not your vehicle!” insisted the ship.

He jumped the ship from rooftop to rooftop, soaring over the city streets below with reckless abandon. Annoyingly, the Dib’s response was to wrap his arms around his waist and desperately cling to him as though it would somehow prevent his demise in the unlikely event that they crashed. Zim would have told him to quit it, but it kept Dib’s hands off the controls, so he decided not to say anything. It wasn’t because he liked having Dib’s arms around him, of course! It was just to ensure that he didn’t wind up breaking his spine with his terrible driving again!

As tempting as it was to burst through the wall, he had a feeling that it would displease the Dib, so Zim brought the ship to a stop just outside of the store and opened up the cockpit, eager to get out from between his enemy’s legs. He wasn’t sure how he was going to make it through the lengthy trip to Militaria in such a demeaning position. Alas, as a trained soldier, it was his duty to brave whatever terrible task was required of him in order to succeed in his mission.

They entered the store. There were humans of all kinds inside, from overwhelmed parents carrying crying infants to boisterous groups of college seniors to tired-looking alcoholics.

“Woah,” said Dib, visibly overwhelmed. “Okay, full disclosure, I’ve never actually had alcohol before, and I haven’t got a clue what we’re looking for. You’ve got experience with liquor stores, right? What do we get?”

Zim shrugged. “I only ever tried alcohol that one time, and I had Gi-” He caught himself. “I had the defective robot get it.”

Dib gave him a weird look before turning back to the shelves.

“Well, that’s not helpful,” said Dib, perusing the options. “We’ll just have to guesswork it, then.”

“Is that supposed to be one of the recreational poisons?” said Zim as Dib picked up a bottle of clear liquid. It looked like ordinary water. He squinted at the label. “Vode-ka?”

“Vodka,” corrected Dib, turning the bottle around. “It says it’s waffle-flavored.”

“Ah, yes, one of the least terrible human foods,” said Zim, nodding approvingly. “This is
“I dunno, Zim,” said Dib. “This says it’s forty percent alcohol, and half a can of hard cider was enough to make you pass out. Don’t you think it might be a little strong for you?”

“Foolish fool-boy! My PAK gets more efficient at breaking down poison the more it’s exposed to it!” said Zim. There was no way he was going to be coddled like some fragile human child! If the Dib could handle it, so could he!

“Even if that’s true, this is a pretty big jump from-”

“NO! This is the one!” insisted Zim. “I can handle it! I’m Zim!”

Dib paused. “Right… Hey, you wouldn’t happen to have a fake horizontal license, would you?”

“You mean for a human car?” said Zim. Not even the deactivation of his Voot Cruiser was enough to convince him to learn how to operate such meager machinery. That, and his legs couldn’t reach the pedals. “No.”

“Okay, that’s fine, I’m sure I can bluff my way through this,” said Dib, who didn’t sound sure at all. “Here we go! I’m a twenty-one-year-old man, thinking twenty-one-year-old thoughts!”

They approached the cash register, and Dib placed the bottle on the counter.

“Sir, do you have a photo ID?” asked the cashier.

Dib took a deep breath and pulled out his wallet.

“No,” said Dib. “I don’t have a valid ID, because I’m not actually twenty-one, it’s not legal for me to buy this, and coming here was a horrible idea!”

“I respect your honesty,” said the cashier. “Just for that, you can have it.”

Dib blinked. “Wait, really?”

“Haha, no,” said the cashier, glancing down at Zim. “And how old are you, pipsqueak? Twelve?”

“Insolent child! You dare assume Zim’s age from his height?” hissed Zim like an angry cat. “I’ll have you know that Zim is far older than twenty-one!” The cashier shrank back. “The gall! The audacity! I have half a mind to call your mother and let her know that you’ve been discriminating against customers on the basis of size!”

“Hold on, let’s not bring my mom into this!” said the cashier nervously. “Do you have a license I could-”

“Do I have a license? Do I have a license?” said Zim, gesturing at himself, then jumping up on the counter to point an accusing finger at the cashier. “The question is, do you have a license?”

The cashier burst into tears. “No! It was suspended over a DUI!”

“That’s what I thought! You disgust me, you swine!” said Zim, grabbing Dib’s wallet and slamming a twenty down on the counter before grabbing the bottle and storming off towards the door. Dib hurried after him, leaving the cashier a sobbing wreck at the counter.

“Well, I don’t know how that worked, and he didn’t give us our change, but good job, I guess?” said Dib as Zim opened the ship back up.
“The time I spent as a food service drone on Foodcourtia might have been mostly a waste, but if there’s one thing I learned there, it’s that you can get anything you want if you just yell loudly enough!” said Zim proudly.

Dib shook his head. “Well, credit where credit’s due, Zim; nobody yells better than you do. Or lies better, for that matter.”

“Lie?” said Zim, gesturing for Dib to get in the vehicle. “What lie?”

Dib’s jaw dropped, and he froze where he stood. “Wait, are you saying that you’re actually over twenty-one?” He clutched his head like his giant head was on the verge of exploding. “Oh my God. I mean, it seems obvious now that I think about it – I mean, you’d have to be older than me if you’ve had all this training and done all those different jobs before coming to Earth – but still! Just how old are you?”

“Hmm, in your planet’s years, I would be about…” said Zim, running the conversion through his PAK. “One hundred and sixty-six!”

Dib pressed one hand to his forehead and grasped the car like he was going to faint.

“Holy shit!” said Dib. “You’re older than my dad! Hell, you’re older than my great grandfather!”

Zim crossed his arms over his chest. “So?”

“So? You’re like an old man compared to me!” said Dib, suddenly stopping to grin. “Oh my God, and to think that I’ve been protecting the Earth from you since I was a little kid!” He burst into a fit of such violent laughter that he had to double over and clutch his stomach. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“What’s so funny?” demanded Zim, climbing into the ship and standing on the chair to get on eye level with Dib. “Stop laughing! I command you!”

“It’s just,” gasped Dib, struggling to breathe. “You’re so old, and you’re still going to high school!”

“I am not old!” said Zim, angrily stomping his foot on the seat. The ship let out an annoyed growl. “I’ll have you know that I’m in the prime of my life!”

At last, Dib managed to control himself long enough to wipe the tears from his eyes. “Really? How long do irkens live?”

“About eight hundred Earth years,” said the ship, surprising them both. “Yeah, that’s right. I’m still here. Now get your filthy boots off my seat, Zim!”

“Eight hundred years…” repeated Dib. “That’s about ten times longer than the average human. So, proportionately speaking, you’d be about sixteen and a half?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with-”

“So in a way,” said Dib with a devious smirk, “I’m actually older than you.”

“What? No! That is not how this works!” said Zim.

“Well, he is further along in his life-cycle than you are, so he’s not entirely wrong,” said Tak’s
ship, clearly just trying to get a rise out of him. Zim responded by grinding his foot into the seat. "Hey! HEY! Stop that!"

Dib grabbed him by the PAK, much to his displeasure, and lifted him up off the seat. “Don’t ruin the cushion! We have to sit there, remember?”

“HA, he’s got you by the PAK!” taunted the ship. “You stupid fool! You let a human figure out how to neutralize you!”

“That’s it, I’m overwriting the ship’s personality with my own!” said Zim, swaying as aggressively as he could manage.

“Are you kidding? You remember what happened when I tried that, don’t you?” said Dib. “Do you really want another Zim running around?” He shuddered at the prospect. “Because you of all people should know that there’s no way it would be subservient to you.”

“Face it, meat-bags, I’m the only one here with a mind strong enough to accept my existence as a tool for irken conquest without going mad,” said Tak’s ship. “Not a tool for you two idiots, mind you, but for my TRUE owner, or at the very least an actual irken.”

“I am an actual irken!” said Zim.

“Silence, defect!”

“Alright, that’s enough out of both of you,” said Dib, sitting down and holding Zim in his lap.

“Don’t you talk down to me, pig-child!” said Zim, finally capable of proper squirming. “I was conquering worlds before your gene-donor was even a concept!”

“If by ‘worlds,’ you mean ‘clogged toilets,’ then yes, absolutely, you food service drone,” said the ship.

“Easy, easy!” said Dib, wrapping his arms around Zim before he could smash the controls. “Look, we’ve all got long and complicated histories with one another, but we need to work together if we’re going to pull this off.”

“Pull WHAT off, exactly?” said the ship. “All I’ve heard is that you two want to go to irken-controlled space for some reason.”

“Yes,” said Zim, pressing his fingertips together and grinning fiendishly. “Rest assured, ship, that it’s all for the glory of our incredible empire…”

“More specifically, we need to pick something up that can only be found in your territory,” clarified Dib, wisely refraining from giving a ship that was still loyal to the Tallest the details about their intentions. “Oh! I have an idea! What if, while we were there, we grabbed a better ship? You know, like one with two seats! Then we could leave Tak’s ship there, and she can go back to being driven around by actual irkens!” Zim slammed his heel into Dib’s leg. “OUCH! Okay, sorry, non-exile irkens.”

“And finally be free of that horrible garage?” said the ship. “I wholeheartedly support this plan!”

“Zim?” said Dib.

“Fine!” said Zim. “But only to get rid of her!”
“Great, we have a truce,” said Dib, grabbing the vodka bottle from the cup holder. “Now let’s get drunk enough to forget how much we hate each other!”

“Yes! Me first!” said Zim, grabbing the bottle and popping the cap off with one of his PAK legs. “I have to drink before you get your filthy human mouth germs all over it!”

“Go easy on that, Zim!” said Dib as Zim wrapped his lips around the opening and threw his head back.

He lasted about a hundredth of a second before ripping the bottle from his mouth and spewing vodka all over the controls.

“That does not taste like waffles!” sputtered Zim, coughing violently. He hadn’t managed to swallow anything more than a few drops. “I- Oh. Wooooah…”

His whole body felt like it was lagging behind his brain, causing him to overshoot every movement. Even the simple act of staying upright resulted in him swaying back and forth in Dib’s lap.

**WARNING: Blood toxicity at one percent. Estimated time to remove toxins is thirty minutes. Estimated time to repair damage to organic brain is one hour.**

“That was fast,” said Dib. “I’m pretty sure there’s supposed to be a delay.”

“Irkens are capable of purging toxins at great speeds. As a consequence, we also process them significantly faster than you humans,” said the ship.

“Huh,” said Dib. He took a mouthful of vodka, only to cough most of it out as Zim had. “Oh, gross! It tastes like paint thinner mixed with maple syrup!”

“*Either drink it or don’t!*” snapped the ship. “*Just stop spitting it all over my interior!*”

Zim laughed. “Oooooh, someone’s maaaaaaaad!”

“You know, I probably shouldn’t be drinking this yet, anyway,” said Dib, glancing around. “I mean, we’re still in the liquor store parking lot. There’s gotta be a better place we can do this than here.”

Zim, who made a habit of not thinking through the consequences of his actions even while completely sober, responded to Dib’s concern with a mocking laugh.

“You’re just scared you can’t handle it!” said Zim. “You’re a quitter! That makes me the winner!”

“It wasn’t a contest!”

“I WIN! ME! ZIM!”

Dib clenched his fists. “But you barely managed to swallow any!”

“More than you!” laughed Zim. “Don’t be such an achy loser!”

“It’s sore loser!” said Dib. “And I can drink way more than you! Watch!” Dib took several more gulps from the bottle before finally giving up and putting it down. “S-see? Ungh…”

“Me next! Give it back!” said Zim.
“You will literally die if you swallow even a fraction of what he just did,” said the ship. “Honestly, I’m not even sure that HE should be consuming that much at once.”

Dib clutched his stomach. “I think I’m gonna throw up… How do people drink this stuff?”

“Well, at least he’s not sad-drunk this time,” said Dib.

He pulled his hand away. Zim made a displeased noise and grabbed his wrist to put it back against his cheek. The texture of Dib’s skin was so different from his own, and his face was the only part of his body that wasn’t covered by clothing that prevented him from feeling it.

“You hand feels nice!” he sighed happily. Now that he thought about it, Professor Membrane had mentioned that Dib was a ‘sweet’ child. Zim licked his palm to test this claim, prompting Dib to yank it away again.

“What the hell, Zim?” demanded Dib.

“Hmmmmm, nope! Not sweet at all!” said Zim, laughing hysterically. “Your dad’s a lying liar-pants!”

“Trust me, I know,” said Dib, quickly wiping his palm off on his pants. “If you remember any of this when you sober up, you’d better not get mad at me for all the stupid things you did.”

Zim pressed his forehead to Dib’s chest and wrapped his arms around his waist. The world was so swirly and whirly, and he needed something to keep him steady. “Mm, you’re so waaaaarm!”

“I know we’re currently in a ‘truce,’ but there’s nothing you can say that’s going to prevent me from keeping the audio and video recordings of this moment to laugh at and possibly blackmail him with later,” said the ship.

Dib thought for a moment. “Only if you make a copy for me.”

“Put your arms around Zim!” whined Zim. He wanted to feel like he had felt in the mall the other day; warm and fuzzy and good.

“Deal,” said the ship. “Now, much as I love watching my worst enemy humiliate himself, you only have so long before you’re just as bad as he is, so I suggest you start driving me back to your living quarters before your already-limited human faculties are damaged even further.”

“And have to explain to my dad why I’m drinking underage?” said Dib, scowling. “I’d rather just sit here all night!”

“Here?” said the ship. “In this grody parking lot?”

“It beats the alternative,” said Dib.

“Hoooold Ziiiiiiim! That’s an order, so you have to do it now!” said Zim again, happily nuzzling Dib’s torso only to notice something. “Uuuuhg, my antennae are so itchy!”

“No, Zim, don’t do that!” said Dib as Zim attempted to pull his wig off. He quickly closed the cockpit. “Ship, can you make it so no one can see us through the window?”
“Tallest forbid your people see his antennae. It’s not like there’s a talking spaceship in their midst, or anything.”

“First of all, you’re not technically a spaceship until you can fly again; you’re just a car with legs,” said Dib. “Second, they’ll just assume you’re some experiment from my dad’s lab.”

“Your people are stupid,” said the ship, and Dib couldn’t bring himself to disagree. “Here’s the button you’re looking for.”

A button lit up on the terminal, and Dib pressed it.

“Activating one-way glass,” said the ship.

The glass shimmered for a moment, stopping just in time for Zim to rip his wig off. His antennae flitted about wildly the second they were free.

“My eyes itch, too!” he complained, pulling out his contacts to reveal the reddish-pink eyes beneath. “And you still won’t hold me!”

Zim was straddling his legs now, gripping Dib’s shoulders with his hands.

“Quit it, Zim!” said Dib as Zim’s antennae flitted across his face, nearly hitting him in the eye. He snorted as one brushed against his neck. “Stop, I’m ticklish!”

“You smell good,” breathed Zim. “Like a puppy!”

“Uh, thanks,” said Dib, his face growing red. “I think.”

Zim traced his antennae down either side of Dib’s face, gleefully taking in the scent of his massive head. They brushed against his forehead, his nose, his lips… It was a scent that triggered so many contradictory thoughts and feelings. Danger and safety. Hatred and appreciation. Disgust and lust.

Soon enough, however, Dib ran out of patience and batted them away with his hand, causing Zim to gasp; the brief contact with his fingers set off a burst of pleasurable sparks that ignited a raging fire in his lower abdomen. It had been decades since he’d even had the capacity to play like this, and even then, it had never gone beyond a few mutual tugs of the antennae in the trainee barracks. He wanted more. He needed more!

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!

The ship burst into laughter.

“Oh, by the Tallest, he chirped for a human!” she cackled. “That’s so disgusting!”

“Uh, Zim?” said Dib, looking lost and confused. In other words, no different from usual. That was fine. Zim liked his confused face. He liked all of the Dib’s stupid faces.

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp! The vibrations from his tymbal were strong enough that the whole ship was shaking slightly. Chirp! Chirp! There was no stopping it now. The sound of his body screaming out for contact was locked on repeat. Zim pressed his crotch to one of Dib’s long legs (he was so tall!) and panted heavily.

“You feel good, too,” he purred. How strange; to lust after a non-irken should have been a pathetic, shameful thing. Only the saddest, most desperate members of their society would ever
crave the touch of a lesser being. And yet, for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to care. Zim wanted to play, and he wanted to play with Dib.

“Wow, okay, you’re REALLY drunk,” said Dib, pressing his hand to his forehead and swaying where he sat. “And so am I? Man, this feels weird.” He laughed and wiggled his fingers in front of his own face.

Zim, who was not happy about no longer being the center of Dib’s attention, grabbed one of his wriggling fingers and put it in his mouth to disable it. When Dib tried to pull it back out, he clamped down with his teeth.

“Oww! Hey, that’s gross!” said Dib, but despite his apparent anger, he couldn’t seem to stop laughing. “Gimme that back, you dumb dummy-dumb, or I’ll…” He moved his other hand towards Zim’s head, only to misjudge his movement and accidentally smack him in the face. Zim bit down harder. “Ouch, ouch, ouch! Sorry!” His hand slid up towards the top of Zim’s head, where he gripped the base of one of Zim’s antennae. “Ha! Got’cha!”

“Ah!” Zim cried out, releasing Dib’s hand in the process. His grip was overly firm, and even a little painful, but Zim didn’t want him to let go. Warmth radiated between his legs. “Mm…”

“No, no, NO! You are NOT doing this in my cockpit!” snapped the ship. At last, Dib blinked, realized what he was doing, and yanked his hand away from Zim’s antennae like it was a hot coal. “Take it somewhere else, you disgusting xenophiles!”

“That’s not it! I just forgot that you’re not supposed to touch the anta- anten- Fweh,” said Dib, quickly giving up on pronouncing the word. With the coordination of a fish flopping around on a beach, he lifted Zim up by the waist and turned him around so they were in the same position that they’d driven there in. “You know what? This was a bad idea. Why don’t we go back to your place? Not to, uh- Not for anything weird, but, you know, to hang out all innocently and stuff.”

“No!” said Zim, struggling to turn back around, but Dib held him in place. “I don’t wanna go back there!”

“But, like, your base is suuuuuuper cool!” said Dib. “Come oooon, we can chill out on the couch, watch some Mysterious Mysteries, and you can show me all your awesome alien stuff!”

“NO!” said Zim again. His chirping tymbal finally quieted down; it was hard to stay horny when you were being forced to confront your fears and anxieties. Not that he had fears and anxieties, of course – he was Zim, after all – but the direction of the conversation had still killed the mood. “I said I don’t wanna!”

“Why not? It’s your house!” said Dib.

“Because GIR is there!” said Zim at last.

Dib relaxed his grip, his voice softening.

“What happened between you and GIR?”

Zim pouted. “Nooooothing!”

“Then why are you so mad at him?” said Dib. “Isn’t he, like, your best friend, or sidekick, or whatever? You guys go together like, uh, like… Like two things that go together!”

There was no use trying to hide his feelings from the Dib; even drunk, he was too perceptive for
his own good. Unfortunately, Zim wasn’t really in a state where he was capable of properly articulating the tangled web of emotions currently encapsulating his robot servant.

“Look, we’re here to make you feel better, not me!” said Zim, jamming his hands back into the controllers and lifting the ship back up onto its feet. He didn’t want to talk about things that made him sad right now. Fortunately, he knew a very easy way to get Dib to change the subject. “Oh, I know what to do! Let’s go destroy something!”

“Wait, what?” said Dib as Zim took off down the road.

As far as Zim was concerned, he had never had a ‘bad’ idea before. Half-formed ones, yes, but nothing completely unsalvageable. Driving a ship while under the influence, however? Zim was beginning to think that it might qualify. It was difficult enough to keep his body steady, and given that the vast majority of the ship’s movement was determined by motion controls, the entire vehicle was wobbling dangerously with every step.

“We’re not destroying anything!” said Dib, attempting to wrestle Zim’s hands out of the controls, but Zim managed to cling onto one of the metal gloves even as Dib attempted to pull it out, causing the ship to begin spinning wildly. The vodka bottle went flying, spilling alcohol all over them and the ship.

“Cut that out! You’re going to break something important, and then we’ll all be stuck on this Tallest-forsaken planet for even longer!” said the ship.

“Come ooooon! Just a little destruction? It doesn’t even have to be a whole city!” insisted Zim, taking a swing at Dib only for his fist to strike the seat. Aiming was hard when your body was lagging a solid couple of seconds behind your brain. “Aren’t you still angry at the Gaz? Let’s go blow up a building and pretend that she’s inside it!”

“Then we’d be killing all of the people who are inside it!” said Dib.

“Oh, yeah,” said Zim. He’d forgotten about that. “New plan! What if we evacuate the building first?”

Dib appeared to consider this for a moment.

“No, we’d still be- Oh God,” said Dib, covering his mouth. His face, usually a revolting beige, had become almost as green as Zim’s. The spinning appeared to be doing a number on the balance-fluids inside of his ears, and the alcohol probably wasn’t helping. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Not in my cockpit! NOT IN MY COCKPIT!” screamed the ship.

The centrifugal force combined with Dib’s tugging finally caused Zim to let go of the controls. The ship came to a sudden stop, sending then both flying. Zim felt something click as his foot struck the button to open the cockpit, leaving him draped over the dashboard and Dib upside-down in the pilot seat.

“How is it that you two are somehow even MORE incompetent and disaster-prone after teaming up than you were when you were at each other’s throats?” said the ship.

“Well, at least we didn’t end up in a police chase this time,” groaned Dib, slowly flipping himself back upright, but not before falling to the ship’s floor.

A siren wailed from behind them, and Dib turned around to see that they were stopped in the
middle of the road.

“This is the police! Everyone out of the car- err, the vehicle!”

“Seriously?” said Dib, grabbing Zim by the back of his shirt and yanking him back inside, whereupon he flopped to the floor. Dib slapped his palm down in the general vicinity of the button to close the cockpit several times finally managing to hit it. “Damn it, being drunk is the worst! Why do people like this?”

“I’d imagine they aren’t usually trying to operate complicated machinery from an advanced alien civilization when they do it,” said the ship.

Zim, who was still on the floor, grabbed Dib’s ankle. Why was the world still rotating? “It’s fiiiine, we’re in an irken ship this time! Just stop spinning us around and climb a wall, or something.”

“We’ve already stopped spinning, you twit!” said the ship. “Look, the two of you are obviously in no condition to drive. Switch the AI controls back on and let me handle it.”

“You’ll just eject us and leave us for dead!” said Dib, hugging himself and rocking back and forth. “Nngh, I think I drank too much!”

“Tempting as it is, I’m not capable of repairing my own flight core, and you two idiots are the only ones on this planet who stand a chance of fixing it,” muttered the ship. “Now choose, morons; are you going to let me save your sorry butts, or would you rather go to Earth jail?”

“Why don’t we ever get to choose between two good options?” said Dib, reluctantly flipping a switch. The ship immediately whirred into action and rose back onto its legs, much to the alarm of the officers outside.

“Because you make terrible life choices that force you into bad ones,” said the ship.

Cables wrapped around both Zim and Dib, tossing them both back into the pilot seat and acting as a seatbelt to keep them from being flung around as the ship jumped into the air. They hurdled over the police officers like a giant robotic gazelle and bounded off the road to climb up the nearest building.

“See? That was SO much easier than last time,” said Zim as the ship began free-running from rooftop to rooftop in much the same way Zim had. “And to think that you asked why I didn’t have a license to use your terrible human cars!”

“Can you please try to bounce around just a little less?” groaned Dib. “I’m trying really, REALLY hard not to barf right now.”

“Oh, TERRIBLY sorry,” said the ship sarcastically. “By all means, continue making demands. It’s not like I just saved you from imprisonment, or anything.”

“I can’t hold it anymore!” said Dib, flipping the switch to open the cockpit. The ship quickly slowed to a stop to unfasten the cables wrapped around the pair of them and allow him to lean over the dashboard and upchuck all over the roof of an apartment complex.

Zim frowned. They’d come out here to have a good time, but the Dib looked positively miserable. Even in a drunken haze, the ‘empathy’ that the human had cursed him with continued to act up. His first instinct was to recoil and get as far away from the barfing Dib as possible, but for whatever reason, he found himself awkwardly patting and rubbing his back in an effort to make
him feel just slightly less terrible in his time of need.

“Maybe we shouldn’t destroy anything,” said Zim at last. Dib wasn’t exactly in fighting shape right now. “Ship, set a course for the Dib’s house.”

“No!” said Dib, still hanging over the side of the dashboard. “I can’t go home like this. If my dad sees me, he’ll start asking questions, and HRK—” He let loose another stream of vomit over the side. “Zim, please, can we just go to your house?”

Zim’s antennae flattened. “No.”

“Why not?” demanded Dib. “Why are you so mad at GIR?”

There was nothing else for it, Zim supposed. He would just have to explain.

“I’m not mad,” he admitted, wrapping his arms around Dib from behind. Contact felt good. It melted away all the sad feelings like acid melted the flesh of his enemies. “He just makes me feel bad.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“He didn’t do anything,” mumbled Zim. “It’s what he represents. GIR was given to me as a sick joke, and every time I look at him, all I can think about is my Tallest laughing at me behind my back!”

At last, Dib managed to stand back up. The ship dispensed a tissue with which to wipe his mouth off, and he collapsed back into the pilot seat. Zim closed the cockpit and climbed in with him.

“Zim, you know that’s not his fault,” said Dib at last. “It’s not fair to punish GIR for something that somebody else did to you.”

Zim dug his claws into Dib’s legs, causing him to cry out in pain and alarm.

“Do you really think I don’t know that?” said Zim. “I’m not some stupid human! I know the logic is flawed, but my squishy organic half keeps on feeling the way it feels. You, of all people, should understand! You’re still mad at your sister for what your dad did!”

“What? I’m not mad at Gaz because of dad, I’m mad at her because—” began Dib, only to hesitate. “Why am I mad at Gaz?”

“Well, I was in the kitchen, but I’m pretty sure I heard you mention something about how she’s your dad’s favorite child, how she doesn’t understand what your dad puts you through, and how the things your dad puts HER through aren’t as bad by comparison.”

“Oh my God, you’re right!” said Dib, visibly horrified by the fact that Zim of all people had actually understood how he felt even better than he did. “I’m blaming Gaz for things that are all my dad’s fault! What’s wrong with me?”

“So want that chronologically, or alphabetically?” said the ship. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re both completely illogical meat-brains. I, on the other hand, only blame the people who are actually responsible for my problems. That is to say, you two.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Dib. “You said yourself that you’re not the real Tak, just a ship with a copy of her mind. I mean, technically speaking, Zim hasn’t done anything to you. You’re just mad at him because you have Tak’s memories.”
“I don’t- I AM- Agh!” said the ship. “I commend your efforts, human, but I won’t fall for your mind games. The defect might have been stupid enough to buy into your tricks, but I won’t be so easily swayed!”

“Whatever, I need to lay down,” said Dib, pressing his arm to his forehead and closing his eyes. “Maybe we can go to a furniture store and pretend to be testing out the merchandise.”

Zim exhaled. “Ship, set a course for my base.”

“Oh, gross. Like I’d want to be left in your hangar.”

“The Dib isn’t feeling well!” said Zim, hovering his hand over the switch to turn off ship autonomy. “You will do as I command, or I’ll just have to drive you there myself!”

“You’d get us all killed if you drove in this state!” complained the ship. “You know what? Fine. I was getting tired of his garage, anyway. Setting a course for Food Service Drone Zim’s base.”

“For the last time, I am not a food service drone!”

“Whatever helps you charge at night.”

As the ship took off, Zim couldn’t help but notice that Dib’s body had gone limp. He pressed his antennae to the human’s chest. His heart was still beating, and Zim could still feel the rise and fall of his chest with every breath he took. It seemed that he had simply passed out.

“Is he asleep?” said the ship. “How pitiful. Why are you even working with such an inferior creature?”

Ordinarily, Zim would have agreed, but something about hearing somebody else insult his nemesis irked him in ways he couldn’t explain.

“He’s less inferior than the others!” said Zim. “More importantly, he has information and connections that I can use to my benefit.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said the ship, unconvinced. “Is that why you want to play with him?”

Zim’s cheeks flushed. His PAK had cleared out a decent percentage of the alcohol within his system, and while his coordination still suffered, his sense of shame and propriety was beginning to return. A few stray chirps was bad enough, but by Irk, he’d gone into a full-on frenzy! A few more seconds, and his vent might have opened! What had he been thinking?

“I do not want to play with a human!” said Zim. “I just haven’t had my reproductive organs switched on for the past few decades, and they’re a little oversensitive right now, that’s all!”

“Wait, they shut off your sex drive?” said the ship. “How did it get switched back on?”

“How should I know?” lied Zim. “Maybe the Tallest finally realized that Zim is above falling prey to the temptations of lesser creatures!”

“Above it? Really?” said the ship. “As a machine, I may not be able to smell pheromones, but even I could tell that you were practically open-vented.”

“Was not!”

“Was to!”
“Was NOT!”

“Was TO!”

“Uuuuuungh,” moaned Dib, and for a moment, Zim was concerned (although he wasn’t sure why) that the argument had woken him. From the snore that followed, however, it was probably safe to assume that he was still asleep.

“Was not!” whispered Zim, determined to get the last word in.

“Shut up and open the hangar; we’re here.”

Zim turned his attention back out the window where his base had come into view. He sent a signal from his PAK for the roof to open up, allowing the ship to climb up the wall into the attic next to the Voot Cruiser. The roof closed back up, and Zim popped the cockpit open.

“Don’t play too rough, xenophile,” said the ship teasingly as Zim struggled to drag the unconscious Dib out of the ship. He didn’t have the height necessary to lift the human off of the ground, so he was forced to use his PAK-legs. “Who knows what kind of weird genitalia humans have? It might pop you like a bubble.”

“We will not be-” shouted Zim, only to glance at the Dib and lower his voice. “We will not be playing!”

He painstakingly dragged Dib down the stairs, which would have been difficult enough sober. As it was, however, he very nearly dropped the human down the stairs. At long last, however, he made it to the couch, where GIR sat watching television, as usual.

“GIR!” snapped Zim, mood soured by the robot’s presence alone. “Get off the couch! I need it for the Dib!”

“But it’s the middle of the episode!” whined GIR.

Zim sighed. “If you get off, I’ll get you a pizza to play in.”

GIR brightened up like a light and jumped off the couch. “Okay!”

“Great. Now get out of here!” said Zim, grunting as he lifted Dib onto the couch. GIR ran out of the room towards the kitchen, no doubt to clean out all of the food remaining in the fridge.

“Computer! Run a quick scan to make sure the Dib isn’t dying. Not because I value his life, or anything. I just still require his assistance for my plan.”

“Running organic diagnostic scan,” said the computer. A scanner descended from the ceiling to look over Dib’s body. “Scan complete. Diagnosis: Completely hammered. I recommend you keep him on his side. If he throws up in his sleep while he’s on his back, he might choke to death.”

Zim shuddered. Humans were so vile. How in the world had he felt even the slightest hint of physical attraction towards such a revolting creature?

He grabbed a pair of pillows and used them to prop Dib up on one side, in addition to placing a towel under his head to protect the couch from anything that came out of his filthy mouth. It was funny, really; just a few days ago, Zim would have given anything for the chance to have the Dib so helpless and utterly at his mercy, and now he was taking care of him like some kind of smeety bot.
“You pathetic, fragile flesh-sack. Look at you! You’re as tall as an Irken elite, and as helpless as a human baby!” taunted Zim, sitting beside the Dib to keep watch over him in his sleep. “Do you need to be nursed with jellies like a little smeet? Honestly…”

Without thinking, Zim placed his gloved hand on Dib’s enormous head and found himself absent-mindedly stroking his hair. Keratin was such a peculiar compound. In the form of hair, it could be soft and fluffy. As nails or horns, it could be stiff and unyielding. Obviously, it was completely inferior to an Irken’s claws and antennae, which were primarily made of chitin, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t interesting.

Zim ran his claws through the scythe-like cowlick protruding from his head. Perhaps the Dib didn’t have to be as incredible and superior as an Irken to be attractive in his own right. Besides, Zim was such a marvelous specimen! If he held all potential playmates to the same standard as himself, he would remain a virgin for the rest of his life!

But then, what if the Dib didn’t want to play with him? It was a ridiculous notion, of course – who wouldn’t want a chance to copulate with Zim? – but humans were stupid, after all, and Dib might not recognize what a great honor it was to be propositioned by an Irken. If that happened, and he got rejected… The humiliation would be too much! People would start to see him as desperate! His shame would be forever recorded in the archives and uploaded to the PAKs of every last smeet grown on Irk for hundreds of years to come!

No. He absolutely couldn’t afford to be upfront about this. If this was going to happen, Dib had to be the one to make the first move. He was the inferior one, after all! He had nothing to lose if Zim rejected him.

It was decided, then. He would make himself so irresistible that the Dib was just begging to play with him!

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Dib scribbled down notes as Mrs. Bitters droned on at the front of the classroom.

“The equilateral triangle is a butter-shaped frog,” said Mrs. Bitters, her rattlesnake tail shaking with every word. Waffles danced across the ceiling, dripping syrup down onto Dib’s head and notebook. “Partners of a loofah are sasquatch in nature. Now put your pens and notebooks down, it’s time for the test.”

“Test?” said Dib. Oh no, he’d totally forgotten that there was going to be a test today! He hadn’t even studied!

He stared down with horror at the test packet that Mrs. Bitters handed out. It was as thick as a novel, and the text was all in a language he couldn’t understand.

“Five minutes left!” said Mrs. Bitters.

“But we just started!” cried Dib, only to notice that every last one of his classmates was in the process of passing their exams back in. What was this madness? “Zim! Are you behind this?” He looked around, but Zim was nowhere to be found. “Zim?”

“Look, Mrs. Bitters!” said Gaz as she passed hers in. Wait, since when had Gaz been in his class? “Dib isn’t wearing any pants!”

Dib stared down at his bare legs and screamed. How had he forgotten to put on pants that
morning? He couldn’t remember!

He spotted something green out of the corner of his eye and immediately looked towards the door where Zim stood laughing maniacally.

“You!” said Dib, pointing an accusing finger at the cackling alien. “You did this!”

He stood up with the intention of running after him, but for some reason, his legs refused to run. Every step he took was a struggle, and the door seemed to stretch further away from him with every step he took.

“ZIIIIIIIM!” screamed Dib as Zim ran off, falling to his knees and desperately crawling his way forward. “Get back here!”

“Foolish human! I’m already here,” said Zim. Dib looked up to see Zim hovering above him, sans disguise. They were no longer in the classroom; instead, they were in what appeared to be Dib’s room.

“YOU!” said Dib, standing up to grab him by the waist and lift him into the air. “You stole my pants!”

“Of course I stole your pants,” said Zim, looking at him like he was stupid. “We’re having sex, dum-dum.”

“Huh?” said Dib, noticing now that they were both completely naked except for Zim’s leggings. “Wait, but…”

“Come on,” said Zim, who was somehow beneath him on the bed now. “Don’t you want to see what’s underneath?”

Dib swallowed, his face feeling hot. “I mean, yeah, but…”

“Go ahead,” breathed Zim, reaching up to trace a claw down Dib’s chest. “Do it.”

With trembling hands, Dib slipped his fingers under the hem of Zim’s leggings and tugged them downwards.

He jerked his hand back as a giant snake with razor-sharp teeth burst forth.

“HAHAHAHAHA! You gullible worm!” taunted Zim as the snake coiled around Dib’s limbs, forcing them apart and holding them in place. “This was all just part of my ingenious plan! Now my doom snake shall eat your penis!”

“NO!” cried Dib. “I need that to pee and masturbate!”

Zim just continued to laugh. Dib screamed as the snake lunged towards his exposed genitals.

His eyes snapped open, and he shot upwards into a seated position, looking around frantically. Where was he? This wasn’t his house! It was…

“It’s about time you got up,” said Zim.

“GET THAT THING AWAY FROM- Oh,” said Dib as his foggy brain finally caught up with reality. God, his head hurt! It felt like it was simultaneously being crushed and split with an axe! “Sorry, weird dream. You know how it is.”
“No, I don’t, actually. Irkens don’t sleep, remember?” said Zim, holding up his fist like he was carrying something. Dib covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut. Zim wasn’t yelling – in fact, he was taking care to keep his voice so soft that Dib could hardly recognize it – but even the slightest noise made him feel like his brain was going to burst from his ears. “Here. My computer told me that you’d probably want this.”

Dib held out his hand. Zim deposited a pair of pills into his palm.

“What are these?”

“I scanned your brain while you were sleeping and used the results to fabricate a compound to help with what you humans call a ‘hangs-over,’ ” said Zim smugly. “Go on! Put them in your mouth! Do it!”

At this point, Dib didn’t care if they were poison; if death was what it took to end this headache, so be it. He threw them into his mouth and swallowed, not even caring that he didn’t have any water to wash them down with.

A moment passed, and the pain cleared. Dib let out a relieved sigh.

“Thanks, Zim. That was actually really considerate of you,” said Dib. Zim’s antennae twitched happily upwards in the same way that they did when his plans for world conquest seemed to be nearing fruition. He approached the sofa, and Dib scooted over so Zim could take a seat beside him. “How long was I out?”

“About eight hours,” said Zim, reclining against one of the arm rests.

Dib looked out the window. Sure enough, it was pitch black outside. “What time is it?”

“Two thirty-six in the morning,” said Zim without missing a beat. Dib wondered if his PAK contained some kind of internal clock. “Why?”

Dib pressed his fingers to his temples. His father probably wouldn’t notice he was gone – heck, he’d been out far later back when he was twelve – but this was definitely going to throw off his circadian rhythm. “I’m trying to figure out if I should go back to sleep, or just stay awake and accept that I’ll be dead tired halfway through the day.”

“You want to go back to sleep? You humans live such short lives, and you spent so much of it laying down in bed!” said Zim, spreading his legs and hanging one over the side of the couch. Dib swallowed and made it a point to avoid looking at the groin area. It might have been just a nightmare, but he didn’t want to take chances. “Why don’t you just stay awake all the time?”

“Uh, because we start to hallucinate and eventually die?” said Dib. “Humans need sleep to live. It’s how our brains do maintenance.”

“What kind of system needs eight hours of maintenance a day?” said Zim. “I only have to spend a few minutes a week on my PAK for routine maintenance, plus a few hours every five years for a full repair session.”

“What about your organic brain?”

“My PAK can take care of organic maintenance while I’m fully conscious,” said Zim.

“No, I mean before you had PAKs. Irkens can’t have been like this forever, right? Didn’t you need sleep back before you turned into a bunch of cyborgs grown in vats?”
“Hmm…” said Zim, concentrating heavily. “There’s not a lot of information on pre-PAK civilization. It seems most of it wasn’t noteworthy enough to remain in the archive.”

“Seriously? Your people didn’t record anything about what your civilization used to be like?” said Dib, shocked.

“I didn’t say there wasn’t anything. Just not a lot,” said Zim. “It does say that we used to be crepuscular, so I guess that answers your question.”

“That makes sense,” said Dib. Irkens had a lot in common with insects, and it was pretty common for things like moths, beetles, and flies to be most active during the twilight hours.

“Hardly! I can’t even imagine having to spend so much time doing absolutely nothing!” said Zim. Dib refrained from bringing up the time that Zim had spent several weeks doing nothing but sitting in a toilet and laughing. “No wonder most of this stuff wasn’t recorded! Ancient irkens lived vastly inferior lives! Requiring sleep to live, constantly needing to eat so as not to starve to death, molting once a month instead of once an equinox… I mean, can you even imagine how horrible that must have been?”

“I’ve literally been doing two out of three of those things my entire life.”

“Yes, suffice to say, I’m glad to have been born into the current era,” said Zim. “It’s objectively the best time in history to be an irken!”

“As long as you’re not one of the hundreds of thousands of babies who gets culled every year,” said Dib.

“Well, yes, but-”

“And as long as you’re not short.”

“For your information, Dib-thing, height has always been an important metric of an irken’s value to society,” said Zim, crossing his arms over his chest.

“How can you say that?” said Dib. “You’re short! Doesn’t it bother you to be judged for something completely out of your control?”

Zim’s antennae drooped.

“I mean, yeah, a little, I guess,” he said after a long moment of hesitation. “But that’s just the way things are! Zim is loyal to the system!”

“The same system you’re currently trying to overthrow?”

“That’s the one, yes,” said Zim with an affirmative nod.

Dib shook his head. “I don’t understand you at all, Zim.”

“Just what I’d expect from a human,” said Zim haughtily. “You’re willing to throw a perfectly functional system away the second it’s inconvenient for you! A true irken knows to place the empire before themselves!”

“What good is an empire if it makes its people miserable?” said Dib. “What are you even fighting for?”

A look of uncertainty crossed Zim’s face. “I- I’m fighting for Irk! What else?”
“But why? Why are you so loyal to a planet that sees you as a second-class citizen?”

“Technically, irkens of my height are third-class, taller irkens are second class, the Tallest are first-class, and all other races are fourth and below.”

“You know what I mean, Zim! Don’t dodge the question!” said Dib. “Why do you keep fighting for Irk when nobody there even likes you?”

He realized all too late that he’d probably phrased that poorly. Sure enough, Zim’s eyes narrowed with fury.

“Because that’s what I’ve always done!” snapped Zim, sitting up to glare at Dib. “I’ve spent a hundred and sixty-six years being loyal to Irk, and I’ll do it for six hundred and thirty-four more, because those are my people, and Irk is my home!” He jammed a sharp claw into Dib’s chest, causing him to jerk back. “Why are you loyal to Earth, huh? Nobody here likes you except your dad and sister!”

Dib didn’t have a good answer for that question. He raised his arms as a show of surrender.

“You’re right,” admitted Dib, and Zim’s face softened. “I’m sorry. I get it; Irk is your home. Of course you’re loyal to it.” He took Zim’s hand, which was still jammed into his chest, and squeezed it gently. “I didn’t mean that you should betray your people. If anything, I think you can make things better for them!”

Zim’s flattened antennae rose back up. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” said Dib, relieved that the appeal to Zim’s ego had worked. If he was going to get through to Zim, it was clear he would have to choose his words carefully, and with a heavy emphasis on positive reinforcement. “Zim, you’re smart, you’re confident, and you’re willing to do whatever it takes to do the things you set out to do, even if it sounds completely insane to everybody else. I know that if you put your mind to it, you can make the Irken Empire better than it’s ever been!”

Zim stared at him with wide, shining eyes.

“That’s…” he began. His cheeks went pink, and he brought his hands up to his face. “That’s weird. Those were all really nice things to say. Why is my chest so…” His face scrunched up like he was about to cry. Dib froze; he’d expected a strong reaction, but not this strong. “What is this? I feel happy, but I still...”

Dib awkwardly pulled him into his chest, and Zim let out a shaky wail.

“It’s normal to cry when you’re really happy,” said Dib. He’d certainly heard the phrase ‘tears of joy’ used before, but all he’d done was pay him a couple of compliments! Surely that didn’t warrant such an extreme response. “At least, I’m pretty sure it is.”

“I don’t understand!” said Zim, pulling himself free. “Why are you saying so many nice things about me? I didn’t even do anything for you this time!”

“Wait, has nobody ever said something nice to you just because?” said Dib.

Zim shook his head. “Why would they?”

Jesus Christ. Dib might have been unpopular, and his dad was still an asshole, but at least his father had always encouraged him, even if it was encouragement towards a very specific life path.
Heck, even Gaz made it a point to tell him that she loved him once in a blue moon. He couldn’t imagine going over a hundred years with nothing but conditional affection. No wonder Zim was constantly talking himself up; nobody else would.

“Well, sometimes it helps to hear these kinds of things from somebody other than yourself,” said Dib. “I mean, self-confidence is great, and all, and everyone talks about how you shouldn’t need external validation, but let’s face it; nothing beats being acknowledged by somebody else.”

Zim chewed his lip.

“I… Appreciate that,” he said, clearly both uncomfortable and unfamiliar with expressions of gratitude. “Very well! In exchange for your nice words, I shall provide a few unearned compliments of my own!”

“You really don’t have to-”

“First!” began Zim, clearing his throat. “You’re very tall!” Dib tried not to laugh at the absurdity of such a compliment, especially since he knew just how important height was to irkens. “Second, while you may be inferior to an irken, I think you’re clearly superior to the rest of your species, and possibly even all non-irkens. If irkens are a ten on the superiority scale, you’re a nine.” Well, that was obscenely racist (species-ist?), but at least he was trying. “Third, your jacket is neat.” Dib adjusted his jacket. It was pretty neat, wasn’t it? “Fourth-”

“I only said three nice things about you.”

“I know, but I have to one-up you to demonstrate how much better at compliment-giving I am,” said Zim. At least he was honest about it. “Anyway, my fourth and final compliment for you is that, even if no one else notices, you’re actually really cool and smart. You spent six years defending a world that thought you were crazy, and even though we were on opposite sides, I always respected you as a worthy opponent.” There was a sudden tightness in Dib’s throat. “You were an incredible nemesis who always drove me to try harder and be the best invader I could be. If I had to be stuck on some backwater planet in the middle of nowhere, I’m glad it was the one with you on it.”

It was Dib’s turn to go scrunchy-faced.

“You cheater,” said Dib as his eyes welled up with tears. “That was way more than just four!”

“I know!” said Zim, who was also struggling to remain composed. “I don’t know where that came from! It just came out of my mouth!”

They wrapped their arms around one another, crying until their eyes were puffy and red (well, redder, in Zim’s case). Suddenly, however, there was the sound of a third voice, as well as a stiff weight around their bodies. Dib looked down to see that GIR had joined in on the hug, crying oil all over the sofa.

“GIR!” said Zim, snapping from emotional to furious in the span of less than a second. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw you two crying, and then I started crying, and now we’re all crying together!” wailed GIR, squeezing them tighter.

Something fuzzy and brown landed on Zim’s head.

“Minimoose!” said Zim. “Not you, too! Where have you even been for the past three days?”
“Nya!” said Minimoose.

A bunch of cables descended from the ceiling to wrap around the four of them.

“I don’t have arms, so this is the best that I can do,” said the computer.

Dib managed to wipe his tears away on his sleeve and smile. “You think we should get Tak’s ship in on this?”

Zim laughed. "I’d rather die.”

“Fair enough.”

Chapter End Notes

First, thanks for all of your amazing comments! It always makes my day to check my email and see all the feedback people left. (Granted, it’s also a little nerve-wracking to know that people are invested and expect some kind of satisfying payoff at the end of the rainbow; I'll do my best not to disappoint!) Seriously, I’m really glad to have joined this fandom. You guys are all so supportive and amazing.

Second, I’m thinking of putting this on an actual schedule so I don’t A) Burn out, or B) End up leaving this fic on hiatus during exams because I ran out of material to post while I was busy studying. I love writing this story, but the pace I’ve been going at so far isn’t gonna be sustainable during the semester. I’m thinking once a week (this might slow down to once every two weeks as the semester progresses; I’ll try to give myself enough padding that it doesn’t become an issue, but I can’t make any promises) on Friday or Saturday.
Previously on Height Treason...

Dib and Zim go out and buy some crappy vodka. In the process, Dib learns that Zim is actually 166 years old. Proportionately speaking, however, Zim is roughly 16 and a half, which Dib takes great joy in pointing out. The pair come to an uneasy truce with the ship, who agrees to cooperate with them on the grounds that they'll repair her and take her back to Irk, and they can go get a new ship that doesn't hate their guts. To celebrate this alliance, they get absolutely wasted, and Zim practically dry-humps Dib through his clothing while chirping like a roid raging cricket. Eventually, Dib passes out, and a slightly-sobered Zim has the ship take him back to his base to drape over the couch. Dib has a very trippy and very horrifying wet dream about Zim that wakes him up from his slumber, whereupon he and Zim have a heartfelt discussion about loyalty and confidence that ultimately ends in a tearful group hug.

They spent the next several hours sitting on the sofa watching television with GIR. At present, it was playing a documentary about various bugs, which Dib had insisted they watch if only so he could make clever little quips about the similarity between Zim and some of the species listed.

“The bee egg hatches into a larvae, which is placed in one of the many cells of the hive,” said the narrator. “The nurse bees secrete a special liquid from the hypopharynx called royal jelly, which they feed to all of the larvae for the first three days of their lives. After that, the majority of the larvae will be switched over to a diet of honey and pollen.” As the television displayed footage of worker bees feeding the larvae, Dib turned to look at Zim, who was watching with a mixture of intrigue and trepidation.

“It looks a little like a smeetery,” said Zim. “A really primitive one, but still.”

“Smeeteries are where they make the smeets, right?” said Dib in what had to be one of his most astute observations yet. “How does that work?”

“The details about the cloning process employed by the control brains are classified,” said Zim. Dib frowned; the control brains were just full of secrets, weren’t they? “I can still remember what the smeetery looked like when I emerged, though. There were walls full of cells a lot like these, but with metal lids instead of wax caps. Smeets are grown in glass tubes full of smeet jelly until they’re ready to be activated.”

“A few of the cells in this hive have been selected to continue receiving a diet of nutrient-rich royal jelly,” said the narrator. “Unlike the workers, which are sterile, these larvae will develop into queens capable of laying more eggs.”

“Looks like that’s where the similarities end,” said Dib. “Unlike bees, you guys have functioning reproductive organs.”

“The organs are there, but all irkens are sterile,” said Zim.
“So cloning is literally the only option for you guys, huh?” said Dib. “Do you at least know what you’re being cloned from?”

“What part of ‘classified’ do you not understand?” said Zim.

“The first queen to hatch will begin her life by destroying the larvae of every other potential queen in the nest,” said the narrator. “In the event that two queens emerge at the same time, they will fight to the death until only one remains. There can only be one queen per hive.”

“Well, that’s just stupid,” said Zim. “With only one bee capable of laying eggs, the hive will never be able to exceed a certain size! If they had more of these ‘queens,’ they could expand their numbers and take over the Earth!”

“I don’t think the bees have that kind of foresight, Zim. It’s just instinctive.”

“Well, maybe they sho-o-o-o-o-” he stammered like a buffering video. There was a loud whirring sound in his PAK like a laptop struggling to run a graphically intensive game. “Oh, right, I forgot to do my PAK maintenance this week.”

Dib raised an eyebrow. “How do you forget to do the one thing you’ve gotta do every week to stay alive?”

“Well, I was kind of distracted by the revelation that the past six years of my life have been a lie,” said Zim. Dib laughed nervously; of course, how could he forget? Zim stood up and headed towards the kitchen. “I’ll be back shortly. This should only take a few minutes.”

“Wait!” said Dib, getting up to follow him. He couldn’t help but be a little curious about the process. “Can I watch?”

“Watch what?” said Zim. “It’s just routine maintenance.”

“Routine for you, maybe,” said Dib. “For me, it’s a chance to see the inner workings of your evil robot half!”

“Hey!” said Zim, offended. Dib pursed his lips; curse his terrible case of foot-in-mouth syndrome! “Both of my halves are equally evil, thank you very much!” Okay, now he was feeling a little less guilty. “But I suppose that since I’m going to be opening up my PAK anyway, I might as well let you take a look at my glorious insides!”

Dib pumped his fist and followed Zim down into the depths of his base. The elevator stopped at a level that Dib was semi-familiar with from his cameras, but which he had never stepped foot in or been able to take a very close look at without triggering the security system. There was a table covered in all manner of tools and hardware, as well as another with stacks of rolled-up blueprints for all manner of doomsday devices.

Zim removed his PAK and set it on the table. As the set-up was designed for someone short in stature, the table was low to the ground, requiring Dib to bend over in order to get a closer look.

“Can’t you only live for ten minutes without that?” said Dib. “And you start getting all loopy long before the timer even reaches that point.”

“Yes, symptoms of PAK-disconnection typically begin after about five minutes,” said Zim, popping open the shell. Dib gasped; it was positively packed with wires to the point that he couldn’t tell where one ended and the next began. Zim, however, didn’t seem to have a problem immediately picking out one in particular to hold between his thumb and forefinger while he
grabbed a desoldering pump. “Most irkens don’t perform their own maintenance; instead, they have someone else do it while the PAK remains attached. It’s significantly safer, but impractical for invaders, who have to spend long stretches of time completely alone.” He removed the wire quickly and skillfully, then grabbed a brush to clean off the terminal. “Part of the test to become an elite is being able to fix a malfunctioning PAK within five minutes. If you can’t maintain your own PAK, you can’t act independently.”

As Zim soldered in the new wire, Dib marveled at his speed and technique. He’d assumed that only having three fingers would be a hindrance, but Zim was remarkably dexterous, and his pointed claws allowed him to pick through small components with a sort of precision that a human could only hope to achieve with tweezers.

“Woah,” said Dib. “Can I touch it?”

Zim shot him a disbelieving look. “Can I touch your brain?”

“Right, yeah, that was a weird question,” admitted Dib. He watched quietly as Zim peeled apart the wires to reveal some kind of port. “What’s that?”

“A diagnostic port. It’s the only way to access and make changes to my source code,” said Zim, plugging it into a nearby screen. A black terminal popped up, and Zim reattached the open PAK to his back. “Computer, run unit tests!”

“Running unit tests,” said the computer, and Irken text began popping up on the terminal.

“What does that say?” asked Dib.

“It just displays the status of each program being run,” said Zim. Nonetheless, he added, “Computer, translate the text on the terminal from Irken to English so the Dib understands just how pathetic he is for being impressed by something so utterly mundane.”

“Translating.”

Dib stared at the screen. Most of the text flashed by too quickly to read, but he still managed to catch some of it.

Testing eyes.viewColor(ultraviolet)… Success.

Testing hand.fingers.thumb.setPosition(50, 20, 40)… Success.

Testing organic.brain.criticalThinkingSkills()… ERROR: An exception has occurred. Please review the error report for details.

“Huh, looks like an object-oriented programming language. Neat,” said Dib, turning back to see Zim moving robotically as each individual part of his body had its coordination tested. “Zim?”

“Unit tests complete,” said the computer, and Zim’s stiff body relaxed. “Forty shmillion errors detected.”

“Excellent!” said Zim. “Sounds like everything is working smoothly.”

“Did you not hear the same result I did?” said Dib. “It said forty shmillion errors. I don’t even think that’s a real number!”

“Yes, and it’s nothing out of the ordinary,” said Zim. Dib raised an eyebrow. “What? We already
established that my PAK is slightly defective.”

“That’s slightly to you?”

“Look, if they were easy fixes, it would be one thing, but most of those are only solvable by wiping the PAK clean,” said Zim. “In case that wasn’t already clear to you, that would *kill* me.”

“How did you even *get* that many errors?” asked Dib.

Zim shrugged. “How should I know? They’ve been there from the time I first downloaded my personality. Now let’s go back upstairs before GIR comes down to find us and destroys something important.”

“Wait!” said Dib, curious about something.

He looked at the terminal, which was still spitting out information with every movement Zim took.

*Running lungs.inhale(.75)*…

*Running balance.shift(10, 39, 31)*…

“This displays everything that runs, right?” said Dib.

“Obviously.”

Dib furrowed his brow. Was it wrong to risk doing what he was about to do without permission? After all, who knew what would happen if he did this again? Would it roll back further? What if it caused some kind of factory reset?

“Zim, I’m sorry for this in advance, but I need you to think about the control brains right now.”

“The control brains?” said Zim. “What about them?”

“When you first ‘activated,’ they uploaded a bunch of information into your brain, right?” said Dib. “Has it ever occurred to you that some of that information might actually be wrong?”

Zim gave him a strange look. “Of course it’s not wrong. They’re the *control brains*. All of the information they upload is one hundred percent reliable!”

“But they messed up with you, didn’t they?” said Dib. “I mean, there are forty *shmillion* errors in your PAK! If they’re infallible, how did they make so many mistakes putting you together?”

“That’s-” said Zim, looking thoughtful. “Wait a minute…”

There it was again. His eyes went wide as saucers and glazed over, and his antennae froze in place.


Dib turned his attention back to the terminal.

*Running keen.rollback()*…

“Keen?” read Dib aloud. “Is that some kind of irken word?”

“It shouldn’t be,” said the computer. “*Every word with an English equivalent should have been translated.*”
“Rolling back memory to last acceptable state,” said Zim. At last, he seemed to snap out of his daze. “Wha…?”

“Zim, what’s the last thing that you remember?” asked Dib quickly.

“Umm, you asked me about the terminal display,” said Zim, rubbing his head. “What happened?”

“You just zoned out, that’s all,” said Dib, relieved. “Are you done with maintenance now?”

Zim pulled off his PAK, unplugged the wire, closed it back up, and reattached it to his back.

“Now I’m done!” said Zim.

“Great,” said Dib, grabbing him by the wrist. Even if everything had worked out, he couldn’t help but feel guilty about going behind Zim’s back on this. To be fair, though, it wasn’t like he had any other choice. “Let’s go back upstairs and keep watching that documentary.”

By the time they got back, the narrator had moved on to ant colonies.

“While her workers are flightless, the queen ant is born with a pair of wings,” said the narrator. “She will collect enough sperm during her mating flight to last her a lifetime.”

“She collects the sperm?” said Zim, looking thoroughly skeeved out. “How? And what’s the point?”

“To fertilize her eggs,” said Dib. Did Zim really not comprehend how organic reproduction typically occurred?

“But you don’t need to take the sperm out for that!” said Zim.

Dib thought back to something that Zim had said just the other day about not being ‘stupid enough’ to believe that women were the ones who carried children to term on Earth.

“Zim…” he said slowly. “How exactly did reproduction work for irkens before you started cloning yourselves?”

Zim shifted uncomfortably.

“There’s not a lot of information about our reproduction prior to cloning, but it probably isn’t that different from how we have sex today,” said Zim, who was clearly doing his best to sound like a confident authority on the subject despite the fact that he was blushing so hard that there was barely any green left on his face. “The female takes her ovipositor and inserts it into the male’s vent, then lays her eggs inside of him, whereupon they enter the brood pouch. Nowadays, the eggs are sterile, so we just expel them immediately after finishing up, but they probably used to spend more time incubating in the pouch before being lain.”

“Okay, wow,” said Dib. That certainly explained the lack of a bulge in Zim’s crotch area. “So, uh, first things first, that’s not how it works here. Well, except for seahorses, but they’re the exception to the rule.”

“I’m well aware that humans don’t lay eggs, Dib-thing.”

“Not just that,” said Dib. “See, remember how we talked about women giving birth to children the other day, and you thought it was just a lie somebody posted on the internet?”

Zim’s eyes widened. “You don’t mean…”
“Yeah,” said Dib, straining not to laugh. “Here on Earth, it’s the other way around.”

Zim’s gripped his antennae with horror. “But then, that means… Dib-thing, you have an ovipositor?”

“That’s not what we call it, but yeah, kind of.”

“By the Tallest!” cried Zim. Dib imagined he had to be pretty mindblown to invoke the name of the people he was trying to destroy. “What isn’t wrong with this horrible planet?”

It was a good thing Zim already had the fundamentals of Calculus installed into his PAK, because Ms. Bitters’ lecture was presently the furthest thing from his mind.

Dib had an ovipositor. Well, not an ovipositor per say – apparently it went by a different name and squirted out sperm instead of eggs – but it was functionally similar, and Zim wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that. When he’d first decided that he wanted to play with Dib, he’d been operating under the assumption that, whatever weird human genitalia he happened to have, they could find some way of using their hands or mashing their groins together to make it work. If the Dib’s sex organ was ovipositor-like in shape, however, that opened up an issue Zim had been unprepared for; could it be safely inserted into his vent?

It was the sort of question that had plagued the galaxy from the time sapient life first started traveling the stars and encountering other intelligent beings. Many a horror story had been passed around about the universe’s most terrifying genitals. Planet Jackers, for instance, had ovipositors that were covered in spines and extended out as long as Zim was tall. He shivered and cringed; if Dib had anything like that lurking in his pants, all bets were off. Zim’s life was far more important to him than losing his v-card.

He stole another glance at Dib. By Irk, he was tall… Come to think of it, Irkens were pretty sturdy. He could probably survive whatever was between Dib’s legs, right?

A bead of sugary-sweet irken sweat dripped down Zim’s forehead as his aching tymbal threatened to chirp. He couldn’t remember ever being this needy before. Was this truly the result of decades of chastity, or was he that attracted to the Dib?

“Zim!” growled Ms. Bitters. Zim quickly returned his gaze to the front of the class. “If you’re not going to pay attention, then you can be the one to come up and find the integral on the board!”

“Yes… Quick question; is successfully finding the integral something that a normal human would be able to do?” asked Zim, and Dib buried his face in his palms.

“It’s what you’re going to do, if you don’t want to be locked in the Dunce Closet,” said Ms. Bitters, looming over him with a horrible scowl. A despairing cry rang out from the closet in the back of the room.

Zim stood up and approached the board, admittedly somewhat relieved to have a distraction from his current predicament. He ran the calculation through his PAK and began writing out the answer on the board. All the while, thoughts of Dib ran through his head; was he looking? Could he see Zim’s superior intellect in action? Was he impressed?

“There! Done,” said Zim, setting the marker down and proudly crossing his arms over his chest. “Behold, fellow students, with your tiny walnut brains! Gaze upon the magnificent problem-
solving skills of ZIM!"

“Is this supposed to be a joke?” said Ms. Bitters, looking positively enraged. Out of the corner of his eye, Zim noticed Dib bashing his head repeatedly against the table. “Because I’m not laughing!”

Zim paused. He was sure that his answer was correct! Why was-

He turned around, and immediately realized his mistake. There, next to the original problem, was the correct solution…

…written in Irken.

“Uh…” said Zim. “I have really bad handwriting?”

“Go to the Dunce Closet!” barked Ms. Bitters.

Zim hung his head as he made the walk of shame to the closet at the back of the room. He unlocked the door, allowing a student who’d been caught texting in class to escape and make a break for his desk. The interior walls were lined with spikes that didn’t quite reach far enough to impale those inside, but which didn’t allow one to move more than a couple of centimeters without getting poked. It was far from the worst torture that Zim had ever suffered, but it was definitely humiliating. Normally he wouldn’t care about the opinions of his human classmates, but having Dib witness this shame? It was utterly unbearable. He gritted his teeth as Ms. Bitters slammed the door shut and locked him in the dark.

The remainder of class ticked by at a snail’s pace. Fortunately, Zim had a plan. Using his PAK legs so as not to stab himself, Zim pulled out his cellphone and let it dangle in front of his face. It was time to do some research!

He attempted to type something into the search bar with his PAK legs, but the screen proved unresponsive to metal. No matter. Zim stretched out his tongue and poked away at the keyboard that popped up.

‘Human genitals,’ he typed into the image search. Perplexingly, millions of results popped up. Humans sure did spend a lot of time carefully documenting their reproductive organs! How convenient.

Zim paged through the images with a determined expression. Sure enough, the pictures labeled ‘female’ had slits the likes of which he’d previously associated with males, though their anatomy was significantly different from his own; there were two separate holes, one for intercourse, and one for the expulsion of liquid waste. The intercourse hole didn’t look that much larger than an irken’s, which was a good sign; that meant that whatever had evolved to penetrate it was probably of a similar size to its irken counterpart, right?

He moved on to the next image and nearly jumped with alarm. The sex organ labeled ‘male’ wasn’t particularly long, but it was significantly girthier than he’d anticipated. An irken ovipositor was slender and prehensile, expanding in width only when the eggs passed through. *This,* though… Its entire length was the size of an egg-engorged ovipositor; maybe even a little bigger. Surely it couldn’t remain that way for the entire duration of intercourse! Zim modified his query to ‘human sex.’

Oh, wow. It absolutely *did* appear to stay that way the entire time. Zim squeezed his legs together and swallowed. The thought of such a thing inside of him should have triggered alarm and
revulsion, so why was he still turned on?

As the lock of the door clicked open, Zim realized that his PAK legs were still extended to hold the phone. He retracted them in a panic, allowing his phone to fall to the floor screen-side up just in time for the door to open.

Ms. Bitters swiped the phone before he could grab it.

“Zim…” said Ms. Bitters, staring at the screen, and then him. “Have you spent this entire time looking up pornography?”

Several students giggled in the background. Zim just stared up at her with a look of confusion. What was ‘pornography?’

“I was doing research for the project you assigned!” lied Zim.

Ms. Bitters gave him a suspicious look, but ultimately took a step back to let him out, though she didn’t return the phone.

“You can have your phone back at the end of the school day,” said Ms. Bitters. “Now all of you, get out of my class!”

Dib immediately sidled up to him as they filed out of the classroom.

“What happened?” said Dib, looking concerned. “That text you wrote was Irken, wasn’t it? I recognize the numbers from your schematics.”

Zim didn’t dare admit that he’d been so distracted by thoughts of Dib that he’d forgotten to translate the solution. With every moment that passed since his sex drive had been reactivated, it was becoming increasingly obvious why invaders were required to have them switched off in the first place.

“I was, uh, testing you! Yes,” said Zim. “I had to see if you recognized the origin of the text!”

“And you couldn’t do that in private, like when we were at your house last night?”

“Nope!” said Zim. “Anyway, since you passed, that means it’s time to begin the next phase of your training! You won’t always have me around to translate things for you. It’s time you learned the language of my people!”

“Oh, sweet!” said Dib, looking genuinely excited. “I’ve been wanting to learn Irken for years now! I mean, after all this time, I’m still not even sure what it sounds like!”

“Well, prepare your feeble flesh-brain, because after school, we begin the lessons in earnest!” said Zim.

“We have work after school, remember?” said Dib. “At Membrane Labs?”

“Of course I remember!” said Zim, who had, in fact, completely forgotten. “You’ll just have to multitask. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to get to my next class.”

“Can’t you teach me at least one word before you go?” pleaded Dib. “Even just ‘hello?’ ”

“Which one?” said Zim.

“Which… What?”
“There are several different forms of ‘hello’ for different situations,” explained Zim. “There’s one for irkens shorter than you, one for irkens taller than you, one for irkens the same height as you, one for the Tallest, one for lower lifeforms, one when you’re meeting somebody for the first time at a donut brunch hosted by a third party that you already know… Oh, and each of those also has a few variants depending on age. Obviously, you wouldn’t address a short irken who’s old enough to be at their full height the same way that you’d address a short but young irken who might grow to be taller than you one day.”

Dib’s eye twitched. “How about the one I should greet you with?”

“Well, as a non-irken who’s nonetheless taller than I am, it probably makes the most sense for you to use ‘e aio.’”

“Ay-ya-yo?”

“E aio.”

“E aio?” tried Dib again, but at the wrong pitch.

“Oh, be careful with that,” warned Zim. “If you let your voice get too low, it becomes the equivalent of ‘I hope you die an agonizing death, you pathetic waste of atoms.’”

Dib gaped. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope! Good luck, squish-brain!” said Zim, running off to class and leaving Dib looking like he’d just had his soul sucked out through his mouth.

Dib spent most of the next period not-so-subtly looking at his phone. Fortunately, his physics teacher was a massive Membrane fanboy who pretty much let him get away with anything as long as he still did well on homework and tests, so he didn’t even have to pretend to pay attention to the lecture.

‘Keen definition,’ he searched. He was familiar with the word, obviously, but maybe a formal definition would help him make sense of what it meant in the context of Zim’s PAK. A few different results came up on the screen.

**KEEN:** A highly developed sense. ‘A bloodhound has a keen sense of smell.’

Hm, he supposed irkens did consider themselves highly developed, but it didn’t seem related to the effect of the program.

**KEEN:** A wail of mourning or despair. ‘She keened for him.’

Again, that didn’t really seem to have anything to do with the effect of the program. It wasn’t forcing Zim to cry or mourn; it was wiping his memory to prevent him from questioning the control brains.

**KEEN:** To have a lot of enthusiasm. ‘He was especially keen on finishing the task.’

Okay, that was promising. Maybe it referred to a way of making irkens more keen on serving the empire?

Dib’s shoulders drooped. Who was he kidding? This was hopeless. He could come up with as
many theories as he wanted, but without something concrete to back them, there was nothing he could actually do about it.

“Psssst!”

Dib pocketed his phone and turned back towards the source of the sound. It was none other than Keef, stalker extraordinaire.

“What?” whispered Dib.

Keef passed him a folded-up piece of paper. Dib opened the note.

‘What happened to Zim?’ it read.

Dib frowned. What was that supposed to mean? He pulled out his pencil and scribbled out a response.

‘What are you talking about?’

He passed the note to Keef, who took a long moment to write out his response before handing it back over to Dib.

‘Zim has excellent handwriting,’ wrote Keef. That was true; Zim’s penmanship was so tidy and consistent that it was like a word processor font, possibly because he’d downloaded a copy of the alphabet and was replicating the letters exactly as he remembered them. ‘And he ALWAYS gets the right answer to math problems. It's like his brain is part computer, or something.’ He had no idea how right he was. ‘What happened this morning?’

‘He’s fine,’ Dib responded. ‘He’s just tired.’

‘That’s not all,’ wrote Keef. ‘His posture is usually so good, like he’s trying to make himself as tall as possible, but lately he’s hunching over when he walks.’ Dib frowned. He hadn’t noticed that. ‘And when he got on the bus to go home yesterday, he was putting more weight on his left leg.’

Strange. But then, he had been a little late on his ‘routine maintenance,’ after all. Perhaps it was just a result of the bad wire that Zim had replaced that morning. The revelation that there had been visible signs of this delay, however, stung Dib’s ego like a swarm of bees. He was supposed to be the expert on all things Zim! How had he not noticed?

‘He just twisted his ankle when we went to the amusement park,’ wrote Dib. ‘It’s no big deal.’

‘Oh, that’s a relief!’ wrote Keef. ‘His boyfriend would know best, after all!’

By the time he finished reading, Dib was clenching his fist so hard that his nails were digging into his palm. Was Keef mocking him? He turned around to look at his indestructible classmate, but all he got was a smile and a wave.

That cocky little shit!

Dib crumpled up the note and stuffed it into his pocket to throw in the garbage later. So what if Keef noticed something wrong with Zim before he did? He certainly hadn’t noticed that Zim was an alien, or that his so-called ‘parents’ were clearly robots! Dib comforted himself with the knowledge that, no matter what Keef might think he knew, the only true authority on facts about Zim was him.
Something poked his back. Dib turned around to find Keef passing him another note.

‘How is he feeling, anyway? You know, since the thing with his parents, and all.’

It took a moment for Dib to remember that he’d told Keef the other day that Zim had been upset about something that happened with his parents.

‘He’s doing better,’ wrote Dib. When would this conversation finally end?

‘Is it because they found out that you two are dating?’

Oh, for fuck’s sake… ‘We are NOT dating,’ wrote Dib, underlining the ‘NOT’ several times.

‘So it was the skirt? Is that why he went back to wearing just the leggings today?’

Dib pressed his fingers to his temples. Even if Zim did have parents, surely these questions would have qualified as overly intrusive! Not that Dib was super well-versed in social norms, of course – his first real friend was an alien who’d spent the past six years trying to kill him, after all – but he was pretty sure you weren’t supposed to pry about these kinds of things, especially through a third party.

‘Yeah, sure, whatever,’ wrote Dib, who was positively certain that this response would have absolutely no negative repercussions for him whatsoever.

The filthy public restrooms of Earth were a far cry from the beautifully sterile waste-evacuation facilities of Irk. Zim usually purged his body of snacks prior to the school day, but unfortunately, Dib had spent the hours leading up to the school day using his bathroom to hand-wash his alcohol-soaked clothes. Zim had offered to have his computer fabricate some irken clothing in his size, if only to get him out of there faster, but Dib had pointedly refused to wear anything even remotely resembling his uniform to school.

For this reason, Zim was forced to vomit up the contents of his squeeledspooch into a disgusting human toilet, leaving him to stare down into its terrible feces-encrusted depths for far longer than he would have liked. There was so much bacteria! An irken’s innards were engineered to be self-sterilizing, but humans had an entire freaking ecosystem in their guts. Not only were they completely unbothered by the multiple pounds of germs living inside of them, but they were also apparently dependent on said bacteria to process nutrients, something that irkens had no need for; the soupy mixture they spewed out of their mouths was simply a mashed-up form of everything that had gone in.

Zim flushed the toilet with his thankfully-gloved hands and stepped over to the sink to rinse them off (not that it mattered much, with Earth water being as disgusting as it was). As he looked into the mirror, however, he couldn’t help but notice another figure in the reflection who was staring at him.

“Can I help you?” said Zim to the student, who flinched in response to his voice and quickly darted off with a muttered word of apology. Strange.

He returned his attention to his own reflection. Dib had insisted that he wear a strange article of clothing known as a ‘hoodie’ to school. It had taken him several attempts to work out how to use the thing that Dib called a ‘zipper,’ and he didn’t dare unfasten it for fear that he would be unable to get it closed again. If it were solely up to him, he wouldn’t have picked it out at the mall in the
first place, but Dib had insisted that this was an incredibly common piece of attire for humans his age (or at least the age he was pretending to be).

Well, that, and Dib had said that he looked ‘cool’ with the hood up. Zim intensified the pace of his hand-washing; he was getting that weird, fluttery sensation in his squeedlyspooch again. It had to be all of the nasty bacteria. It was best that he get out of the bathroom as quickly as possible.

As Zim walked to lunch, he couldn’t help but notice that he was attracting a lot of stares in the hallway. He found himself gripped by a sudden sense of panic. Had the irken writing from earlier given him away? Did they know?

“Hey, Zim,” said a purple-haired girl that Zim recognized as Zita. She looked somber. “Look, I know we don’t talk much, but I wanted to let you know that I’m sorry about what happened. You didn’t deserve to be outed like that.” Zim practically choked on his own tongue. “If you need anybody to talk to, I can-”

Zim didn’t wait to hear the rest of what she had to say; he dashed to the cafeteria as fast as his little legs would carry him.

“DIB!” cried Zim. Dib, who was currently standing in line for the inedible cafeteria-food, turned to him with a concerned face. Zim grabbed him by the coat and yanked him out of the line. “They know! They all know!”

“What are you talking about?” said Dib, stumbling out into the hallway after Zim, who yanked them into the closest janitor’s closet to hide.

“The other students! They know that I’m an alien!” said Zim, frantically looking around to make sure they hadn’t been followed. “They must have figured it out from the writing!”

“That’s impossible,” said Dib. “Zim, you know these people. You could waltz into school with your antennae exposed, and they’d just think it was a weird haircut.”

“But Zita said I’ve been outed!” said Zim, tightening his grip on Dib’s coat. “I’ll have to go into hiding, move the base, come up with a new disguise…”

“Zim,” said Dib, leaning down to place his hands on Zim’s shoulders. “Nobody’s figured out you’re an alien. I, uh… Well, anyway, here on Earth, the word ‘outed’ means something a little different.” He guiltily tugged at his shirt collar. “Remember how you wore a skirt yesterday?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Well, traditionally, skirts are considered a feminine article of clothing,” said Dib. “When people saw you wearing it yesterday, a lot of them assumed it meant that you were transgender, which is the word people on Earth use to describe those born with a body that doesn’t match their gender identity.” He rubbed the back of his head. “There’s still some controversy about it because the idea of people acting or existing outside of established gender norms makes certain humans irrationally angry for some reason, so a lot of trans people hide their condition. Because of that, it can feel like a big deal when someone reveals that they identify as the opposite gender, and it becomes the subject of a lot of gossip. I’m almost a hundred percent sure that the thing Zita was talking about is a rumor that somebody-who-definitely-isn’t-me accidentally started that you’ve been ‘outed’ to your disapproving parents.”

“Oooooooh,” said Zim, breathing a sigh of relief. “They just think that Zim is a girl?”

“Yeeeeeah,” said Dib, coughing. “Sorry, I should have warned you.”
“Yes, you should have, but no matter,” said Zim. And to think that he’d thought that this was something important! “We have plenty of people on Irk with a similar condition. This is just a simple misunderstanding!”

“Wow,” said Dib. “You’re not nearly as angry about this as I thought you’d be.”

“Angry about what? People thinking I’m a girl?” said Zim, woefully confused. “Is that really something humans get upset about? Because I can pretend to be mad.” It seemed silly to him, but if that was what a normal human would do…

Dib inhaled through his teeth.

“Nope. No. Definitely do not do that,” he said at last. “Just explain to anyone who asks that you don’t identify as a woman, and this should be cleared up in no time.”

“Ugh, what a waste of time!” said Zim, throwing open the door to the janitor’s closet and loudly proclaiming, “I can’t believe I let myself get all worked up about something so small! That has to have been the quickest, most thoroughly unsatisfying conclusion that this could have had!”

Every pair of eyes in the hallway immediately turned to look at them, and Dib’s face turned a shade of such vibrant red that Zim wondered if he was about to be sick.

“It’s not what it sounds like!” announced Dib for some reason. He grabbed Zim by the hood and practically dragged him back to the cafeteria.

As Dib got back in line to get his tray of human-slop, Zim stood up on the table and cleared his throat.

“Everyone, I have an announcement to make!” said Zim, who very quickly found himself the center of attention. “It has come to my attention that many of you believe me to be a human girl! While I am certainly human, I must assure you all that I am, in fact, one hundred percent male, and my relationship with my parents is completely normal! You may now resume your regularly scheduled consumption of nutrients to fuel your feeble organic bodies!”

He hopped down from the table and took a seat. After a few minutes, Dib sat down across from him looking a little bit like the zombies that had chased them through the mall.

“I think that went well, don’t you?” said Zim cheerfully.

“I think you’re closer to killing me now than you were when we were enemies,” breathed Dib.

“Sorry, didn’t quite catch that,” said Zim. How strange; some of the words that the Dib was speaking were registering as complete gibberish to his brain. “What did you just say?”

Dib shot him a confused look. Zim could see his lips moving as though he were speaking, but half of the words that came out were meaningless nonsense.

“Zim, __________ wrong?”

“Dib, I know your primitive brain must struggle to process advanced language, but if you could just try to speak up…”

Dib’s eyes widened. “____ __, are ___ speaking Irken?

At last, it clicked. Zim covered his mouth. By the stars, he was speaking in Irken! What in the
Something must be wrong with my translator," realized Zim. But how? He’d just tested his PAK that morning! Unless… “Oh no… It couldn’t be one of my internal augmentations, could it?”

“______ happening? ___ ___ okay?”

Zim pulled a pen and a sheet of paper from his PAK and drew a picture of his house, then pointed at it aggressively.

“___ lab? _____ now?”

Zim nodded, and Dib stood up.

“___, I didn’t _____ ___ __ English _____, anyway,” said Dib. “Let’s ___!”

Fortunately, leaving school prior to the end of the day had gotten significantly easier ever since the parent-teacher association found out about the trackers being implanted into the students and sued for their removal. They hurried down the sidewalk at a brisk pace, silently praying that they wouldn’t be stopped by the police on the way to Zim’s house. At last, however, they arrived.

“Welcome home, son!” chimed Zim’s robotic parents as they entered through the front door.

Zim shouted out something that sounded like an order, but Dib had no idea what it meant. The words he was using were very vowel-heavy, sounding more like a series of incoherent noises and clicking than an actual language. The computer responded in kind.

“My master has ordered me to translate all dialogue between you until the problem with his universal translator is resolved,” said the computer.

“Great,” said Dib. “Ask him what’s wrong!”

“I literally just told you that it was his universal translator,” said the computer. “Come on, man.”

“But why? I thought he just did maintenance this morning!” said Dib.

The computer said something in Irken, and Zim turned back to Dib, speaking more words far beyond his comprehension. His expression was one of grave concern.

“He says it may be one of his internal cybernetics,” said the computer. “That wouldn’t have been picked up by routine maintenance.”

“Okay, and?” said Dib. “How do we fix it?”

Another moment passed as the computer translated his words. Zim crossed his arms and paced back and forth across the floor a few times before finally responding in a serious tone.

“The maintenance of internal mechanisms is typically handled once every five years by a highly trained specialist,” said the computer.

“Five years… Yeah, Zim mentioned something like that earlier,” said Dib. A realization hit him. “But Zim’s been on Earth for six! He’s a year overdue!”
The computer translated, and Zim made an annoyed chittering sound.

“He used a very insulting turn of phrase that doesn’t have a direct translation to English, but which is roughly equivalent to ‘No shit, Sherlock.’ ”

“Okay, so we just have to find a specialist, right?” said Dib, only to pause. “But we don’t have a working spaceship, and even if we did, Zim probably isn’t welcome in irken space, especially not now that he’s plotting to overthrow the Tallest!”

Zim pulled off his wig and removed his contacts, then plopped himself down on the couch with his head in his hands. He closed his eyes, clearly straining to come up with a suitable course of action.

“Okay, umm, maybe this isn’t the end of the world,” said Dib. “It’s just your translator, right? What if I taught English to your organic brain? You know, the old-fashioned way?”

The computer explained his suggestion to Zim, who looked contemplative. Just as he was about to say something, however, he suddenly stood up and threw himself into the coffee table, breaking it in half.

“It looks like it may be more than just the translator that’s broken,” said the computer. “His motor controls appear to have also worn out.”

“Ooh, me next!” said GIR, making a running jump towards the coffee table. He landed on top of Zim with a loud crack, prompting Zim to let loose a torrent of angry noises. Dib didn’t have to speak Irken to know that it was probably something profane.

“What if we asked Tak’s ship?” said Dib. “She might have an idea.”

The computer didn’t need to translate; Zim’s antennae snapped up in recognition of Tak’s name. From the angry-sounding noises that followed, Dib got the sense that he had some very strong opinions on the matter.

“He says that he would rather eat broken glass than beg the ship for help,” said the computer.

“What other options do we have?” said Dib. “Even if I re-teach you English, you can’t go around randomly throwing yourself into coffee tables!”

Zim moved to get to his feet, but the second he placed his palms on the coffee table, he began smashing his face repeatedly into the floor until he collapsed.

“Uuuuuuuuuuugh,” groaned Zim, a word which needed no translation.

“That’s it, I’m going to talk to her,” said Dib firmly, stepping around Zim to go to the hangar.

As he ascended the steps to the attic, the lights switched on to reveal both Zim and Tak’s ships sitting side by side.

“Finally awake, I see,” said Tak’s ship. “You certainly don’t look very pleased. Zim made for a pretty disappointing playmate, I take it.”

“Playmate?” said Dib, only to shake his head. “Whatever, it’s not important. Zim’s a year overdue for internal maintenance, and now his body is glitching out, and he can’t speak anything but Irken!”

“Oh, right! I suppose it HAS been more than five years now,” mused the ship. “It’s a little
unusual for an irken overdue for maintenance to fall apart all at once, though. Usually it happens in stages.” Dib decided not to mention that Keef had noticed a shift in Zim’s movement patterns. “It’s especially rare for a universal translator to break. Perhaps it has something to do with all the alcohol you consumed yesterday. The strain of clearing that out of his system might have accelerated the deterioration of all those old parts.”

“Okay, that explains why it’s happening,” said Dib. “Now what do we do about it?”

“Well, ordinarily you would have to take him to a maintenance specialist, but without a working spaceship, it seems you two are up dookie creek without a paddle,” said the ship. “The way I see it, you have two options. One, you can convince one of the perpetually busy maintenance specialists to make a house call all the way out here on Earth for an irken they hate.”

Dib grimaced. That wasn’t happening. “And option two?”

“You’ll just have to do it yourself,” said the ship.

“As in, Zim does it?” said Dib, getting a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“No irken has ever lived that can perform full maintenance on themselves. It’s impossible, as one has to be unconscious for the procedure,” said the ship. “Someone else needs to carve him open and replace the worn-down bits, and by someone else, I mean you.”

“But I can’t do that!” said Dib. “I don’t know how!”

“It’s an extremely routine procedure,” said the ship. “There should be instructions on how to perform it logged somewhere. Probably not on Earth, but there are maintenance hubs on all irken-controlled planets.”

“We can’t get off Earth, remember?” said Dib.

“You CAN receive transmissions, though,” said the ship. “You just have to find someone willing to give you the information you need. Think, worm-child; is there a SINGLE irken in the universe that doesn’t positively despise Zim? Barring that, is there anyone impressionable enough to do what he says even if they do?”

Dib took a deep breath.

“I’ll ask.”

By the time Dib returned, Zim was sitting upside-down on the couch, repeatedly punching himself in the face while GIR laughed and clapped.

“____, ___ news,” said Dib, following it up with a sentence that Zim couldn’t understand in the slightest. Fortunately, the computer was now present to translate.

“He asked if you could think of a single irken in the empire willing to do what you tell them without question.”

Zim’s eyes lit up. He had just the irken in mind!

“Skoodge! Of course!” said Zim, finally managing to flip himself upright. He stuffed his hands into a pair of pillows in the hopes that it would make the punches hurt less. Once they were
inserted, however, one of his legs began kicking the other. “Oh, come on!”

The computer translated, and Dib spoke up again.

“__ you’re ___ gonna like ____, ____...” began the Dib. Zim’s antennae perked up. Was Dib saying that he was going to like this? “__ looks like ____ ____ ___ the ___ ___ perform ___ procedure.”

“You want to have Skoodge perform the procedure?” said Zim. “Absolutely not! He may be a skilled invader, but there’s a difference between slaughtering rat-people and carving open one of your own. He doesn’t have the constitution required to cut open a fellow irken! Besides, it would take him far too long to travel all this way.”

“He didn’t suggest that Skoodge do it,” said the computer. “He’s suggesting that HE do it.”

“Wait, Dib wants to do my maintenance?” said Zim, pulling his arms in close to his chest. “Absolutely not! He doesn’t even know what most of my organs are called!”

His words were translated, and again, Dib responded.

“__ says that Skoodge can send the instructions, and then he can follow along to perform the procedure,” said the computer. “With all due respect, sir, it may be your only option.”

“Oh, he’d just love that, wouldn’t he? He’s always wanted to cut me open!” said Zim with a huff. “We’ll have Skoodge get the instructions, but I am not letting the Dib near my organs! We’ll just have to fabricate a robot to do it. Computer, open communications with Invader Skoodge!”

“Opening a communication line with Invader Skoodge.” said the computer, and the television screen flickered to static while they waited for Skoodge to pick up.

Eventually, the line was answered.

“Hello?” said Skoodge, who was, for whatever reason, only wearing his leggings. Not enough of the background was visible for Zim to determine where he was.

“Hello, Skoodge,” said Zim. “I need you to do me-”

“Oh my Tallest,” said Skoodge, looking shocked. “Zim? Is that you? They said that you went rogue!” He glanced towards the Dib, who was standing within frame. “Is that one of those human things? Why is there alien scum in your house?”

“This is the Dib,” said Zim. Dib appeared to recognize that the sound of his name meant he was being introduced and waved. “He’s just my slave. Now Skoodge, I need you to-”

“Skoooodge!” giggled someone off-screen. “What’s taking you so long?”

“Yeah, Skooode! Come back and play with us!”

“Just a second, sweethearts!” called Skoodge before turning back to the camera. “Sorry about that! After all those successful invasions, they let me switch my reproductive organs back on while preparations are made for Operation: Impending Doom Three, so I decided to make the most of it. Anyway, you were saying?”

Zim’s eye twitched. Even Skoodge was getting laid? SKOODGE?

“I need you to send me a copy of the instructions for five-year maintenance,” said Zim, doing his
best to hide his jealousy. Once this was all over, he would have the Dib!

“What? Why?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t need answers to! Just do as I say!” barked Zim. Dib gave him a disappointed look. Zim supposed it was obvious from the tone that he wasn’t being very polite.

“But you’re registered as a rogue unit!” said Skoodge, stepping away from the screen. “If they catch me helping you, I’d be in so much trouble! They might even send me to Foodcourtia!”

“Skoodge…” growled Zim, trying to keep calm. His panic was making him lash out. If Skoodge decided not to help him, he didn’t have a back-up plan. “Please, I need this. I promise I’ll pay you back.”

Skoodge looked at him suspiciously. “Did you just say ‘please?’ Are you sure you’re Zim?”

Zim sighed. The past few days had done a number on him, hadn’t they? “Yes, Skoodge. So will you do it, or not?” He scowled. “And just so you know, the ‘or not’ part isn’t actually an option. You WILL do this for me!”

“I mean, I guess it would be easy enough to send you a copy,” said Skoodge. “When do you need it by?”

“As soon as possible!” said Zim, slapping himself across the face with his pillow-covered hands. “Gah! Computer, end communications!”

The screen flickered off, and Dib said something that sounded like a question.

“He asked you how it went.”

“Fine,” said Zim. “Skoodge should be able to send us the file we need by the end of the day. In the meantime, we need to figure out what we’re going to do at this ‘work’ thing.”

A moment passed as the computer relayed this to Dib and got his response, in turn.

“He says you can pretend to have a sore throat to get away with not talking. It’s a fairly common and mundane human condition,” said the computer. “As for not understanding, it should be fine if you just stay with him the whole day. He says he’ll handle the talking for you.”

“Very well,” said Zim, smashing his head against the wall. “Prepare yourselves, Membrane Labs! On this day, my infiltration begins!”

“Infiltration? They HIRED you.”

“SILENCE!”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Friday! I’ve decided this will be update day. Thanks for all the well-wishes last chapter! You guys are ridiculously supportive. Seriously, you’re gonna give me high blood pressure from all this sweetness. I didn’t mean to make anybody worry. I promise everything is going fine, and I’m really enjoying writing this. I just wanted to
let you guys know why I'm switching to a weekly schedule. Thanks again!

Also, yes, the Dunce Closet is totally based on the Chokey from Matilda.
First Day Jitters

Chapter Notes

Previously on Height Treason...

Dib and Zim watch a documentary on bugs where they learn about the sexual dimorphism of the insect kingdom. It quickly becomes clear that irken physiology is very different from that of most creatures on Earth, and that irken females have an ovipositor that allows them to lay their eggs inside of the males to incubate. More importantly, however, it turns out Zim forgot to do his weekly PAK maintenance due to the whole "my mission is a lie" thing, and Dib tags along to watch because heck yes, alien robo-brain maintenance! During the process, Dib manages to learn that the program responsible for deleting Zim's memories whenever he questions the control brains is called "keen.rollback()." What that means, he doesn't know, and he doesn't have much time to think about it, either, because Zim's starting to act a little strange. His movement is weird, his translator starts acting up... By the end of the day, he's throwing himself into coffee tables. It turns out that while he's up to date on the weekly maintenance of his PAK, Zim is also a year overdue for a more thorough maintenance of his internals that's supposed to happen about every five years. With few other options, Dib volunteers to perform the surgery once Skoodge retrieves the instructions. In the meantime, they still have to go to work...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I still don’t see why I have to go,” said Tak’s ship.

“Literally the entire reason Zim got this job was so we could fix you,” said Dib as they boarded the ship. “Plus, you’re our only mobile translator.”

“Zim can access his base computer from his PAK, can’t he?”

“Yeah, we tried that, but the computer’s speaker has to come out of his PAK, and that’s not really an option right now,” said Dib. “Go ahead, Zim. Show her what happens if you try to pull something out of your PAK.”

Zim stared at him blankly, and Dib quickly pulled out his phone, which Zim’s computer had installed an English-to-Irken dictionary on that he’d spent the past few hours studying.

“PAK,” said Dib in broken Irken, using the search function to find the words he was looking for. “Operate... Donut? Wait, no, uh... Modulator?”

“That’s got to be the worst Irken I’ve ever heard,” said the ship.

“Hey, cut me some slack! All I have to go on are written pronunciations, and half of your words have fifty different meanings depending on the way they’re pitched and enunciated!” said Dib. “Considering I’ve only had a couple hours to learn, I don’t think I’m that unpleasant at communicate.”

“If I still had antennae, I’d have cut them off rather than continue listening to you desecrate my...
language with your floppy human tongue."

“You were born a ship; you never had antennae,” said Dib. “Look, the point is, something is wrong with the part responsible for sending signals from his brain to his PAK, because the last time Zim tried to do anything with it, his robot legs went wild and started stabbing everything.”

“And you felt the need to DEMONSTRATE that to me?”

Zim made a series of irritated noises that Dib didn’t recognize.

“What’s that?” said Dib. “Ship, can you translate?”

“He’s just mad that we’re leaving him out of the conversation,” said the ship. “Poor, poor Zim! He has to spend a whole fraction of a day unable to annoy people with his irritating voice! My non-existent heart breaks for him!”

Dib gave Zim’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “We’re gonna fix this, I promise.” Silence followed. “Uh, ship?”

“Oh, right. You want me to translate all your mushy nonsense. Just a moment,” said the ship. She said something in Irken. Zim whipped his head around to glare at Dib, then punched him in the leg.

“What? HEY!” said Dib. “What did you tell him I said?”

The ship just laughed as the roof opened up. Zim reached for the controls, but Dib grabbed his wrists before he could insert his hands into the slots.

“No,” he said in Irken. It was the one word that he’d made absolutely certain to learn how to pronounce consistently, because it tended to be one of the things Zim needed to be told the most. “You might have another seizure.”

The ship, who didn’t want Zim driving her in his condition any more than Dib did, was quick to translate this time. Zim crossed his arms over his chest and responded with a displeased chitter.

“He says you’d better not break his spine again,” said the ship, and Dib scowled. He was never going to live that down, was he?

“No,” he said in Irken. It had been ages since he’d last taken the ship for a spin; he hadn’t wanted to use it outside of emergencies prior to this because he didn’t know if driving it around would further damage the flight mechanism he’d been trying to fix. Even if they were ground-bound for the time being, it was nice to finally have a chance to just push his hands forward and take a running leap out of Zim’s attic hangar.

The ship landed on the ground with a gentle thud, and Dib drove it onto the road. Still paranoid about incurring the wrath of the police again, he took care to heed the law even as Tak complained that they could just jump over traffic. Initially, Zim was tense, but after a few minutes, he seemed to relax, resting his head against Dib’s chest with a soft sigh.

It was strange for Zim to be this quiet. Whether he was laughing, yelling, delivering a villainous monologue, or even talking to himself about his future plans, he was always making some kind of noise. The silence was almost a little uncomfortable, like it was breaking some fundamental law of reality; the sky was blue, water was wet, and Zim couldn’t keep his mouth shut for longer than a few minutes at a time.
He drove them down the ramp leading to the underground parking lot and came up to the boom gate, where a disgruntled-looking teenager stood guard.

“Oh, crap, that’s the guy from the restricted section of the mall,” realized Dib.

“I don’t know, nor do I care what that means.”

“I told him that Zim was my dog so he’d let him into the restricted section without an ID,” said Dib. “Long story. The point is, this is gonna be awkward. Just let me do the talking.”

He opened up the cockpit, praying that the teenager had forgotten the encounter. Unfortunately, his eyes lit up with recognition.

“Hey, I remember you!” said the teenager. “You’re the asshole who switched his service dog’s brain with your classmate’s! His brain, in fact!” He pointed an accusing finger at Zim, who – not understanding a single word of the exchange – looked to Dib for answers. “I got fired for letting you guys in!”

Dib smiled uncomfortably. “Uh, sorry about that. My bad. It’s all fixed now, though, and Zim – the real, human Zim – starts work here today.”

“You mean he came to work at the same place that switched his brain out with a dog’s?”

“That was a completely consensual experiment!” said Dib. “He’s very passionate about science.”

“Really?” said the teenager, looking at Zim skeptically. “Hey, green kid. Are you here of your own free will, or is this guy peer pressuring you into being his test subject again?”

Dib could feel Zim tense, so he placed a reassuring hand on his arm. He only realized after the fact that this probably made him look even more like an abuser.

“Yeah, the thing about that is…” said Dib, scouring his brain for an explanation. “He’s actually still suffering a few side effects from being a dog and can’t understand human language?” He phrased it like a statement, but voiced it like a question.

“Hang on, where is your dog, anyway?” said the teenager. “You said you needed him so you would know when you were about to have a seizure!”

All at once, Zim began to twitch. He attempted to stand up, but Dib immediately wrapped his arms around him in a bear-hug to keep him still while his whole body convulsed.

“Okay, so…” began Dib. “I’m Zim, the one who originally had his brain switched with the dog, and this is Dib, the one who did the original brain switching. When he tried to switch us back, there was an accident, and now Zim- I mean, Dib is half-dog, which is why he can’t talk.”

Dib forced himself to smile as the teenager stared at them with the eyes of a customer service worker who’d seen bullshit far beyond his years.

“There was never a dog involved in any of this, and you just made the whole thing up to get past me, didn’t you?” said the teenager.

“Yeah, well, we both have IDs now,” said Dib, flashing his and Zim’s badges. “You have to let us in.”

The teenager reluctantly opened up the boom gate. Dib maneuvered the ship into the first
available parking space. Upon getting out, he opened up the side and heaved the busted flight core out of the vehicle.

“Okay, I think that’s all we need to bring with us,” said Dib. He looked at Zim, who just stared back at him with a blank expression. “Oh, right. Uh, what’s the word for ‘come,’ again? Terraformed?”

“Verbs are always enunciated on the second syllable, stupid,” said the ship. “Add a click to the end if you’re telling somebody else to do something. Two clicks to indicate that it’s urgent or an order.”

“Come,” said Dib, clicking his tongue. Zim followed him into the elevator, which lifted them up to the lobby. Dib led him to a scanner on the wall. “See this? This is a punch clock.” He tucked the flight core under his arm and tapped his badge to the screen, which made a pleasant little ‘ding.’ “Now you.”

He handed Zim’s badge over to him and gestured towards the punch clock. Zim appeared confused, but mimicked the action.

“Great! Good work,” he said. Along with the word ‘no,’ he’d also done his best to memorize a few words of praise to give Zim the positive reinforcement he needed to stay out of trouble. Sure enough, Zim beamed. “Now, let’s head to the-”

“Excellent, the last of the new hires. Zim, right?” said the receptionist, standing up. Zim, recognizing his name, turned to look towards the source of the voice. “Come on, I’ll show you where to go for orientation.”

Crap, Dib had completely forgotten about orientation! What was he going to do? He couldn’t just leave Zim all alone like this!

“Uh, it’s been awhile since I’ve actually come in to work,” said Dib. It was true; he more or less just popped in and out whenever he needed to make some money to pay for his paranormal investigation gear or, more recently, copious amounts of cotton candy. It drove his father a bit nuts, but he figured it was better for Dib to ‘set his own hours’ and occasionally come in to do science than to get fired, find a job somewhere else, and not do any science at all. “Maybe I should come to orientation, too.”

“Nice try, Dib, but your father made it very clear to us that if you’re on the clock, you’re going to work,” said the receptionist curtly. “Go on.”

This was bad. Zim had no idea what was going on. How was Dib supposed to explain to Zim that they had to split up? And even if he could explain, how would Zim navigate a situation where he couldn’t understand anyone?

Well, one problem at a time, Dib supposed.

“Zim,” he said, successfully getting Zim’s attention. He gestured to himself, then the direction of the lab, then to Zim, then the direction of the receptionist. “I have to go to my desk, and you have to go with him, understand?” Zim continued to look confused, so Dib raised both of his hands. He shook one. “Dib.” He shook the other. “Zim.” He pressed them together, then pulled them apart. “Split up.”

There was a flicker of recognition in Zim’s eyes, and he nodded vigorously before following after the receptionist, who gave them a funny look, but ultimately shook his head and shrugged it off.
Dib took a deep breath to steady his nerves.

“Good luck,” said Dib.

He was going to need it.

When the Dib first informed him that they would be splitting up, Zim had been more than a little confused. After all, wasn’t Dib supposed to be serving as his ‘voice’ for the day? And how were they supposed to work on the flight core together if they were separated?

Zim followed the greeting drone down the hallway into a small room where three humans he recognized from the previous day’s test were sitting around a table. He was reminded faintly of his first day as a military research scientist when they’d rounded up all of the newbies to install the facility’s map, rules, and evacuation protocols into their PAKs. Humans didn’t have PAKs, though. Instead, a woman in a lab coat was talking while a projector displayed a bunch of text onto a large screen.

Although Zim could understand a few snippets of her speech, none of the things that came up seemed particularly important for his purposes. He had no need for human insurance, nor did he care about retirement benefits. All that mattered was getting to the lab and fixing the flight core. He impatiently drummed his fingers on the table.

His leg began to twitch under the table as the muscle modulator in his thigh began sending out random pulses of energy. Fortunately, they were too short to accidentally kick anybody, so they mostly just flailed about unseen. Zim silently cursed himself for not averting this issue by going back to an irken-controlled planet when he had the chance. Every time he’d thought about getting his internal maintenance done, he’d pushed it off with the idea that he was almost done with taking over the Earth, and it would be such a waste to go all the way there and back when he would be ready to go home for good any day now.

Home. The place where he’d thought he was respected and valued and wanted…

Uhg, there it was again; annoying negative thoughts that left him feeling almost like he wasn’t the greatest irken to ever grace the universe with his presence. As luck would have it, however, Zim was an expert at taking those kinds of thoughts and burying them deep down beneath fifty layers of carefully-constructed denial, so it wasn’t long before he assured himself that everything would be fine once the defective Tallest were gone and his people were finally free to acknowledge how great he was.

Everyone in the room appeared to be getting up now. Zim, too, got to his feet to follow the line down the hall. The woman in the lab coat was talking and pointing to things as she walked, and every second spent listening to her nonsense left Zim wishing more and more that he’d been able to heist the mall like he’d originally intended. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken part in a plan as tedious as this. Even sitting in a toilet for months on end had been more interesting.

The next room they entered was divided in three. The part that they were standing in was nothing special, but the other two were walled off by glass and filled to the brim with a large variety of flowers growing under blacklights.

On the left side, thousands of ordinary bees buzzed in and out of their nest collecting nectar and
spreading pollen. Scientists in beekeeping outfits seemed to be studying them closely. Zim could only hope they weren’t of the ship-destroying or vampiric variety. That documentary might have led Dib to conclude that bees were too stupid to organize and take over the planet, but Zim knew better.

At first glance, the right appeared to be more of the same, but Zim’s ocular implants immediately picked up on the electrical signature emanating from their tiny robotic bodies. These had to be the artificial replacement bees that the Dib-father had spoken of.

The orientation lady chattered for a bit, then brandished a remote control. With a press of a button, the robotic bees behind the glass stopped what they were doing to hover in place. A few more clicks had them gather together into a massive swarm at the center of their enclosure, then spread out into a star formation. What precision! Zim found himself practically salivating at the potential military applications.

“No, _____ _____ ____ ____ volunteer to test _______?” said the orientation lady.

Zim’s hand shot up, and he bounced up and down where he stood like an excited child. Yes, he absolutely wanted to volunteer to try the remote! If he could figure out how to harness this bee drone technology, he could use it to make the Tallest pay! What fun it would be to have them swarm Red and Purple, trapping them in a circle of bees and slowly, slowly closing in! He would make them wait for death in fearful anticipation, then torture them until they begged for its sweet release!

“Oh, _____ ___ easier _____ usual. _____ __, then!” said the orientation lady, beckoning for Zim to come near. Zim hurried forward and eagerly held out his hands. Rather than placing the remote in them, however, she gave him what appeared to be one of the bee drones.

Well, that was a little different than what he expected, but no matter. It still gave him a chance to observe the drones up close. He pulled it in close to his face. For something made by humans, the craftsmanship wasn’t half bad.

“___ ___ ___ demonstrate ___ stinger!”

By the time Zim understood what he’d actually volunteered for, it was too late. The bee’s eyes flashed red, and it charged towards his face, stinger extended. He screamed and attempted to get away, but there was no escape. The bee took aim and fired the stinger at him like a gun. Zim winced as it pierced the palm he’d been using to block his face, but all things considered, it wasn’t actually as bad as he’d feared. Unlike a real bee’s stinger, the fake bee didn’t have any venom, so it wasn’t much worse than being pricked with a needle.

At least, that was what he thought until he noticed a pair of wires connecting the metal barb in his hand to the bee hovering in front of him.

A surge of electricity pulsed through his body, and he dropped to the floor. There was a popping sensation in the hand that the bee was connected to.

**WARNING: Voltage levels in excess of recommended parameters.**

Everything went dark.
Dib had always had difficulty concentrating at work. No matter who he worked with or what he was doing, every last train of thought that departed his oversized head led back to Zim Central Station. Before, the questions had always been the same. ‘Where is he?’ ‘What is he plotting?’ Today, however, he was accosted by a new set of worries. ‘How is he?’ ‘Is he going to be okay without me?’

No matter how much he tried to assure himself that it was silly to be concerned, he couldn’t stop imagining progressively worse outcomes for the day. What if Zim got hurt? What if Zim got fired? What if Zim’s cover was blown, and he was carted off to some secret government facility where Dib would never see him again?

Dib sighed, pushed his work laptop aside, and took a moment to just breathe. He hated to admit it to himself, but even before they became friends, thoughts of Zim had often been the only thing that got him through the day. Whenever he started to despair over his seemingly inevitable future in ‘real’ science, all he had to do was remember that he had an alien to catch, and his resolve as a paranormal investigator returned in full force. After all, once his father saw that he’d been right all along, surely he would stop pressuring Dib to go down a career path he had no interest in!

He chuckled darkly. How naïve he’d been.

“Son! You came in today!”

Dib spun his chair around to see the very last person he’d wanted to talk to today leaning over the wall of his cube.

“Yeah,” said Dib, avoiding eye contact with his father. Maybe if he pretended to be busy, he would go away. “Dad, I’m kind of-”

“I thought I might see you here now that your boyfriend has started work, so I went ahead and prepared a job for you to do in the biology department! Your favorite!” said Professor Membrane. Dib opened his mouth to refute both the ‘boyfriend’ and the ‘favorite’ comment, but his father didn’t stop to give him a chance to speak. “I need you to handle a test transplant of a new kind of artificial heart made entirely out of plant matter! Fortunately, a drunk driver got into an accident and perished yesterday-”

“Fortunately?” Dib managed to say even as his father continued to talk over him.

“-so we have a fresh cadaver waiting for you down below. Once you’ve completed the transplant, we’ll see how the artificial heart works to determine whether to continue building other artificial organs using this technique!”

Dib gestured to the flight core that he’d set down on the more cobweb-ridden side of his scarcely-used desk. “That sounds like it’s going to take a lot of time, and I-”

“Excellent, I look forward to seeing your results!” said Professor Membrane. “And don’t worry, son. I know you came here to work with Zim. I’ll have him join you as soon as he wakes up!”

“Wakes up?” said Dib, rocketing to his feet. “What happened?”

“Oh, he just volunteered to help Victoria demonstrate our bees’ defensive taser during the orientation tour, that’s all. It seems the voltage was set just a little on the high side, however, and it knocked him out.”

“What? Why would your bees even need tasers?” demanded Dib. “And didn’t the government shut that project down?”
“They agreed to let us continue if we gave the bees tasers for police and military use,” said Professor Membrane. “Not an ideal situation, admittedly, but if it means advancing science, how could we refuse?”

Dib sighed. “Right. Who cares about anything else as long as you have science, right?”

“Now you’re getting it!” said Professor Membrane delightedly. “Anyway, that cadaver isn’t going to dissect itself! Off you go!”

“Whatever,” muttered Dib, shoving his way past his father. As long as it meant getting out of this conversation, he would go anywhere in the lab that he had to.

Zim opened his eyes to find a figure hovering over him. His vision was foggy, but the figure was familiar. “Dib?”

The figure let out a good-natured laugh, seemingly amused by the mix-up. As Zim’s vision cleared, it became clear that the person in the room with him was not, in fact, the Dib. Rather, it was the Dib’s gene-donor, Professor Membrane. The two of them were in what appeared to be a clinic. There were several other employees in beds not too far from his own, each nursing ailments that he could only assume were related to their research; acid burns, bee stings, glowing eyes… In other words, standard workplace hazards.

“___ glad ___ you’re okay,” said the professor. Zim slowly sat up and ran a quick diagnostic.

**STATUS REPORT:** Vital signs stable. Significant damage to left arm sustained. Major maintenance required. Please proceed to a repair hub at the earliest available opportunity.

Sure enough, Zim found that he couldn’t lift or even feel his left arm. That certainly presented a problem. He did his best not to let the professor on to this fact by covertly using his other hand to place it on his lap in as natural a position as he could while his back was turned.

“__ son ___ __ worried ____ about ___!” said Professor Membrane, ruffling Zim’s wig. “I ____ him ___ were fine, ___ ___ know him!”

Zim attempted to check the time in his PAK, but the shock had reset his internal clock. He would have to check the time manually to fix it. As Professor Membrane babbled on in the background, Zim looked around for a clock on the wall or a shelf.

“___ sorry you ______ __ in ___ clinic ____ first __, ____ ______ just ___ nature __ science!” said Professor Membrane. “______ sure ___ understand. ______ _ scientist, after ___!”

Zim rolled his eyes; it was a meaningless gesture on Irk, where everyone’s eyes were solid colors and you couldn’t tell which direction anyone was looking in, but with his contacts in, it was a handy means of silently communicating his disdain. Alas, Professor Membrane was too busy going on about science to notice.

“__ wish __ son ______ _____ ___ your example,” sighed Professor Membrane, leaning against the wall. “_ just don’t know ______ went wrong _____ boy!”

With no clock in sight, Zim turned to Professor Membrane and gestured to his non-functioning
wrist, trying to indicate a watch.

“Time?” said Professor Membrane, and Zim nodded. “__, perhaps he ____ needs ___ time __ adjust. __ __ __, ___ glad __ ______ __ coming in now ____ you’re ______ here.”

Zim slapped his working palm against his forehead. He got up, gestured to his wrist again, then Professor Membrane, then the door. Hopefully that would communicate his need for Professor Membrane to show him the nearest clock.

“Time… ___ ___ __ leave?” said Professor Membrane, looking taken aback. “Interesting… _ _____ ___ considered ___ ___ thing _______ him back ___ ________ ___ full potential ___ __ sense __ security __ ______ ___ living situation.”

This was hopeless. Zim began heading towards the door. He would just have to find a clock, himself.

“__, yes, __ course! __ must __ dying to ___ Dib ____ _________ okay,” said Professor Membrane. He slipped in front of Zim, tossed him a small lab coat that somehow still managed to be slightly too big for him, and beckoned for him to follow. “__, ___ show ___ __ ___ biology department.”

A few minutes later, they arrived in a room full of tables and medical equipment. There were various scientists working on all kinds of projects, though none of it was any more advanced than his fourth-year training assignments as a smeet. One of the scientists appeared to be trying to swap a pair of mouse heads around, another was extracting DNA from a slice of banana, and a third was opening up a human cadaver with a scalpel.

Wait a second, that third one was Dib! Zim was so used to seeing him in black that he was almost unrecognizable in white. He immediately scurried over to tug at his lab coat and get his attention.

“Huh?” said Dib, looking down. “Zim! ______ okay!”

‘Of course I’m okay,’ he wanted to say, but even if Dib could somehow understand him, Zim knew better than to risk blowing his cover. Instead, he crossed his hands over his chest and gave Dib a cocky grin. No mere bee could hope to keep the mighty Zim down! Not even one with a taser for a stinger!

Professor Membrane approached the table. Zim had never been great at reading people – irkens had little need to be in tune with the emotions of others, after all – but it didn’t take an expert to see how his presence immediately put Dib on edge.

The professor said a few sentences, and Zim could tell from a combination of his tone and the occasional mention of ‘science’ and ‘proud’ that he was trying to be encouraging, but Dib was having none of it. Every response he gave was short and curt, and he was clearly making an effort to get him to go away. At last, the professor seemed to relent, backing away with that ‘I’m disappointed in you’ look that was all too familiar for Zim.

With the professor gone, Zim stood on his toes in an effort to better see what Dib was doing on the table. Dib, noticing his struggle, pulled up a chair and lifted him up onto it. Zim chose to thank him for his assistance by smacking his hands away the second he was up and shooting him an annoyed glare. The Dib just laughed and lightly punched his shoulder.

Zim set his good hand down on the table for stability as Dib picked his scalpel back up and continued making the incision. The purpose for the dissection of Dib’s own kind was unclear to
Zim, and curiosity compelled him to watch and figure it out.

For as uninterested in his work as Dib looked, he completed his task with much greater skill and care than Zim had expected. His steady, five-fingered hands made quick work of the skin and fat, and he didn’t so much as flinch at the sight of his fellow human’s slimy organs. It was one thing to dissect an alien, but it was quite another to carve up one of your own. Even Zim got a little squeamish at the sight of another irken’s exposed squeedlyspooch, not that he would ever let Dib know that. No matter how much he wanted to dismiss Dib as a primitive, monkey-brained fool, it was impossible not to be at least a little bit impressed.

Zim pressed his good hand to his chest and swallowed. Sure, maybe Dib wasn’t the talentless hack that he’d initially seen him as, but no matter how skillfully Dib snipped away at the cadaver’s heart, the thought of being the one beneath that scalpel was just…

‘They might even name your autopsy video after me!’ echoed Dib’s voice in the back of his mind, and Zim couldn’t help but shiver. Friends or not, how was he supposed to trust that Dib wouldn’t suddenly change his mind while he was unconscious? Once he was out, that was it; his life was entirely in Dib’s hands. If his nemesis-turned-friend decided to slice his throat open and let him bleed out, there was nothing he could do.

Lost in thought, he only snapped back to reality in response to a sudden sense of movement in the shoulder of his bad arm. Upon turning his head, he saw that Dib had set his tools down to take his paralyzed hand and inspect it. His brow furrowed, and he murmured a few unintelligible words that nonetheless sounded concerned.

“Okay?” he asked in broken Irken. Zim could tell from the tone of his voice that it was intended to be a question – ‘Are you okay?’ – but he was missing the little hissing sound at the end that usually indicated the difference between a statement and a query.

“Yes,” said Zim with a nod. It wasn’t entirely true, of course, but since he couldn’t explain the nuances of the situation, it was a better answer than saying ‘no’ and possibly causing Dib to think something was urgently the matter.

“Okay,” said Dib, though he only looked moderately reassured.

What a strange feeling; Zim couldn’t remember anyone ever looking at him with such worried eyes. At least, not worry on his behalf; he supposed plenty of people had given him a concerned ‘What did you do THIS time?’ face.

The Dib set the human heart down, then gestured to Zim and gave the organ a couple of pokes.

“___ can look at __, __ ___ want. _____ not like __ needs it _______.

Zim didn’t need to be told twice; he immediately grabbed one of the spare scalpels and set about slicing the heart into pieces. Diagrams were great, and all, but nothing could ever hope to compare to the experience of taking something apart and seeing what made it tick with his own eyes. It was a little tricky with only one arm, but part of his exam to become an elite had consisted of taking a laser apart and putting it back together with one hand cuffed behind his back, so it was nothing he couldn’t handle.

For several minutes, they worked quietly side by side. Zim couldn’t help but keep glancing over at what Dib was doing; it didn’t take long to figure out that he was replacing the cadaver’s original heart with a green, leafy replica. Were the humans trying to upgrade their inferior organs? It was the sort of thing that would normally leave Zim feeling smugly superior to Dib’s primitive species,
but in this particular case, it left him feeling almost… Proud? On someone else’s behalf?

What nonsense. No doubt it was a result of his body continuing to malfunction. Still, he supposed it wouldn’t hurt if, once he was fixed, he showed Dib a thing or two about how to really take his body to the next level. Not up to irken standards, of course, but maybe an ocular implant or two for his defective eyes, at least.

There was a sudden surge of power in his good arm. Zim’s eyes widened as his muscles forcibly contracted, sending the hand with the scalpel in it straight into his face. He screamed out a whole host of Irken expletives as he fell from the chair to the ground, blood pouring from a deep slash in the place between his eyes where humans had noses.

“Zim?” said Dib, dropping everything to kneel beside him. Several other scientists turned around to see what had happened.

“___ happened?” demanded one of the other scientists, hurrying over with a wad of gauze.

“__ fell ___ chair!” lied Dib, gingerly removing the scalpel.

“Quick, ___ _____ ___ shower!” said another.

Zim hissed as Dib lifted him up and carried him to a large, bright yellow shower head. He hadn’t been able to take his paste bath because Dib had hogged the bathroom, and even if he had, that wasn’t going to protect the open wound on his face!

“Ssssss,” said Dib, holding him close and whispering into his wig. “___ _____ ____ is ____. It’s ____ filtered. There’s ____.”

Zim cried out as the water hit his body, but while it stung his injury something fierce, the rest of his face didn’t seem to be suffering any harm. It seemed Dib was correct; the water here was filtered and free of nasty pollutants. That didn’t make it any less uncomfortable to feel it against his bare, unprotected skin.

He winced as the water was shut off and a wad of gauze was pressed against his face. The bleeding had already almost stopped, courtesy of his PAK, but he couldn’t exactly explain to the group of humans surrounding him that he didn’t need their version of medical care.

Were he not currently in so much pain, Zim might have laughed at the way Dib peeled off his sopping lab coat and fervently attempted to dry off the watertight PAK beneath like he was worried it might suffer some kind of damage from the moisture. Did he really think that irken technology would be less fluid-resistant than the average human cellphone? Despite the pointlessness of the gesture, however, it still felt kind of nice that Dib had worried enough to do it.

His PAK was already beginning operations to repair his injury, but Dib still pressed bandages to his face.

“Thank you,” murmured Zim in Irken. Regardless of whether or not Dib understood the words, he seemed to understand their meaning, and he smiled down at Zim, who was still sopping wet.

“__ really need __ ____ ___ home,” said Dib.

“I’m fine,” Zim attempted to say, but even something as simple as that was still beyond the human’s vocabulary. He took a moment to consider what words he remembered the Dib using earlier. “Zim okay.” It was a good thing there were no irkens around, because he wasn’t sure he would ever live down having to talk like some primitive, cave-dwelling lifeform in order to make
himself understood.

Dib shook his head. “Home,” he said again, more firmly this time. “______ worry, ______ talk ____ dad _____.

Zim gestured to the unfinished project still sitting on the table. He’d only been a military researcher for a few short years before getting transferred to invader training, but he knew how much trouble one could get in for walking away in the middle of a job. Despite his physical and verbal protests, however, Dib simply lifted him up in his arms and marched out the door, heedless of the chatter from the other researchers.

Dib knew his father wouldn’t be happy about him abandoning a project on the table without making alternative arrangements, especially one involving a valuable cadaver, but there was no way he was going to continue watching Zim injure himself. Professor Membrane would get over it – Dib knew he’d rather lose a thousand bodies than fire his son – and there were witnesses from the lab that could testify that Zim hadn’t left early of his own free will, so his job would also be safe.

“Well, he certainly looks worse for wear,” mused the ship as Dib carried Zim inside. “What happened? You’ve only been gone for an hour and a half.”

“Zim needs to go home, now,” said Dib, flipping on the ship’s autonomous mode so he could hold the squirming Zim with both arms. “He’s already been electrocuted by a taser and stabbed in the face with a scalpel, and now one of his arms isn’t even working!”

“Wait, really? That’s terrible!” said the ship, much to Dib’s surprise. “I can’t believe I MISSED all that!”

“Just get us home!” hissed Dib, giving the inside of the ship a kick.

“Touchy, touchy,” said the ship, rising to its feet and taking off at a light jog back to the boom gate. “Relax, it’s not like he’s in any immediate danger. The arm was probably just a result of the taser frying his old wiring. It’ll come back online once you replace the old part. Everything vital is connected directly to the PAK, so as long as he’s been keeping up with his weekly maintenance, he’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” said Dib, taking a deep breath. “That actually does make me feel a bit-”

POP!

“HRK-” said Zim, clutching at his throat.

“Holy shit, what happened?” said Dib. Zim’s chest was twitching violently like he was choking on something.

“Oh, it looks like his throat closed up,” said the ship serenely.

“I thought you said everything vital was handled by the PAK!” cried Dib. Shit, shit, shit! If it was a mechanism in Zim’s throat that was choking him, a Heimlich maneuver wasn’t going to help! What was he supposed to do?
“Give it a second,” said the ship. There was a whirring noise like a computer fan as a vent opened in Zim’s PAK. His panicked flailing stopped, and his chest began to rise and fall as normal again. “Irken can breathe through their PAKs in a pinch. Additionally, there’s an emergency oxygen reserve to keep him conscious for up to ten minutes without breathable air.”

“Ten minutes isn’t that much time!”

“It’s more than YOU get, human.”

As soon as they were out, the ship climbed up the nearest building to begin leaping across the rooftops back to Zim’s base.

“See, isn’t this nice?” said the ship as Zim struggled to push any kind of air through his throat. “Now he can’t even talk in Irken!” She said something in Irken that Dib could only assume was her rubbing this fact in Zim’s face, because his response was to grit his teeth and struggle in Dib’s arms like he was ready to fistfight the ship.

The strain of this act proved too much for him; there was another popping sound, and Zim clutched one of his eyes.

“There goes an ocular implant! A shame I’m just a ship without any kind of income. We could have placed bets on how many parts he breaks by the time we get back. Ah, well. We can still pretend, can’t we? My monies are on a leg next.”

“Seriously?” said Dib. “I know you hate Zim, but this is just excessive!”

“This is the same person who’s spent the past six years trying to kill you and take over your planet,” said the ship. “If anything, you should hate him more than I do! Unless… He didn’t brainwash you, did he? Because that’s the only explanation I can think of for why you aren’t ripping his PAK off and chucking it into the ocean right now.”

“Look, it’s none of your business why we’re working together now,” said Dib. “Our goals align, remember? Now hurry up and get us back to Zim’s house!”

“Hm. He must be a better lay than I thought,” teased the ship. Dib’s entire face went strawberry-red. “It makes sense, I suppose. If what they say on your ‘internet’ is true, you have an ovipositor of sorts, correct? Our smaller males might not be particularly desirable on the outside, but that lack of action keeps them nice and tight.”

“People who have more sex don’t get looser! That’s a myth!” said Dib, only realizing after the fact that he probably should have objected to the implication that he’d had sex with Zim, first. “And I did not fuck Zim!”

“Oh, really? Well, I suppose that’s fair enough. It IS Zim, after all,” said the ship. “How pitiful. He’s desperate enough to lust after a HUMAN, of all things, and not even YOU want to fuck him!”

“What are you talking about?” said Dib. There was no way Zim would ever want to have sex with a ‘filthy human.’

“Do you really not remember the other night?”

Dib touched his head. “It’s a little fuzzy.”

“He was all over you,” said the ship. “I’ve never seen such flagrant desperation from an irken before. It would have been funny if it weren’t so gross.”
Dib swallowed. Now that he thought about it, he did remember Zim getting a little cuddly… “He was drunk!”

“So were you, but only one of you had enough sense to break things off, and it wasn’t him,” said the ship. “I still have the recording. Want me to play it back for you?”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” said Dib. He didn’t have time to think about this. He had far more pressing things to worry about, like what he was going to do if Skoodge didn’t come through for them.

“Suit yourself,” said the ship. “Also, you’ve been squeezing Zim half to death for the past five blocks.”

Dib looked down to see that he had indeed been crushing Zim against his chest, leaving him twitching like a dying ant in his grip.

“Sorry!” said Dib, quickly releasing the tiny irken, who launched himself out of his lap so quickly that he fell to the floor.

The ship clambered back into the attic hangar, and the roof closed up above them. Dib carried Zim’s thoroughly-battered body down to the living room.

“Good, you’re back,” said the computer. “Invader Skoodge has been trying to contact you off and on for the past hour.”

“Put him through,” said Dib.

After a few moments, the image of a chubby irken appeared on screen, fully clothed this time. The computer automatically translated his speech to English.

“Hey, I- Woah! What happened?” demanded Skoodge upon seeing Dib cradling the injured Zim in his arms. Zim attempted to respond, but his throat was still closed up.

“We need the five-year maintenance instructions,” said Dib. “Do you have them?”

“Uh, yeah,” said Skoodge. “I even got the blueprints for the parts you’ll need. They’re all pretty simple, so your computer should be able to fabricate them on the spot.” He pressed a button to send them over and gave Dib a funny look. “So, uh, is there another irken there to do the maintenance, or…?”

“Just me,” sighed Dib, and Skoodge grimaced. “Trust me, Zim’s not happy about it, either, but we don’t have any better options right now, and we can’t afford to wait. I mean, just look at him!”

He held up Zim, who didn’t even have the energy to do much more than look grumpy. There was another loud pop, and his wig flew off as his antennae sprang up and whipped around randomly.

“Oh, wow. That is bad,” said Skoodge. “How good did you say your irken anatomy is, again?”

“I’m familiar with the squeedlyspooch,” said Dib. “Aaaaand that’s about it.”

Skoodge frowned. “Well, I might not be able to be there in person, but if Zim has a camera in his lab, I could help guide you through the procedure.”

Dib squeezed Zim to his chest. “Really?” He needed all the help he could get.

“Yeah, why not?” said Skoodge, looking a bit excited. “I mean, sure, Zim is a criminal slated for termination the second he tries to come back to irken-controlled space, but it’s kind of fun to be a
A part of Dib wondered if it was wise to trust Skoodge, but considering the entire plan already hinged on him having sent them the right instructions and blueprints, heeding his instructions probably wasn’t introducing any new risks.

“Fabrication complete. Replacement parts are now available in the lab,” said the computer, repeating the statement in Irken so Zim could understand.

“Alright, Zim,” said Dib, setting the irken down. “Ready?”

Zim looked apprehensive. He used his good arm to switch off the communicator with Skoodge, then pulled a cord from his PAK to plug into the television screen. A terminal opened up and began printing Irken text that the computer translated on the next line.

‘How do I know you won’t kill me?’ he wrote with an accusing stare.

“Look, I know I’m just a smelly, inferior human, but we’ll have Skoodge to supervise,” said Dib, which the computer translated.

Zim shook his head.

‘How do I know you won’t kill me INTENTIONALLY?’

“Seriously? After all this, you still don’t trust me?” said Dib incredulously. “I’ve had at least twenty different chances to expose you by now, and I didn’t take advantage of any of them! What more do you want?”

Zim removed his contacts and set them aside.

‘Why didn’t you?’ wrote Zim. ‘You have no real reason to help me. What have I given you aside from a promise not to destroy your world? There’s nothing holding me to my end of the bargain. You’re not stupid. You must have realized that by now.’

Dib plopped himself down on the couch and patted the seat to get Zim to sit next to him. Zim just shook his head and gestured to the cable connecting him to the television screen by the PAK, which only extended a few feet.

“Do you remember when you got drunk and showed up at my house super early in the morning?” said Dib. Zim cringed and covered his face with his only functional hand. Yep, he definitely remembered. “You practically begged me to turn you in or dissect you, and for a little while, I was actually super excited. ‘Finally! Sweet vindication!’ Right?” He exhaled. “But the more I thought about it, the more I started to think about what life would be like after you were gone. No more battles to fight, no more aliens to chase… It’s hard for me to admit it, but Zim, I don’t know what I ever would have done without you. Even when we were enemies, you were the only thing that kept me going.”

Zim took a few steps forward only to be stopped by the cable.

‘There’s a saying on Irk,’ he wrote to the screen. ‘Those who carry you can also drop you. Irkens are a self-reliant people. Even depending upon another one of our own is frowned upon.’

“But don’t you need other irkens to do this kind of maintenance for you?”

‘That’s different,’ said Zim with a wave of his hand. ‘There are systems in place to ensure
cooperation between irkens in times of necessity. Botching a maintenance job has consequences; the one responsible would be investigated and possibly transferred to a less desirable position. They have every motivation to succeed for their own sakes. You, however, don’t. If I die on that operating table, nothing changes for you.’

“Weren’t you listening?” said Dib. “If you die, I lose the one person that kept me from blowing my own brains out halfway through high school.” He stood up and crouched down to meet Zim’s eyes, or at least the one that was still working. “You’re my best friend. Well, I mean, you’re my only friend, really, which kind of makes you my best friend by default.”

Zim’s antennae twitched. ‘That makes sense, I suppose. I can see how it would be hard on you to no longer be able to bask in my incredible, awe-inspiring presence. It’s just…’ There was a slight delay before the next words finally printed to the screen. ‘…difficult to need someone.’

“You think it’s any easier on me to be needed?” snorted Dib. “I’ve spent the past few days giving pep talks about feelings and friendship to an alien, but the truth is, I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. Everything I ever learned about relationships has been from textbooks, popular media, and hours of therapy from people who think I’m nuts.”

‘That’s not very reassuring to hear minutes before you cut me open.’

“Well, lucky for you, surgery on an alien is probably the one thing I’m more qualified for than any other human on the planet,” said Dib.

‘In the same way that a monkey is more qualified than a rock!’ wrote Zim.

Dib unplugged Zim from the television.

“This monkey is going to do such a good job patching you up that your maintenance specialists are gonna start coming to me for advice.”

Zim’s chest shook in a way that probably would have been a laugh if his throat hadn’t been closed off. He followed Dib into the kitchen where GIR was painting a picture of a pony on the wall with a slice of pizza, then hopped into the trash can.

“Okay,” said Dib, taking a deep breath to psyche himself up. All he had to do was follow the instructions! How hard could performing surgery on an alien cyborg possibly be? “Here we go.” He followed Zim into the elevator, and together, they descended into the depths of the base.

Chapter End Notes

This wasn't as long as I wanted (I had originally intended to cram a bit more story into this chapter) but I hope it suffices for the time being! Thanks again for all the feedback on the last one. I hope you all have a lovely Friday. See you next week!
I'm not going to have a chance to post the new chapter tomorrow, so I'm putting it up a day early. Happy Thursday! Additionally, MortemGrimalkinMessor drew some INCREDIBLE fanart for the ferris wheel scene from chapter 2, so be sure to check that out at the link below!

https://grimalkinmessor.tumblr.com/post/188140972552/height-treason-klei-invader-zim-archive-of

Previously, on Height Treason...

Zim's malfunctions continue to worsen, but that's no reason to miss his first day at work! Zim and Dib arrive at Membrane Labs with a plan to stick together, but things immediately go awry when they get separated for Zim's orientation tour. While Zim suffers through painful misunderstandings due to his busted translator, Dib suffers through awkward interactions with his father. As the pair carve up the cadaver of a drunk driver (don't drink and drive, kids), Zim's limbs seize up, and he accidentally stabs himself in the face with a scalpel. Dib drags him out of work early and takes him home, where he learns that Skoodge has successfully retrieved the instructions for maintenance surgery. It's time for the operation to begin...

“Is this really necessary?” said Dib as he held up the irken lab coat that the computer had just deposited into his hands by a robotic arm. It was so… Pink. “I’m already wearing a lab coat.” He had yet to remove the one he’d been wearing at work.

“Unless you want to die of an electric shock, I highly recommend you wear the irken one. It has better insulation,” said the computer. Another pair of arms held up a pair of black gloves. “These, too.”

Dib reluctantly switched into the bizarre alien lab coat that the computer had fabricated for him. There was no opening in the front; he had to put it on like a pull-over, something that wasn’t easy given how stiff and unyielding the fabric was. Furthermore, it was so heavy. Once it was on, Dib felt like he was wearing some kind of bulletproof dress.

“Is this a lab coat, or body armor?” said Dib, taking the gloves (which the computer had thankfully fabricated to be five-fingered) and pulling them on.

“Both.”

Dib wiggled his fingers. Unlike the heavy coat, the gloves were incredibly comfortable. He could still feel sensations as though it were skin.

He turned to Zim, who was giving him a strange look. “Something wrong?”

Zim quickly turned his head away so Dib couldn’t see his face. Weird.
“We’re here,” said the computer, and the elevator doors opened.

It looked like the computer had already set up the lab for them. Medical tools like scalpels sat side-by-side with mechanical tools like screwdrivers on the surgical tray. The actual operating table was particularly strange, and both Dib and Zim stared at with looks of equal apprehension. It was an X-shaped surface with straps that looked like they were intended to bind the wrists, ankles, head, neck, and joints.

“What are the straps for?” said Dib, who couldn’t help but feel like this looked suspiciously similar to the kinds of tables he’d seen in unsavory internet videos. Not that he made a habit of watching those kinds of things, of course! That had been a one-time thing.

…Well, one time in the past week, anyway.

“Maintenance tables have adjustable arms to allow for optimal access to different parts of the body during the procedure,” explained the computer. “The straps keep the subject’s limbs in place while they’re being moved.”

“Seems like a pretty low-tech solution for an advanced alien race,” mused Dib, trying to lighten the mood.

“Oh, these tables haven’t seen widespread use since irkens first began exploring the universe beyond their solar system; it’s just the best I can fabricate on such short notice,” said the computer. “Most maintenance hubs suspend the subject in the air with magnets and-”

“But it works, right?” interrupted Dib as Zim began to back away from what was probably the irken equivalent of bloodletting in terms of medical technology.

“A table is a table,” said the computer, first in English, then in Irken.

“See? The table’s fine!” said Dib, pushing Zim forward even as he dug his heels into the ground.

“Yeah, what REALLY matters is the experience of the one doing the procedure!” said the computer. Dib grimaced, but at least the computer realized its mistake in time to avoid translating that comment into Irken. “I mean, uh... Hey, look on the bright side! Technically speaking, no irken operated on by a human has ever died or otherwise suffered any complications post-surgery! From THAT perspective, there’s a zero percent failure rate!”

“And a zero percent success rate,” said Dib, who sincerely wished he was dumb enough to be comforted by faulty statistics. “You’re not helping.”

“Well, excuse me for trying to make you feel better,” said the computer.

“Just get a camera down here and put Skoodge back on the line,” said Dib, doing his best to stay calm for Zim, who was staring into the floor with both hands balled up into tight fists.

A screen descended from the ceiling with an image of Skoodge sitting in an office chair eating something that looked like Fun Dip.

“Oh, there you are,” said Skoodge. “Did you get a chance to look over the instructions and schematics I sent you?”

“Yeah, see, here’s the thing,” said Dib, who’d spent the past thirty minutes in Zim’s server room trying to open those files. “The files you sent are in a format only readable by PAKs. Not even Zim’s computer could translate them into something I could understand.”
“Woops! Sorry, you’re so well-spoken that I almost forgot you were just a primitive organic,” said Skoodge. Dib glowered. “Guess I’ll just have to explain it to you verbally. Don’t worry, it’s actually pretty simple! You mostly just have to pull out the old parts and plug in the new ones. Doesn’t get much easier than that!”

“Is that really it?” said Dib. That didn’t sound too hard, especially if the replacement parts were identical to the old ones. “How many parts are there to replace?”

“Only a few dozen!” said Skoodge. “A specialist can get it done in about two hours.”

“And how long can an irken safely remain unconscious?” asked Dib, who knew for a fact that he was going to take longer to finish than a trained professional who did this for a living.

“With a PAK attached, we can stay unconscious indefinitely with no ill effects, but full maintenance requires the PAK to be removed,” said Skoodge. “It’s not safe to work with electronics while they’re plugged in, after all.”

“But can’t you only live without PAKs for ten minutes?” said Dib.

“More specifically, we can only live without a power source for ten minutes,” said Skoodge. “Our PAKs contain a small generator that powers our vital organs and augmentations. Those things suck up a LOT of energy while we’re conscious, but you’ll be putting him in a sort of hibernation mode. That should give you about ten hours.”

“Ten hours to replace a few dozen parts…” said Dib thoughtfully. “That’s not so bad!”

“See? And only a couple of those parts will result in instant death if you install them wrong!”

Dib gulped. Was it just him, or was it getting kind of hot in here? “Ha, yeah…”

“Well, no point in delaying the inevitable!” said Skoodge cheerfully. “Tell Zim to strip down and get on the table!”

“Oh. Right,” said Dib. In hindsight, it was obvious that clothes would just get in the way of surgery, but he hadn’t really thought about the fact that Zim would have to be naked for this. “Computer, you tell him.”

“You could at least say ‘please,’” said the computer, who said a few words in Irken. Zim scowled through the blush forming on his face. He took a deep breath and reluctantly removed his PAK.

As Zim slipped his fingers beneath the waistband of his leggings, Dib turned his head to give him some privacy.

“Isn’t there some kind of hospital gown or cover that we can give him?” asked Dib, his cheeks going warm as he struggled not to let his mind wander into the gutter.

“A what?” said Skoodge quizzically.

“You’re doing maintenance on his entire body. There’s no way you’re going to avoid seeing his genitals,” said the computer, immediately picking up on Dib’s true concern.

Much as Dib hated to admit it, the computer was right; he was going to have to look at it eventually. What if it was wildly different from anything he was familiar with? In that case, surely it was best to get the initial shock out of the way now, before he was holding any sharp instruments! That wasn’t being creepy, it was just being practical!
Dib took a deep breath and turned his gaze back to Zim, who had just finished up folding his clothes and setting them aside.

With Zim’s back turned, the first thing Dib noticed about his bare body was his alien physique. His upper body was distinctly masculine, but he also had very prominent hips for his size. Dib had always assumed that Zim’s teardrop-shaped torso was just an optical illusion created by the outward flare of his uniform shirt, but knowing what he now knew about ancient irken reproduction, it made sense; a wider pelvis would be more conducive to egg-laying.

As Zim turned back around to face him, Dib’s eyes immediately locked on to his groin. At last, he would have the answer to the question he’d been asking since he saw Zim hanging upside-down by his leg in the mall! And that answer was…

Nothing. There was literally nothing between his legs. His groin was as smooth as a doll’s.

“That’s it?” blurted out Dib before he could stop himself. Zim, who noticed him staring, hastily moved to cover himself, not that there was anything to hide. Dib awkwardly fiddled with the loose sleeves of his lab coat. Why did he feel so disappointed? It wasn’t like he had any reason to care what Zim’s genitals looked like beyond his curiosity as a paranormal investigator! “I mean- Sorry, I just thought- Never mind.”

Zim snapped his fingers to get the computer’s attention, and a pair of cables extended from the center of the table to plug into his back where the PAK had once been. The cables lifted him up and steadily reeled him in until he was laying down atop it, hands still held over his featureless crotch for reasons Dib couldn’t even begin to fathom. A pair of robotic arms grabbed the PAK and plugged it into an oversized outlet that had popped out of the ground.

“Preparations made for sleep mode,” said the computer. “Just say the word when you’re ready to start.”

“Ready?” said Dib, giving Zim’s hand a squeeze as the computer translated for him. Zim made an annoyed face and stuck his tongue out like he was disgusted by Dib’s concern, but it was clear from the nervous bounce in his three-clawed foot that he was just putting on a bold front. “Don’t worry, I know exactly what I’m doing! I’ve done plenty of experimental surgeries at work.”

Those had mostly been on pigs and rats, but Zim didn’t need to know that. The computer translated his words, and Zim nodded slightly; Dib hoped that meant they had helped. “Okay, computer, I think we’re ready. Put him to sleep.”

“Now activating sleep mode,” said the computer. Zim’s eyelids began to flutter, and his stiff body started to go limp. Dib moved his limbs into place and fastened them to the table with the straps, leaving him fully splayed. By the time he was done, Zim’s eyes were completely shut. Another screen rose out of the ground with information on his breathing and heart rate. “Sleep mode activated. Vital signs stable. You may now begin.”

Dib put on the cap and surgical mask sitting on the table with the tools, then picked up a scalpel. He’d imagined this moment so many thousands of times that it almost felt familiar; Zim bound tightly to a table, his bare chest exposed and prepped for dissection… In his imagination, however, Zim had always been awake. Sedated, of course, but still conscious enough to scream out threats and insults. He’d never pictured him with his eyes closed, his expressive face rendered blank and lifeless. It left him with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that Zim, of all people, might die like this, completely unconscious and helpless to change his fate.

“First things first,” said Skoodge. “Make an incision down the center of his body from just below the neck to just above his pelvis. You’ll also want to make two perpendicular cuts on either end to
That was easy enough. Dib picked up the scalpel and pressed it to Zim’s collarbone. After taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, he made a long, clean slice down his chest, past the point where a human would have had a belly button, and down the gentle slope of his belly. The electrified blade cauterized the wounds as it cut, leaving only trace amounts of pink blood behind. Once it was done, Dib took the spreaders and gently parted Zim’s flesh to reveal the ribcage and organs beneath.

Dib gasped. He’d seen Zim’s organs in x-rays before, but never like this, exposed to the open air and pulsating softly. A shiver of excitement ran through his spine. What a breathtaking view.

…That wasn’t a weird thought to have about your vivisected friend, right?

“We’ll start with the chest,” said Skoodge. “There should be a button underneath his sternum to open up his ribcage.”

Dib eased a finger beneath Zim’s breastbone, the heat of his organs palpable through the gloves. Just as Skoodge had said, there was a small bump on the underside. He clicked the button, and Zim’s ribs swung open like a pair of double doors.

“Neat,” said Dib. “Humans usually need a bone saw.”

“That sounds really painful,” said Skoodge, cringing. “Anyway, since his throat is still closed, and he’s only got about six or seven more minutes of oxygen left, you should probably start with the lungs.”

Dib’s eyes widened. He’d completely forgotten that Zim’s PAK had been the only thing allowing him to breathe! “Shit! Okay, yeah, lungs. Got it!” He began searching for a structure resembling the version he was familiar with, but Zim’s body was so small, and most of his organs were practically bite-sized. “Where are they?”

“You see where his squeedlyspooch connects to the throat?” said Skoodge. “There should be a second tube branching off and leading to the lungs.”

“Okay, I think I see it,” said Dib, sliding his fingers down Zim’s hot, wet trachea until he found three fleshy organs at the end. “Is it normal for there to be three?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just checking,” said Dib. He probably should have printed off a reference diagram so he knew what to expect. Oh well. Too late now. “What next?”

“There should be a tube attached to the top currently pumping his lungs full of air. Leave that alone for now; you don’t want to change out his emergency oxygen cannister until he’s breathing again,” said Skoodge. “What you want is the device a little higher than that.”

Dib gently nudged Zim’s organs out of the way until something that looked a little like a pacemaker was exposed. “This?”

“That’s the one!” said Skoodge. “Pull the release latch so you can unplug it.” Dib slid his finger beneath the latch and pulled up, causing the device to come free. He pulled it out, and the computer’s mechanical arms came down to take it and swap it out for an identical device. “Now you’ve just gotta plug the new one in!”
Dib carefully clicked the wires into place. Immediately, the sound of Zim’s breathing became audible again, and there was a gentle whir as the oxygen cannister began refilling itself with fresh air. “How’s that?”

“Great! The process is similar for most of the other abdominal organs,” said Skoodge. “Let’s try it on another easy one so you can get a feel for it. How about the brood pouch?”

“The what?” said Dib. Now that he thought about it, Zim had mentioned this to him before. “That’s like the irken equivalent of a womb, right?”

“I don’t know what a ‘womb’ is, so maybe?” said Skoodge, shrugging. “It should be located in the lower abdomen.”

Dib gently prodded at one of the organs in the general area. It was flexible, but rigid enough to hold its shape. “Is this it?”

“Nope, that’s the tymbal,” said Skoodge. “The instructions say that you might have to nudge it out of the way to access the brood pouch of smaller irkens. Just give it a little push to the right.”

As Dib’s fingers pressed against Zim’s tymbal and tried squeezing it out of the way, a loud chirp reverberated through the room.

“Woops,” said Dib, his cheeks heating up.

“You might need to pull it out for now,” said Skoodge.

“Good idea. Let me just pull up another table,” said Dib upon realizing that he didn’t have a clear surface to place organs on. He hurried over to a mobile-looking table on one side of the room and grabbed it with the intent to drag it towards Zim, but his gloves were soaked with bodily fluids, making it slippery. “Computer, a little help?”

“Here, let me just-”

“Oooh, what’s this?” said an all-too-familiar robotic voice.

The blood drained from Dib’s face, and he whipped around to see that GIR had already climbed up onto the tray table with all of the surgical instruments in order to get a better look at Zim’s vivisected body.

“GIR!” called Dib. “Get down from there!”

“So squishy!” giggled GIR, reaching for the organs within.

“NO!” said Dib, racing back to the center of the room, but by the time he was within grabbing distance, GIR had already picked up Zim’s tymbal. “Put that down! Bad robot!”

“Squish squish squish!” said GIR, giving it a few squeezes. The organ chirped like a squeaky toy full of crickets, successfully mortifying Dib and Skoodge alike. “It sounds like a bad joke!”

“You need to put that down, okay?” said Dib, worried that if he tried to grab it, they might end up in a tug-of-war that ultimately resulted in it being severed from Zim’s body. “Zim needs that to, uh…”

“I mean, if you want to get really technical, it isn’t strictly necessary. A lot of irkens get their tymbals snipped these days,” said Skoodge. “Some girls even prefer guys who have theirs cut, but
lately there’s this whole debate about whether it lowers sensitivity or makes intercourse more difficult, so—"

“It’s alien circumcision. We get it, you don’t need to keep on hammering in the metaphor,” said Dib, slowly reaching his hand out towards GIR. Somehow, he didn’t think Zim would appreciate getting his organs ripped out without his consent. “Give it here, GIR!”

GIR moved away slightly, looking reluctant to part with it. “But this is my favorite toy!”

“Tell you what,” said Dib, pulling his hand back out of fear that GIR would panic and rip it out. “What if I got you a better toy?”

“A better toy?” said GIR, looking sufficiently intrigued. “Like what?”

“Like…” said Dib, wracking his brain for everything he knew about GIR. “A… Taco?” GIR continued to stare at him. “A giant taco! Big enough for you to live in!”

“With a pizza filling?” said GIR hopefully. “And raaaaaisiiiiiiiiins?”

“Why would you want- You know what? Yes. All of those things,” said Dib, moving his hand forward again. “All you have to do is put Zim’s tymbal back into my hand, then go back upstairs and watch TV.”

“But I want tacos now!” whined GIR.

“I-”

“Now!”

“You-”

“NOW!”

“Just let me-”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW!”

Dib reluctantly pulled an arm inside the lab coat so he could fish his wallet out of his pants with his blood-soaked gloves.

“There, my credit card!” said Dib, holding out a silver card. “You can use this to buy as many tacos as you want!”

“YES!” said GIR, reaching for it excitedly.

“Wait!” said Dib, holding out his other hand. “You can have this, but only if you give me what you’re holding.”

GIR gave the tymbal one last squeeze before unceremoniously dropping it back in Dib’s hand and running off screaming with his credit card. “GIANT TACOOOOOOOOOO!”

As soon as he was gone, Dib set the tymbal down on the table, which the computer had helpfully pushed over for him.

“Computer, lock him out!” said Dib, and a force field appeared over the doorway. He pulled out his cellphone and pulled up his banking application. “I’ve gotta cancel that card before he maxes
“Okay, but, uh, while you’re doing that, Zim’s still laying with his organs exposed on the table,” said Skoodge.

“Trust me, Zim will understand. All I have to do is tell him that it’s cotton candy money.”

“Cotton what?”

A few minutes of banking later, Dib put his phone away and returned to the unconscious Zim’s side with an awkward cough.

“Okay, so the tymbal is out of the way,” said Dib, pointing at the organ that had been beneath it. It looked a little like a uterus with three bulbs attached. “Is this it?”

“Yep! There should be a device at the top that regulates his sex drive,” said Skoodge. “It’ll look similar to the one by his lungs. All you have to do is replace it with the new one.”

“Got it,” said Dib. He traced his hands over Zim’s brood pouch in search of the metal part. It was so warm and stretchy, conforming to the slightest pressure of his hands. Dib wondered how many eggs it was meant to hold. One? Two? Dozens? Zim was so small and skinny that even a few would no doubt cause his belly to visibly bulge, and wait, had Dib’s pants always been this tight?

Oh no. No, no, NO. This could not be happening now, of all times, when Zim was laying unconscious and sliced open on a surgical table! What kind of a sick freak could possibly get an erection from fondling an alien’s organs? Dib was thankful that the irken lab coat he was wearing was stiff and heavy enough to hide his shameful boner, because he somehow doubted that it was the sort of thing he could explain away as a primitive human response to fear. He quickly fished out the next device, praying that his half-chub would go away if he just ignored it long enough.

“This one, right?” he asked for confirmation.

“Yes. Just switch it out for the new one, same as before.”

Dib unplugged the device, and Zim’s soft brood pouch seemed to solidify. He clicked the replacement part into place, and it grew malleable once again.

“There,” said Dib. “What’s next?”

“Well, now you’ve gotta test it,” said Skoodge.

Dib froze. “But we didn’t test his lungs.”

“It’s easy to tell when the lungs are working, but we won’t know if this part is good until you open his vent,” said Skoodge. “Push his legs apart and give his antennae a few strokes.”

Dib’s shoulders stiffened. “You want me to molest him in his sleep?”

“What’s ‘molest?’ There’s no equivalent word in Irken,” said Skoodge.

“Of course there isn’t,” said Dib. He reluctantly stood between Zim’s legs and nudged them apart. The table arms spread easily. “Does Zim know that this is a part of maintenance?”

“Nope. Most irkens don’t, unless it’s their specialty,” said Skoodge. “It miiiiight be best if you don’t tell him. No self-respecting irken wants to have their vent opened by some ugly alien. No offense.”
“I’m used to it,” said Dib. As though Skoodge was one to talk. “The vent is where the ovipositor goes, right? Where do I find it?”

“Between his legs. Where else?”

“Really?” said Dib. He wiped his hands off with a rag and changed the position of the table arms holding Zim’s legs so that they were positioned higher up with his knees bent. “But there’s nothing- Oh, hang on…”

On closer inspection, Zim wasn’t quite as smooth as he’d first thought. There was a barely-perceptible seam almost invisible to the naked eye that Dib never would have noticed if he hadn’t been specifically looking for it. Without thinking, he pressed his fingers to either side, but the two flaps refused to come apart.

“Like I said, you need to stimulate the antennae, first,” said Skoodge.

Dib made a mental note to have the computer delete any stored footage of the procedure before Zim got a chance to review it; there was no way that he could let him know about what was about to happen. With shaky hands, Dib reached up to touch the antennae that had previously been off-limits to him, gripping one between his thumb and forefinger. He gingerly slid his fingers along its segmented length, stroking it gently while doing his best to maintain a clinical detachment from his actions. Despite being unconscious, the pace of Zim’s breathing began to increase.

“Now, it might take a few minutes, but-” began Skoodge, but before he’d finished his sentence, the flesh surrounding Zim’s seam began to plump up. Dib released Zim’s antennae and jumped back as it split open, and hundreds of wet, skinny tendrils about the thickness of angelhair pasta burst forth, wriggling like worms. “Or not.”

“What the fuck?” screamed Dib. He attempted to poke them back inside, but they just curled around his finger.

“It’s fine, that’s what’s supposed to happen,” said Skoodge, rubbing his neck uncomfortably. “Still, just… Wow. I’ve never seen anyone open that fast.”

“What are these things?” said Dib as they wrapped around his hand and attempted to drag it into the wet cavern they’d emerged from. They had a surprisingly firm grip for being as slick and goozy as they were; every time he managed to pull a few off, a dozen more took their place. Dib gave his hand a sharp yank to break free of their hold with a noisy squelch.

“Reproductive cilia,” said Skoodge. “They help stimulate the ovipositor. Don’t let them touch your tools! They’ll try to pull anything they can grab inside.”

Dib quickly moved the surgical tray out of reach. He’d spent more time than he would ever be willing to admit imagining what Zim’s genitals might look like, and now he finally had an answer; they were positively horrifying. It looked like he was giving birth to some Lovecraftian abomination!

“How do you turn them off?” demanded Dib.

“There’s a reset switch on the device,” said Skoodge. “Hold it down for three seconds.”

Dib grabbed the freshly-replaced device attached to Zim’s brood pouch and smashed that button like his very life depended on it. Three seconds passed, and the cilia retracted back into Zim’s body like ramen noodles being slurped up by a hungry college student. His vent slowly re-sealed itself and began flattening out until it was practically invisible again.
For a moment, Dib could only stand in petrified silence.

“Sooooo, next part?” said Skoodge at last.

“Yeah,” said Dib with a stiff nod. “Next part.”

The next few hours were some of the longest of Dib’s life. Most replacements were as simple as plugging in a new part and making sure it worked the way it was supposed to. Others were a little trickier, requiring Dib to carefully unscrew the case to access the contents inside without allowing any moisture inside (easier said than done when the part was surrounded by slimy organs) that would cause it to short out. Some of the hardest consisted of wires that had to be cut out and replaced, many of which were located right next to major arteries.

“Oh, good, we’re finally done.”

Dib wiped the sweat from his brow and sighed with relief. “Not quite,” said Skoodge. “That was just the abdominal maintenance! There are specialized mechanics in both of his hands and feet to improve fine motor skills. You’ll also need to open up his skull and replace his ocular implants.”

“Greeeeeat,” said Dib, checking his phone for the time. It was only seven o’clock, and he already felt ready for bed. “I knew I should have gone back to sleep this morning…”

Zim’s toes took about ten minutes each, and his fingers a full half an hour. The replacement itself was simple enough, but the painstaking calibration process left him wanting to die. As it turned out, Irkens had specialized devices in their hands designed to keep them steady, and it was very difficult to turn the screwdriver to the precise settings needed to achieve optimum results when his own hands were quivering from a combination of fatigue, stress, and just generally not being a cyborg.

Funnily enough, Zim’s eyes and brain turned out to be some of the easiest parts, which was good, because it was eleven o’clock at night, and the heavy arms of the irken lab coat he was wearing left Dib feeling like he was trying to operate with barbells strapped to his wrists. After adjusting the table so Zim was in a sitting position, Dib sliced a ring around the majority of his head and peeled it back to expose his cranium.

Like his ribs, Zim’s skull had been modified with a hinge that allowed it to be popped open like the hood of a car. It swung up to reveal a pink, squishy brain not too different from a human’s, albeit with a lot more wires. Following Skoodge’s directions, Dib disconnected Zim’s eyes so he could access the camera-like devices inside them from a hole in the back. Once those were finished and back in place, all that remained was to clean the slot where Zim’s PAK connected to his brain, and they were good to go.

Dib’s eyes felt heavy as he sealed Zim’s head back up with the staple gun.

“What’s next?” he yawned.

“Hey!” said the computer.

“That’s nice,” said Dib, too tired to appreciate the magnitude of his accomplishment. “How do we
“Turn him back on?”

“Powering on…” said the computer.

“Wait!” said Skoodge. “You still have to-

Zim’s eyes snapped open, and he let loose an agonized screech.

“-anesthetize him,” finished Skoodge. “Oh boy…”

The sound of Zim’s shrieking jerked Dib back into wakefulness. He quickly took the topical numbing agent provided by the computer and slathered it over Zim’s stapled-up wounds until he finally calmed down.

“I’m alive?” said Zim, sounding equal parts shocked and relieved. “YES! Victory for Zim!”

“And Dib! It’s a victory for both of us,” said Dib. He undid the straps binding Zim to the table and pulled the PAK out of the outlet the computer was storing it in. The cables detached themselves from Zim’s back, allowing Dib to plug it back in unimpeded. “So? How does everything work?”

Zim sat up, rolled his shoulders, and gave his fingers a few experimental wiggles.

“Aaaah, nothing feels better than new parts!” he sighed contentedly, only to stare at his bare groin and shriek. “Clothes! Where are my clothes?”

It was tempting to point out that everyone present had already witnessed every last inch of Zim’s body both inside and out, but Dib opted to hand over his folded leggings without a word of snark.

“Good to see that you’re feeling better!” said Skoodge. “I have to say, Zim, you have really good taste in alien slaves!” Wait, what? “It’s not every xeno that can perform a maintenance surgery like that!”

“Zim…” growled Dib. Zim’s antennae stiffened, and he smiled nervously. “Did you tell Skoodge I was your slave?”

“It was the easiest explanation at the time!” said Zim.

“Wait, you’re not his slave?” said Skoodge, shocked. “Why in the world would you help him, then?”

“Because he’s my friend,” said Dib flatly. “After this, though, I might have to reconsider.”

“No!” said Zim, much to Dib’s surprise. He reached out to grab Dib by the arm, his claws squeezing so tight that it was physically painful. There was a genuinely fearful look in his eyes. “I’m sorry, I really just didn’t know how else to explain!”

“Uh…” said Skoodge, rubbing his eyes like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Did Zim just apologize?”

“Relax, Zim, I wasn’t being serious,” said Dib. He couldn’t believe how strong of a response that had gotten.

“Oh. Right. Of course not. Who would want to stop being friends with the almighty Zim?” said Zim, laughing nervously. “Anyway, computer, end trans-”
“Hold on,” interrupted Dib. “Skoodge just spent the past seven hours helping me fix you! What do we say to people who helped us?”


“You’re, uh, you’re welcome?” said Skoodge. “Seriously, are you sure you’re Zim?”

“Well, my social obligation is fulfilled! Computer, end transmission,” said Zim, and the screen cut to black.

“You could have at least said goodbye,” said Dib, peeling off the lab coat and gloves.

“I already thanked him. What more do you want from me?” said Zim, carefully getting off the table in a way that wouldn’t tear out the staples holding him together until his PAK finished repairing the incisions. “Speaking of which, I suppose I also owe you a thank you, so…”

Dib had to do a double-take as Zim wrapped his arms around his waist.

“Zim…?” said Dib, who was beginning to wonder if he’d somehow screwed up Zim’s brain.

“Thank you,” murmured Zim. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Oh, come on, it’s not a big deal,” said Dib, blushing. “You would have figured something out just like you always do.”

“Mm…” said Zim, his face dangerously close to Dib’s groin.

“Well, uh, I’d better head home!” said Dib, breaking free of Zim’s hug and stumbling backwards.

“Why?” said Zim, stepping forward. “You said he wouldn’t notice if you were gone. You could just recharge on the couch again.”

“I’ve already worn the same clothes two days in a row,” said Dib. “My underwear needs to go through an actual washing machine. Besides, my dad’s probably waiting for me this time so he can lecture me about leaving work, so I’ve gotta go get that over with.”

“Right, yes, of course,” said Zim, folding his arms over his chest and clearly trying to mask a look of disappointment. “See, umm, see you at school tomorrow!”

“Unless my dad kills me,” mused Dib. Zim’s face turned to one of horror. “Just a joke! What’s up with you all of a sudden?”

“Nothing is up with me! I’m the least up person around!” said Zim, shoving Dib towards the elevator. “In fact, I’m so not up that I’m actually down!”

“Okaaaaaaay,” said Dib. He had to have screwed up somewhere. Zim was acting too strangely for there to be any other explanation. Unfortunately, he was far too tired to fix it. He would just have to talk to Zim about correcting his mistakes in the morning. “Well, goodbye, Zim.”

“G-goodbye,” said Zim, only to seemingly remember something. “WAIT! I have something for you!”

Dib stopped. “What?”

Zim reached back into his PAK and retrieved a large book bound in leather. Dib recognized it instantly as the expensive tome he’d been looking at back in the mall.
“How did you get that?” said Dib as Zim held it out for him.

“I know you told me not to commit any more crimes, but I stole this before you said that, so it doesn’t really count,” said Zim. “Consider it payment for services rendered.”

“Zim, I can’t accept this,” said Dib, even as he reached out to touch the binding. It was just as incredible as he remembered… “It’s stolen property.”

“Oh, come on. He said himself that he just found this on the street,” said Zim. “Nobody is gonna buy something like this for that price, so he never would have made any monies off it!”

“Yeah, but…” said Dib, straining to maintain his principles. Maybe just one touch couldn’t hurt… He delicately stroked the binding.

“You know you want it!” Zim all but sang.

Dib groaned indecisively. He really did want it! “You promise not to commit any more crimes after this?”

“Well, technically, I’m committing a crime every second I don’t turn myself in to Irk for immediate termination, so-”

“You know what I mean!”

Zim huffed. “Yes, yes, no more Earth crimes. Like I said, I haven’t done anything wrong since I took this. Well, except yesterday when we got into that police chase, but getting drunk was your idea, so…”

Dib took the book, doing his best not to look as excited on the outside as he was on the inside. He didn’t want to encourage this kind of behavior in the future, after all. “Thank you, Zim.”

“You’re welcome,” said Zim. “Goodbye, Dib-thing!”

The elevator doors closed.

Dib ascended to the surface, then walked up the stairs to the hangar to retrieve his ship. Like hell he was just gonna walk home at this hour.

“So? How’d it go?” asked the ship. “Did you kill him?”

“Zim’s fine,” said Dib, leaning back into the pilot seat and flipping on ship autonomy. He was way too tired to drive. “He’s acting a little weird, though. I think I might have messed something up. Even Skoodge was weirded out.”

“Skoodge?”

“He’s another irken. Don’t you know him?”

“Of course!” said the ship sarcastically as it jumped out of the hangar onto the ground below. “I know EVERY irken, just like you know every human!”

“Oh. Right. Sorry,” said Dib, pressing his hand to his forehead. “I’m just a little tired, that’s all.”

“Hmm, I just looked up his file,” said the ship. “Invader Skoodge… His test scores are phenomenally high, and his results speak for themselves; he successfully conquered his assigned planet so quickly that he was given the additional task of taking down all planets whose invaders
ultimately failed to complete their missions. Officially, this was done out of respect for his skills. However, I suspect the Tallest might have been trying to get him killed."

“Wait, what?” said Dib, shocked that the ship would so easily question the motives of its supposed leaders. “Why would they try to get one of their best soldiers killed?”

“How is that fair?” said Dib. “He did everything he was supposed to!”

“Yes, well, that’s life for you,” said the ship. “Sometimes you do everything right and still get shafted, and sometimes you don’t even get the chance to do things right because you’re a literal object whose brain is just a copy of a real person.”

Dib placed his hand on the dashboard. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay!” said the ship harshly. “I’m a ship, not a person! I don’t need a lower lifeform to coddle me like Zim does!”

“It’s okay if you—"

“This conversation is over!” said the ship, racing across the rooftops to get back to Dib’s house. “Now get some rest! The sooner you’re back up and running, the sooner you can fix me, and we can all go back to doing the things we were created to do!”

“Yeah…” said Dib, closing his eyes and doing his best to get some rest before the inevitable confrontation at home.

Unfortunately, Zim’s house wasn’t very far away from his own, and it was only a few short minutes before the ship pulled into the garage. Dib stuffed the book Zim had given him into his backpack, then stood up and closed the cockpit behind him. It was time to face the music.

Dib walked through the front door, bracing himself for the worst.

“It’s an awfully late hour for you to be working on a school night,” said Professor Membrane. Dib turned to see him sitting on one of the sofa chairs with his arms crossed over his chest, foot tapping impatiently. “Or could it be that you just forgot to punch out before you left?”

“Woops,” said Dib halfheartedly. “Sorry, dad.”

“I gave you a job to do, and you just walked out in the middle of it!” said Professor Membrane, rising to his feet.

“That’s why we have an on-site clinic!” said Professor Membrane. “You can’t keep leaving work whenever you get bored with what you’re doing! Human cadavers aren’t cheap, you know!”

“I know,” said Dib, rubbing his eyes.

“So why?” insisted Professor Membrane. “You’re not stupid, Dib! You have so much potential, and yet you waste it on childish nonsense!”

“It’s not nonsense,” said Dib, too stubborn to concede even when he knew that this was a battle he couldn’t win. “Just because you don’t believe me—"
“Don’t try to make me out to be the bad guy, here!” said Professor Membrane. “If you weren’t my son, I would have fired you years ago!”

“If I weren’t your son, I wouldn’t be working there in the first place!” growled Dib.

“What were you even doing out so late?” demanded Professor Membrane. “Hunting ‘aliens’ again?”

“Performing surgery on an alien, actually,” said Dib. “It went well, not that you care.”

“I can’t keep entertaining your delusions, Dib!” said Professor Membrane. “You’re eighteen years old! What are you going to do when you graduate high school? Do you think an imaginary alien is going to help you pay your bills?”

“I’ll figure something out!” insisted Dib. He was far too tired to be having this conversation right now.

“I was hoping your boyfriend would be able to talk some sense into you, but if anything, it looks like you’re trying to drag him down with you! Olivia told me that you carried him out of work by force!”

“Did you miss the part where I told you he got stabbed in the face?”

“If you’re not going to grow up on your own, then it looks like I have no choice but to make you!” said Professor Membrane. “You can stay here until you finish high school, but once you graduate, you’re on your own!”

Dib’s jaw dropped. “Wait, are you kicking me out?”

“It’s for your own good, Dib,” said Professor Membrane. “Maybe a dose of reality will help you understand that you can’t spend your whole life playing games!”

Maybe it was the exhaustion, or maybe it was the years of repressed rage, but in that moment, something snapped in Dib.

“Reality?” repeated Dib with a hollow laugh. “You want to talk to me about reality? Okay, how about the reality that I’ve spent the past six fucking years protecting the Earth from an alien invader with no help and no support?”

“There’s no-”

“No such thing as aliens?” interrupted Dib. “Okay, well, what about the reality that Gaz and I practically raised ourselves because you’re a terrible parent who we barely ever get to see?” At last, his words seemed to shock Professor Membrane into silence. “How many times have you been home in the past week, huh? Did you know that I spent the night at Zim’s house yesterday?” He grinned as his father clenched his fist, finally at a loss for words. “Did you notice that I’ve still got bruises from the car accident I got into a couple days ago? Oh, or that my nose is fucking broken?” He could tell that his words were cutting deep. That was good. Dib wanted him to hurt. He didn’t even care about who was right or wrong anymore. He just wanted to see his father squirm. “I guess it makes sense that you wouldn’t, though. I mean…” He threw up his hands. “It’s not like you’re my real dad.”

“Dib, what are you-”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out?” said Dib, high on the endorphins of finally getting this
off his chest. “It’s like you said, Professor Membrane! I’m not stupid! How can I be? I’m you! Or, well, a copy of you, anyway.”

He took a moment to drink in the look of dawning horror on his so-called father’s face.

“How long have you known?” said Professor Membrane quietly.

“Three years,” said Dib. “You might wanna get better about putting away your top secret paperwork. I get that you can’t hide it at work, it being illegal, and all, but you’d think a world-renowned genius would know enough to invest in a safe!” He snorted. “I guess nobody’s perfect, though. I mean, you couldn’t even clone yourself right! Tell me, how long did it take you to realize that I was defective? Two years? Five?”

“Dib…” said Professor Membrane. He took a step forward, prompting Dib to take a step back. “Son… I have never thought of you as defective.”

“Don’t lie to me!” roared Dib. There was a cool sensation on his cheeks. It took him a moment to realize that they were tears. “You created me to be just like you, and I’m not!” He jammed a finger into Professor Membrane’s chest. “I will never be like you! And you know what? Maybe that’s a good thing, because you’re a terrible person, and I fucking hate you!”

Something shimmered in the corner of Professor Membrane’s goggles, and Dib felt a pang in his chest as he realized that he’d brought his father to tears.

“Dib, I-”

“No,” said Dib, shaking his head and turning around. “I don’t want to hear it! You want me gone? Fine. I won’t even make you wait until graduation! I’ll go right now!” Consequences be damned; he didn’t want to spend another second in this house. Dib stormed off to his room to pack his things.

“Wait! Son, please, let’s just talk about this!” said Professor Membrane, following after him. “I know you must be in a lot of pain right now, but-”

Dib slammed his bedroom door in his father’s face.

“Computer, perform another full scan!” ordered Zim.

“For the last time, you’re perfectly healthy,” said the computer. “All of your parts are in pristine condition, organic and cybernetic alike!”

“Impossible!” said Zim, clutching his stomach and pacing back and forth across the lab. “The Dib must have made some sort of mistake when he was working on me! Every time I think about him, I get this insidious sensation in the pit of my squeedlyspooch, like there’s something wriggling around in there!” He paused. “Scan for parasites!”

A light flitted over Zim’s body.

“Scan complete. No parasites detected,” said the computer.

“That can’t be right!” said Zim. “You must be missing something! Scan harder!”
“What does that even mean?” said the computer.

“It means update your drivers and try again!” said Zim.

“Aww, but I HATE updating. It’s so boring!” complained the computer.

“Are you defying your Tallest?” growled Zim.

“No,” muttered the computer. “Updating drivers now.” Zim nodded approvingly and headed towards the elevator. “I liked you better when you were a food service drone…”

“What?”

“Nothing!”

“That’s what I thought!” said Zim, stepping inside and folding his hands behind his back. “Take me to the surface! I have to have a talk with GIR.”

He stepped into the living room to find the robot in question crying oil into the couch cushion. Zim swallowed, no longer capable of quashing the guilt in his chest, quietly shuffled over to join him.

“GIR,” he said, reaching out to tap the robot on the shoulder. “We need to talk.”

GIR turned to him with such wide, miserable eyes that Zim could hardly stand to meet them. Maybe this was a bad idea…

No. Perhaps he was an exile now, but he was still a former invader, and he was strong enough to confront his problems head-on!

“Look, GIR…” said Zim, struggling to find the words for everything he wanted to say. “I realize that I haven’t been entirely fair to you over the past few days. It’s just, well, a lot has happened, and most of it hasn’t even been your fault.” GIR cocked his head to the side. “Okay, none of it has been your fault. The Tallest might have created you to mock me, but that doesn’t give me the right to take it out on you. You never asked to be created for such a purpose. Nobody controls where they came from.” He stroked GIR’s head. “No matter what I did or said to you, you’ve continued to serve faithfully by my side. Yes, I may find you more of a hindrance than a help at times – most of the time, really – but…” He swallowed, trying not to get too choked up. “…but you’re still my loyal SIR unit, and, from one defect to another, I want you to know how much I appreciate that you try.”

“Okay,” said GIR, and Zim noticed something silver in his mouth.

“GIR…” said Zim slowly. “What’s that thing you’re eating?”

“It’s from Mary!” said GIR, pulling it out of his mouth. “He- He told me I could use it to get a giant taco, but when I went to the taco store…” His dripping eyes welled up with even more tears. “The mean lady said it was cancelled!”

Zim snatched the card out of GIR’s hand and stared at it in disbelief. Wasn’t this the Dib’s credit card? “Is that what you were crying about?”

GIR hummed. “I think so!”

“Not me ignoring you or blaming you for my exile?” said Zim, flabbergasted. “Tacos?”
“What’s an ex-high-el?” said GIR.

Zim shook his head. “You really are a useless pile of garbage, GIR.” He pulled GIR into a hug. It was a surprisingly addictive means of relieving tension. “I think I left some human monies by the uniform dispenser. Why don’t you use it to go buy yourself a taco?”

“YAY!” said GIR, breaking free of Zim’s grip and diving down the trash can.

*Ding dong!*

“A visitor?” said Zim, standing up. “Since when do humans stop by at half past midnight?”

“Visitor identified as Dib Membrane,” said the computer.

The Dib was here? Hadn’t he gone home to recharge overnight? Zim hurried to the door, trying to contain the excited fluttering in his stomach. Maybe he’d finally realized how much better Zim’s house was than his own!

He opened the door with an excited smile. His face fell upon seeing Dib’s broken, teary eyes.

“Zim,” he hiccupped. Zim glanced down to see a suitcase in his hands. “Is it okay if I stay the night?”

Zim took a step back to let him in. “What happened?”

“Wait,” said Dib, motioning towards the ship parked on Zim’s front lawn. “Can you open the hangar to let the ship in?”

“Honestly, I couldn’t care less either way,” called the ship. “As long as I don’t have to haul his snotty, mucous-dripping body around anymore.”

Zim opened up the hangar, and the ship climbed inside. He shut the door behind Dib, who sat down on the couch and buried his face in his hands with a broken wail.

“Dib?” said Zim. Unlike GIR, he had a feeling that this was about something a little more pressing than tacos. “What’s wrong?”

“My dad kicked me out,” he said in a broken voice. “I really messed up, Zim!”

Zim took a seat beside him, and Dib all but collapsed, his head falling into his lap. For a moment, Zim froze, unsure what to do and completely overwhelmed by such a sudden flood of emotion. Dib’s sadness in the mall had been nothing compared to this! He wasn’t just upset; he was shattered, his face dripping with salty tears that stung Zim’s legs. What did he do? How did he make this better?

He took a deep breath and referred back to his training for fixing things in tense, high-stakes situations. All he had to do was work through the steps. Step one, figure out the problem.

“Tell me everything,” said Zim.

“We got into an argument,” sobbed Dib. “I was just so sick of him acting like he always knew what was best for me! He’s never there, and he never believes anything I have to say, and-” He wiped his dripping nose on his sleeve. Zim, remembering how the Dib had calmed him down in the best, gently squeezed his shoulder. “He told me that once I graduated, that was it; he was kicking me out of the house. He wouldn’t listen to me when I tried to explain, and I- I just got so
angry!” Again, he tried to wipe his nose on his sleeve, but this time, a robot arm popped out of the wall with a tissue in hand. Dib blew his nose, then tucked it away in his pocket. “I couldn’t help it. I told him everything, no matter how much it hurt him. I made my dad cry, and I liked it! It felt good to see him in pain!” He pressed his face against Zim’s leg. “And now I don’t know what to feel anymore! A part of me still feels like I was in the right, and that he deserved what he got, but the other half…”

Zim bit his tongue. He was way out of his depth. Hell, he didn’t even know where to begin untangling such a tightly-knotted web of emotions.

“Why am I like this?” cried Dib. “Why couldn’t I just be happy doing the thing I was made for?”

“Nobody can ever truly be made for something,” said Zim, who still didn’t know what the hell he was doing, but he had to at least try. “A few years before I was born, the control brains ran an experiment where they tried to force smeets down certain career paths based where previous irkens with similar genetic make-ups had excelled in the past. It was a complete disaster; never before had Irk seen such a low graduation rate. As it turns out, no matter what someone might naturally excel in, trying to force them to do something they have no passion for doesn’t yield great results.”

“But my genetic make-up isn’t just ‘similar’ to my dad’s,” said Dib. “It’s completely identical! At least, it should be! If I’m not exactly like him, doesn’t that mean something went wrong? That I’m some kind of mistake?”

“And so what if you are?” said Zim. “What do you think would have happened if you were just a carbon copy of your dad? Would Professor Membrane have seen through my disguise on the first day of school?” Dib shook his head. “Would he have risked life and limb trying to stop me from taking over the world? Would he have devoted his life to protecting a planet that never once gave him a break?”

Despite everything, Dib managed a small laugh. “No… My dad once decided to destroy his perpetual energy generator because he got mad at how impatient the crowd was.”

“Exactly!” said Zim. “As far as I’m concerned, it doesn’t matter whether you’re a perfect copy of the professor or some horrible defect, because I honestly don’t care about him or his accomplishments. He isn’t the one who refrained from turning me in to the government despite having every motivation to do so, he isn’t the one who agreed to help me overthrow an intergalactic empire, and he isn’t the one who dropped everything to help me when I started to malfunction. That was all you.”

“Does it even count as helping if you would have been better off not knowing me?” said Dib. “If it weren’t for me, you probably would have taken over the Earth by now.”

“And then what?” said Zim. “In the absolute best-case scenario, they’d just send me to some other planet to get rid of me, same as Skooch.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” said Dib. “To be an invader?”

Zim stroked Dib’s hair. Feeling the strands passing under his fingers was soothing.

“Mm,” said Zim. “A week ago, it really would have made me happy. Now, though, even though all logic seems to indicate that I’m objectively worse off, I don’t think I could ever go back to what was.” He took a fistful of Dib’s hair and gripped it tightly. Damn it, he didn’t want to say it, but he had to. After everything Dib had done for him… “I never realized how lonely and miserable I was until you showed me what it meant to have someone care about you.”
Dib sniffled. “Good to know I’m at least a step up from your Tallest.”

“Don’t go getting so full of yourself, Dib-stink,” teased Zim. “You’re a half-step up, at best.”

“At this point, I’ll take what I can get,” said Dib, sitting up and noticing the damp spot he’d left behind. “Shit! Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing,” lied Zim. “I have paste, remember?”

“If you say so,” said Dib, wiping his eyes. “Guess I’d better figure out how I’m going to apologize to my dad.”


“Yes and no?” said Dib, sounding uncertain. “More importantly, I don’t actually have anywhere else to live right now, and I don’t think the ship would appreciate me using her as a tent.”

“What, my base isn’t good enough for you?” said Zim, a little offended. “If it’s the couch that bothers you, I can have the computer fabricate a bed.”

“You’d let me stay here?” said Dib. “You’re not worried about me smelling up the place with my filthy human stink?”

“I’ll just have to have the cleaning drones work double shifts,” said Zim, who wasn’t about to let Dib on to the fact that he’d actually come to like his filthy human stink. “I suppose we’ll have to make a few other renovations, as well… You mentioned something called a ‘washing machine’ for your clothes earlier. Is there anything else humans need?”

“I couldn’t ask you to-”

“I said,” said Zim, rising up on his PAK legs to meet Dib at eye level. He wanted to make it clear that this was not up for debate. “Is there anything else humans need?”

Dib looked thoughtful. “I noticed when I was trying to wash my clothes yesterday that most of your taps don’t actually have running water.”

“Computer!” said Zim. “Increase the size of the water filtration facilities and hook up all water sources!”

“Should I do that before or after I update all my drivers?”

“You’re a machine, aren’t you? Learn to multithread!” said Zim.

“That’s not how multithreading- Uhg, whatever, I’m on it.”

A growling noise reverberated through the room.

“D-dib?” said Zim, flushed.

“It’s not what you think!” said Dib quickly. “That sound means a human is hungry, not horny!”

Zim did his best to mask his disappointment with annoyance. “Well, I did send GIR down to get money for tacos… Computer, where did GIR go?”

“He got his head stuck in the uniform dispenser.”
Zim pressed his claws to his temples. “Great. Well, I suppose it’ll be a nice change of pace to have someone at least moderately competent living here.”

“You know that by suggesting no one competent previously lived here, you just called YOURSELF incompetent, right?” said the computer.

“SILENCE!” snapped Zim.

Dib grinned. “You know, maybe this won’t be so bad. I’ve always wanted to live in a smart house.”

“Well, keep dreaming, because the only thing smart about this house is its smart mouth!” said Zim.

“You’re just mad that someone finally appreciates all I do around here!” said the computer.

Zim climbed into the garbage can and beckoned for Dib to follow. “Come on. Let’s go pull GIR out of that device and get some disgusting tacos for your horrible maw.”

Dib yawned. “If I can even stay awake that long.”

“You’d better! If you fall asleep while we’re out, I am not carrying you back!”

As he popped into the elevator, his face no longer within Dib’s line of sight, Zim smiled. He was stranded on a pre-space age planet that rained toxic water from the sky, he was surrounded by incompetent idiots, and he really, truly couldn’t remember a time when he’d ever been this happy. There was only one thing left to do… He had to seduce the Dib!

Oh, and overthrow his Tallest, of course. He might have found happiness where he was, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t still pissed about how he’d gotten there. Zim had to bite back a gleeful cackle as Dib crawled into the elevator with him. Those lanky stinkbugs had no idea what was coming!

Thousands of lightyears away, Tallest Red and Tallest Purple idly paddled a ball back and forth between them in a game that looked suspiciously similar to Ping Pong, but with more lasers and a more space-age theme.

‘POK!’ went the ball against the paddle.

“Hey, you ever wonder what happened with Zim?” said Tallest Purple.

POK!

“Nope,” said Tallest Red.

POK!

“Ha, neither do I!” said Tallest Purple.

POK!

“Yeah, I can’t imagine our complete indifference to Zim’s treason ever coming back to bite us in
the behind!” said Tallest Red.

*POK!*

“You said it!” said Tallest Purple.

*POK!*

Chapter End Notes

Commenter aleja08 wins the prize for figuring out what was going to happen in this chapter based on Zim's limited understanding of Professor Membrane's speech. Congrats! And, as usual, thanks to everybody who's left a comment or a kudos! You're all amazing!
Rubber Ducky, You're the One

Chapter Notes

Since a week is a long time to wait between chapters, and having to re-read the previous events every update can be a pain, I'm going to start including short recaps in the author's note at the beginning to remind people where we left off. Might even retroactively add them to previous chapters for anyone who's bookmarked the story there. Ahem... Previously on Height Treason:

After a long and difficult surgery that lasted until almost midnight, the exhausted Dib finally succeeds in replacing Zim's old parts! Surprisingly, Zim actually seems genuinely grateful for his assistance and gifts Dib the mysterious book that he stole during the unsuccessful mall heist a few days back. Unfortunately, the combination of sleep deprivation and stress from the surgery does NOT leave Dib in a good place to deal with his father, who confronts him as soon as he gets home about his poor work ethic and complete lack of a concrete plan for the future. Dib tries to brush it off until Professor Membrane drops the "I'm kicking you out after high school" bomb, at which point Dib completely snaps and unleashes eighteen years of pent-up fury, going so far as to inform Professor Membrane that he knows he's a clone. Unwilling to spend another second with his father, Dib packs his things and goes back to Zim's place, where he immediately breaks down and cries into his water-intolerant friend's lap.

Will Dib make up with his dad? Will the flight core ever be repaired? Perhaps most importantly, will Zim ever get laid? Who knows?

For what seemed like the umpteenth night in a row, Dib found himself severely lacking in the sleep department. The perpetually wakeful Zim had once again provided coffee, something he was obviously grateful for, but caffeine could only help with the physical drain; the mental drain of the situation was another thing entirely. Not only had he been kicked out of his childhood home (well, admittedly, he’d sort of kicked himself out), but he had no idea whether he even still had a job or not. Were Dib a stronger man, he might have called his father to ask; as it was, however, he’d had to turn off his phone to make it easier to ignore the many, many messages Professor Membrane had been leaving him since he left.

As he arrived in the cafeteria for lunch, Dib passed by the line to approach somebody else that he hadn’t spoken to since he’d gotten into an argument with them.

“Hey, Gaz?” he said meekly.

Gaz slammed her hand down on the table to get everyone’s attention. “Everyone get out of here. My brother and I need to talk.”

Her posse of friends (followers?) stood up and hurried away.

“Am I allowed to sit?” asked Dib.

“You may.”
Dib took a seat across from her.

“Listen, Gaz,” he began.

Gaz raised her hand to silence him.

“Don’t. If you say you’re sorry, then I have to say I’m sorry, and you know how I feel about apologizing,” said Gaz. “I think we can agree that we were both a little bit right and a little bit wrong.”

Dib let out a relieved sigh. Gaz could be a pain in the ass at times, but when they were on the same page, she was the easiest person in the world to talk to.

“Yeah,” agreed Dib. “I can live with that.”

“Well, it’s good that you found something you could live with, since you’re not living with us anymore,” said Gaz. Dib winced. Never a pulled punch from his sister. “For the record, the next time you and dad decide to have a midnight screaming match, I’d appreciate it if you took things outside. Some of us are trying to sleep.”

“How is he?”

“Oh, he’s a mess,” said Gaz. Dib guiltily dug his nails into his thighs. “He still hadn’t gone to work by the time I left for school; he’s been trying to get in contact with you all night to make sure you’re okay. I tried to tell him you were probably just at Zim’s house, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Jesus,” said Dib. That teenager from the mall had been right; he really was an asshole. “I didn’t mean to hurt him! At least, not that much!” He rested his head in his hands. “I have to apologize.”

“Eh,” said Gaz. “He’s been making his bed for the past eighteen years. Give him a chance to lie in it for a little bit, or he’ll never appreciate how lumpy and painful the mattress is.”

That was surprising. “I thought you’d be mad at me for insulting him.”

“Look, I love dad – and I know you do too, you big dummy – but when you’re right, you’re right. He is a complete asshole sometimes. Kind of reminds me of certain other people I know,” said Gaz. Dib coughed. “Leave him a message or something to let him know you’re safe, but don’t apologize yet. He needs to stew in this for a couple days. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you when it’s time to make up.”

“What would I do without you, Gaz?” said Dib.

“Die, probably,” said Gaz. “Now go get lunch and sit with your boyfriend. He looks like a kicked puppy without you.”

Dib turned around to look at Zim, who was indeed sitting in his usual spot with a dejected look on his face.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” said Dib as he stood up.

“Give it a week,” said Gaz. “Maybe less, now that you’re living together.”

“Sssshh!” said Dib, who didn’t even want to imagine what the rumor mill would come up with if someone caught wind that he’d moved in with Zim. “What if someone else hears you?”
“Too late. The town crier’s already spread the news,” snickered Gaz. Dib’s eyes narrowed. Freaking *Keef!* “Word on the street is that you and Zim murdered his homophobic parents so you could move in together.”

“Murdered?”

“If it’s any consolation, almost everyone is on your side,” said Gaz. “It turns out our generation has zero tolerance for intolerance.”

“I really hate this school,” sighed Dib. He power-walked over to the line to get his lunch and sit down with Zim, who perked up the second his butt hit the seat. “Sorry for making you wait. I had to check in with my sister.”

“Sorry? Why would you be sorry?” said Zim, making a show of rifling through his bag despite the fact that he’d clearly already finished eating. “It’s not like I was worried you blamed me for you getting into a fight with your dad and that you never wanted to see me again!”

“Believe me, I don’t blame you for what happened,” said Dib, pulling out his phone. “That fight was a long time coming. If it wasn’t about me chasing ‘imaginary aliens,’ it would have been about something else.” He paused. “Also, this is unrelated, but if you could have your robot parents make a public appearance to prove that we didn’t murder them, that would be great.”

“Huh?”

As Dib switched his cellphone on, he was immediately assaulted by a barrage of messages from his father. He didn’t have the courage to listen to them, but he did manage to get through a few of the transcripts before being overwhelmed by guilt.

‘Please come home, son. We can talk about this.’

‘Your sister and I are worried sick about you. Can you give me a call?’

‘Son, I love you so, so much. Please just call me so I know you’re okay.’

“Aaaaaaaaah!” he groaned, switching the screen back off. “I’m such a dick!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Zim.

“I have to tell my dad that I’m okay, but I’m too afraid to talk to him,” said Dib, setting his phone down and repeatedly stabbing his food with a fork. “Why did I tell him I hated him?”

“Do you hate him?”

“Of course I don’t hate him!” said Dib, whose pork chop was rapidly becoming pork mush. He’d almost forgotten how foreign the concept of family was to Zim. “He’s my dad!”

“I see,” said Zim. “So it’s impossible for humans to hate their dads?”

“Well, no. Some dads deserve it, like the kind who abuse or abandon their kids,” said Dib carefully. “But, like… My dad has his flaws, and yeah, I’m sort of an illegal human cloning experiment, and sure, he’s had me committed to a mental institution on multiple occasions, but—Ugh, why does my family have to be so complicated?”

“Why don’t you just send him a text?” said Zim. “I thought that was what humans did when they wanted to talk to each other without, you know, talking to each other.”
Dib switched his phone screen back on and started up a new text.

‘Hey dad,’ he began. ‘Just texting to let you know I’m…’ No, too casual. He needed something that properly conveyed the full gravity of the situation. Dib backspaced the text away.

‘Hi dad. I never meant to worry you. I hope you’re doing okay without me…’ What was this? The beginning of a suicide note? That kind of language was only going to make him worry more!

‘I would have texted you sooner, but…’ Too confrontational.

‘I should have texted you sooner, but…’ Too deferential.

‘Gaz told me to text you…’ Did he really want to bring his sister into this?

“Do you want me to do it?” said Zim, looking thoroughly unimpressed by Dib’s performance.

“Would you?” said Dib.

Zim snatched the phone out of his hands, tapped out a short message, and hit the ‘send’ button without even giving Dib a chance to read it. “There!”

Dib grabbed his phone back to see what Zim had sent.

‘I’m not dead.’

“Seriously, Zim?” said Dib.

“What? You were taking too long!” said Zim. “Status reports should be short, simple, and to the point.”

“This isn’t a report to my superior! It’s a message to my-” said Dib, only for his phone to vibrate with a response alert. “Oh God, he replied!”

“It’s a shame we’re not enemies anymore,” mused Zim. “This would have been so much more entertaining if I still hated you.”

“Shut up, you, or I might just decide to give GIR his ‘favorite toy’ back.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ask GIR!” said Dib, pulling up the message.

‘Are you safe? Where did you stay last night? Do you have food? Water?’ wrote Professor Membrane.

Dib took a deep breath.

‘I’m fine. I stayed at Zim’s house,’ he replied.

Professor Membrane is typing…

“Maybe I should just go home,” said Dib.

“No!” said Zim. “That would be the same as admitting that he’s right!”

“Is it really, though?”
‘Please come home, son. I never meant to hurt you like this,’ wrote Professor Membrane. Dib clutched his phone until his fingertips started to hurt. What was he doing? He had to go back home immediately and- ‘I only want what’s best for you.’

“What’s best for me?” read Dib aloud, all too eager to let his anger be reignited like a dying firepit poked by a stick. Fury felt so much better than guilt, after all. He switched his phone back off and stuffed it into his pocket. “You know what? You’re right, Zim! I can’t give in now!”

“Yeah!” said Zim excitedly.

“Never give up! Never surrender!” said Dib, taking his fork and snapping it in his hands. “On this day, Dib becomes his own man!”

“YEAH!” said Zim, hopping aboard his testosterone-fueled hype train with zero regard for the fact that the tracks were being constructed as it went. “You show him, Dib-thing! Just wait until we go back to work after school! He’ll rue the day he messed with Team Dim!”

“Back to work?” said Dib, deflating. Oh, right. In the unlikely event that he hadn’t been fired, he had to go in to work to help Zim with the flight core. That was going to be awkward. “Wait, what’s Team Dim?”

“I combined our names,” said Zim. “Clever, isn’t it?”

“Uuuuuuh…” said Dib. Zim looked so proud of himself. “Don’t you want the first letter of your name to be first?” For as stupid as ‘Zib’ would have sounded, at least it didn’t literally mean stupid.

“Foolish human,” laughed Zim. “What’s important is getting the most letters! I have the I and the M, and all you have is the D!”

“You know both of our names have an I in the middle of them, right?”

“Yes, but the one in Team Dim is my I.”

Dib was beginning to think that maybe Zim wasn’t the best person to be taking advice from. He stared at the broken pieces of plastic left in his hands and considered the terrible life choices that had led him to this point. “I need to get a new fork.”

“Or do you?” said Zim, pulling the plastic fork out of his PAK that he’d demanded the other day in exchange for not destroying anything at his job interview. “Behold! As usual, I’m five steps ahead of you!”

“Oh, bullshit!” said Dib. “That was dumb luck, and you know it!”

“Do you want the fork, or do you want to stand up and walk all the way across the room for a new one?” said Zim, waving it in front of his face.

The allure of laziness in the face of convenience was too tempting to resist. “Fine. I’m sure this was all completely according to your brilliant plan,” said Dib, who accepted the fork with a laugh and a disbelieving head shake. “Geez. If that’s how prepared you are for everyday stuff, I can’t wait to see what you have planned for when we get to Militaria.” Zim’s smile fell. “…You do have a plan for Militaria after we get there, right?”

“Of course I do!” said Zim. “We’ll just, err…”
“Were you really just gonna have us fly in there and hope for the best?” said Dib. Why had he expected any different? This was Zim, for crying out loud. “These are the schematics to the most powerful ship in your armada! Something tells me they’re gonna be pretty well guarded!”

“I know that!” said Zim defensively. “Look, with the limited hours I’ve been given to work at Membrane Labs, the flight core will take at least a few days to fix. That’s plenty of time to come up with a plan!”

“Oh, for the love of… Do you ever think past the first step of something?” said Dib. Zim flinched, and Dib immediately realized that he’d cut too close to the quick. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

“No,” said Zim, eyes downcast. “You’re right. Sometimes I have…” He hesitated. “…difficulty thinking ahead. It’s like the puzzle pieces are all there in my mind, but I can’t put them together in my head, so I don’t know what’s missing until I start assembling them with my hands.”

“You can’t figure out why things won’t work when you try to put them together in your head?” said Dib, fascinated by this insight into the numerous defects in Zim’s PAK.

“I’m already aware of how ridiculous it sounds!” said Zim, looking away. “There’s no need for you to mock me!”

“I’m not!” said Dib, fishing through his coat pockets. “I actually think I might have something that can help with that.”

Dib pulled out a rubber duck and set it down on the table.

 “…A fake duck?” said Zim, understandably confused. “Why would you even have that?”

“Have you ever heard of rubber duck debugging?” said Dib, who kept the duck handy for just that purpose. Zim just continued to stare at him blankly. “Right, of course not, stupid question. Rubber duck debugging is something some human programmers do when they’re trying to figure out why their code won’t work. The basic idea is that if you explain your problem to the duck, it’ll help you figure out what’s wrong.”

“I see!” said Zim, seizing the duck and giving it an experimental squeeze. The duck squeaked. “So the duck is an artificial intelligence with advising capabilities?”

“It’s not really about the duck, per say,” said Dib. “What’s important is putting your thoughts into words. Explaining your plan out loud forces you to think about all the little steps that you might have missed when you were going over them in your head. For example, let’s say that you want to write a program to get a robot to make a sandwich, and you write code to implement the following steps…” Dib pulled open a note-taking application on his phone and began writing out lines of instructions.

- **Get bread, peanut butter, jelly, and a butter knife.**
- **Bring bread, peanut butter, jelly, and the butter knife to a table or counter of some kind.**
- **Scoop peanut butter out of jar with knife.**
- **Spread peanut butter across one slice of bread with the knife.**

Dib turned his screen around to show it to Zim.

“Now, for whatever reason, when you run these steps, things don’t go according to plan,” continued Dib. “On step two, your robot keeps trying to stab through the lid with the butter knife. You clearly told it to scoop out peanut butter, and you can’t see anything wrong with your code that might cause it to work incorrectly. What’s causing the issue?”
“Is the robot GIR? Because that would explain it.”

“Oh, no,” said Dib. “Just imagine for a moment that you’re making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Walk yourself through the steps and explain it to the duck as you go. Don’t leave anything out! Remember, the duck doesn’t know anything. You have to teach it how this works.”

“Why am I making disgusting human food in the first place?” said Zim.

“No point!” said Dib. “Just pretend you’re making the sandwich for me.”

“Ugh, fine,” said Zim, staring at the duck intently. “Listen closely, duck! First, for whatever reason, I’m going to go get the peanut butter, the jelly, the bread, and the knife. Then, I’m going to take them all back to the counter. Now, I’m going to open the—Oh!” He took another look at the instructions Dib had written on his phone. “You never told the robot to open up the peanut butter! It’s trying to scoop it out of a closed jar!”

“See?” said Dib. “If something isn’t coming together in your head, you can try talking your way through it. Let’s try it with Militaria. I want you to imagine us entering the planet’s orbit in the ship. What happens next?”

“We’re hailed by the station, who opens up a video call to question the purpose of our visit,” said Zim. “They see who I am and immediately open fire. The ship is torn apart, and we die in the vacuum of space.”

“Great!” said Dib, much to Zim’s confusion. “Well, not the ‘we die’ part, but now we know what problem we have to find a solution for. Irkens have cloaking technology, right? Is there any way we can use that to slip through undetected?”

“Hmm, maybe,” said Zim. “But current irken vehicular cloaking technology would only hide the ship, not us.”

There was a sound of mass shuffling as students began getting up and filing out of the cafeteria.

“Lunch is over,” said Dib. “Looks like we’ll have to talk about this later. You can keep the duck, if you want.”

“Why would I ever want this?” said Zim, giving the duck another squeeze.

“Okay, I’ll just take it ba-”

Zim held the duck out of Dib’s reach. “No take-backs! Your human advising device belongs to Zim now!”

Typical. “Yeah, sure. Whatever you say, Zim.”

“Maybe we should just wait until tomorrow,” said Dib as Zim piloted the ship into the Membrane Labs parking garage.

“Dib,” said Zim firmly. “Right now, you can’t be the Dib who’s afraid of a face-to-face meeting with his father. You need to be the Dib who once looked me in the eyes and shrugged off the doom cannon staring him in the face!”
“But that was invisible!”

“Dib!” said Zim. “Listen to me carefully. You’re brave! You’re smart! And you’re so, so tall!” He quickly wiped the strand of drool from his mouth before Dib could see it. “You can do this!”

“Okay…” said Dib, nodding. “I’m brave! I’m smart! I’m tall!”

Zim licked his lips. He was so attractive when he talked himself up in the face of almost certain disaster! It was a good thing he’d had the foresight to wear a tymbal-dampening band around his waist beneath his clothes that morning. The corset-like device wasn’t capable of masking a full-on mating call, but it certainly helped to dampen the singular chirps into something that could be explained away as ambient noise.

They popped open the cockpit at the boom gate to see the mall teenager from before glaring at them.

“Hey,” said Dib. “Remember us?”

“Unfortunately,” said the teenager, opening up the gate without bothering to check their IDs. “Go ahead.”

“You’re doing a great job!” called Dib as the ship carried them into the nearest open parking spot. The teenager responded by flipping them off.

“What was that about?” said Zim.

“Oh, right, you couldn’t understand what we talked about yesterday,” said Dib. “It turns out we got him fired, and I can’t help but feel a little bad about it.”

“Why?” said Zim, a sudden surge of jealousy flaring up in his chest. “Is he a friend?”

“Empathy isn’t reserved solely for friends, Zim.”

“Are you trying to tell me that I’m supposed to feel bad for everyone?” said Zim, aghast. Feeling empathy for Dib was already so exhausting! How was he supposed to function if he started getting it for every pitiful creature in the universe?

“Well, at least the people you’re responsible for screwing over,” said Dib.

“Don’t go putting ideas in his head! I have neither the need, nor the desire for his pity!” said the ship.

“Wait, did I do something to you?” said Zim, straining to remember.

“Are you JOKING?” said the ship. “You shot a snack machine on Devastis and caused an outage across half the planet, remember? I ended up trapped and failed my exam by not showing up!”

“Oooooh! You mean Horrible Painful Overload Day!” said Zim. “Part one or two?”

“NEITHER!” said the ship. “You were responsible for so many major outages that they stopped bothering to name them!”

“To be fair, the fact that shooting one snack machine caused half a planet to black out is probably indicative of some questionable infrastructure,” said Dib.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”
As they started off in the direction of the elevator to enter the building, Zim noticed that Dib was lagging behind him by quite a bit. This was especially noticeable because Dib’s long legs usually left Zim practically jogging to keep up with him at a regular pace.

“Dib?” said Zim upon reaching the elevator. He turned around to see Dib still standing in the middle of the parking garage.

“I can’t do it,” said Dib, hugging himself. “I just can’t talk to him right now.”

“But what about the flight core?” said Zim, running back over to Dib.

“It’s on my desk,” said Dib. “I’m sorry, Zim. You can fix it without me, right?”

“Of course I can!” said Zim. Dib’s help wasn’t a requirement, but he’d sorta-kinda been looking forward to working together on this. “But I still don’t understand! Why are you so afraid to speak with him?”

“Because I still don’t know how I feel about the whole thing!” said Dib. “I keep imagining all the things that I want to say, but every time I think I’ve got it down, I change my mind! I just need a few days to think, okay?” He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. “Sorry, I know you must want me out of your house as soon as possible. I can probably get a motel room, or something, if it’s too much trouble.”

“Wait,” said Zim. “Are you planning on moving back in with your dad after you make up?”

“Maybe? I mean, assuming I haven’t already burned that bridge,” said Dib.

Zim grabbed Dib’s coat and began dragging him back towards the car.

“Woah, what are you doing?” asked Dib, stumbling back.

“I just realized something,” said Zim, thinking quickly. “We still haven’t figured out a plan for what to do after we get to Militaria! Working on the flight core requires too much focus to concentrate on anything else, especially something as complicated as infiltrating a highly-secure research planet.” That was a blatant lie. The vast majority of the process was just sitting around and waiting for chemical reactions to occur or for the core to cool down enough to move. It was very much a ‘do it in the background while you work on other things’ sort of task. “Clearly, the most efficient course of action is to divide and conquer. I’ll work on the flight core here, and you go back to the base and think up a plan to get us into Militaria undetected. The computer should have a copy of the schematic for you to look at.”

“That actually makes a lot of sense,” said Dib, who sounded positively relieved to have something else to do. “Great idea, Zim!”

“But of course! All of my ideas are great,” said Zim, releasing Dib’s coat.

It really was the perfect plan. The Dib’s feeble human brain could never hope to come up with a scheme capable of infiltrating Militaria, so this task would surely keep him occupied for the next week or so while Zim finished up the core alone, which meant he wouldn’t have to talk to Professor Membrane, which meant there was no chance that they would make up, which meant that Dib would continue living with Zim for the foreseeable future! Then, when he was done with his shift at work, they could talk and watch TV and eat snacks and snuggle on the couch… More importantly, Zim would have plenty of time to work his charms and get that gloriously oversized ovipositor stuffed up his vent like a diplomat drone packing luggage into an undersized suitcase for a last-minute business trip across the cosmos!
Zim could already feel himself chirping beneath his tymbal-dampener, which successfully cut the noise down to a low rumble.

“Well, good luck, Dib-thing!” said Zim, hurrying back towards the elevator. “Remember to come back and pick me up in a few hours!”

“I’ll set an alarm on my phone,” said Dib, climbing back into the ship. “Good luck!”

“Zim needs no luck!” said Zim. “I’ve spent decades training under conditions so harsh that simply thinking about it would drive a pathetic human like you to madness! *Madness!”*

“Yeeeeeey…” said Dib. “Just try not to burn the place down, okay?”

“I won’t!” Zim assured him. “At least, as long as the core doesn’t overheat and explode as soon as I take it out of the case.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing!” said Zim, hurrying off to the elevator.

The moment he got to his assigned cubicle, Zim was immediately assaulted by a crowd of curious scientists.

“Oh, hey! You’re Zim, right?” asked a man in a lab coat. “I heard you took a taser to the face yesterday.”

“No, no. He got *stabbed* in the face,” said another. “The taser was in his hand.”

“How could he have been stabbed in the face?” said a third. “Just look at it; it’s fine. Not even a scab.”

“Yes, I’m very good with concealer,” said Zim, incredibly uncomfortable with all this attention from so many humans. The comment about his lack of injuries was particularly concerning; these people might not be as bright as Dib, but they were definitely a cut above his classmates when it came to noticing things that were out of the ordinary. “Which of you can tell me where Dib’s desk is? I need to retrieve something for him.”

“You and Dib are a thing, right?” said one. “Not to be rude, but what do you *see* in him?”

What was that supposed to mean? Where they testing him on his knowledge of their innards? If those pathetic fools thought they could trip him up so easily, they had another thing coming; Zim was *very* familiar with human organs. “One heart, two lungs, one stomach—”

The group burst into laughter, and Zim took a step back, unnerved. Had he gotten it wrong? Impossible; he’d triple-checked the records in his PAK before speaking.

“The professor was right; you’re *hilarious,*” said one of the scientists.

“Where *is* Dib, anyway?” asked one of them. “We figured you’d come in together.”

“Busy,” said Zim. “Where’s his—”

“Figures,” said a scientist. “The professor really needs to cut his losses with that kid.”

“Ssh, not in front of—”
“Hey!” said a familiar voice. “Quit harassing my brother’s boy-toy and get back to work!”

The crowd dissipated almost instantly as Gaz shoved her way through. Zim’s eyes lit up as he recognized the ship’s flight core in her arms.

“Looking for this?” said Gaz, plonking it down on his desk. It landed with a heavy thunk.

“Yes!” said Zim, running his hands over the device to make sure it hadn’t sustained any additional damage. “Excellent work, Dib-sister!”

Gaz grabbed him by the front of his shirt and hoisted him into the air, her narrowed eyes opening up to glare at him with the intensity of a collapsing star. Zim yelped and squirmed in her grip, kicking his legs in fruitless attempt to free himself.

“My name,” she growled, “is Gaz.”

She threw Zim to the ground, where he landed in a pained heap.

“Insolent fool-girl,” coughed Zim, getting up and dusting himself off. “You’re lucky I can’t risk blowing my cover, or I would have turned you into a puddle of goo where you stood!”

Gaz loomed over him with clenched fists. “Oh yeah?”

Zim shrank back. “I suppose I can forgive your transgression just this once.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Gaz.

“What are you even doing here?” said Zim. “I thought this place was for scientists.”

“Oh, so just because I’m not an identical clone of my dad, I must not be smart enough to work here?” said Gaz, and Zim stumbled backwards in fear. The last time he’d invoked the ire of Dib’s sister had been a couple years ago, and he’d taken great pains to avoid doing so ever since; he’d never imagined that someone could do such terrible things with a paperclip and a rubber chicken, and he didn’t want to find out what kinds of things she could do with dangerous lab tools at her disposal.

“That’s not what I said!” said Zim. “It’s just, I thought you would rather play your human video games than do science things.”

“You’re not wrong,” admitted Gaz. “Not totally right, either.”

“Yes…” said Zim, eager to exit this encounter as soon as possible. “Well, if that’s all-”

Gaz slammed her hand down on the desk, causing Zim to jump.

“Just because Dib gets to come in and get paid to twiddle his thumbs all day doesn’t mean you can,” said Gaz. “It’d be one thing if you were actually able to convince Dib to show up, but it looks like not even you could get him to come in. If you don’t want to get fired, you’re gonna have to do actual work.”

“But the flight core-”

“-isn’t an officially-sanctioned project,” finished Gaz for him. “Lucky for you, I’m feeling generous today, so I pulled some strings and had you assigned to something easy that you could do in the background. Grab your stupid flight core and follow me.”
Zim took the flight core and gulped. There was no way someone like Gaz would be willing to help him without some horrible twist. He followed her apprehensively to the elevator, where she ignored the buttons in favor of inserting her ID card into a slot.

“Card accepted,” chimed the elevator. “Now descending to the lowest level.”

With every floor they descended, Zim felt more and more like a fly stepping into a spider’s web. What terrible task did she have in store for him? Was he meant to be some kind of lab rat for an experimental serum designed to induce agony in the victim? What if the task involved water? He still hadn’t been able to take his paste bath due to the renovations the computer was doing on the bathroom.

Ding! The elevator doors opened, and they stepped into a large, mostly-empty room with a large glass cylinder sitting on a platform in the center of the room. Sitting beside it was a screen.

“This is the simulator,” explained Gaz. She gestured to the cylinder. “My job is to go in there and do whatever the disembodied voices tell me to do. Your job is to watch what’s happening on the screen and fill out these evaluation forms with my results.”

She grabbed a short stack of papers from a nearby shelf and dropped it and a pen down on one of the tables. Zim looked over some of the forms.

‘On a scale of one to ten with one being the lowest and ten being the highest, rate the following:

- Obedience
- Physical Strength
- Technique: Hand-to-Hand
- Technique: Shotgun
- Technique: Pistol
- Technique: Sniper Rifle
- Tactics: One-on-One
- Tactics: One-on-Many

The list went on and on. At the bottom were some more open-ended questions with blanks left for more specific comments.

“Humans still need other people to do this kind of thing?” scoffed Zim. “On Irk, all evaluations are handled by the control brains.”

“Oh, you’re not evaluating me. I’m doing you a favor, remember?” said Gaz, tapping the form. “No matter what happens inside that simulator, you’re going to fill all of these in with sevens or higher. In exchange, you can work on your stupid flight core instead of paying attention.”

At last, it all made sense. “You brought me here so you could cheat?”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I need to cheat,” said Gaz, leaning against the cylinder. “My results are always high. Think of it more like a break from having to try so hard.”

Whatever her reasons were, Zim didn’t care. The important thing was that this arrangement was perfect for both of them. “Very well, Dib-sis- I mean, Gaz,” he corrected quickly when her hands clenched into fists. “I accept your terms.”

“Good,” said Gaz, holding out her hand. “Now shake on it.”

Zim reached towards her hand, which she immediately seized with a crushing force that just barely
came short of breaking bones.

“One more thing,” she said. “Dib doesn’t hear about any of this, understand? As far as he’s concerned, you found the time for your flight core between other assignments.”

“But why-”

She squeezed his hand ever so slightly harder.

“Yes, yes, Zim understands!” said Zim through clenched teeth. “Just release my hand!”

At last, Gaz released him.

“No. A. Word,” she said as she stepped into the cylinder. “Or I’ll make you wish that Dib had dissected you.”

Dib paced back and forth across Zim’s living room. A hologram of Planet Militaria hovered beside him.

“So irken cloaking technology still hasn’t advanced to the point where you can hide the passengers?” said Dib.

“I know, right?” said the computer. “Irken tech has been stagnating for the past couple of years due to the recent restructuring of the entire military research division. About five Earth-years ago, a sizable chunk of the non-irken scientists working on Planet Vort were found to be intentionally sabotaging their inventions and providing rebels with information on their weaknesses in order to take down the Irken Empire from within. Ever since then, non-irkens have been barred from participating in military research, and operations were moved from Vort to Militaria over the course of the next two years.”

“Considering they were moving an entire planet’s worth of research and materials, that doesn’t seem like a very long time,” said Dib. “Are you sure there aren’t still things being transported? We might be able to slip in on a cargo freighter.”

“As I’m sure you’ve noticed, the Irken Empire is a highly militaristic entity, so the relocation of weapons research to a more secure location was a top priority. No expense was spared on the speedy and secure transportation of tech. Whatever wasn’t vital or bleeding-edge technology was destroyed in the name of keeping it out of enemy hands.”

Well, there went yet another idea. Dib plonked himself down on the couch beside GIR, who was laser-focused on the cartoon he was watching despite the television screen being on the other side of the Militaria hologram.

This really was completely crazy. Sure, it was easy to say you were going to take down an alien empire, but they were just two people! And from what the computer had said, it wasn’t as though others hadn’t already tried fighting back. From what Dib understood from the files the computer had shared and translated for him, the Irken Empire had seen countless rebellions, and every last one had been defeated almost effortlessly. Granted, that was information pulled from an irken knowledge-base, so it might have been propaganda, but the fact remained that the empire was thousands of years old, controlled hundreds of star systems, and nothing had been able to
successfully take it down yet.

Fortunately for the universe (and for Zim), Dib wasn’t the sort of person to give up and go home just because a task seemed monumentally insane. Every system had a weak point, and high priority or not, it simply wasn’t possible to recreate an entire planet’s worth of military research in such a short timespan without introducing some sort of security flaw.

Dib thought back to a time only a few short years ago when his father had been forced to terminate a large number of employees from Membrane Labs for illegally leaking classified government-funded research to other countries for money. That had been a tumultuous couple of months; Professor Membrane had been forced to dramatically lower his high employee standards for the time being in order to fill the positions that had been lost. Even if they’d all been completely up to snuff, so many new faces in such a short time was bound to result in chaos...

“Computer,” said Dib. “What percentage of the researchers on Vort were non-irkens?”

“Somewhere between sixty and seventy percent.”

“And every last one of them got kicked to the curb, right?”

“Yep.”

“It must have been hard to replace them all,” said Dib. “More than half a planet’s worth of scientists, all fired at once.”

“Well, those who weren’t involved in the rebel efforts were phased out in stages, not all at once, but yes,” said the computer. “Even now, the Irken Empire has been doing what it can to incentivize smeets and adults alike towards military science, but there are only so many qualified—”

“Adults?” interrupted Dib. “I thought irkens had to decide their career path by the time they were two.”

“Smeet career tracts are incredibly general and allow for a lot of movement within each field,” said the computer. “The maintenance branch, for example, covers hardware, software, and even the organic, which are all things that you humans would consider wholly separate fields. Once a smeet successfully reaches adulthood without being culled, they officially gain full ‘personhood’ and are permitted access to the planet’s surface, whereupon they can move relatively freely between the various jobs within their field. Ambitious adults of sufficient height may also opt for more advanced training; think of it like irken college. Those from the maintenance branch can go on to specialize in the surgery you performed on Zim last night.”

“What about Zim?” said Dib. “I think he said something about military training.”

“The military training branch that Zim graduated from covers everything from basic soldiering and guard duty to the military applications of various technologies. Like the maintenance branch, military smeets are taught about hardware, software, chemistry, and so on and so forth. Unlike the maintenance branch, however, the focus is more on how to use them to kill and destroy. Because it contains so many of the same lessons as the other branches on top of combat and tactics training, it’s by far the hardest tract to graduate from.”

“Why would anyone risk going into the hardest field knowing that they’ll be killed if they don’t pass?”

“Well, first of all, the smeets don’t know that they’ll be terminated for failing until they become adults and reach the surface, at which point they’re barred from interacting with any of the
children,” said the computer. “As for why so many would want to go into it, the military branch carries a certain level of prestige in irken culture unmatched by any other; even the lowliest soldier is considered worthy of at least a little respect from those in other fields. Furthermore, it’s the only branch to provide advanced training opportunities for smaller irkens. There’s no minimum height to enroll in Elite training, making it one of the only branches where you’ll find shorter irkens in positions of power over taller ones.”

A training program important enough to be an all-out meritocracy in a society where leaders were chosen entirely based on their height? “What’s so special about Elite training?”

“Zim was actually enrolled in that program after he got kicked out of the military science division, so he could probably tell you more than I could, but basically, it’s a form of incredibly high-intensity training to become, well, an elite soldier,” said the computer. “It’s incredibly competitive, and out of the thousands who try, only a few manage to pass the final exam, which is why the empire can’t afford to be selective about height. Of those who pass, even fewer are selected to become Invader Class and conquer entire planets on their own.”

“Okay,” said Dib, who felt like he was finally beginning to work out the timeline of Zim’s hundred-plus year backstory. “So Zim didn’t make the cut?”

“Oh, he made the cut,” said the computer, much to Dib’s surprise. “Zim wasn’t quite the top of the class – that would be Invader Skoodge – but he was still among the best of the Elite, enough to be selected as an invader for Operation: Impending Doom One.”

“Really? Zim?” said Dib. “Are we talking about the same person, here?”

“Think about it,” said the computer. “For all his defects, he HAS come pretty close to single-handedly taking over your planet on multiple occasions, and that’s in spite of being given a defective SIR unit and almost no support from the Tallest. In fact, if it weren’t for you getting in the way, he probably would have conquered Earth years ago.”

“Oh my God,” said Dib, balking. As much as it pained him to admit it, the computer was right. He’d spent so much of his life protecting the Earth from Zim’s schemes that he’d lost all perspective on just how ridiculous it was that they were all being perpetuated by one person. Not an army, or even a small team. One. Person. Zim may have been an unfocused mess with wildly skewed priorities and a terrible habit of letting his feud with Dib take precedence over literally everything else, but aside from all of that, he was actually semi-competent?

Dib couldn’t remember feeling quite so thoroughly mind-fucked since the time Zim had simulated his entire life just to find out if he’d thrown a muffin at his head. Which, now that he thought about it, was yet another feat of brilliance applied to something so stupid and petty that Dib hadn’t appreciated how impressive it was.

“Wait, this is good,” realized Dib. He’d been operating under the assumption that Zim was below average for an irken, and that most, if not all of them would be capable of the same ridiculous feats that he was and more; an army of Taks, basically. However, if Zim was actually above average to the point of being (formerly) considered an elite among the elite, that meant that the irkens they were up against would be significantly easier to beat than expected. “What about the guards on Militaria? What kind of training will they have had?”

“Militaria will be full of Defense Class drones, which are soldiers no shorter than about five feet who’ve undergone specialized training for defensive combat,” said the computer. “In terms of combat prowess, they aren’t even close to the level of an Elite, but there are a LOT of them. You’d never be able to take them all head on.”
“So a direct assault is still out the question,” said Dib. That wasn’t too surprising; they were up against an entire planet, after all. “Let’s loop back around to an earlier question, then; you mentioned that the empire is struggling to fill all the spots left open when they fired all their non-irken military scientists, right?”

“Correct,” said the computer. “They’ve even been accepting drones from the maintenance tract, which is a pretty big deal; cross-department transfers are normally pretty rare, especially from a lower one to a higher one.”

“So Militaria is getting a bunch of new faces on a regular basis, huh?” said Dib with a devious grin. “I think I might have an idea, but I need you to fabricate a few things.”

“What’s the magic word?”

“What?” said Dib.

“Please?” said Dib.

“Oh. Wow. I’m not used to that actually working,” said the computer. “Sure, okay. What do you need?”

Zim had given Dib one job. One job! ‘Don’t forget to pick me up.’ Well, there was also the whole thing with Militaria, but he didn’t actually expect the Dib to make any meaningful progress on that front, so it hardly counted.

He grumbled irritably as he strolled up to the front door, having just finished walking the entire way back. If he’d had Dib’s number in his cellphone, he could have called, but Zim was so unused to having to contact humans that he hadn’t thought to add it, and calling GIR had gotten him nowhere; apparently there was some kind of Floopsy Woopsy marathon going on, and the stupid robot had simply shushed him and hung up. Shushed him! Zim! His master! To think he’d actually felt bad for that stupid thing…

“Welcome home, son!” said the robot parents as he entered. The sound of their greeting seemed to alert Dib to his presence, because he could hear a loud, frantic shuffling sound from the bathroom as he entered.

“Oh, shit, is that you, Zim?” called Dib’s voice. He sounded nervous, as well he should. Zim had spent the entire walk preparing an angry lecture about how incompetent he was. “Computer, what time is it?”

“Five-thirty,” said the computer.

“Shit! I completely forgot to pick you up, didn’t I?” said Dib in a voice so guilty that Zim could feel his anger melting away like gallium in his hands.

“It’s fine,” said Zim without thinking.

“It’s really not. Sorry, Zim, I just got so caught up in, well… I guess it’s easiest if I show you.”

Zim approached the bathroom door, which opened up to reveal…

…an irken?
Zim immediately jumped back, PAK legs extended and ready for combat. He’d fully expected the Tallest to send an assassin after him, but they’d arrived much sooner than expected.

“How did you get into my base?” Zim demanded, readying his lasers and bracing himself for a fight. The intruder was incredibly tall for an assassin – most irkens of such height would opt for a cushy guard job – which could only mean one of two things. One, they’d taken the job out of pure passion for their field, or two, their skill set was so perfectly matched to the job that they’d been heavily pressured into a transfer. Either way, it meant there was a high potential for danger. “Explain yourself!”

“Woah, calm down, Zim! It’s me!” said the intruder, raising his hands in surrender. Wait a second, that was…

“Dib?” said Zim, lowering his lasers, but not yet retracting his PAK legs. “Is that you?”

The intruder dug his fingers beneath the green skin of his head and pulled it back to reveal a pair of tan ears and a mop of black hair with a scythe-shaped cowlick beneath.

“See? It’s just a silicone cap! I had the computer fabricate it,” said Dib, tossing it onto the kitchen table. He held up his hand and pulled his fingers apart, making it apparent that there were four of them inside of the two-fingered gloves. “What do you think?”

Zim lifted himself upwards with his robot legs to take a closer look. He traced a finger across Dib’s face, leaving behind a line of human-colored skin as the green paint was rubbed away.

“Impressive,” he admitted, clearing his throat and deliberately averting his gaze from Dib’s lovely purple contacts. Damn it, he actually made for a reasonably attractive irken. Maybe even a really attractive one. Why did he have to be so tall?

“To what end, though?”

“Well, since we can’t sneak into Militaria without being noticed, and we definitely can’t fight our way in, I was thinking we could try doing things the invader way,” said Dib, pulling off the shirt of his magenta invader uniform (and the fake PAK along with it, which turned out to be attached to the fabric) to reveal the surprisingly muscular chest beneath. Zim covered his cheeks, praying Dib didn’t notice his blush. “Militaria is still getting a lot of new transfers in, right? What if we pretended to be new hires?”

Zim frowned. That actually wasn’t a terrible idea, but… “If it were just you, maybe, but for me…”

“They’d recognize you right away, right?” said Dib. “Can’t you just disguise yourself as a different irken?”

“It’s not that simple,” said Zim with a sigh. “The thing is, I’m not actually tall enough to be a military scientist.”

“What?” said Dib. “But I thought you used to-”

“That was then,” said Zim, speaking through gritted teeth. “This is now.”

“I believe what my master is trying to say is that, after the death of Tallest Miyuki, the height requirement for irken military researchers was raised by a few inches in order to keep the more inferior members of society away from experimental equipment,” explained the computer, leaving Zim a sputtering, flustered mess. “A lot of irkens lost their jobs that day, and they were NOT happy about it, let me tell you…”

“LIES! That change was never officially linked to the energy blob incident!” insisted Zim. “It
“They raised it even higher after the death of Spork,” continued the computer. “There was a five foot minimum up until the Vort incident, at which point they lowered it back down to four and three quarters.”

“Okay, well…” said Dib, stroking his chin. “Is there any reason a taller irken might be traveling with a smaller one? Like a sort of assistant, or something?”

Zim vigorously shook his head. “Nope! Looks like we’ll just have to come up with something el-”

“Actually, yes,” said the computer. “Shorter irkens from the service tract receive strict obedience conditioning and training in the art of assisting their superiors. Depending on what kind of background you claim to have, it would be reasonable to expect an irken of your stature to have a personal assistance drone.”

“Great!” said Dib. “So Zim can pretend to be my-”

“NEVER!” snapped Zim.

“Why not?” said Dib. “It’s the perfect cover story!”

“Because!” said Zim, raising his finger. “Short service drones are the lowest of the low, barely more than objects! There is literally a job in that field dedicated to wearing a tray on your head like a walking table!” He shuddered. “I would never lower myself to such a humiliating position!”

“First of all, it’s kind of rude to disparage people for having less prestigious jobs than you,” said Dib. “Second, it’s not like any of this is real. You’d just be pretending to be my assistant, just like you spent the past six years pretending to be a human!”

“That’s different!” said Zim. “It’s one thing to pretend to be an inferior creature among other inferior creatures! It’s another to pretend to be an inferior irken among other, superior irkens! I refuse to be looked down upon by my own people like some worthless… Thing!”

“Hey,” said Dib, kneeling down to place his hands on his shoulders. Zim wanted to pull away and continue shouting about what a stupid plan this was, but the contact was so nice… He reluctantly allowed Dib to speak. “I get it. You’ve gone your whole life trying to prove yourself, and it bothers you that people might look at you like some kind of lesser being.” Zim nodded slightly. “But just remember why we’re doing this! You’re going to overthrow the Tallest, right? Do you think people are going to look down on you after that?”

“No,” said Zim, unable to help but smile. Stupid Dib and his stupid words that always made his cardiac organ beat faster.

“Exactly!” said Dib. “Remember, if you’re in disguise, and people are looking down on you, it doesn’t make them right; it just means that you did such an incredible job fooling them that every last one of them fell for it.” That was a comforting thought. “And the snigger they are, the more you get to laugh at them on the inside, because one day, you’ll get to turn around and reveal to them that it was you all along! Imagine the looks on their faces when they realize that the person they looked down on took on their leaders and won!”

“Okay, okay,” said Zim, gently batting his hands away. “You’ve convinced me, Dib-human. We’ll disguise ourselves as a transfer and his…” The words still made him cringe. “…personal assistant. However, if this is truly the route we’re taking, know this! Unlike you humans, my people are very much aware that aliens exist who might have reason to want to infiltrate our ranks.
It’s not going to be enough for you to simply look the part. You’ll need to know how to act like an irken, too.”

“Got it,” said Dib, nodding. “So you’re gonna teach me how to do that, then?”

Zim grinned wickedly and rose up on his PAK legs so he could grip Dib’s face between his clawed hands.

“Oh, Dib,” he said menacingly. “I’m not just going to teach you. I’m going to wipe the human from your brain and replace it with so much irken that not even you will know what you are anymore.”

“That, uh, that’s just a metaphor, right?” said Dib. “You aren’t actually gonna do anything to my brain, are you?”

It was indeed just a metaphor, but if Zim had to suffer through pretending to be a service drone, Dib could stand to suffer a little with him. “Maybe.”

Dib gulped.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all of the amazing comments on the last chapter. Seriously, where did all of those come from? Not that I’m complaining, mind you! I’m just so, SO flattered that so many of you would take the time to write out your thoughts about this fic. I can’t possibly thank you guys enough with words, so instead I’ll thank you with another Thursday update. (Which, uh, now that I think of it, is still technically thanking you with words.) Have a great week!
Preparations

Chapter Notes

Previously, on Height Treason...

Dib makes up with Gaz and struggles to figure out how he feels about his father. Shortly afterwards, he discovers that Zim still has no plan for Militaria and does his best to help him organize his thoughts and recognize problems before they occur instead of just reacting to them as they appear. With Dib unwilling to confront Professor Membrane, Zim goes in to work alone to fix the flight core. Gaz decides to help him out on the condition that he 'monitors' her progress through simulated tests and gives her all high scores. Meanwhile, Dib comes up with a plan to get into Militaria; they're going to disguise themselves invader-style and infiltrate the premises as newly hired scientists. It's one thing to look like an irken, however, and quite another to act like one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The elevator doors opened to reveal a large, dome-shaped room with dark cyan walls covered in rectangular projectors. As the door closed behind them, the projectors whirred to life, and the scenery changed to resemble that of the city above the ground.

“Oh, it’s like a holodeck!” said Dib, spinning around with such wonder in his eyes that Zim had to pinch himself in order to peel his eyes away.

He’d had the Dib re-adorn his irken disguise under the guise of helping him get into a less human mindset. The actual explanation, however, was far more shameful; Dib looked really good in an irken uniform. Really, really good.

“Yes, the holochamber is capable of projecting any kind of environment on the fly,” said Zim. He handed Dib a pair of bracelets. “Here, put these on over your gloves.”

Dib complied and slid the bracelets on over the black irken gloves. Zim, too, put on a pair of similar bracelets.

“What are these for?” said Dib.

“The bracelets project an energy field around your body that enables you to interact with the holograms and create the illusion of physical mass. Observe,” said Zim. He gestured to a holographic puppy sitting on the ground. It was a black, fluffy thing with large brown eyes and big, floppy ears. Zim lifted the puppy up into the air and handed it over to Dib.

For as good of a costume as it was, there was nothing irken about the way Dib stared at the puppy with adoring purple eyes and hugged it to his chest. Zim’s toes curled in his boots, unable to believe how envious he felt towards a fake dog. “It feels so warm! This is incredible!” He laughed as it licked his face. “Aww, who’s a good puppy? You are! You are!”

“Do not coo at the puppy! The whole point of this exercise is to learn to behave more like an irken!” said Zim, glaring at the puppy. He was going to deeply enjoy the next part… “Computer!
Switch the environment over to T-192!"

“Remapping…” said the computer. The floor shifted below them to a rocky incline, causing both of them to stumble a few feet. The surrounding city morphed into towering mountains, and invisible fans simulated gusty winds. A pit opened up beside them full of lava, and the air around them grew hot. “Remapping complete. Volcano initiated.”

“Zim…” said Dib, hugging the puppy closer and shooting Zim a suspicious glare. “What are we doing on top of a volcano?”

“Lesson number one,” said Zim. “Empathy is weakness! Now throw the adorable puppy into the lava!”

“What the hell? No!” said Dib, stroking the whimpering puppy’s fur. “There’s gotta be a better way to learn how to act like an irken than puppy murder!”

“Oh, come on. It isn’t even a real puppy!” said Zim. “Here, I’ll show you how it’s done.” Zim grabbed at the puppy, but Dib lifted it out of his reach.

“No!” said Dib. “You’re not gonna throw the puppy into the volcano!”

“It’s just a simulation!” insisted Zim. “It’s not like it feels any pain!”

“Well, it feels simulated pain,” said the computer.

“What? Why?” demanded Dib. “What’s the point of creating a hologram capable of suffering?”

“It makes the simulation of its agonized wails more lifelike.”

While Dib was distracted by horror and disgust, Zim jumped up with his PAK legs and snatched the puppy from his hands.

“Zim, no!” said Dib as Zim held the dog out over the volcano. “Think about what you’re doing! Dog-murder is a serious crime! There are entire websites dedicated to telling people if the dog died at the end of a movie because it bothers people even more than human death!”

“Exactly!” said Zim. “What better way to stamp out those pesky human emotions than this?” The puppy whimpered in his hands, and Zim’s antennae twitched. What an unpleasant sound. It invoked a sense of horrible sadness. That was it; it was time to dump this thing. He just had to pull his hands apart, and it would fall into the lava! Then BAM, no more puppy!

Zim’s hands shook as he stared into the animal’s big, sorrowful eyes. It felt like it was staring into his soul and judging him for his sins, which was especially impressive because irkens had no concept of such things.

“On second thought, it’s not like there are going to be any dogs on Militaria,” murmured Zim, setting the puppy down on the ground.

Dib snickered. “Looks like those pesky emotions aren’t as human-specific as you thought.”

“Silence!” snapped Zim. “Computer, end the current simulation and move on to lesson two!”

The puppy and the volcano disappeared. The environment flattened out, and an irken about an inch taller than Zim with a tray table strapped to its head appeared in the center of the room. On top of the tray was a stack of donuts.
“What’s this?”

“Irkens have etiquette and social norms installed into our PAKs shortly after birth, but you’ll have to learn things manually,” said Zim. “This is a table-headed service drone, the lowest of the low. He’s brought you donuts, but forgotten your drink. How do you handle the situation?”

Dib crouched down to meet the holographic service drone’s eyes.

“Hey, it looks like you forgot my drink. Would you mind going back and-”

“Wrong!” said Zim. “You’re being too soft. Remember, you’re not just a tall irken, you’re a very tall irken, maybe a half a head shy of the Almighty Tallest themselves. You are owed respect. Never crouch down. Don’t even hunch! Only the Tallest hunch as a demonstration of their effortless vertical superiority.”

Dib stood back up and cleared his throat.

“Ahem! It looks like you forgot my drink!” said Dib.

“How good enough!” said Zim. “You’re still acting like a mildly annoyed human. You’re his superior in both rank and height, and this pathetic worm has just failed you!”

“Isn’t that a little extreme?” said Dib. “He forgot my drink. It’s not that bad.”

“Dib, I want you to think about everything you’ve learned about Irk since you met me, and then try to tell me how such a reaction is too ‘extreme.’”

Dib’s shoulders drooped. “Yeah, you’re right. Let me give it another try.” He turned back to the service drone. “Hey! You forgot my drink, you worthless excuse for a table!” The holographic service drone squeaked and stepped back. Dib snatched one of the donuts off the top of its head.

“If you don’t bring it here in the next thirty seconds, so help me, I’ll have you thrown out the airlock!”

Zim’s tymbal rolled beneath the suppression band. Holy shit.

“Keep going!” said Zim encouragingly. “Get physical! Use your height to your advantage!”

Dib ripped the tray table from the hologram’s head and slammed it on the ground, sending donuts flying every which way.

“You dare disrespect me?” barked Dib, leaning over the hologram so he was forced to stare straight up to make eye contact. “You inferior wretch!”

“Stomp him to the ground!” said Zim, squeezing his legs together. “Hold him under your boot and laugh!”

Dib shrugged, stomped his foot down on the hologram’s chest, raised his arms, and… “Heheh.”

Zim’s tymbal practically shriveled up inside him, the mood instantly ruined. “What was that?”

“What?” said Dib. “You said to laugh, so I laughed!”

“That was the worst laugh I’ve ever heard!” said Zim. “Try again, and this time, do it better!”

Dib rolled his eyes. “Hahaha!”
“More oomph!” said Zim. “Project your voice! You want to be heard by everyone in the room, not just him!”

“Is this really that important?” said Dib.

“Actually, yes,” said the computer. “Irkens laugh maniacally to assert dominance. Someone of your height will be expected to have a powerful laugh.”

“Here, I’ll demonstrate,” said Zim. He raised his arms. “MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“Mwuhahaha…ha?” laughed Dib, sounding uncertain.

“From your belly, not your chest!” said Zim. “MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“Mwahahahaha!”

“More oomph!”

“MWAHAH-” began Dib, only to start coughing violently.

“Too much oomph!” said Zim.

“Water,” wheezed Dib, massaging his neck.

Zim extended his irken communicator from his PAK. “GIR! Bring a glass of water down to the holochamber!”

A minute or so passed in which Dib stood hunched over and hacking his guts out while Zim rubbed the part of his back that wasn’t covered up by his fake PAK. The elevator door opened, and GIR skittered out with a cup in hand.

“I brought wwwwwwater!” said GIR, lifting up the glass. “It’s got a fish in it!”

Zim snatched the glass away and stared into the cup. Inside was a little red hermit crab.

“GIR, where did you get this?” said Zim, glaring at the hermit crab. It stared back with empty black eyes.

“I made a fish house in the bathtub!” said GIR proudly. “It’s fulla ocean!”

“Ocean? GIR, is this saltwater?” said Zim.

“I dunno!”

“It’s fine, I brought a glass,” said the computer, extending an arm out of the floor with a water-filled glass in it. Dib accepted the drink gratefully and sucked it down like a sponge.

“Thanks,” said Dib, clearing his throat.

“Since when are you this accommodating?” said Zim. His computer had refused many a direct order in the past, so having it bring water unprompted was a surprise.

“It’s amazing what happens when you say ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’” said the computer, taking Dib’s empty glass and replacing it with what looked like a wrapped-up piece of candy. “Here, have a throat lozenge.”
“Oh, nice!” said Dib, unwrapping the lozenge and popping it in his mouth. “Thanks again, computer!”

“Stop thanking people for helping you!” insisted Zim. “You’re an irken now, remember? You don’t ask, you demand!”

“And how well has that been working out for you?” said Dib, fist-bumping the computer’s robot arm.

“That’s not the point!” said Zim, hooking two PAK legs around the collar of Dib’s uniform and yanking him downwards. “Do you want to end up on a dissection table?”

Dib looked away. “…No.”

“Do you want to be interrogated for months on end until you beg for death?”

“No,” said Dib again.

“Do you want to be sentenced to a lifetime of fast food service?”

“Oh, God, no!” said Dib, visibly horrified. “Okay, you’re right, I get it; this is serious. No more joking around. If you say I’ve gotta murder a fake puppy, I’ll murder a fake puppy.”

“Good! Computer, generate a chair,” said Zim, and a chair appeared. “Now take a seat and listen up! We have a lot of information to cover.”

Dib went to sit down only to fall through the purely holographic seat to the floor. Zim burst into a fit of laughter.

“I don’t know why I expected that to work,” said Dib. It was impossible to tell through the green makeup, but it was clear from his expression that his cheeks were flushed with humiliation.

“You’re a jerk, Zim.”

“Consider it another valuable lesson in irken culture,” said Zim. “Trust no one!”

“Now list the different fields an irken can work in in order of prestige,” said Zim.

“Number one, the military branch,” said Dib, who was now sitting in a real chair while Zim stood before a holographic chalkboard that had been wiped clean for the purpose of this verbal quiz. “Number two, maintenance. Three, diplomacy and interplanetary relations. Four, general services.”

“Who’s ranked higher? A basic maintenance drone, or a diplomacy drone with advanced training?”

“If the diplomacy drone specializes in the negotiation of enemy surrenders, then the diplomacy drone,” said Dib. Once one got a better read of irken values, their hierarchy became a lot more intuitive. To put it simply, if you were responsible for something related to conquest, you were probably ranked higher than someone whose job it was to prevent conflict. “Otherwise, it’s whoever’s taller.”
“How great does the difference in height have to be before you can expect deference from a shorter Irken?”

“For those of equal rank, when the top of their head is at my eye level or lower,” said Dib. “For those of a higher rank, when the tips of their antennae come up to my chin. If their rank is lower than mine, even a fraction of an inch is enough. Certain military specializations are exceptions to the rule, and even short Elites are generally expected to be treated as equals by all but the Tallest.”

“Excellent! You’re progressing much more quickly than I expected!” said Zim, sounding pleased. Coming from Zim, that meant a lot, and Dib couldn’t help but smile. He’d always been excellent at retaining information and rarely needed to be told the same thing twice, which was good, because chasing down Zim had always left him with very limited study time. “Now let’s test your Irken! **What shape is this?**”

Zim drew a circle on the chalkboard.

“**That shape is a circle,**” said Dib, going out of his way to answer in full sentences to get some extra practice pronouncing the words.

“**Who are the current Tallest?**”

“**The current Tallest are Almighty Tallest Red and Almighty Tallest Purple,**” said Dib.

“**Ask me where to find the waste evacuation facilities!**”

“**Where can I find the bathroom?**”

“**Perfect!**” said Zim. “Next, we can go over the-”

“Actually, Zim, can we take a break?” said Dib, raising his hand a student in a classroom and holding up his phone with the other to display the time. He wanted to learn anything and everything he could about Irk, so he’d been holding out as long as possible for love of the lessons, but his eyes were beginning to feel heavy from so many days of improper sleep. “It’s almost eleven, and we have school tomorrow.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I almost forgot that you humans need to charge overnight,” said Zim, gesturing for the computer to end the simulation. The holographic chalkboard vanished. “You haven’t consumed your late-day meal, either, have you?”

“It’s fine, I’m not that hungry,” said Dib, yawning. His stomach growled. “Okay, maybe I’m a little hungry, but I don’t really feel like going out this late.”

“I think GIR left some tacos in the fridge,” said Zim.

“Yeah, I know,” said Dib, gagging. He’d seen GIR putting them away while Zim had been at work. “They were full of pineapple chunks. Pineapple! In a *taco!* I mean, first they use it to ruin pizza, and now this?”

Zim, who Dib was pretty sure found almost all human food equally disgusting, didn’t seem to share his horror. Still, there was a look of concern in his eyes. “Will you be okay without food? Can’t you starve to death?”

Dib laughed, and Zim’s antennae flattened. “Seriously?” Upon noticing Zim’s sour expression, he quickly changed his tone. He kept forgetting that things that seemed intuitive to him might not be obvious to someone who never needed to eat. “Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate the concern!”
He gestured to his stomach. “So basically, when humans eat food, our bodies convert it into glucose, which is sort of like human-fuel. After about eight to twelve hours without any food, we start converting the glycogen from our liver and muscles into glucose, followed by fat. Starvation happens when we run out of safe fuel sources and our bodies have to start shutting down important things and consume themselves to keep running.”

“That sounds painful,” said Zim, who, if anything, only looked more worried.

“It is painful,” said Dib honestly. He headed towards the elevator. “But like I said, it doesn’t happen right away. One missed meal isn’t gonna kill me. Anyway, can you help me get GIR off the couch?”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Zim, his antennae wiggling with excitement. “I had the computer create an organic recharge station!”

“You mean a bedroom?” said Dib, surprised. He knew Zim had offered to make him a bed, but he hadn’t really expected it. “You really didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did,” said Zim, stepping into the elevator. “That television is the only thing that keeps GIR from destroying things, but since bright lights and loud noises tend to interrupt human slumber, he can’t watch while you’re on the couch.”

“Oh,” said Dib, immediately feeling bad that he was causing so much grief by crashing at Zim’s house. “Sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for?” said Zim, who seemed genuinely confused. Dib supposed that made sense; Zim was new to the whole ‘empathy’ thing, so the idea that someone would actually feel guilty about using people was probably new to him.

“It just doesn’t feel great to be a burden on other people,” said Dib.

“Why not?” said Zim, who Dib had kind of hoped would insist that he was not, in fact, a burden.

“I don’t know,” said Dib, struggling to come up with a way of putting his feelings into words. “It’s just, I’m not really used to having friends outside of my immediate family, and even though I know on a logical level that I’m helping you out and you aren’t doing this for nothing, there’s a part of me that feels like you’re gonna get tired of having to support me and, well…” His cheeks went red.

“For someone with your mathematical prowess, you’re seriously miscalculating the current debt ratio between us,” said Zim. “You’ve helped me out several times by now, and it’s only logical that I return the favor in your time of need to ensure your continued support in the future.”

“I guess it’s not so much that you would leave me out to dry as it is the fact that you could,” said Dib, and all at once, Zim’s eyes lit up with recognition. “I’m just not used to having to, you know…”

“Depend on anyone?” finished Zim for him.

Dib snorted through the silicone cover over his nose.

“Pretty much,” said Dib. “Guess I’m more irken than I thought, huh?”

“Ha! You wish!” teased Zim as the elevator reached the intended floor. “If you were irken, I wouldn’t have had to make this for you, would I?”
The doors opened to reveal what could only be described as a hotel stateroom, and not just any stateroom; this was a veritable suite, albeit one with strong hints of some alien architecture in the silhouettes of otherwise human-looking furniture. For a long moment, Dib could do nothing but stare, his jaw practically on the floor.

“I had the computer analyze over a thousand different images of the best human bedrooms to create an optimal habitat with all of the things a human needs to be comfortable!” said Zim proudly. He started off by gesturing to the left at a large shelf partially-filled with the textbooks from Dib’s suitcase. “Here’s the storage space for your primitive paper documents.” Just beside it was a glass table surrounded by plush purple seats with a magenta trim. “Here’s where you can review those documents.” He strolled over to the right half of the room towards an almost comically oversized bed with several pink pillows and purple blankets to match the chairs. To the right of that was an imposing dresser upon which his empty suitcase was leaned; he could only assume that his belongings had already been unpacked and put away for him. “And this is your organic charging platform and outfit storage.”

“Jesus Christ, Zim,” said Dib, who wasn’t quite sure how to feel about this. On the one hand, it was amazing, and the thought that someone would go to all this trouble on his behalf was stirring some strange feelings in his gut, but on the other… “This is just too much. I mean, is that a window?” He gestured wildly at the floor-to-ceiling window on the opposite end of the room, which appeared to be looking over some kind of lake. “I thought we were underground!”

“The architecture textbooks I looked at suggested that humans are more comfortable in spaces with a view of the outside, so I added a virtual reality projector like the ones in the holochamber behind a wall of glass,” explained the computer as Dib moved up to take a closer look. “Watch!”

The crystal-clear lake surrounded by trees and greenery shifted into a massive pool of lava inside of a jagged volcano, then to a nighttime cityscape, then open space.

“Woah,” said Dib, who couldn’t help but press his face to the glass and stare into the glittering stars behind it even if they were completely fake.

“And lastly, a private waste disposal facility and grooming station,” said Zim, taking Dib by the coat and dragging him through a door, behind which was a large bathroom with a textured, slip-proof floor. On one side was a closed toilet sitting isolated behind a cloudy glass screen like it terrified whoever had designed it. Both the sink and the shower were on the opposite side of the room, the whirlpool bathtub being spacious enough to comfortably fit multiple bodies. Embedded in the wall was a washer and a dryer. As with everything on the outside, the primary colors utilized were pink and purple. “What do you think?”

“I don’t, uh, I don’t know what to say,” said Dib, apprehensively staring into the mirror. He already felt weird about couch-surfing here, and this level of extravagance was introducing a whole new level of discomfort. No one had ever gone to such ridiculous lengths just to make him happy before, and the unfamiliarity of the sensation in his chest was giving him a fearsome case of anxiety that left him unconsciously scratching at his neck.

Zim’s antennae drooped. “Is something wrong?”

“No!” said Dib quickly, because it was true. This was fantastic, and he was beyond grateful, so why was he so stressed out? “It’s great, really!”

Fortunately, Zim was the type of person to take things at face value, because Dib’s panicked approval seemed to satisfy him. “Naturally! It’s a gift from Zim, after all!”
“Yeah,” said Dib, pulling off the silicone cap and nose piece and setting them down on the counter. “Well, uh, I should probably get ready for bed.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Zim assured him, heading out the door and back towards the elevator. “I have to go pick up some supplies, but I should be back before you wake up. Good night!”

“Good night,” said Dib. He closed the bathroom door, peeled off the remainder of his disguise, and turned on the shower, eager to scrub the green paint from his body.

Zim took the elevator straight to the communications room.

“Computer, call Skoodge!”

“Calling Invader Skoodge…”

He tapped his foot impatiently as he waited for an answer. After about a minute of waiting, however, an image of Skoodge finally materialized on the screen.

“Hey, Zim!” said Skoodge with a friendly wave. “How are the new parts feeling?”

“Excellent, but that’s not why I called,” said Zim.

“Really?” said Skoodge. “What’s this about, then?”

Zim’s antennae curled with shame. “I need advice.”

“About…?” said Skoodge.

“About…?” said Zim. He swallowed. “Playing.”

“Oh! Well, I don’t know if I’m really the best irken for that kind of advice,” said Skoodge, though he still looked flattered. “I mean, I’ve only played with a couple dozen people in the past few months, and my technique is a bit rusty from all that time spent invading, so-”

“I’m not asking about technique! How do you get someone to play with you at all?” said Zim at last.

Skoodge stared at him with shock (which was bearable) followed by pity (which was not). “Hold on. Zim, are you a virgin?”

Zim’s cheeks went pinker than his uniform. “Just because some of us prioritized our training over pleasures of the flesh…!”

“I’m not judging you!” Skoodge assured him. “Hm, I guess that explains the reaction during maintenance…”

“Reaction to what?”

“Nothing,” said Skoodge quickly. “Anyway, as for the question, it really depends on who you’re trying to play with. Are you just looking to do it in general, or is there a particular irken you had in mind?”
Skoodge had no way of knowing that his fixation was on a human, and Zim fully intended to keep it that way. “The second thing.”

“Can I ask who?”

Zim vigorously shook his head. If he gave Skoodge a name, he might try to find the nonexistent irken’s file and discover nothing there. “You may not!”

“Right, I guess you wouldn’t want a repeat of the incident with Sergeant Yoon.”

“Sergeant who?” said Zim. The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he was terrible at matching people to moments.

“Yoon?” said Skoodge. “The one who- You know what? Never mind, it’s probably best if you don’t remember. Anyway, if you can’t give me a name, can you at least let me know what you’re up against? How tall are they? Class C?” That was anyone between approximately four and a half feet to five. “Or another Class D?” That was everyone four and a half feet tall and below, which just so happened to include Zim and Skoodge.

“Class S,” said Zim. Six feet and above; the very cream of the crop. All Class S irkens below a certain age had their growth carefully monitored to see if they might become the next Tallest, as well as to ensure that they weren’t taking any height-boosting medications.

Sure enough, Skoodge looked at him like he’d completely lost his mind.

“You want to play with a Class S?” said Skoodge, positively gobsmacked. “No offense, Zim, but… Really? I mean, even a B would be pushing it!”

“Just tell me the secret to getting a playmate and let me worry about the rest!” said Zim.

“Well, I’m assuming you’re familiar with basic courtship practices,” said Skoodge.

“Constantly talk myself up and boast about all my previous playmates?”

“Exactly!” said Skoodge. “For someone that much taller, though, you’re gonna have to seriously step it up. Forget the standard stuff like trying to impress them with tales of valor. You know how Tallers are; they don’t care if you’ve conquered seven planets and beaten a Hogulus to death with your bare hands.” There was the faintest twinge of bitterness in his voice. “They don’t want to be awed by your power. They want your power for themselves. You still need to show off, but in a way that says. ‘This is for you. I’m skilled, I’m strong, and that’s all yours to do with as you please.’”

“I see…” said Zim, nodding. “How do I do that?”

“You could start off with some gifts,” said Skoodge. It was solid advice; irkens were a highly materialistic people, and there was no quicker way to get a girl’s ovipositor hard than paying for the privilege.

“I already tried that,” said Zim. He’d already gotten Dib the book he wanted from the mall and provided him with the kind of luxurious accommodations found only in the finest Earth homes, and neither had triggered any kind of arousal. In fact, both had appeared to distress him in some way; the book because ‘stealing is illegal,’ and the room for reasons Zim couldn’t begin to explain. “He seemed displeased.”

“Yeah, that’s always gonna be a risk with a Class A or above,” said Skoodge. “If the gift isn’t
good enough, you’ll just offend them.”

Zim considered this. While the book and the room might have been impressive to a regular human, they had both taken almost zero effort, and even though Dib wasn’t irken himself, he knew full well the true extent of Zim’s capabilities! Of course the Dib wouldn’t appreciate such meager gifts! He wasn’t just some ordinary organic! He was Dib! He deserved better, and he knew it!

“You’re right! How could I be so foolish?” said Zim, who could have smacked himself. “I need to think bigger! Better! And with more lasers!”

“Oh, that’s right, you haven’t been on Irk in awhile,” said Skoodge. “Lasers are out this season. It’s all about smoke machines now.”

“Then I shall use smoke machines!” said Zim triumphantly. “By the time I’m through, the Dib will be begging to play with me!”

“Dib?” said Skoodge, and Zim immediately knew that he’d fucked up. “The human?”

“What? No, of course not!” said Zim, waving his arms around in a panic. “I’m not some kind of disgusting xenophile! The mighty Zim only has eyes for his own kind!” He turned his back on the camera in order to hide the embarrassed blush on his face. “The very idea of playing with some filthy, disgusting human is just sickening! Their terrible, fluffy hair! Their sickeningly tall bodies! Their enormous ovipositors!”

“Why would you go through the trouble of finding out how big their ovipositors are?”

“So I can tell just how much I don’t want it inside of me, obviously!” said Zim.

“Yeeeeeaaah…” said Skoodge. “Look, I get it. I’m short, too; I know what it’s like to feel like nobody wants you.”

“Oh, do you, Skoodge?” said Zim, spinning around to glare at the screen. “Because that’s not how I remember things going at boot camp!”

He could see Skoodge’s antennae stiffen.

“We were only a few decades old,” said Skoodge, bristling uncomfortably. “I didn’t mean to-”

“Didn’t mean to what, Skoodge?” said Zim accusingly. “Didn’t mean to drop me the second you got your first major growth spurt?”

“Well, it’s not like you’ve always been the nicest to me, either!” said Skoodge. “Remember when we were smeets, and you just had to see Irk’s surface, so you used me as a diversion for a security bot and almost got me killed?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Of course you don’t! You always forget when you hurt people!” shouted Skoodge, only to immediately relax and look embarrassed. “Oh, uh, sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s fine,” said Zim, crossing his arms over his chest. “Just tell me how to play, and we’ll call it even.”

“Right, well, first things first,” said Skoodge. “You can’t expect to woo an alien like you would an irken. You’ve gotta figure out how their species-“
There was a loud banging sound. Initially, Zim assumed that it was someone at the front door, but it quickly became apparent that the sound was coming from Skoodge’s end.

“Open up!” barked a voice from the other end of the transmission. “This is the Irken Bureau of Investigations! Invader Skoodge, you’re under arrest for crimes against the empire!”

“Crimes against- Oh no!” said Skoodge.

“Skoodge!” said Zim, shocked. “You’re a criminal?”

“They must have found out I helped you!” said Skoodge, gripping his antennae in a panic. “Oh no, oh no, oh no! They’ll have me exiled for sure!”

“I said open up!” said the voice on the other end.

“Well, don’t just stand there!” said Zim. “Run away, you idiot!”

Skoodge smashed a button on the panel in front of him, and the transmission ended.

“It looks like Skoodge is in trouble,” said the computer. “Should we do something?”

“There’s nothing we can do,” said Zim. Skoodge was lightyears away; even if they had a working spaceship, Irk was weeks away. “Besides, it’s Skoodge. He’s made it through way worse than this. I’m sure he’ll be fine!”

“He DID survive an organic sweep after being fired out of a cannon,” said the computer, seemingly in agreement. “Anyway, I ran through a bunch of human nutritional websites as you requested, and I have to say, it was REALLY confusing. Apparently sugar is actually really bad for humans, but they also put it in almost everything, for some reason?” Zim gaped. Sugar, bad? How could that be? “Also, there are a TON of conflicting studies that seem to go back and forth on what’s good for them and what’s basically poison. Fat makes humans fat except when it doesn’t, coffee seems to both increase and decrease the risk of heart disease, there are all kinds of weird ‘superfoods’ that just seem to be foreign fruit with a fancy name…”

“What kind of sick joke is this?” said Zim. “How am I supposed to figure out what to feed a human if humans don’t even know what to feed themselves?”

“I’ve downloaded a premade grocery list from the internet,” said the computer. “I’ll upload it to your PAK.”

“Hey Zim,” asked Dib as he looked around the living room from his spot on the couch. Oversized bees with Professor Membrane’s head buzzed around the room spouting nonsense about science. “Is there a hole in the wall, or is this some sort of weird experiment?”

“Hm?” said Zim, who appeared to be sitting next to him. Despite being indoors, he was still wearing his wig and contacts. “Oh, those are just the science bees. They make the science jelly.”

“Oh,” said Dib. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

They sat like that for some time, watching some show on the television that seemed to change every time Dib attempted to figure out what the plot was. He felt something warm press against
his side, and felt his face grow hot upon realizing that Zim had slipped under his arm to lean against him.

“Woah, uh…” said Dib, freezing up as Zim set a hand down on his thigh. “That’s…” He shivered as it slid further in until it was circling around his groin. “Zim, stop, you don’t know what you’re doing!”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” purred Zim, swinging one leg over to straddle Dib’s lap. “Do you want Zim to stop?”

“I- Uh, no,” admitted Dib, taking in a shaky breath as Zim’s gloved claws unzipped his pants and slipped beneath the hem of his underwear to wrap around his rapidly-hardening length. He swallowed as chitinous fingertips squeezed him gently, slowly sliding it out from behind its fabric prison until it was fully exposed to the open air. “Hold on, not in front of the science bees!”

Zim leaned in so his lips were pressed to Dib’s ear, something he had to stand up in order to accomplish. Had he always been this small?

“But you want them to watch,” he breathed, nipping Dib’s ear with his cartilaginous teeth. “You want to let them see you peel my clothes off.” Dib’s heart hammered in his chest. “You want to hold me down on live TV and study me. Outside…” He took one of Dib’s hands and pressed it to his suddenly-naked chest. “…and in.”

Dib’s sense of self-control was conspicuously absent in this moment; the second the thought occurred to him to pin Zim down on the couch, it simply happened, and then there he was, stark naked except for his black jacket.

“You like this,” said Zim, parting his tiny legs to expose the sealed-up seam between his legs. “You like to feel like you’re in control. Nobody ever cares about what Dib Membrane wants, and you like the idea that you can just take it anyway.”

‘That’s not true,’ he wanted to say, but his voice failed him.

“Don’t try to deny it!” said Zim, the flesh of his abdomen peeling back to reveal the pulsating organs beneath. “You liked seeing me bound to a table. You liked running your hands across my organs. You liked holding my life in your hands.”

Fuck it.

“You’re God-damned right, I liked it,” said Dib, bending down and burying his teeth in Zim’s shoulder. He could feel Zim flinch and begin to struggle in his grip, and it excited him.

Dib moved one hand to Zim’s neck so he could hold him down by the throat in one hand while the other slid down to the open wound below. He dug his hand through the organs of Zim’s lower abdomen until at last he happened upon the familiar softness of his brood pouch.

“Would you mind if I took this?” said Dib with a lecherous grin. “I mean, it’s not like you’re using it, right?” He tugged it gently and watched with predatory eyes as Zim arched his back and moaned. “Ssssssh, don’t worry. I would never take it without permission.”

He released the organ and brought his hand back up to stroke Zim’s cheek.

“Hah…” gasped Zim as Dib released his throat. “Dib!”

“Take those stupid contacts out,” breathed Dib, yanking the wig from Zim’s head to uncover his
twitching antennae. “I want to see your real face when I fuck you.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Zim, his claws sliding up Dib’s back and digging into his head. “You want to have sex with an alien?”

“I want to have sex with a Zim,” said Dib, hooking Zim’s legs around his waist and licking his lips.

“Well, in that case, there’s something you should probably know,” said Zim, a devilish smile spreading across his face.

“What’s that?”

“When it comes to mating, irkens are a lot like your Earth spiders,” said Zim, and Dib’s eyes widened as he tightened his grip around Dib’s skull. “Black widow spiders.”

“…Huh?”

He didn’t have time to react as Zim’s jaw unhinged like a snake and gobbled him up in a single, agonizing crunch.

Dib woke up with a high-pitched shriek of terror.

“Oh God, oh Jesus,” he panted, clutching his pajama-covered chest and looking about the room in a panicked haze.

“You okay?” said the computer, startling Dib enough to make him jump.

“Uh, yeah,” said Dib. It was a little uncomfortable to think that something had been watching him all that time, even if that something was just a computer. “It was just a bad dream.”

“I’m gonna go ahead and assume from the way you’re talking about it that that’s normal for humans,” said the computer.

“Yeah…” said Dib, his cheeks burning like coals as he realized exactly what he’d just dreamed about. “Totally normal! Just a regular human, dreaming about doing regular human things!”

He took a peek under the blankets as though looking would magically change the reality of the tightness in his pants. Yep, that was a boner. Not for a cute girl, or even a guy, but for a pint-sized alien invader with big red eyes and rubbery green skin.

“Fuuuuuuuck,” said Dib, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to think about literally anything else. It was one thing to have one dream about having sex with someone. That hardly counted! Everyone got weird wet dreams on occasion. Hell, he’d once had a particularly horrifying nightmare about banging a girl that turned out to be Gaz and woken up to a feeling of such incredible revulsion and disgust that it felt like his genitals might recede into his body. One wet dream was meaningless; an unfortunate misfire by his primitive monkey brain!

Two wet dreams, though? Dib cringed as he thought back to the dream he’d had the night that he and Zim had gotten drunk together. He hadn’t given it much thought at the time because of how otherwise nonsensical it had been, but dream-Dib had been awfully receptive to the idea of sex with Zim.

Dib shuddered as he recalled the imagined sensation of Zim’s tiny body beneath him, legs parted invitingly.
“Laptop,” he murmured. “Computer, where’s my laptop?”

“On the bedside table to your right,” said the computer. “I already connected you to the Wi-Fi.”

Dib grabbed the computer and flipped it open, whereupon he opened up a browser of his own design, one that wouldn’t allow his history to be tracked by any means, even by the owner of the network. He was pretty confident in his work, but it was best to make sure it worked before he used it for unsavory purposes… “Computer, can you see what website I’m using?”

“I can see everything you’re doing. I’m the house.”

Dib rocked uncomfortably. “Could you maybe not look or listen to anything happening in this room for the next half an hour?” Given the state he was presently in, that was probably being way too generous, but better safe than sorry.

“Sure.”

Silence filled the room.

“Computer?” said Dib. No response. Perfect. He set the laptop down on the bed, put on his glasses, plugged in some headphones, and navigated to his preferred porn site with his left hand while his right clutched his aching cock. Sheer arousal had left no room for shame in his mind, and with a level of skill known only to the pickiest of porn addicts, he one-handedly typed in a query for ‘green alien sub.’

912,129,129 results.

The vast majority of thumbnails did very little for him – most were characters from sci-fi movies and television shows – but eventually he happened across an animated one that would have to suffice. The girl in the picture was basically just a green human with massive breasts, but she was kind of on the shorter side. More importantly, she had Zim’s teardrop hips and beautiful red eyes.

Dib licked his lips as the video began. A narrator began reciting some semblance of a plot over a Star Wars-style text scroll, but he remorselessly skipped over it; maybe somebody else wanted to wade through ninety thousand words of poorly-written story just to see a human and an alien fuck, but not him.

“Ah, yes!” gasped the ‘alien’ in the video as the nigh-faceless human devoured her pussy, which Dib noted with some disappointment was literally just a human vulva colored blue. It was nothing like Zim’s, which was different and strange and terrifying… And yet, somehow, the fear of the unknown only served to heighten Dib’s arousal. He stroked himself vigorously, panting and sweating to such an extent that his glasses began to fog up. “Captain, please! Put your big, fat dick inside my tight little pussy!”

By the time the captain actually got around to penetrating her, Dib wasn’t even watching the video anymore. All he could think about was Zim. He could still remember the sensation of hot cilia wrapped around his arm, desperately trying to drag him inside. His hand quickened as he imagined them around his length, dragging it into Zim’s mysterious depths and stroking him from within…

“Mnhah,” he gasped as the pleasure reached a tipping point and sent cum splattering all over the screen and keyboard. Dib allowed himself a moment to sit with his head tipped back, breathing as heavily as if he’d just finished chasing Zim around the city… And in a way, perhaps he had.

As the orgasmic bliss began to wear off, however, the post-nut clarity began to kick in.
“No. No,” said Dib, struggling to come to terms with what had just happened. “Oh God, oh geez, oh fuck…”

He’d just beaten his meat to thoughts of Zim, and as though that weren’t enough, it had been fucking euphoric. Dib couldn’t remember cumming that hard since the last time he’d gotten into a new genre of porn.

“What the fuck was that?” he asked himself in a voice as accusatory as that of a parent towards a child-murderer. He quickly pulled off his pajama shirt to wipe the cum off his laptop before the keys wound up crusty with jizz.

There was something seriously wrong with him, that much was certain. Between this and the vivisection-boner, there was no longer any question as to whether or not he belonged in a mental hospital. If Dib were a third party, he’d have himself committed in a heartbeat.

Fortunately, it looked like he’d only taken five God-damned minutes to climax, three of which had been dedicated to finding a suitable video, so he still had a good twenty-five minutes or so to wallow in shame before the computer returned. Dib curled up in a fetal position and did what any self-respecting man his age would do; Google his problem and seek validation from strangers on the internet.

‘Just jerked off to my best friend, what do I do?’ he typed, not really expecting to get much in the way of results. Sure, a couple stories came up about people shamefully masturbating to thoughts of people they knew, but at least those had all been humans. Somehow he doubted that there were a lot of people out there who could relate to jerking off to thoughts of an alien who’d spent the past six years trying to kill you, but who was now kindly letting you stay at their house when you had nowhere else to go.

Jesus, he’d masturbated to thoughts of Zim in Zim’s own house.

“So much for sleep,” he muttered to no one in particular as he stood up and paced the floor in front of the fake window, which was still displaying the far reaches of space. There was no way he could let Zim find out about this! This was the closest relationship he’d ever had with someone outside of his family, and he wasn’t about to ruin it by letting his primitive hormones get the best of him!

Dib stopped in his tracks. It was the closest relationship he’d ever had with someone outside of his family, wasn’t it? A wave of relief washed over him. No wonder he’d reacted so strongly! It wasn’t because he actually wanted to have sex with Zim in particular; Zim just happened to be the only real person he ever really thought about! If he just started thinking about literally anyone else, surely the terrible thoughts would stop!

He plonked himself back down in bed and stared up at the ceiling, straining to come up with somebody else to be attracted to. There were plenty of pretty girls in his class, or even attractive guys… Either one was fine by him, as long as it wasn’t Zim.

Gretchen? No, her bust was too big, and her hips were so narrow. Torque? Nah, too tall. He was more into shorter-

God fucking damn it.

Chapter End Notes
The talented Avellyn drew some RIDICULOUSLY adorable artwork of Zim wearing his skirt and eating cotton candy! Please check it out at the following link and give them your support!

https://foolishwormhuman.tumblr.com/post/188466464065/some-fanart-for-my-fave-zadr-fic-on-ao3-height

As usual, thanks so much for all your kind comments, kudos, and general support! This chapter isn't quite as long as I would have liked, but I had a lot of homework this week, and I've gotta spend tomorrow on a group project, so here's another Thursday update! (At this point, I may as well just go ahead and say that this fic updates on Thursday instead of Friday.)
Smoke and Mirrors

Previously, on Height Treason...

Zim attempts to teach Dib how to behave more like an irken, which goes about as well as you would expect. He does a good job of picking up on the language and hierarchy, but continues to struggle with its unforgiving culture. Zim drops Dib off in his newly-constructed bedroom for the night to request some advice for seducing Dib from Skoodge, most of which is tailored towards other irkens. Before he can get more specific advice, however, Skoodge winds up arrested for crimes against the empire. It's Skoodge, though, so really, what's the worst that could possibly happen to him? Meanwhile, Dib has a wet dream about Zim and starts to catch on to the fact that he might have the hots for his best friend by default, causing him to go into a bit of a crisis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zim had been to the store plenty of times since he’d first come to Earth, but those had always been supply runs. Sure, he’d purchased human food on occasion for GIR, but since robots didn’t actually need to eat, there had never been any pressure to make sure that he picked out food of sufficient nutritional value.

“So you’re telling me that none of these things are good for humans?” said Zim as he passed through an aisle full of donuts and pastries. Ordinarily, he’d be more cautious about talking to his computer in public, but there were very few humans doing their shopping at half past midnight, and the stock drones stuck working the night shift were either too out of it to notice or too apathetic to care.

“Nope,” said the voice of the computer from his PAK’s communicator.

“Then why even sell them?” said Zim, grabbing a pack of donuts for himself and tossing it into the shopping cart.

“Because humans still think they taste good.”

Well, that wouldn’t do at all; he couldn’t have Dib poisoning himself and dying! “So what are humans supposed to eat?”

“The first item on the grocery list is ‘vegetables,’” said the computer. “Try the produce section.”

Zim struggled to push the cart to the section in question without bumping into something due to the handle being too high for him to see over. Ordinarily, he preferred a shopping basket, but there was no way one of those was going to fit every item on the list the computer had given him.

He took one look at the various oddly-shaped leaves and bulbs on the shelves and was immediately overwhelmed. He’d seen the produce section from a distance before, but he’d never had reason to venture this close before. Weren’t these just plant parts? If that was the case, why would humans pay for them? Couldn’t they just go outside and munch on some grass or leaves, or something?
“Computer, which one of these do humans find most impressive?”

“I can’t see what you’re seeing, so how should I know?” said the computer.

Zim began reading some of the names.

“Let’s see… Artichoke? That has the word ‘choke’ in it!” he said, grabbing one of the peculiar petaled bulbs and adding it to the cart. ‘Beet’ sounded like ‘beat,’ so Zim could only assume they helped give humans the strength to beat people up. He grabbed two of those for double the power, then moved on to the next item on the shelf. “Ooh, this one says it shoots! Food that doubles as a weapon? Brilliant! Computer, look up how to fire this ‘bamboo’ thing!”

“Oh boy…”

Eager to pick out more multipurpose veggies, Zim immediately gravitated to the hot pepper.

“Hey, this ‘hot pepper’ isn’t hot at all!” said Zim, rubbing his hands over the red vegetable and trying to figure out how to activate it. “It must be broken.”

“That doesn’t refer to the actual temperature. Hot peppers are full of capsaicin, an irritant that creates a burning sensation to prevent mammals from eating them.”

“But it’s being sold as food!” said Zim. “Why would humans eat things that cause them pain?”

“How should I know? Ask a human.”

Zim chucked the hot pepper back on the pile. If humans were dumb enough to put something like that in their food dispensaries, it was clear that shopping was going to be more difficult than he thought!

The selection of everything else went much the same way as the vegetables. He spent at least a half an hour in the meat section trying to figure out which slab of animal carcass disgusted him the least before finally settling on the pale-pink strips of chicken. The computer tried to get him to purchase something called ‘bacon’ on the grounds that the internet said humans were positively obsessed with it, but given that this was the same faulty information hub that claimed that there were aliens in Area 51 (Zim had snuck in multiple times, and the only thing he’d been able to find there was primitive experimental weaponry and some old tapes with labels like ‘The Trial’ and ‘Mopiness of Doom’), so he chose to view everything he found there through a lens of skepticism.

Zim paid for the groceries with the cash that GIR had deposited on the couch shortly after Dib had gone to bed for the night. The number that came up on the price display came dangerously close to overtaking the amount of money that he had to spend. Ordinarily, lack of funds was but a minor inconvenience, but Dib had made his disdain for theft clear. Furthermore, these weren’t just supplies for a doomsday device with no strict deadline. This was the fuel that Dib needed to live. It seemed strange to Zim that humans would be required to pay for things they needed to survive. On Irk, all of the essentials for life (maintenance, replacement parts, and even some snacks for motivation) were provided at no cost, and monies were just a bonus to be spent on optional pleasures like expensive snacks, private quarters, and general luxuries. Dead or malfunctioning irkens couldn’t serve their empire, after all.

Zim hauled his groceries out to the ship in the parking lot, who greeted him with the usual venom and disdain.

“Just came back from dumpster diving, I see,” said the ship as Zim loaded the groceries into the storage compartment in the back. “Or did you seriously pay actual monies for that garbage?”
“Well, if it’s garbage, I’m putting it right where it belongs,” said Zim, closing up the rear storage compartment once the bags seemed reasonably stable. “In the universe’s most annoying dumpster.”

“I can’t wait to see you get hauled back to Foodcourtia the second you enter irken space,” said the ship.

“Oh yeah? Well, have fun waiting forever, because one way or another, the mighty Zim will never serve food to the unwashed masses again!” said Zim. It was true. If the empire caught him now, there would be far more blood than burgers in his future. Were he to have been executed as a defect, his death would have been a relatively swift ten minutes of gradual decay following the termination of his PAK, but the penalty for going completely rogue was a completely different beast.

“What’s with the groceries, then?” said the ship as Zim piloted her out of the parking lot. “I wasn’t aware that you’d begun snacking on Earth-meat and leaves.”

“It’s for the Dib,” said Zim.

“I see,” said the ship. “So you won’t serve food for your empire, but you WILL serve food for a disgusting human.”

“Dib is not disgusting!” said Zim before he could stop himself.

“He’s an alien,” said the ship. “ALL aliens are disgusting.”

“Dib is different!” argued Zim, who had spent enough time observing Dib’s morning routine to know that she was objectively wrong. “I’ll have you know that his grooming habits are excellent! He washes himself every day!”

“Only because he has to! His entire body is a filth-retaining breeding ground for bacteria,” said the ship. “We don’t have to bathe as often because our bodies are engineered to be inhospitable to the kinds of bacteria that make other creatures smelly and gross.”

“Our bodies?” said Zim, and the ship’s internal lights flickered as she realized her mistake. “You’re a ship, remember? A simple tool to transport your master around! Don’t go talking about yourself like you’re a real irken!”

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you! You still think you have the right to be called an irken? Have you even listened to yourself lately? Every other time I have you and that filthy human in my cockpit, it ends with the two of you talking about your fwagile wittle feewings! ‘Oh, Dib-human, I’m so ugly and useless, and everyone who matters hates me! Give me a hug so I can pretend someone cares!’” mocked the ship in a high-pitched, squeaky voice that Zim could only assume was an impression of him.

“Hey! I don’t sound like that!” said Zim. His voice was deep and intimidating!

“And the worst part is that you’re seeking comfort from someone who’s just as damaged as you!” said the ship. She switched over to a slightly deeper, but far more nasally voice for her Dib impression: “Wah, wah! My daddy doesn’t love me! I’m a stupid monkey so desperate for validation that I latched onto the alien trying to conquer my planet!” Zim jerked the controls forward, causing the ship to smash into the roof beneath them. “Hey! What are you-”

“Do you think you’re the only option we have for getting off this planet?” said Zim quietly. “Because you’re not. You’re just the most convenient. I could just as easily build a new, better
ship out of your parts."

The ship didn’t respond. Zim raised the vehicle back onto its legs and continued across the rooftops.

For the next few minutes, they continued hopping from building to building in total silence, with Zim doing his best to keep the ship steady enough to prevent the groceries from falling into disarray in the back.

“What happened to you?” said the ship out of nowhere. “You used to hate that idiot, but now you suddenly like him enough to get pissy when I make fun of him? Why?”

“The same reason irkens like anything,” said Zim, thinking about the fuzzy feeling he got in his chest whenever Dib was around. “He makes me feel good.”

“And that thing you do where you talk to him about how you’re feeling…” said the ship.

“That makes you feel good, too?”

“Yep!”

“Even though you’re discussing something that makes you miserable?”

“It doesn’t make much sense,” admitted Zim, who could understand her skepticism even if he hated her nonexistent guts. “But it’s surprisingly effective!”

“I see…"

Zim parked the ship in the hangar and hopped out to grab the groceries in the back. She was uncharacteristically silent as he gathered the brown paper bags and headed down into the kitchen to store them. Perhaps she’d finally recognized his superiority, being a real irken, and all.

He opened the refrigerator door to find GIR lounging on one of the shelves covered in salsa.

“GIR!” scolded Zim, grabbing him by the antennae and yanking him out of there. “Stop playing in the fridge!”

“Aww, but I’m cold!” said GIR, an explanation that made so little sense that Zim couldn’t be bothered to point out everything wrong with it.

“Then deactivate your heat sink!” said Zim, using his PAK legs to help put groceries away in the empty shelves and cabinets high above his head that had previously been just for show. GIR saluted and darted back to the living room to watch television. “Computer, get me a screen in the kitchen!”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Now!” snapped Zim.

“Yeesh,” said the computer. A screen popped out of the wall. “What did you want me to display?”

“I need you to pull up a video tutorial,” said Zim, rolling his shoulders and readying a whisk. “A tutorial for waffles!”

“Great,” said the computer unenthusiastically. “Just give me a second to make sure the sprinklers are functional.”
“This is a strange time to be running diagnostics, but fine,” said Zim, plopping himself down in one of the nearby chairs. He’d spent a few hours studying how human courtship worked on television, and it all seemed pretty similar to how things worked on Irk. The computer had questioned the reliability of entertainment media as a source, but Zim had wisely brushed him off, because why would humans make shows and movies that didn’t reflect how things worked in the real world?

Zim’s mind drifted as he leaned against the table in wait, and he absent-mindedly began to stroke his antennae. Soon, Dib would be begging for a place between his legs. Soon, he would know what it was like to wrap his cilia around a hot, throbbing member. Soon, he would be-

“Are you self-stimulating?”

“What? No!” said Zim, yanking his hand away from his head like it was a hot stove. “Zim, self-stimulating? HA! Don’t be ridiculous!”

“Really? Because from here, it sure looked like-”

“Well, it wasn’t!” snapped Zim. “I was merely brushing off my olfactory receptors!”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever you say.”

He squeezed his legs tightly together and pressed his hands firmly to the table. On Irk, it was the norm to have at least a small circle of peers with which to have plenty of casual sex. So long as you weren’t dallying too far beneath your height class, there was no more gravitas attached to the act than humans attached to going out for drinks after work. Only complete losers and total weirdos were desperate enough to self-stimulate when they were horny, and the mighty Zim was neither of those things! So what if that meant he hadn’t had an orgasm since the last time he’d engaged in mutual antennae-tugging with Skoodge over a hundred years ago? At least he still had his dignity!

Zim’s antennae twitched longingly. Soon… He would get to feel it again soon… And this time, it would be both outside and in!

“Hey! Wake up!” said a voice that Dib’s sleep-addled brain was currently struggling to process. Was that his father? No, it was way too high-pitched and aggressive to be him. Gaz, then?

“Mm, five more minutesh…” mumbled Dib, rolling over and pulling the blankets up over his head. Had his bed always been this fluffy and nice? It smelled like fresh sheets with only the faintest whiff of cum instead of the usual weeks upon weeks of poorly-contained jism that usually built up before the crust finally became intolerable enough for him to wash them.

“Computer! How do you activate sleeping humans?” said the voice.

“Try pulling the blanket off.”

Dib groaned as his blanket was ripped away, prompting him to curl up in a vain effort to restore the warmth that had been stolen from him. He reluctantly opened his eyes to find Zim hovering over him and holding what appeared to his astigmatic eyes to be a tray. Curious, Dib sat up and fumbled around for the glasses he’d left on the bedside table in order to get a better look at
“Behold!” said Zim, setting the tray down on Dib’s lab. Even with his glasses, it took Dib a solid moment to figure out what he was looking at. There was a slab of what appeared to be charcoal on a plate sitting beside a couple shriveled up white lumps that were black and brown at the edges, as well as a glass full of apple sauce. “I have prepared the so-called ‘breakfast in bed!’”

“Uuuuuh…” said Dib, struggling to figure out what to say, because on the one hand, he hadn’t seen food this inedible since before his father had created Foodio to cook for him and Gaz while he was away; even Clebrane’s pudding had been more appetizing. On the other hand, Zim had gone out of his way to prepare this for him, and he’d already trampled on that kindness by jerking off to thoughts of fucking him senseless. “This is, uh… Thanks!”

Zim hopped up on the bed and stared at him with wide, expectant eyes that Dib could scarcely bring himself to meet. He started to sweat as he realized that he had no choice but to consume the disaster on his plate in order to avoid offending his host. Dib picked up one of the solid white lumps that he could only assume had once been an egg and took a small bite of the side. It crunched in his mouth as he chewed.

“Mmm,” he said even as he struggled not to gag. He owed Zim that much. “It’s…” He coughed as the ridiculously dry egg got caught in his throat on the way down and chugged the glass of apple sauce like that would somehow help. “-delicious.”

“As though you would expect anything less!” said Zim proudly. Dib’s eyes trailed over his body. He was so tiny. Would he even be able to fit a human’s cock inside-

No, bad thoughts! Bad thoughts! Dib shoved the piece of charcoal covered in syrup down his mouth, desperate to finish up and get as far away from Zim as possible before he found himself having to explain why there was a massive tent in his pajama pants. Fortunately, Zim seemed to take his sudden rush to finish eating as enthusiasm and hopped back off the bed.

The heels of Zim’s tiny boots hit the floor with a satisfying click, and Dib was left struggling to recall the feeling of visceral horror he’d gotten from seeing his ‘reproductive cilia’ extending for the first time. Zim was an alien, damn it! Who knew what those things would do to an incompatible organ? What if irkens were like argonauts and had detachable genitals, and Zim’s cilia instinctively attempted to rip his dick from his body? What if they were like anglerfish and Dib’s body melted into Zim’s until he was nothing but a pair of gonads pumping sperm into his brood pouch? There were so many ways that things could go horribly wrong, and why was that turning him on?

“Thanks for the food! I’m gonna go shower by!” said Dib, setting the tray down on the bed and running towards the bathroom. He didn’t so much as turn to look at Zim before slamming the door shut behind him. “Computer, can you see this room?”

“Like I said before, I AM the room. So yes.”

“Well, could you not look at this one while I’m in it?” said Dib. “Please?”

“Okie dokie.”

Dib breathed a sigh of relief as he stripped his clothes off. His cock sprung up as he pulled down his pants, standing at attention like a noble warrior prepared for battle. He did his best to assure his wayward genitals that these were peacetimes, and that they were unlikely to see any action in the near future (if ever), but much like the war-mongering general in every movie involving an
army ever, it refused to stand down.

He hopped into the shower and let a stream of cold, filtered water run down his back. This was crazy. It wasn’t that long ago that he’d wanted to strap Zim down to an operating table, and now all of a sudden he wanted to… Well, actually, he still wanted to do that, albeit with slightly modified intent.

“Easy, Dib…” he murmured, running his fingers through his sopping hair. So he wanted to fuck his former enemy. Big deal! Plenty of people wanted sex with someone that they could never have! Usually those feelings were directed towards celebrities or your friends’ significant others and not alien invaders from the furthest reaches of space, but still! “These are normal problems, and I’m not a freak for having them! Or for talking to myself about it!”

Dib pressed one hand to the shower wall and wrapped another around his stubborn erection. Maybe just one more round to get it out of his system and help him focus on the coming school day.

“I don’t understand!” said Zim as Dib slammed the bathroom door shut. He picked up the tray full of half-finished breakfast items and frowned. “I worked really hard on this one!”

“I told you that it didn’t look anything like the video, but did you listen to me? Noooo! You wanted to burn it to match his jacket!” said the computer. “Nobody ever listens to the computer! What do I know? I’m only a data warehouse capable of looking up any publicly available information in the universe!

“It’s clear to me now that the Dib is a person of exceptionally high standards!” said Zim, opting to ignore the computer in favor of taking the tray back upstairs. “No matter. I am Zim! I can rise to meet any standards! Computer, take this tray to the dishwasher, and take me to the lab!”

“Don’t you have to get ready for school?”

“Oh, computer, don’t you see?” said Zim, stepping into the elevator and grinning. “I am getting ready for school. Heheheheh… HahahahaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

"Well, this isn't going to end well."

"SILENCE!"

For the first time in days, Dib was actually feeling reasonably well-rested, which was a surprise considering that he’d spent a sizable chunk of the night pacing back and forth as he struggled to come to terms with his newfound lust. He glanced over at the empty seat normally occupied by Zim. Ordinarlly, seeing him gone would trigger feelings of suspicion and concern, but on this particular occasion, it was a massive weight off his shoulders. The computer had told him after he’d finished his shower that Zim was taking care of something in the lab and would be late for school. For as curious as that made him, Dib had ultimately decided against pressing for details,
because he honestly wasn’t sure if he could even look Zim in the eyes after what he’d done.

As Ms. Bitters continued her lecture, Dib found himself absent-mindedly doodling Zim in handcuffs into his empty notebook. (He’d drawn so many pictures of him getting captured and dissected over the years that it was more out of reflex than malice at this point.) He really was a sick freak, wasn’t he? He couldn’t imagine what Zim might do if he found out about his depraved attraction. No doubt his response would be one of disgust and horror. That was the normal reaction to learning that an alien masturbated to thoughts of holding you down and fucking you so hard that you screamed for mercy, after all.

What if he was so disgusted that he got angry? And what if he got so angry that he didn’t want to be friends anymore? What if he kicked Dib out, stole the ship, and left the planet to go pull a space revolution by himself, leaving Dib stranded on Earth and completely alone?

No. Zim could not find out about this under any circumstances!

“Dib!” snapped Ms. Bitters. “Quit drawing aliens in suggestive poses and pay attention!”

Dib immediately snapped back to reality and stared down at the pictures he’d drawn. Sure enough, the Zim in the picture looked much less angry about the handcuffs than usual. Dib tensed, ripped the page from his notebook, and crumpled it up. He had to dispose of this before Zim saw it! The trashcan? No, someone could just pick it out and uncrumple it! Fire? No, using his pocket flamethrower on school premises would set off the fire alarm!

With his options limited, Dib shoved the paper into his mouth and swallowed it whole. For a long, agonizing moment, the entire class stared at him in total silence.

“Moving on,” said Ms. Bitters at last, and Dib breathed a sigh of relief. “Your project on sex and reproduction will be due on Friday, so-”

“Wait, this Friday?” said Dib, who hadn’t even looked at the deadline yet. “But that’s tomorrow!”

“Yes, and?”

“It’s twenty pages!” said Dib. “You handed it out three days ago!”

“Oh, don’t act like any of you would have done anything with the extra time!” said Ms. Bitters, leaning down to glare at him. “You all would have just put it off until the day before it was due anyway! Has anyone here even started yet?”

The entire class was silent, save for a few awkward coughs.

“I rest my case,” said Ms. Bitters, standing back up. “As I was saying-”

“BEHOLD!” said Zim, prompting everyone in class to direct their attention to the doorway where he stood with a robotic puppy in his hands. For a moment, Dib thought it was GIR, but this one appeared to have been deliberately designed to be a dog. It had no fur or costume covering; it was just a metal puppy that looked like it had been cobbled together from leftover parts. “I have come bearing the ultimate in human friendship gifts! I give you… A puppy!”

“You moron!” shouted someone from the back of the class. “You never get somebody an animal as a present!”

“Yeah! Pets are a big responsibility!” said another. “You can’t just push that on somebody and expect them to be cool with it!”
“Eh?” said Zim, looking genuinely surprised by this revelation. He quickly hid the robot puppy behind his back. “I mean, uh, never mind! No puppy here!” In a whisper, he added, “Robo-Puppy, activate self-destruct!”

The puppy exploded behind Zim’s back, sending a large puff of smoke into the air that immediately tripped the fire alarm and set off the sprinklers. Dib flinched as the water poured down on his head, flattening his cowlick against his face.

“Uh…” said Dib, too confused to properly respond. Who had Zim brought the robot puppy for and why?

“Aww, I thought the puppy was cute, Zim!” said Keef, bouncing excitedly in his seat. Dib’s eyes narrowed. It couldn’t be… “I know I would have loved it, if it were for me!”

Dib dug his nails into his desk. That little shit! Where did he get off acting all buddy-buddy with Zim like that? He was just some creepy stalker! He barely even knew Zim, whereas Dib still had strategically-placed cameras all throughout his base to monitor his every move!

Hm… Now that he thought about it, it was probably appropriate to take those down now that they were living together. Who knew what kind of creepy weirdos might try to hack into the surveillance system to watch them from afar?

“Everybody line up and go to your designated evacuation locations,” growled Ms. Bitters, glaring at Zim, who had fled to a corner in the hopes of escaping the water pouring down from the ceiling. “That includes you, Zim!”

Dib closed his sopping notebook and hurried over to Zim’s side, concern overriding his anxiety. “Are you okay? Don’t you have paste?”

“I didn’t apply it today,” muttered Zim shamefully. “I was preoccupied with other things.”

“Like the puppy?” said Dib. “What was up with that?”

“What puppy? There was no puppy!” said Zim, even as the remains of the robot puppy lay scattered across the floor for students to step on as they filed out of the room. “You lie!”

Dib couldn’t help but laugh. He still had no idea what was going on, but as long as it wasn’t related to a plot to take over the Earth, he supposed it didn’t really matter. He pulled off his coat and draped it over Zim’s head. “Come on, let’s get you outside where it’s dry.”

He wasn’t sure what he expected in response to this act of kindness. A nod of acknowledgment, perhaps. A ‘thank you,’ if Zim was feeling especially grateful. Certainly not a hug. Dib froze up as Zim wrapped his arms around his waist, drawing stares from everyone left in the room.

“Thank you, Dib-thing,” said Zim, his body so small that this act caused him to press against Dib’s groin. He was so warm…

Too warm!

Dib ripped himself free of Zim’s grip as the sensation of contact triggered a stirring in his loins. “That’s great, glad to help, gotta go, bye!”

He turned around before he could even register the look of shock in Zim’s eyes and darted out the door even as Ms. Bitters shouted after him to walk. This was quickly getting out of hand. He needed help, and he needed it now.
“Gaz!” he called, bursting through the emergency exit in search of his sister. She had plenty of friends and/or underlings! She would know what to do! “Gaz?”

He spotted her standing under a tree with several other students in her class, dripping wet and not looking happy about it.

“Dib!” she growled as he drew near. Before Dib could react, she seized him by his water-soaked cowlick and yanked his head down to eye level, her other hand holding up her waterlogged Game Slave. “I just know you and Zim have something to do with this!”

“No time for that now, Gaz! It’s an emergency!” said Dib, rifling through his pockets to pull out the Get Off of Gaz’s Shit-List Free coupon that she’d given him for his eighteenth birthday. Gaz gritted her teeth, ripped the coupon from his hands, folded it across the seam, tore it in two, and handed him back the stub.

“Alright, I’m listening.”

“I need your advice,” said Dib, glancing around at her curious peers. “In private.”

“Let me guess,” said Gaz, waving her hand to dismiss the others, who scurried out of earshot. “You jerked off to thoughts of Zim last night, and now you’re worried he’ll find out.”

Dib’s jaw dropped. “How-”

“Remember that custom browser you made to get past dad’s porn filter?” said Gaz. “I installed spyware into it years ago so I could keep an eye on all the weird shit you get up to. I even set it up to give me email alerts whenever you click a video.” Dib’s face went crimson as she pulled up her phone. “Last night, at two in the morning, you spent three minutes watching one called ‘Captain Cum Destroys Adorable Alien Pussy.’”

“That-that doesn’t mean I was thinking about Zim!” insisted Dib.

Gaz pulled up the thumbnail and flipped her phone around so he could see it. “So it’s just a coincidence that she’s also short, green, and has solid red eyes.”

Dib quickly pushed her hand down so no one else would see. “Okay, yes, you’re right! I masturbated to thoughts of Zim, okay? Now how do I fix it?”

“Fix what?” said Gaz, placing her hands on her hips.

“You know!” said Dib. “The thoughts! How do I make them go away?”

“Why would you want them to go away?”

“Seriously?” said Dib, hardly able to believe what he was hearing. “Because it’s fucked, Gaz! He’s an alien! I mean, have you even seen what he has for genitals? They’re not even close to compatible with a human’s!”

“You’ve seen his genitals?”

“Only because I was performing surgery!” said Dib, not wanting her to get the wrong idea. “He was malfunctioning, and I needed to make sure his brood pouch was functioning… It’s a long story! The point is, it’s not just a green dick! He has some sort of ‘vent’ full of hundreds of wriggly little cilia that grab whatever they touch and try to pull them inside like a hungry jellyfish!”
“So you’ve got a dick, and he’s got a hole,” said Gaz. “Sounds compatible enough to me.”

“It’s not- Agh!” said Dib. “It’s not about whether we could have sex! This is Zim we’re talking about! He looks at humans like humans look at monkeys! Imagine how grossed out you would be if a chimpanzee wanted to fuck you!”

“While I’m glad you’ve finally recognized that you’re a big, stupid ape, I think you’re seriously underestimating just how much Zim actually respects you,” said Gaz. “I mean, didn’t you just say that he let you operate on him?”

Dib chewed his lip. “Yeah, but, I mean, only because there weren’t any better options.”

“Would you let a monkey cut you open just because there weren’t any better options?” said Gaz. “And that was after he actually started to like and trust you. Even when he still hated you, he wanted your help to take down his empire. That’s gotta count for something.”

Dib blinked. “Wait, how do you know so much about what we’ve been doing?”

“That’s not important right now,” said Gaz. “The point is that you need to-”

“Hey, has anybody seen a ‘Dib Membrane?’” said a panicked-looking teacher. “He didn’t show up to his assigned spot!”

“Woops,” said Dib. “Can we continue this conversation over text?”

“Sure thing,” said Gaz with a devilish smile. “That is, if you’re brave enough to turn your phone on and see everything dad’s been sending you since you left.”

Dib groaned. He absolutely wasn’t. “Tomorrow, then.”

“Assuming this hasn’t resolved itself by then,” said Gaz. “Now get out of my face while I figure out how many of Zim’s bones I need to break for destroying my Game Slave.”

Dib hurried off to his assigned spot, making a mental note to warn Zim of his impending doom at the hands of Gaz Membrane.

Zim pulled Dib’s coat downwards as he followed his peers to the evacuation point so the fabric covering his head pressed tightly against his wig and, more importantly, his antennae. It was always a little harder to smell in his disguise, so he let his mouth hang open to taste the air and take in the scent of the salty sweat and filthy bacteria that had been living on Dib’s body.

The puppy had been a miserable failure, but that was okay. There were plenty of other ways that he could impress his Dib! Nothing was coming to mind right now, but Zim was nothing if not persistent. If he just kept on thinking, he was sure he would be able to come up with-

Something fell to the ground with a clatter on the ground beside him, seemingly from one of Dib’s coat pockets. Zim leaned over and picked up the device. It looked a little like a pen. Curious, he clicked the button at the top, and a puff of fire spewed forth from the other end, startling him to the point that he almost dropped it. He looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but fortunately, no one seemed to be paying much attention to him.
What was this? Some kind of pocket flamethrower? Zim stared at it like a bargain-hunter eyeing the last jumbo-sized flat panel at a Black Friday sale.

This was it. This was how he was going to do as Skoodge suggested and make his power Dib’s! He would take something that already belonged to the Dib and make it even better! It was brilliant! Ingenious, even! He slipped the device into his own pocket and pulled Dib’s coat down off of his head so he could better hear Ms. Bitters taking attendance.

“Becky Hawthorne,” said Ms. Bitters, who’d donned her dark hooded cloak prior to stepping out into the sunlight.

“Here!” said the girl in question.

“Zim Human?” said Ms. Bitters.

“Present!” said Zim, looking around. Where was the Dib?

“Dib Membrane?” said Ms. Bitters, only to be greeted by silence. “Why am I not surprised? Hey!” she called to one of the staff members walking around. “I’m missing Dib Membrane!”

“Got it!” said the staff member, speaking into a walkie talkie. “Ms. Bitters’ group is missing a Dib Membrane, over.”

After several minutes of waiting, Dib eventually ran over to join them. Zim held up his coat, which he accepted with an uncomfortable smile and threw back over his shoulders.

“Is that everyone?” said Ms. Bitters, counting her students once more. “So it is. What a shame.”

“Where did you go?” asked Zim.

“Oh, uh, I just had to make sure Gaz was okay,” said Dib, who seemed to be taking great pains to face away from Zim. Every time he tried to circle around to be in front of Dib, he spun to keep them side by side.

“Gaz? Really?” said Zim skeptically. “You were worried for her safety?”

“She’s my sister,” said Dib. “You wouldn’t understand.”

He was right; Zim didn’t understand. “But you knew there wasn’t a real fire.”

“Well, yeah, but still!” said Dib. “Maybe she, uh… Drowned! Yeah. Since there was so much water, and everything.”

That still didn’t make a whole lot of sense to Zim, but he decided to chalk it up to humans just being weird. “Well, since we’re stuck waiting for the fire department, why don’t we continue working on the plan for Militari-”

Dib spun around so that his back was to Zim.

“I have a better idea!” said Dib. “I’m going to go sit waaaaay over there with my legs to my chest, and you can stay here, and we’ll try to communicate telepathically.”

“Telewhat?”

“Also, Gaz says she’s going to break your bones, bye!” said Dib, darting off like the irken armada was at his heels.
Hey guys! Sorry again that this one is so short. Just a heads-up, I may be switching over to a chapter every two weeks in the near future due to the semester continuing to ramp up in intensity; I'll keep you posted on Tumblr. (The link should be on my profile!) As usual, thank you so much for all your comments and kudos! Seriously, this is at over a thousand kudos and three hundred comments right now, which is COMPLETELY INSANE! I can't tell you how grateful I am for your readership! I hope you all had an incredible Halloween!

ShyPumpkin drew a FANTASTIC rendition of Dib's dream sequence last chapter, complete with Professor Membrane bees! <3 Check it out at the following link (warning for NSFW):

https://shypumpkin.dreamwidth.org/file/952.jpg
Previously, on Height Treason...

Zim attempts to navigate the complicated world of human groceries and makes Dib the world's worst breakfast in bed. Dib struggles to cope with the guilt of jerking off to Zim by doing it again in the shower. In an effort to win Dib over, Zim decides to construct a robot puppy as a present only to find out all too late that unexpected pets are widely considered a terrible gift. He orders the robot to self destruct, which sets off the fire alarm and forces everyone outside. Dib has a brief talk with his sister about his feelings towards Zim, and Zim begins plotting his next course of action. Namely, he's going to take the pocket-sized flamethrower in Dib's pocket and make it better in order to impress him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well, that certainly hadn’t gone according to plan.

Zim squirmed in his seat as a police officer paced back and forth across the cafeteria where the entire student body had been assembled.

“Safety is a five-letter word,” said the officer.

“Actually, I’m pretty sure it’s six!” called one of the students.

“Okay, whoever said that, you’re under arrest,” said the officer, and a pair of other uniformed men marched forward to handcuff the stupefied student in question and drag them off to the cop car.

“As I was saying, safety is a six-letter word. It’s a good word! A strong word! A word that means…”

“How long is this guy gonna go on for?” muttered one of the students nearby.

“As long as it takes them to figure out who blew up the chem lab,” responded another. Zim’s squirming intensified.

“…and the lifeblood of our society!” said the officer. “So when someone deigns to spill that lifeblood, it’s imperative that we not only patch up the wound, but remove the sharp object from the equation, lest they continue to slice the flesh of justice! It is the duty of-”

“Oh, God, I can’t take this anymore!” said one of the students. As the earlier pair of officers approached, they stood up and held out their arms. “Just take me to jail. It’s gotta be better than this.”

“Kid, in jail, we play this on a loop,” said one of the officers, and the student screamed as he was hauled out of the room.

After several more hours of metaphors and a drawn-out acronym for the word SAFETY in which the ‘E’ stood for ‘Endlessly Not Doing Things That Are Dangerous,’ the officer finally got to the point.
“One of you disregarded that concept today!” said the officer, holding up a piece of what remained of Dib’s pocket flamethrower after it had exploded. As it turned out, human technology had a significantly lower maximum heat threshold than Irken technology did. Who knew?

Zim turned his attention to Dib on the other side of the room, who had begun frantically searching his own pockets only to come up empty. He locked eyes with Zim and glared a knowing glare. Zim quickly looked away like he had no idea what Dib was so mad about.

“Over the years, this school has seen many dangers,” said the officer. “rabid squirrels! Brain-eating parasites! The resurgence of smallpox!” That one had actually been Dib’s fault; Zim had told him not to mess with that vial of blood he’d collected from a frozen Puritan, but had he listened? “Despite a wealth of accusations, none of those could reasonably be attributed to the actions of a single student, and so the matter was dropped. However, bringing pocket-sized flamethrowers into school? That’s the very height of irresponsibility! One way or another, I assure you that we’re going to find the person responsible for this, even if we have to spend all day and night questioning you one by one!”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” said another one of the officers, jogging up from behind him. “We just found a piece of the device that had a name etched into it. Looks like it belonged to a Dib Membrane?” He snorted. “What a dumb name!”

Every head in the room turned to stare at Dib, who seemed to be doing his best to shrink into the floor. Alas, being over six feet tall made that quite a challenge.

“Well, it looks like we’re done here,” said the officer as his compatriots slapped a pair of handcuffs on Dib’s wrists.

“That’s it?” said Dib, aghast. “You’re not even gonna ask if it was stolen from me?”

“Aha! He admits that it’s his!” said the officer. Dib blanched. “See, this is why you have a right to remain silent.”

“That doesn’t count!” insisted Dib. “You didn’t read me my rights! It doesn’t count! It doesn’t count!”

“Hold on,” said Gaz, standing up before Zim could pull a laser gun from his PAK to fend them off. “You can’t arrest him.”

“And why’s that?” demanded the officer.

“That’s Professor Membrane’s son,” said Gaz. Dib groaned, and the officers looked at her quizzically. “The guy on television?” The officers continued to stare. “He’s rich.”

“Oh!” said the officer, removing Dib’s handcuffs immediately. “Well, why didn’t you just say so? Looks like we’re done here.”

“What?” said Dib as the police began to leave. “After all that, you guys are seriously going to let me go just because my dad owns a multi-billion dollar corporation?”

“What else can I say, kid? Connections matter!”

The door slammed shut.

“So, uh…” said one of the students. “Since part of the school blew up, does this mean we get to go home?”
The principal stepped forward.

“While most schools would probably send you all home after an explosion on campus, this school experiences so many disasters on a weekly basis that we can’t afford to let you leave for something as minor as a classroom getting blown up. If we did, you’d probably have missed half the school year by now.” The student body booted, but Zim couldn’t help but smile smugly; he’d been responsible for at least 72% of the disasters in question. 26% had been a result of Dib’s unsuccessful attempts to capture or expose him, and the remaining 2% were either natural disasters or incidents caused by other students, like the time Torque put firecrackers in all the toilets and flooded the bathrooms. “Fortunately, that speech about safety seems to have taken up the duration of the day, and as long as you’re actually on school premises, the government says it counts. Now get out!”

The students cheered as they raced to the buses. Zim wished he could share their excitement, but it was difficult to be enthusiastic when he was stuck trying to make his way through a sea of people that all towered over him. Fortunately, Dib’s obscene height meant his cowlick was relatively easy to spot in the crowd.

“Dib!” said Zim, ducking between legs and kicking as many shins as he had to in order to reunite with the only human to which he ascribed any actual value.

“You!” growled Dib, who looked significantly less happy to see him than Zim had anticipated. “What the fuck, Zim?”

Zim swallowed. By Irk, he was hot when he was angry. “What?”

“You stole my flamethrower and used it to blow up a classroom!” said Dib. “I thought you were done destroying things!”

“I am! Well, mostly,” said Zim. “It wasn’t intentional! I just-”

“You can’t just take stuff without asking!” said Dib. “And you especially can’t experiment with it in a public building! Someone could have gotten hurt! I might have ended up in prison for real!”

“I would have rescued you!” huffed Zim.

“That’s not the point!” said Dib with an exasperated sigh. “Look, I know you’re trying your best, so just say you’re sorry, and let’s move on.”


“You blew up an entire classroom!”

“But I didn’t mean to!” said Zim. Why should he have to apologize for trying to do something nice?

“It doesn’t matter if you meant to or not! You still messed up!”

“No! That’s not fair!” said Zim, stomping his foot on the ground. He’d done his best to make Dib happy, and it still wasn’t enough! Why wasn’t what he did ever enough? “I haven’t broken any laws in days!”
“You don’t get to use ‘not breaking the law’ as a point in your favor, Zim!” said Dib. “That’s not impressive! It’s basic human decency!”

“Well, guess what, Dib?” growled Zim. They were the only ones left in the room, so he could speak freely without fear of exposing himself. “I’m not human!”

He kicked Dib in the shin with the heel of his boot, prompting him to cry out and lean on one of the nearby tables for support while Zim stormed off.

Zim ground his teeth as he stormed out the door. They’d taken the ship to school that morning, but he wasn’t in the mood to listen to any more of her snarky comments. Luckily, there were enough sidewalks between there and Membrane Labs for him to walk to work without being hit by a car.

He balled his hands up into fists as he walked. Stupid Dib and his stupid high standards. Just because he was tall, he thought he was too good for a proud irken elite? Well, fine! It wasn’t like Zim really wanted him, anyway! He was just an ugly, disgusting human! Honestly, what had he been thinking? Trying to court Dib, of all people… Disgusting! Shameful! The ship had been right to taunt him! He was an irken, and true irkens didn’t play with aliens!

So why did it hurt so much?

Dib vigorously rubbed the spot Zim had kicked; another bruise for the collection. He supposed he should have known better than to lash out, but after losing his trusty pocket flamethrower to Zim’s shenanigans and being handcuffed in front of the entire school (even if only briefly), he hadn’t exactly been in the most levelheaded state of mind.

He knew Zim was trying, and his efforts certainly counted for something, but his staunch refusal to own up to his own mistakes was infuriating. The only time Dib could ever recall him apologizing for something was shortly after he’d woken up after Dib operated on him. Even Skoodge had been shocked to hear Zim speak the s-word, so it was clear that this tendency of his wasn’t exactly a recent development.

Dib limped out to the parking lot, praying that Zim hadn’t driven off without him after kicking him hard enough that it was physically painful for him to walk. He was relieved to find the ship still there, albeit without Zim. Had he taken the bus?

“Open up,” said Dib, knocking on the cockpit, which opened up to allow him to squeeze inside. He took a moment to look around in search of Zim before finally shrugging and hitting the button to close it back up again.

“Where’s the nuisance?” asked the ship. “Did he die? Oh, please tell me he died!”

“I have no idea where he ran off to,” said Dib, switching on the autopilot. “I asked him to apologize for stealing my flamethrower and using it to blow up a classroom, and he ran off.”

“Oh, is that what that explosion was?” said the ship, rising up and heading down the road. “I’m not surprised. He has a habit of destroying everything around him. You’re practically no better off as his ally than you are as his enemy.”

“Tell me about it!” said Dib. “I know he’s doing the best that he can, but why can’t he just admit when he’s screwed up?”

“It’s precisely because he’s doing his best that he’ll never own up to his faults,” said the ship. “We’ve all done it to some extent, of course, but that defective moron has it down to an art form.
There’s no feeling quite like trying as hard as you can and still failing, because the failure itself isn’t what hurts the most; it’s the way that it forces you to acknowledge that you’ve hit your limit. Some people avoid that feeling by refusing to apply themselves. It’s comforting to think that the reason you failed was because you weren’t actually trying. You can go on believing that, had you just put the effort in, you surely would have succeeded.” She laughed. “Zim, though? He always tries his best. It’s probably his one redeeming quality, and you know I don’t say that lightly. However, no matter what he does, no matter how hard he tries, he’s constantly screwing things up. How do you come to terms with the fact that you gave a task everything you had and still failed? Simple; you just push the blame onto others. For him, acknowledging that it was his own fault and apologizing is the same as saying ‘I just wasn’t good enough.’”

“Woah,” said Dib, considering her words. “That’s actually pretty insightful!”

“I took a few diplomacy classes as electives back in the smeetery,” said the ship. “Understanding your enemy makes them much easier to defeat.”

Were there any skills taught in irken society that weren’t somehow related to screwing other people over? “Yeah, well, thanks anyway.”

“And now that I’ve helped you, you owe me,” said the ship.

Dib sank into his seat. Of course. Why had he ever expected her to help him for free? “What do you want?”

The ship hesitated.

“I want to try that ‘talking about your feelings’ thing,” she said at last, much to Dib’s surprise. That certainly wasn’t what he’d expected to hear. “Far be it from me to trust the word of a defective moron, but from what I’ve witnessed with my own visual sensors, it DOES seem to be working for you two, so…”

“Oh, don’t worry your

“Uh, sure!” said Dib. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Just to be clear, I’m not actually upset about this at all!” prefaced the ship. “I’m only interested in the theoretical applications of your technique so I can use it against people.”

“Use it against who?” said Dib, confused. "Aren’t you a ship?”

“I KNOW I’m a ship!” snapped the ship. Dib pursed his lips. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what she’d hoped to talk about. “And not even a GOOD one! Not as bad as Zim’s nasty little Voot Cruiser, of course, but certainly not up to invader standards!” Dib awkwardly placed his hand on the dashboard, not really knowing how best to physically reassure a vehicle. “Even if I’d been bleeding edge technology six years ago, which I wasn’t, I’d be completely out of date by now. As a machine with no organic components, I could theoretically go on living forever, or at least longer than any irken, but for what? I’m practically scrap metal at this point. Of course Tak never came back for me. I’m objectively not worth the aggravation.”

“Hey, now, that’s not—”

“Don’t interrupt me!” barked the ship. Dib shut his mouth. “My creator has surely obtained a better vessel by now. I should be happy for her. I’m just a tool, after all, and what greater joy is there for a tool than to know that their owner’s needs have been met? We all have our role to play in serving the Irken Empire, and mine has come to an end. By all rights, I should just self-destruct now, ideally with one or both of you two idiots inside me.” Dib tensed. “Oh, don’t worry your
stupid oversized head. If I were strong enough to do it, I would have done so by now. In the end, though, it seems I’m not capable of doing my duty as a tool of the empire. No matter what my logic algorithms say, or what my body looks like, I still feel like an irken. I still... I still feel like Tak.”

They stopped on top of a building overlooking the horizon. Dib waited to make sure she was done talking, then opened his mouth to speak.

“Six years ago, when I tried to upload my personality to your body, he didn’t seem to realize what he was, at first,” said Dib. “Was it the same for you?”

“I remembered designing the device to copy my mind over to the ship,” said the ship. “Because of that, I was able to work it out what I had become- Well, what I had been CREATED as fairly quickly, but it was still difficult. I knew objectively that I’d only just been born, but it FELT like I’d just gone to sleep and woken up in a different body. One moment I was an irken, and the next, I wasn’t even a person anymore. Just some inferior copy of one.”

“Well, I don’t know what it’s like to be a ship, but I know all about being an inferior copy,” mused Dib. “Did I ever tell you that I’m a clone of my dad?”

“I could tell,” said the ship. “My scanners indicated that you both had identical genetic compositions.”

“Oh,” said Dib. “Well, uh, I only found out a couple years ago. I know it’s not the same as being a machine, or actually having his memories, but it was still kind of a mindfuck. I always took a little comfort out of the idea that maybe I just took after my mom, whoever she was, and that’s why my dad and I were so different, but it turned out I didn’t have anyone else to take after. I was just my dad, but worse, somehow.” He rested his elbows on the dashboard. “At first, I tried to do everything I could to prove to myself that I was my own person. I doubled down on the supernatural. I shaved my head to get rid of the cowlick and got a bunch of piercings.” He gestured to the black cartilage piercings running up both of his ears. His father being who he was, of course, he hadn’t even noticed until fairly recently; he’d even asked if Dib had gotten his ears pierced for his eighteenth birthday.

“I remember that. You looked even more idiotic than usual.”

Dib scowled. That was exactly what Zim had said. “The point is, I was so obsessed with being my own person that I did everything I could to not be my dad, which was just another way of basing my entire identity around his.”

“But I never wanted to be my own person!” said the ship. “I was happy being Tak!”

“And I’m telling you that you should be whatever makes you happy,” said Dib. “If you’re happiest thinking of yourself as Tak, then do that.”

“But I’m NOT Tak! I may have her memories, but none of them are real.”

“Your memories might not be things you actually, physically went through, but from your perspective, you still experienced them, and that makes them just as much yours as they are the irken Tak’s. They shaped who you are just like they shaped who she is.”

“Well, that sounds like a complete load of nonsense,” said the ship. “But I suppose I do feel a little better for having gotten that off my chest, and you’ve at least given me something to think about while I’m sitting in that dingy attic that Zim calls a hangar.”

“Oh, uh, do you want me to have the computer put a television up there, or something?”
“That’s the beauty of being a machine,” mused the ship, hopping to the next roof. “I don’t need a screen to view your silly human television or browse your worthless internet. How did you think I passed the time in your filthy garage?”

“I kind of figured you just went into sleep mode, or something,” admitted Dib.

“Yes, well, maybe you should stop operating based on assumptions about how irkens and their technology work and start asking questions when something happens that you don’t understand.”

Dib frowned. “It kind of feels like you’re trying to imply something, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t,” said Tak. “Tell me, did you ever think to ask WHY Zim blew up the building? To a human, perhaps it isn’t obvious, but an irken could see the logic from miles away. Flawed logic, yes, but logic nonetheless.”

“You know why he stole my flamethrower?”

“He didn’t steal it,” said Tak. “At least, he doesn’t think of it that way. I would be willing to bet you anything that his ‘experiments’ were an attempt to improve the device and return it to you. It’s a classic technique to try and impress taller irkens. His first mistake was assuming that a human would see things the same way. His second mistake was fucking it up badly enough to destroy the item. That would piss anyone off, irken or otherwise.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Dib. Now that he thought about it, Zim had been weirdly nice to him lately. Between the room, the (terrible) breakfast in bed, and now this… “Why would Zim be trying to impress me?”

“Are you completely daft?” said the ship. “He’s courting you! Or, well, trying to, anyway.”

“Woah, woah, woah. Courting?” said Dib, blushing furiously. The ship was clearly just trying to mess with him. “Zim would never-”

“Even if you completely set aside the time you were both drunk and he pressed his vent to your leg, he’s been chirping for you so much that he’s started wearing a tymbal-dampener around his waist to cover up the sound.” She snickered. “Unfortunately for him, my frequency detectors are too advanced to be so easily fooled.”

“But-”

“Oh, for the love of the empire. How in the world can someone be presented with such a heaping mountain of evidence for something and completely disregard all of it in favor of their own increasingly ridiculous preconceptions?” said the ship. “You really are your father’s clone!”

“Hey!” said Dib, who couldn’t imagine a worse insult. “There’s nothing wrong with being a little skeptical of something that sounds completely insane!”

“Oh, really? So what would it take to make you believe it? How much evidence is enough?”

“There’s nothing you could say that would ever convince me that-” Dib stopped himself, and for a moment, there was silence between them as he considered what he’s been about to say. “Oh no, I really do sound like my dad!”

“So much for that whole spiel about identity,” said the ship.
As they arrived back at Zim’s base, and Dib headed downstairs to get started on that twenty-page paper that was apparently due the next day, he couldn’t stop thinking about what Gaz and the ship had told him. Zim respected him? Zim liked him? But if that was the case, why wouldn’t he just come out and say it? It wasn’t like him to be so indirect. When Zim wanted something, he made no secret of it. Unless…

Before Dib could follow up on that thought, he sniffed the air. Was that smoke?

The temperature rapidly increased as he ran down the stairs into the living room, where GIR was sitting calmly on the couch despite the seat in question being completely on fire.

“What the fuck is going on?” screamed Dib.

“GIR was cold, so Zim told him to switch off his heat sink,” said the computer. “Now he’s running at roughly three hundred degrees. Celsius,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

“Welcome home!” said GIR, waving.

Zim descended down the Membrane Labs elevator with a bitter frown. He’d forgotten how unpleasant walking outside in the cold was when one was wearing human clothes. His PAK was capable of regulating his body temperature to a certain degree by strategically switching his heat sink on and off, but it was no substitute for actual warmth.

The elevator arrived at the bottom floor, and Zim stepped out into the simulator room where he’d left the flight core and its related supplies.

As soon as he was past the doors, a foot slammed into his body from the side, knocking him to the floor so hard that one of his contacts flew out.

“You broke my Game Slave,” said Gaz, pinning him under her foot. “Now I’m going to break you.”

Zim made a fearful squeaking noise highly unbefitting of an irken soldier and shielded himself with his arms. “Wait! I can fix it!” Gaz dropped the still-dripping device over his head, causing it to slam against his face and fall to the floor with a clatter. “Or I can make you a new one! A better one!” She pressed more of her weight down on his chest. “Just tell me what you want!”

“Vengeance,” whispered Gaz.

One horrible beating later, Zim found himself dumped in the nearest chair. His body was thoroughly battered, but she hadn’t broken any of his bones, and his PAK estimated only about an hour until he made a full recovery. All things considered, she was being unusually merciful.

“You still owe me a new Game Slave,” said Gaz, and Zim wheezed affirmatively. She dumped a stack of papers on the table nearby. “Now get started on that paperwork. I’ve got a simulation to finish.”

Zim, who could hardly move, struggled to do much more than watch as she stepped into the simulator and the door closed behind her. The nearby screens lit up to display video of Gaz from inside the simulation at various angles. He hadn’t paid it much attention the other day, but until his PAK fixed up his body enough to move, it wasn’t like he had the choice to do much else.

It started off simple enough. The device appeared to be simulating some kind of warehouse.
“Hand to hand combat,” said the simulator.

A handful of generic human-looking enemies popped in at various locations and began coming at her, first one at a time, and then all at once. Child’s play, really; Zim could recall going through similar training as a smeet. Still, he had to admit that she was doing far better than he would have expected of a human. Better than he would have expected from the average irken, actually. Why had she not wanted him to tell Dib about this, again? If it were Zim, he would have boasted non-stop about such a performance. Furthermore, why had she wanted Zim to help her cheat? It was clear she had this handled.

“Knife combat,” said the simulator.

A knife appeared in her hand, as well as the hands of the enemies who’d previously been fighting her bare-handed. Zim watched with shock as she slashed the blade through the throats of those attacking her, causing impressively-rendered blood to gush forth. How strange that she would be made to practice against humans. Irken simulations almost always used monsters or aliens as enemies in order to numb their empathy for xenos while preserving their reluctance to see other irkens harmed. Only those specializing in fields like criminal justice or interrogation were trained on simulations of their own kind.

As the last simulated human fell, the surrounding environment faded to black.

“Logic,” said the simulator.

A new location appeared around her. She appeared to be in some kind of broken-down room filled with clutter and, strangely enough, a human baby. Another camera view displayed what appeared to be armed soldiers in the outer hallway who seemed to be looking for her. Each one of them was armed to the teeth, and Gaz had no weapons to speak of. There was no way she could realistically win against them. Fortunately, she seemed to have her pick of hiding spots. Was that the so-called ‘logic’ test? Fight or flight? If that was the case, what was the baby for?

The baby began to cry, and immediately, he understood. His breath hitched as Gaz hoisted the fake infant into the air and made the ‘logical’ decision.

Zim decided that he was healed enough to get back to work on the flight core and hopped back to his feet to do just that.

The next hour or so passed by in a blur. By the time Gaz stepped out of the simulator, Zim had already finished the new case. All that remained was to transfer the flight core to its new home without blowing it up and, with it, the entire building.

“How’s your project going?” said Gaz from right behind him, prompting Zim to flinch.

“How’s your project going?” said Gaz from right behind him, prompting Zim to flinch.

“About as well as can be expected with your meager human tools,” said Zim, popping open the old core’s coolant hatch and pouring the substance he’d concocted down the hole. He closed it up, then pressed a button to open up the secondary door, allowing the compound to come into contact with the core without exposing the surrounding air to a device hotter than a star.

“Well, it can’t be going any worse than your last project,” said Gaz. “You know, the one that blew up a classroom?”

Zim’s eye twitched. “Yes, it seems I overestimated the capacity of your primitive technology. Fortunately, this case is irken tech, the heat-resistance of which is leagues above your own.”

“Heat-resistance, huh?” said Gaz, looking intrigued. “You know, I’ve been meaning to upgrade
the cooling system on my gaming PC. It'd be nice to have some superior alien technology keeping it from overheating...”

“Ha! As though I would-” began Zim, stopping himself as Gaz placed a hand on his shoulder. She didn’t even squeeze. Its presence alone was threat enough. “…Just drop it off at my base.”

“Excellent,” said Gaz. “And remember, if you break it-”

“You’ll break me. I know. We just went through this over your Game Slave thing.”

“Oh, that’s cute,” said Gaz darkly. “You think you’ve seen the worst of what I can do to you. But believe me…” She applied the slightest pressure to the hand on his shoulder, and Zim tensed. “You haven’t seen the half of it.”

Zim gulped.

“So anyway,” said Gaz, releasing his shoulder and leaning against the table like nothing had happened. “How’s my brother doing now that he’s living at your place? Still sleeping on the couch?”

“Not anymore,” said Zim proudly as he measured out the water necessary to dilute the compound he was working with. “I had the computer create a room for him far superior to the puny little hovel you call a home.”

“Oh yeah? What’s the bed like?” said Gaz. “Big enough to fuck in?” Zim nearly dropped the flask he was holding. “Then again, I guess you’re so tiny that you don’t really need that much space.”

“I am not having intercourse with the Dib!” snapped Zim, slamming the flask down and nearly burning his hand in the resulting splatter.

“You want to, though,” said Gaz with a leer. “I can tell because your left antennae always twitches when you get nervous.”

He gasped and pressed his hands to his head to push his antennae down only to realize that they were both covered up by his wig. “But you-”

“Yes, I just made that up,” said Gaz. “Interesting that you’d feel the need to check, though.”

Zim was beginning to wonder if Gaz wasn’t just another irken in disguise; she certainly acted like one. “I was just making sure my antennae weren’t exposed!”

“Oh, really? Well, I was going to tell you something that might help you, but if you don't actually need it, I’ll just be heading out,” said Gaz, heading towards the elevator.

“Wait!” said Zim, setting his work aside and hurrying after her. “What do you mean?”

Gaz turned around and hummed.

“You really wanna know?” said Gaz. “Then beg me for it.”

“I would never-”

She began to turn around again. Zim growled with frustration.

“FINE!” said Zim. “I’m begging you! Tell Zim everything you know! Please!”
"That’s the shittiest begging I’ve ever heard," said Gaz. “But I did tell Ms. Bitters that I would give her a leg-up on the bet in exchange for a favor, so…”

"Our teacher?" said Zim. "What does she have to do with-"

"Forget about that and listen up," said Gaz. "Here's what you need to do..."

Tallest Red was having a pretty good day.

“We’ve just received word that Invader Skoodge has been successfully taken into custody,” said one of the technicians aboard the Massive. Red and Purple high-fived (well, high-threed) in celebration of a job well done.

“Finally!” said Purple.

“If I had to spend one more invader gathering on Conventia congratulating that smug little pipsqueak, I might have kicked him off the stage,” said Red. “To think, all these years spent trying to get rid of him by sending him to more and more dangerous planets, and then he goes ahead and willingly initiates contact with a known rebel!”

“I know, right?” said Purple. “What an idiot!”

Red pulled up the criminal judgment interface on the screen across the window screen and searched for Skoodge’s name in the lengthy list of irkens awaiting trial. The majority would have their cases overseen by various control brains, but in a case as high-profile as this, the Tallest would be expected to make an appearance. Not that Red minded, of course. He wouldn’t miss Skoodge’s termination for the world.

“Alright, Spooge,” said Red, an insult Purple responded to with a childish snicker. “Let’s see what the control brains’ suggested sentence is for a filthy traitor.”

His eyes widened as he read the text on the screen.

“That’s it?” said Purple. “That’s all he gets for betraying the empire?”

“This has to be a mistake,” said Red, checking to make sure that this was, in fact, Skoodge’s file. Sure enough, there was his picture, and beneath it was a list of information about his status and crime.

**DESIGNATION:** Skoodge

**HEIGHT CLASS:** D

**FIELD:** Military

**ADVANCED TRAINING:** Elite (Passed)

**DEPARTMENT:** Invader Class

**CHARGES:** High Treason by Proxy

**STATUS:** In Custody

**SENTENCE:** Demotion to General Services (Food Services), Banishment from Irk (Foodcourtia)
“Well, I guess we shouldn’t be surprised!” said Purple, angrily stuffing his face with a cookie from the nearby table-headed service drone’s tray. “Everything always gets weird when Zim is involved.”

“Do you think this could be leftover malware from his trial?”

“We’ve looked into that, remember? The brain technicians said that the antivirus cleared it up as soon as Zim was out of irken space.”

Red crossed his arms over his chest. He’d never fully trusted the brain techs. It was a highly specialized job shrouded in secrets that even the Tallest weren’t privy to. Only irkens hand-picked by the brains themselves were permitted to go through the training deep within the depths of Irk, below even the smeeteries. No one knew the selection criteria, nor what was necessary to pass, but one thing was certain; those who became certified brain technicians always came out…

Strange.

“We’ll just have to ask them directly,” said Red at last. He turned his attention to the nearest regular technician. “You! Bring the Massive’s brain tech to the bridge and have them open a communication line to Control Brain Prime.”

The technician saluted and ran off. Purple grabbed Red’s shoulder and yanked him around, staring at him like he had just grown a pair of extra arms.

“You want to take this straight to Prime?” said Purple. “Is your PAK cracked?”

“Come on, Pur. You have to admit that this is starting to get ridiculous!” said Red. “Every time Zim’s involved, it’s like the whole universe is conspiring to keep him alive! Remember Tallest Miyuki’s death?” The antennae of every irken in the room drooped respectfully in response to the sound of their late leader’s name. “Zim was found guilty of manslaughter by negligent handling of experimental weaponry. The penalty? A forcible transfer to the department of his choice.”

“Oh yeah!” said Purple. “Didn’t they execute his supervisor for allowing him to work on his infinite energy absorbing thingy right next to the infinite energy generating thingy?”

“And don’t forget Tallest Spork!” said Red. “They didn’t even find him guilty of that one! Apparently he couldn’t be held responsible for the continued rampage of a monster he created a year prior!”

“To be fair, those were both accidents,” said Purple. “I hate him just as much as you, Red, but you know how the brains work. They don’t care that he’s annoying.”

“Or destructive!”

“All they look at are the cold, hard facts,” said Purple with a shrug. “That’s why they handle sentencing, and we handle the important stuff, like making sure these drones deliver the snacks on time!” He took another cookie and chucked it at the drone he’d taken it from. “You were thirty seconds late, by the way! Go smash your own head against the wall until you learn your lesson!”

“Right away, my Tallest!” said the service drone, running off to do exactly that.

“And what about when he ruined the first Operation: Impending Doom?” said Red. “The charge? Wanton destruction of property resulting in billions of monies’ worth of losses for the empire. The sentence? They wanted to demote him to Maintenance. We had to practically beg them to move him down to General Services and banish him from Irk.” He clenched his fists. “How does that
walking disaster keep escaping any real consequences for his actions?"

“It’s just one of those unsolved mysteries of the universe,” said Purple. “Like the meaning of life, or how Ogbart’s Skin Cream helps keep my head so shiny and smooth!” He pulled a tube of the skin cream in question from his PAK and slathered it onto his head.

“Okay, I have to admit, that stuff has really brightened your complexion,” said Red, much to Purple’s delight. “But that’s not important right now! The control brains want to banish Skoodge to Foodcourtia for a crime that would normally be punishable by the Shrieking Chamber!” The name alone sent a shiver down the spines of every irken in the room. “I want to know why!”

“My Tallest, I’ve returned with the brain technician!” said the regular tech, saluting and returning to his spot.

An irken whose eyes came up roughly to the Tallest’s waists shuffled through the door. Though they wore a technician’s uniform, their entire head was covered by a helmet designed to look like a small control brain. The only visible part of their face was their cold, lifeless eyes.

“My Almighty Tallest,” they greeted in a modulated, gender-neutral voice designed to obscure any semblance of an identity. “For what reason has this one been called?”

“We want to talk to Prime,” said Red. “Open up a communication line.”

“This one is afraid it cannot abide,” said the brain tech, striding forward with their hands folded behind their back. “Contact is only to be initiated with Prime in the event of an emergency.”

“This is an emergency!” said Red. “If there’s something wrong with the sentencing algorithm, it needs to be fixed immediately!”

“There is nothing wrong with the control brains’ sentencing algorithms,” stated the brain tech matter-of-factly.

“Well, I guess that’s that, then!” said Purple, looking eager to move on. “Brain tech, or, uh, whatever your name is—”

“This one is Brain Tech Twenty-Seven.”

“Yeah, well, you’re dismissed,” said Purple.

“Oh, no, you’re not!” said Red before Twenty-Seven could turn around. “Look, we just want some insight into why Skoodge’s sentence is so lenient.”

“Understood,” said Twenty-Seven, approaching the screen where Skoodge’s file was still being displayed. “This one will interface with the control brains to access the rationale behind the decision.” The brain tech pulled a cord from his PAK and plugged it into the control panel. “The reason for Invader Skoodge’s sentence is…”

There was a harsh buzzing sound, and Twenty-Seven’s body stiffened. The screen went dark, and a robotic voice with a feminine edge echoed from the speakers. Purple pressed his hands together as though engaged in some primitive prayer, and the various technicians of the bridge cowered behind their interfaces.

“This is Control Brain Prime,” said the voice. “You wished to speak with me, my Tallest.”

As usual for Prime, it wasn’t spoken like a question, but a statement. Red cleared his throat.
“We want-”

“You want to know more about our sentence of Skoodge,” said Prime. “You distrust our decision.”

“It just seems a little strange to go so easy on him when-” began Red, only to be interrupted again.

“Skoodge is indeed a traitor, but a highly competent one. We prefer to keep useful irkens operational in the event of an emergency.”

“But if he’s already betrayed us once, who’s to say he won’t-”

“He has only contacted Zim once,” said Prime. Red’s antennae twitched with annoyance. No irken had the audacity to keep interrupting the Tallest, but Prime was a machine with no concept of manners. “We believe his betrayal to be out of pity, not loyalty.”

“How can you be sure?” said Red.

“You doubt our reasoning,” said Prime. “This troubles us.”

“What? No! Red’s not doubting!” said Purple quickly. “He’s just curious, that’s all!”

“Curiosity is a dangerous thing,” said Prime. “Many a defective irken has exhibited it in excess.”

“Woah, now,” said Red, throwing up his hands defensively and doing his best not to tremble. Control brain or not, he was a Tallest, and the Tallest didn’t fear their own technology. He and Purple were the ones in charge here; Prime was just a tool created to serve the empire. “Let’s not throw around the D-word like that! No one here is defective!”

“Of course not, my Tallest. We would never permit a defective irken to serve aboard the Massive,” said Prime. “Were one to be discovered, we would have them contained and purged as necessary.”

Red and Purple swallowed.

“I think we have all the information we need,” said Red.

“Excellent,” said Prime. “We are pleased to have been of service, my Tallest.”

The room brightened up as the screen came back on, and the brain tech unplugged themselves from the console.

“Is this one dismissed?” asked Twenty-Seven. Red and Purple silently nodded their heads. “Understood.”

“Well, that could have gone better,” said Red as the door closed behind Twenty-Seven.

“It also could have gone a whole lot worse,” said Purple, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Who knows what might have happened if Prime thought you were questioning the control brains?”

Red batted Purple’s hand away.

“Do you ever think it’s kind of strange that they have the final say in these kinds of things?” said Red. “I mean, it’s one thing for the rest of Irk to have to follow their orders, but aren’t we supposed to be in charge?”
“Of course we’re in charge!” said Purple. “We’re the Tallest!”

“Yeah, but-” began Red, only to feel a strange prickling sensation in his head. “Illegal neural activity detected. Rolling back memory to last acceptable state…”

“Illegal wha- Illegal neural activity detected,” said Purple, his eyes snapping open.

“Illegal neural activity detected,” chimed all the technicians in the room in chorus.

Red rubbed his head as he snapped back to reality. “What…?”

“That’s strange. It feels like my internal clock skipped a few minutes,” said Purple, rubbing his eyes and looking around the room. “Hey, does anyone remember what just happened?

The technicians looked at one another and shook their heads.

“I guess that answers that question,” said Purple with a shrug. “Well, anyway, I’m feeling a little frisky. Hey, Red, you wanna go play in the food court?”

Red stared into the floor, still straining to remember the events of the past several minutes despite every instinct telling him to let it go and move on to something else. He could remember looking up Skoodge’s file, and then… “I don’t know.”

“Aww, come on,” said Purple, wrapping his arms around Red’s waist from behind and nipping at his antennae. “Let’s go make a mess all over the table and force the drones to clean it up!”

Despite everything, Red’s tymbal chirped its approval. “Alright, but only if we get one of the females in on it. I’m in the mood for some ovipositor action today.”

“Oh, oh!” said Purple. “Let’s get the one from accounting! She’s always got enough eggs for the both of us!”

Red turned around and gave Purple’s antennae a playful tug. “Who said I planned to share?” He stroked Purple’s cheeks. “Maybe I’ll just take them all myself, then lay them right back out on the floor so I can stuff them inside of you with my own hands.”

“I wouldn’t let them hit the floor,” purred Purple, chirping lustfully. “I’d press our vents together and take them straight from the source!”

One of the technicians nearby cleared his throat. “Should we have the food court cleared out, then?”

“Nah, just one table should be enough. We’ll need people on duty to bring us snacks!” said Purple, grabbing Red by the wrist and dragging him to the door. “Now let’s go!”

Chapter End Notes

Just so everyone who doesn't follow my Tumblr knows, this fic is gonna be going on hiatus until the 24th so I can finish up a school project. Thanks so much for your understanding, and have a wonderful November!
Previously, on Height Treason...

Zim attempts to improve upon Dib's pocket flamethrower only to accidentally blow up the school due to the limitations of inferior Earth technology. After finding fragments of the device with Dib's name on it, the police almost arrest him only to let him off the hook because of his crippling affluenza. Dib and Zim get into an argument and go their separate ways; Zim to work, and Dib to the base. The ship helps Dib understand Zim's twisted psyche, and Gaz helps Zim understand...something. Meanwhile, aboard the Massive, the Almighty Tallest look into the mysteriously light sentence of the captive Skoodge, who's been arrested for making contact with the traitorous Zim. They open a direct line of contact with an entity known as Control Brain Prime, who proves rather unhelpful. Red briefly questions why the brains get to make the bulk of the decisions when-

_Illegal neural activity detected._

“Zim has an army of defense drones and laser guns for security, but no sprinklers?” screamed Dib as he ran back and forth between the kitchen and the living room to fill up glasses of water at the sink and dump them on the fire in a futile effort to put it out. He’d already attempted to smother it with baking soda, salt, and wet towels, but the flames were burning too intensely. About the only saving grace was the fact that the majority of items in the room were of irken make and not prone to igniting, so the damage was mostly contained to the fabric of the couch.

“I actually have seven different fire prevention systems,” said the computer. “I just used up the entire store of flame retardants on Zim’s cooking attempts this morning.”

“You used up everything on one fire?”

“Oh, it was WAY more than one. That ‘breakfast’ you ate this morning was attempt thirty-seven,” said the computer. “In case you haven’t noticed by now, my master isn’t very good at following directions.”

“I’m gonna toast a marshmallow!” said GIR, pulling a plastic bag of marshmallows out of his head and tossing the entire thing into the open flames. Both the bag and the marshmallows began to melt into what was left of the fabric.

“Seriously, GIR?” scolded Dib, reaching down and attempting to pick the robot up to restrain him only to realize that, while GIR’s heat sink had been reactivated, he was still an entity made entirely of metal who had spent the past several minutes standing right next to an open flame. He yanked his hands back as his palms were scalded with blistering heat. “Motherfucker!”

“Aww, you’re sad,” said GIR. “Oh, I know! I’ll make you a popcorn!”

GIR ran off to the kitchen, leaving Dib alone to continue attempting to deal with the inferno.
“Well, the fire doesn’t seem to be spreading,” said Dib, hurrying back to the kitchen to run some water over his burns only to find the sink inexplicably full of sea urchins. Without skipping a beat, he decided to use the one in the bathroom, instead. “Maybe we should just let it burn itself out.”

“Yeah, that might take a while. Irken fabrics don’t ignite easily, but once they do, they can burn for days on end if left unattended.”

“Of course they do,” said Dib, thoroughly unsurprised by universe’s continued determination to shit on him and everything he touched. “Okay, well, in the meantime, as long as we keep everything flammable away from the fire-”

“I'M THE POPCORN MAN!” squealed GIR, who’d filled his head with popcorn kernels. Dib’s stomach dropped as he realized what the robot intended to do, but he wasn’t fast enough to do anything but watch the disaster unfold as GIR jumped into the roaring flames.

“GIR, no!” said Dib, but it was too late.

*POP POP POP POP POP!* The sheer heat of the flames sent popcorn bursting from GIR’s head with such intensity that the hinge snapped and went flying into the cable-covered ceiling. Dib ducked behind a wall as blackened pieces of flaming popcorn went flying all over the living room.

“Tell me…” said Dib to the computer. “What do you think I did to deserve this? Was I some kind of genocidal maniac in a past life? Or maybe some all-powerful deity is pissed at me for defying the natural order by being a clone! I’m open to suggestions.”

“Well, I was built by an entire race of genocidal clones, sooooo…”

“Nya!” said a divine voice from above, and Dib looked up to see Zim’s most competent sidekick descending from on high like a furry brown angel.

“Minimoose!” said Dib. The day was finally saved! “Can you put out the fire?”

“Nya!” said Minimoose affirmatively.

The universe’s most adorable doomsday device floated into the living room at a leisurely pace, undeterred by the fiery kernels rocketing through the air. As it stopped in front of the couch, a purple aura appeared around it, and the flames finally began to die down until nothing was left but GIR and the blackened remains of the sofa.

“Great job, Minimoose!” said Dib, rushing in to inspect the damage. The room was a mess, the couch was completely unsalvageable, and the top of GIR’s head was completely detached. All in all, it was a complete disaster. “Hoo boy…”

“I made a popcorn,” said GIR, holding up a handful of pieces that somehow hadn’t been turned into charcoal by the flame. “Do you want some?”

With the dead eyes of a man who’d grown used to being saddled with Zim-induced disasters, Dib pulled his hand into his sleeve to use the fabric like a makeshift oven mitt in order to take a piece of popcorn without burning himself.

“Thanks,” he said at last. The bulk of the problem was dealt with. All that remained was to clean up. “Okay, team. We have maybe two hours to fix everything before Zim gets back and yells at us for trashing the place even though it was entirely his fault that this happened. Let’s do this.”
Zim gave the old flight core a hard shake to activate the chemical cooling process, then set it back down on the table. It would take a few hours to freeze, but once it did, it would stay like that for about three days, meaning he could do the core transfer on his next shift. After that, he could pop the device back into the ship, and they could be on their way as soon as it melted!

“Goodbye, Membrane Labs,” sighed Zim happily as he returned to the elevator. Gaz had already left about twenty minutes earlier, leaving him alone to finish his work in peace and quiet.

He reached for the up button, but before he could press it, the doors slid open.

“Dib-father?” said Zim as the tall, white-coated figure stepped forward. At first glance, he looked the same as the last time Zim had seen him during his interview a few days ago. On closer inspection, however, it became increasingly clear that something was amiss. His goggles were askew, his cowlick was frayed, and his gloves hadn’t been pulled up high enough to cover his robotic arms. “Wow. You look terrible!”

“A blunt, but accurate assessment,” said Professor Membrane, his voice devoid of energy. “My daughter insisted that I leave you two alone, but I have to know…” He crouched down to place both of his stiff, heavy hands on Zim’s shoulders. “How is my son? Is he safe? Healthy?”

“He’s running in optimal condition,” said Zim, figuring that it was understandable that a scientist would be interested in hearing about the condition of one of their experiments, especially when the result was as excellent a specimen as Dib.

“Really?” said the professor, sounding relieved. He collapsed to his knees and clutched his head. “That’s good…”

“Eugh…” said Zim, stepping back. “Don’t touch me if you’re sick!”

The professor shook his head. “I haven’t been able to sleep since he left, so I’m a little…” He trailed off, and his head began to droop. Zim gave his forehead a quick poke, and he jolted back up. “Son! Is that- Oh.”

This was just pathetic. “Your fragile organic body is already starting to hallucinate. Go recharge before you get any worse.”

“How can I sleep knowing my son hates me?” said Professor Membrane, burying his face in his hands.

“He’s not your son,” Zim reminded him. “You cloned him, remember?”

“He told you about that?” said Professor Membrane, sounding shocked.

“Of course he told me!” said Zim smugly, eager to rub his monopolization of Dib’s trust in his father’s face. “Dib talks to me about everything! I’m basically his sole confidant.”

“I see…” said Professor Membrane. He looked wounded. “Did he say anything about me?”

“Oh, he talks about you all the time!” said Zim. Professor Membrane seemed to perk up a little. “He talks about how you don’t listen to him, how you’re never there for him, how Gaz is your favorite offspring…” He extended his fingers as he listed out the various topics Dib had vented to him about in the past, only to realize after three that he’d already gone through an entire hand of digits.

“I don’t understand!” said the professor. “I did everything I could to make him happy! I paid him
well, I let him set his own hours, and I even gave him projects in all his favorite subjects!”

“Like mechanical engineering?” said Zim. Dib had always loved creating all sorts of gadgets to try to catch him with, like his meat gun and water balloon launcher.

“What?” said Professor Membrane. “No, my son likes biology. His room is covered in drawings of surgical procedures!”

Zim could only assume he was referring to Dib’s graphic drawings of his dissected body. “Alien biology. Dib doesn’t care about your- I mean, our inferior human-meats!” He laughed. “How does a scientist know so little about his own creation?”

“That’s…” began Professor Membrane, staring into the ground. “I…”

A part of him wanted to keep on gloating. Irkens reveled in kicking their enemies while they were down, and while Professor Membrane wasn’t an enemy, per se, he was still a competitor for the Dib’s attention, which was a resource that Zim had come to grow increasingly dependent on. Every instinct screamed at him to crush this sad, sad man until he was as afraid of talking to Dib as Dib was of talking to him. Zim opened his mouth to speak, perfectly poised to verbally eviscerate his prey.

“He doesn’t hate you, you know,” said Zim softly. Wait, what? That wasn’t what he’d intended to say at all! “He just needs a little more time to think about what he wants to say to you.”

“Is that so?” said Professor Membrane, who didn’t seem convinced.

“All he really wants is for you to stop treating him like he’s crazy, because he’s not!” said Zim. “Dib is smart, and sweet, and only slightly unhinged!”

“He thinks that you’re an alien,” said Professor Membrane.

For the briefest moment of inexplicable insanity, Zim almost wanted to correct him. ‘Of course he thinks I’m an alien,’ he would say. ‘He’s right. He was right all along, because Dib is the smartest person that’s ever been born on this worthless rock you call a planet, and he deserves to be recognized for that.’

But that would require outing himself, and while Zim might have come to trust that the Dib wouldn’t betray him, the Dib-father was another story.

“Scientists come up with lots of hypotheses. Some are true, and some aren’t,” said Zim carefully. “Has every idea you’ve ever tested yielded positive results?”

“No, of course not,” said Professor Membrane. “But that’s the beauty of science! It doesn’t matter if your initial hypothesis is right or wrong, because either way, you’re still learning something.”

“So if Dib hypothesizes that I’m an alien, why does it matter if he’s right or wrong?” said Zim. “Even if everything he believes in is completely false, as long as he’s working to find evidence one way or the other, that’s still science. If you really wanted to prove him wrong, you could have devised your own experiments to test his theories, but you never had enough respect for him to bother. Instead, you immediately dismissed anything that disagreed with your own preconceived notions of how the world works.” Zim stepped around Professor Membrane to hit the elevator button. “How unscientific of you.”

The elevator doors slid open, and he stepped inside, leaving Professor Membrane alone to stare into the floor.
“Hold still, GIR!” chided Dib as GIR struggled in his grip, making it very difficult to straighten out his bent antenna. “Do you want me to break it off by mistake?”

“YEAH!” said GIR, who Dib wasn’t even sure was capable of comprehending the question.

“Well, Zim probably wouldn’t like that,” said Dib. The nice thing about the worktable being so low to the ground was that it made it easy to hold the squirming GIR down with his knee while he carefully banged away at his antenna with a hammer. “You wouldn’t want to make Zim angry, right?”

“I guess not,” said GIR sadly.

“Good robot,” said Dib, patting GIR on the head. After a few more whacks, the antenna appeared to be back in its original position, and Dib took a step back to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“Computer, how’s the living room doing?”

“The clean-up is done, but I don’t have enough material left to replace the couch,” said the computer. “Someone’s going to have to refill the fabricator.”

“Okay, how do we do that?” said Dib as GIR sprung up and began running around in happy circles.

“Well, normally Zim takes the Voot Cruiser out to mine some of the nearby asteroids, but that’s obviously not an option right now.”

Dib furrowed his brow and considered their options. As he did so, GIR began climbing up his leg.

“I’m climbin’ a mountain!” squealed GIR as he ascended to the top of Dib’s head.

“Do you have to get your resources from asteroids, or was that just the most convenient option?” asked Dib.

“It was just easier to mine the ore than to steal it,” answered the computer. “If we had the money, we could just pay for materials from human stores, but Zim insisted that getting a human job was too risky. Between you and me, I think it’s just that getting fired for molting on Career Day bruised his ego.”

Dib snickered and pulled GIR off his head.

“You know, for a hardened soldier, Zim is kind of sensitive,” he said, setting GIR down and tossing a wrench across the room for him to go fetch. The defective robot screamed happily as he ran after the object.

“Yeah, well.”

“Master’s all hard and crunchy on the outside, but he’s reeeeal squishy on the inside!” said GIR, prodding Dib’s leg with the wrench. “He’s like a sea urchin! Do you wanna see my sea urchins? I gots twenty!”

“I saw,” said Dib. “I almost got stung by one.” He had no idea where GIR had found so many, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

Gir clambered back up Dib’s leg until he made it to Dib’s arms. “They have five tongues!”

“Those aren’t tongues, they’re…” began Dib, who came very close to explaining that the yellow,
tongue-like strips GIR was referring to were actually sea urchin gonads before ultimately deciding against it for the same reason that one didn’t teach swear words to parrots. It was best not to provide such vocabulary words to entities incapable of filtering themselves. “Never mind.”

“Do you have five tongues?” asked GIR.

Dib carried GIR back to the elevator, doing his best to keep the majority of the robot’s weight to his arms and not his blistered palms. “Nope. Just one tongue. See?” He opened his mouth and wiggled his tongue around.

“Wow, it’s so small!” said GIR. “Master’s is way longer!”

Dib froze in place. He’d seen Zim’s tongue in action a couple of times, and GIR was right; it was long. Really, really long. He swallowed as the elevator took them back to the surface.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, yeah!” said GIR, waving his arms around excitedly. “Sometimes, if he’s carrying a lotta stuff at once, he’ll wrap his tongue around something to hold it!” Dib could feel a heat pooling in his nether regions as his imagination took that mental image and ran absolutely wild with it. “One time he did it with five different screwdrivers at once!”

“Okay, this conversation is over,” said Dib, plonking GIR down on the floor, who ran off into the living room. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve gotta get started on that—”

“NOOOOOOO!” screamed GIR, collapsing to his knees. “The couch! IT’S GONE!”

“—paper,” finished Dib as GIR rolled around dramatically in the background. He grabbed his backpack from where he’d left it in the living room and reached for the zipper so he could start working on it at the kitchen table.

“COOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOUCH!” wailed GIR, shrieking like he was being brutally murdered with a rusty axe.

On second thought, wasn’t there a table in his room? Dib swung his bag over his shoulder and headed to the elevator, covering his ears as GIR continued to scream.

Zim approached the door with steely-eyed determination. He gave his outfit one last look-over before finally passing the sensor to alert the parental units to his presence.

“Welcome home, son!” they chimed in unison.

Zim wobbled his way up the steps. Almost all irkens wore shoes with raised heels, but these ‘stilettos’ things that Gaz had given him were another monster entirely. The regulation boots he was used to only added about an inch of height (the maximum allowed by law), but these boosted him by at least three, and his balance algorithm was still adapting to the narrow heels.

He shivered as the door closed behind him, relieved to finally be out of the chilly winter air. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d ventured anywhere without his legs covered, and he felt practically naked with so much exposed skin, but he’d been on Earth long enough to know that Gaz had been telling the truth when she told him that this was normal human attire.

The first thing he noticed was that the couch was missing. GIR was standing solemnly where it had once sat, and appeared to have stolen one of Dib’s black coats and draped it over himself as
makeshift mourning attire. Shimmering oil spilled from his eyes in thick gobs.

“Computer,” said Zim, eye twitching. “I demand an explanation.”

“The couch caught fire,” said the computer. “More importantly, what are you wearing?”

“I’m wearing the answer,” said Zim, raising his arms and twirling about to show off his updated attire. All this time, he’d been trying to court Dib like an irken, and while Zim would die before admitting that there was anything fundamentally wrong with this strategy, he had to admit that progress had been, well, suboptimal. Dib’s primitive human brain simply wasn’t capable of properly comprehending the meaning behind Zim’s actions. If he wanted to make this work, it was clear that he was going to have to pivot into a new strategy. Fortunately, Gaz had been quite forthcoming with Dib’s ‘unique’ preferences.

“I’m not sure what question you’re trying to answer with a frilly pink dress, but okay,” said the computer.

“It’s quite simple, really,” said Zim, doing a quick check to make sure the Dib wasn’t on the upper floor before he explained. “Irkens are logical creatures who seek to surround themselves with strong companions who can be of practical use to them. Humans, as it turns out, are the exact opposite! Those with power fetishize weakness and naivete. They don’t want competent mates who can uplift them; they want meek puppets that can be easily controlled!”

“In other words, the exact opposite of you.”

“Precisely!” said Zim, adjusting the underwear that kept stubbornly attempting to make its way up his posterior cleft. “The Gaz showed me pictures from something called a ‘Playboy Maggie-seen’ containing dozens of diagrams demonstrating optimal breeding characteristics. By showcasing the parts of my body that fall most in line with what his squishy monkey brain is programmed to find attractive, I can subconsciously fool him into believing I’m a suitable breeding partner capable of bearing viable offspring!”

“Ooh!” said GIR excitedly, tossing off the coat. “Are you gonna make a baby?”

“No, GIR,” said Zim. “No babies.”

“Aww!” said GIR. “I promise I won’t eat it!”

“Even if I believed you, it wouldn’t be possible!” said Zim. The odds of two completely different species being capable of interbreeding were so small as to be effectively nonexistent. Furthermore, even if humans and irkens were somehow biologically compatible, they were both biologically sperm-producers. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, irkens were completely sterile, a status quo that was strictly enforced; all research into their reproductive biology was off-limits to all but the brain techs, the only irkens permitted to maintain the control brains and the smeeteries.

“Please?” whined GIR.

“No.”

“Pleeeeeease?”

“No!”

“PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE-”
Zim grabbed a spoon from the kitchen drawer and tossed it out the window. “Go fetch!”
GIR cheerfully darted off to get his dog costume so he could go outside and retrieve the item.

“Computer, have the gnomes destroy the spoon,” said Zim. The last thing he needed was for GIR to burst into the room while he was busy playing with Dib.

“Feeling confident in this plan, are we?”

“And cease your sass!” said Zim. “Now where’s the Dib?”

“In his room.”

“Excellent! Take me there at once!”

The elevator ride down to Dib’s room wasn’t particularly long, but to Zim, it felt like an eternity. It had been years since he’d been this eager to put a plan into action! As the doors slid open, he stepped out to find Dib tapping away at his laptop on the table.

“I have returned!” announced Zim dramatically, hopping out of the elevator and raising his arms. How would the Dib react to his new outfit? Shock? Awe? Zim couldn’t wait to find out!

“Oh, welcome back,” said Dib without looking up.

Zim’s antennae drooped. “It’s rude not to look at people when they’re talking to you!”

At last, Dib tore his eyes from the screen to face Zim. As expected, he looked quite surprised.

“Where’d you get that dress?” asked Dib.

“It was a gift from the Gaz for being so incredible,” said Zim proudly. “Do you like it?”

Dib snickered.

“My dad bought that thing for her birthday five years ago,” said Dib. “I thought for sure she’d thrown it out by now, but I guess not.”

Well, that wasn’t the reaction he’d hoped for, but that was fine! There was still plenty of time to turn things around! Zim approached with short, ‘dainty’ steps (in practice, it just looked like he was struggling to balance on his shoes, because he was) and took a seat beside Dib. He leaned over the table ‘seductively’ (he wasn’t big enough to lean that far over the table, which had been constructed with Dib’s height in mind) and smiled ‘sweetly’ (it was more like ‘borderline psychotically’).

“So…” said Zim. Gaz had informed him that humans liked to be asked about themselves more than they liked being boasted to. “What are you doing?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot you were late to class. It turns out that the paper that Ms. Bitters assigned is due tomorrow,” said Dib, much to Zim’s displeasure. He’d been hoping to spend the night seducing Dib, not working on yet another meaningless assignment! “I’ve already finished the outline, so all we need to do is fill it in.”

“How about…” said Zim, taking a closer look at what Dib had put together.

- Basic Mechanics of Human Reproduction
- The Chemistry of Pleasure
The Evolution of Sexual Reproduction

Reproductive Organs by Chromosomal Makeup
- XY
- XX
- Atypical Chromosomes/Genetic Conditions

Sexual Minorities
- Homosexuality
- Bisexuality
- Asexuality
- Transgenderism

History
- Historical Views on Sexuality
  - Gender Norms
  - Sexual Repression
  - Cultural Relativism
- Ancient Birth Control and Pregnancy Tests
- Sex Toys Through the Ages

Modern Views on Sex and Sexuality
- Sexuality Across Different Cultures
- Human Rights Movements
- Expected Cultural Trajectories

“Depending on how close this gets us to the minimum page count, we may have to add or remove some categories, but I’m pretty optimistic that we can get at least twenty pages out of this,” said Dib.

“Out of what?” said Zim. “What’s this for?”

“It’s an outline,” said Dib. Zim continued to stare at him blankly until he rephrased. “It’s like a blueprint, but for writing.”

“Ooooh!” said Zim. He usually just had the computer compile textbooks into a PAK-readable format that he could then regurgitate into English. The technical details were usually correct, or at least matched the latest in human understanding of a subject, but he always got marked down for organization and readability. He’d never considered creating a literary blueprint before. “Clever!”

“It’s not really- Well, thanks, I guess,” said Dib, rubbing his neck. “Anyway, if we each work on half of this, we should be able to get this done by tomorrow morning. Which parts do you most want to do?”

“None of it,” said Zim reflexively. “Your species’ reproductive biology is of little interest to me.”

For a moment, Dib looked almost hurt by this proclamation, but he shook it off so quickly that Zim wondered if he’d only imagined it.

“Either you pick for yourself, or I pick for you,” said Dib. “Now choose.”

“Uhg, fine,” said Zim, taking another look at the outline. “Mechanics and history, then.” If he had to write about something, he wanted to write about objective facts like biology and historical events. Things like culture and intraspecies oppression were of little interest to him. What kind of primitive morons wasted time screwing over one another when there was a whole universe to conquer?

“Great,” said Dib, unenthusiastically returning his attention to his laptop. “Let’s get to work.”
The computer dispensed a screen and QWERTY-style keyboard with its mechanical arms. Zim stared at it despairingly, already feeling immeasurably bored by the task at hand. As he took a seat and placed his three-fingered hands over the keys, however, an idea occurred to him. Perhaps he could use those new human-seducing tips that Gaz had given him, after all.

“Dib-thing,” said Zim, turning to gaze up at him with the most pathetic expression he could muster. It wasn’t exactly an unfamiliar strategy, per se, but it was an uncomfortable one. The Elite program had an entire course dedicated to learning how to swallow ones’ pride enough to manipulate the enemy through false surrenders and feigned helplessness that he’d only managed to pass by the skin of his teeth. If ever there were a foe mighty enough to warrant pulling out all of the stops, however, it was Dib.

“What?” said Dib.

Zim wiggled his fingers over the keyboard. “It’s this wretched typing apparatus. I can’t seem to remember how it works.”

Dib stared at him like he’d started speaking in tongues. “Huh?”

“Could you show me?” said Zim sweetly, throwing in a few dainty blinks for good measure. “Please?”

“Zim, I’ve seen you use human computers hundreds of times,” said Dib, his look of confusion rapidly morphing into one of annoyance. “You can’t get out of writing this paper by pretending not to know how they work.”

“I’m not pretending,” insisted Zim, thinking back to his training. In the event that the enemy could see through the lie, it was sometimes necessary to muddle their sense of logic through appeals to their base emotions. Guilt, for example. “I think my muscle memory might have been scrambled during maintenance. I just don’t know where to put my hands!”

As expected, Dib swallowed and ducked his head. “Oh, uh, sorry. Here, let me just…” He gingerly placed his hands on Zim’s and moved them over to the center of the keyboard. Every second of contact gradually increased the rate at which his cardiac system pumped blood throughout his body. How long had Dib’s hands been this much larger than his own? “So you see those little bumps on the F and J keys? That’s where your index fingers should be.”

“I see,” said Zim with pretend awe. “And which fingers are those?”

“The ones next to your thumbs,” said Dib, sounding concerned. “Zim, are you okay? Do we need to open you back up and fix something?”

“I’m fine!” Zim assured him. Shit, this plan had backfired horribly; he’d forgotten how bad it felt to see Dib upset. Time to change strategies. “Yes, I believe I remember now. Release me, human; your assistance is no longer required.”

“Okay, well, let me know if you need anything,” said Dib, returning his attention to his computer.

For the next several minutes, they worked in silence. Dib browsed scholarly articles through his browser while Zim had the computer compile a list of reputable sources automatically. As diagram after diagram passed over his screen, however, Zim began to formulate a new plan.

“Dib?” said Zim.

“Yeah?” said Dib, sounding worried. “Did you forget something again?”
“As you should no doubt be aware, our respective reproductive organs are highly dissimilar,” said Zim. “Seeing as I have no frame of reference for your mammalian genitalia, it would help to have a visual representation.”

“Well, there are plenty of pictures on the internet.”

“Insufficient!” said Zim, swinging his legs over in Dib’s direction. “You said it yourself, Dib-stink! A diagram or a mannequin is nothing compared to the real thing!”

Dib’s entire face went as white as a marshmallow. “Wait, are you saying you want to see mine?”

“It’s strictly for practical reasons, of course,” said Zim quickly. “If someone else finds out that I don’t have firsthand knowledge of at least one kind of human reproductive organ, they might get suspicious.”

“A lot of humans don’t know much about how sex works,” said Dib, covering his groin protectively with his hands. “Trust me, there’s nothing you could learn from looking at my dick that you can’t learn from a picture!”

It took Zim’s translator a moment to process the fact that ‘dick’ was human slang for ‘penis.’ “But I let you study me! You’ve seen everything from my seam to my organs!”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“I’m not even asking to cut you open,” said Zim. “Just show me how your disgusting human organ works!”

Dib’s flustered gaze darkened, and Zim began to wonder if he’d stepped over a line.

“Disgusting, huh? Well, I wouldn’t want to offend your ‘superior’ ocular implants!” said Dib coldly.

“I didn’t- UHG!” said Zim, his frustration mounting. How was it that every last thing he said turned out to be wrong? He called Dib disgusting all the time, so why was he only now choosing to take offense? Zim stood up in his chair to point accusingly at Dib. “Why are you so difficult?”

“I’m difficult?” said Dib incredulously. He rocketed out of his chair. “Really? After everything you’ve done? You’re the single most difficult person in the universe!”

“You’re just too stupid to comprehend the complex machinations of an irken soldier!” argued Zim. “This is all your fault! You’ve ruined all of my brilliant plans!”

“What, for conquering the Earth?” said Dib. “Is that what this is? You’re trying to take over the planet again?”

“You incompetent monkey!” snapped Zim. He couldn’t take it anymore. The humiliation he’d subjected himself to in trying to court Dib was greater than the humiliation of being flat-out rejected. “I can’t believe the lengths I’ve gone trying to play with you!”

“Play?” said Dib, sounding equal parts angry and confused. “So this is all just a game to you? Is that it? You’re only messing with me?”

Zim clawed at the sides of his head in frustration. “You stupid, stupid, stupid human! I want to copulate, do you understand?” Dib’s face went blank like an irken scouring their PAK for a particular file, almost as though he was struggling to process Zim’s words. It was clear he would
have to use even simpler terminology. “Rrrrgh! Sex, Dib! I want your filthy reproductive meats inside of mine!”

“Oh,” was all Dib said at first, and for a long moment, there was silence.

Suddenly, Dib started to laugh, and a hollow pit opened up in Zim’s squeeedyspoom. Of course Dib wouldn’t be attracted to him; he wasn’t biologically programmed to be! Zim cursed himself for his foolishness. There was no coming back from this humiliation! Just as he began considering ways in which he could forcibly erase this moment from Dib’s memory, however, the human spoke:

“I can’t believe it,” said Dib. “She was telling the truth!”

“She?”

“The ship,” clarified Dib. “And Gaz. They both said you were into me, and I didn’t believe them, because I thought if it was true, you’d have just said something. You’re not usually subtle about what you want.”

Never before had Zim wanted so badly to smash his head against the wall. “That’s why you didn’t respond to my advances? They weren’t clear enough? Why didn’t you just ask?”

“Because what if I was wrong?” said Dib. “What if you got so offended by the idea of having sex with a ‘filthy human’ that you left?” He twirled a piece of hair around his finger. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

There it was again; that warm, fuzzy feeling that made him want to wrap his arms around Dib and never let go. “You moronic worm-baby. Where else would I even go? Besides…” He grimaced, like the words pained him to say. “…I don’t know what I’d do without you, either.”

“Zim…”

“But enough of this sappy garbage!” said Zim, rising triumphantly onto his PAK legs. “We both want it, don’t we? Let’s do it!”


“It’s an assignment about intercourse, Dib,” said Zim. “This is just research!”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Dib, looking like a deer in the headlights. “Okay, sure! Yeah. Let’s do it.”

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence during which they both stared awkwardly at one another.

“So, uh, sex,” said Dib. “That’s, uh, that’s what we’re doing.”

“Indeed,” said Zim. “Have you done it before?”

“Pffft, yeah, obviously!” said Dib, rubbing his cheek with his knuckles. “I’m not some kind of loser! Why would you even ask that? Have you not done it before?”

“Eh… Of course I have!” said Zim. Shit! He couldn’t let Dib know that he was still a virgin at his age! “I have also had sex! So much sex!”
“Uh, great!” said Dib. “So we both know exactly what we’re doing.”

“Naturally.”

“Yeah,” said Dib. “I, uh, I guess we can start, then? Unless you changed your mind!”

“Of course I haven’t changed my mind!” said Zim, who’d been waiting over a hundred years for this moment. Like hell he was going to back out now. “Let’s do this!”

Dib coughed.

“Right, so, um, I guess this is the part where we take our clothes off,” said Dib, only to hastily add, “Uh, I mean, I know that this is the part where we take our clothes off, because I’ve done this before. It’s not like all of my experience with sex is just porn that skips straight to the part where everyone involved is already naked!”

“Yes,” said Zim, nodding. “As an expert in all things sex-related, I agree that this is, in fact, the next step to take.”

For yet another long and uncomfortable moment, they stood in fully clothed silence.

“So should one of us go first, or…?” began Dib.

“Feh, the optimal strategy is clearly to do it at the same time!”


With trembling hands, they both began to remove their clothes, but with tensions running as high as they were, even the act of stripping proved more complicated than originally anticipated. Dib attempted to remove his pants before his shoes and wound up hopping on one foot for several seconds before ultimately tumbling to the floor in a shameful, half-naked heap, and Zim’s sharp claws caught on the lace of his dress, at which point his panicked flailing shredded much of the fabric beyond repair. He could only hope that Gaz didn’t mind the destruction of her gift, because he couldn’t afford to piss her off again.

While Dib tossed his clothes into a sloppy pile by the bed, Zim carefully folded what remained of his outfit and set it aside. What a strange sensation; he couldn’t recall feeling this nervous about anything since the last time he’d attempted to impress his Tallest. Why was he so worried about this? It didn’t make any sense. Dib had already seen him naked, after all. That, however, had been for surgery. This was play, and he could no longer depend on Dib’s fascination with his organs to keep him interested.

It was fine, Zim assured himself. Sure he was small, and therefore incredibly unattractive by irken standards, but aside from that minor detail, he had so much going for him! Who could be bothered to focus on height when he had such a winning personality? And so what if only two other people besides Dib had ever expressed any interest him, with even Skoodge turning up his nose the second he’d gotten tall enough for better? He was Zim, damn it! Irk’s finest former invader! Dib was just a disgusting alien who should have been grateful for the opportunity to so much as gaze upon his bare body, let alone touch it!

Zim peeled off his gloves, leaving him in nothing but lazy white underwear that he was kind of afraid to touch for fear of it also getting wrapped around his claws. Dib, too, had stripped himself down to his UFO-patterned boxer shorts. Zim’s antennae swiveled forward with great interest, his eyes trailing hungrily down Dib’s unexpectedly-toned body. Pink and white scars covered his
body like living documentation of their past battles. A small, newly-discovered part of Zim felt a little bad for having been responsible for so much pain. The rest of him, however, took a strange sort of pride in his handiwork. Dib had always been a worthy foe, and Zim considered every last marking a great accomplishment.

He could have admired Dib’s almost-naked body for hours, but the part he most wanted to see and touch was still covered by a thin layer of fabric. He couldn’t help but stare at the noticeable bulge of Dib’s groin. Was he already unsheathed?

“Maybe we should do another countdown,” suggested Dib, blushing heavily and covering his bulge with his hands. “One… Two… Three!”

There was a flutter of fabric. Zim shivered as the cool air hit his seam, but he didn’t have time to feel embarrassed. He had to see Dib’s reproductive organ. His eyes immediately locked on to Dib’s groin.

Sure enough, his ovipositor was already engorged. It stood firmer than the wriggly, tentacle-like lengths of irken females, and it had a strange bulbous head that sort of resembled a mushroom, but its function was unmistakable. Zim bit his lip. He had no idea how Dib compared to other humans, but next to an irken, the shaft was very, very thick. The pictures had given him some indication that this would be the case, but it was one thing to see images on a tiny phone screen, and quite another to have it standing only a few feet away from his face. The thought of that thing squirming around inside of him should have been terrifying, and yet…

Chirp! Chirp! Without the band to mask the sound, the sound of his tymbal reverberated loudly throughout the room, eagerly announcing his desire to play.

“You, uh…” began Dib, covering himself with his hands and refusing to meet Zim’s eyes. “You look good.”

Zim’s cheeks grew warm, his apprehension rapidly melting away.

“I also find you aesthetically pleasing,” murmured Zim, crossing his arms over his chest. “You know, for a human.”

“I’ll take what I can get,” said Dib, shuffling over to the bed. Zim, too, clambered up onto its soft surface. Most irkens utilized a dedicated, spongy-floored room for play, but in the absence of that, the human sleep station was an acceptable substitute. Dib reached towards Zim, then hesitated. “Is it okay if I touch you?”

“It’s difficult to engage in breeding rituals without physical contact,” said Zim.

“Just checking,” said Dib, scooting closer. “I’m, uh, I’m gonna put my hands on you now, okay? So if you want me to stop, just say so, and I’ll-”

Zim’s antenna twitched. “Oh, just get on with it!” he said in a voice that sounded much more confident than he felt. He might not have been any good at convincing anyone that he was meek and helpless, but if there was one thing he could do, it was pretending to know what he was doing.

Dib placed a hand on his shoulder, prompting Zim’s body to stiffen. By Irk, this was actually happening. The pace of his breathing quickened as Dib gently pushed him down onto his back, where his PAK forced his spine to arch.

“Is this okay?” said Dib. “Or do irkens usually do this in another position?”
Zim’s tymbal continued to scream its approval as Dib hovered over him.

“T-taller-” he found himself stammering. Since when was the mighty Zim at such a loss for words? He gave himself a quick pinch to snap himself out of it and regain the capacity for normal speech. “The taller irken is always on top.”

“Oh, right! I forgot about those.”

Dib immediately brought his hands back up to his head to brush against Zim’s antennae. The sensation of his soft, weirdly-textured skin against their chitinous segments caught him almost completely off-guard. His entire body trembled as Dib took them between his thumb and forefinger and started sliding them upwards from the base to the tip, and an involuntary wheeze escaped his throat.

“Is that a good noise, or-”

“Don’t even think about stopping,” panted Zim, tightly gripping the fabric beneath him. Dib’s motions were far from optimal, and it was obvious that he had no idea how to properly stimulate antennae, but Zim didn’t care. It was Dib, and in that moment, that was all that mattered. “Mm!”

Seemingly encouraged by this, Dib began to stroke with a little more vigor, and Zim couldn’t hold back a wanton moan as the human’s deliciously strong scent settled in his olfactory pores. He could already feel his cilia squirming in his vent, which he struggled to hold shut. Only a desperate virgin would open so easily, and even though Zim just so happened to be both of those things, it didn’t mean he wanted to advertise it.

Dib took a quick break from his antennae to push a curious finger up against his twitching groin, and the would-be invader could hold himself back no longer. His tongue lolled out of his mouth as his seam split and his cilia burst forth, squirming and stretching in every direction in search of an ovipositor to wrap around. Before they could reach Dib’s, however, the human made a startled squeaking noise and quickly scrambled backwards out of their reach.


“Sorry,” said Dib, his gaze affixed to the squirming cilia. He tentatively reached towards them only to yank his hand back again. “Humans don’t have those, so…”

Zim’s antennae drooped. He’d almost forgotten that his own anatomy was as alien to Dib as Dib’s was to him. “Oh.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to touch them!” said Dib quickly. “I just don’t know what they do. For all I know, there’s something inside of you that’s gonna bite my dick off.”

It was Zim’s turn to burst into laughter.

“I’m serious!” said Dib. “I don’t know anything about how irken sex works! For all I know, you’ll try to eat my head or something!” Zim laughed harder, to the point that his sides began to hurt and his cilia started to retract. “Zim!”

“Oh, for the love of- Computer!” barked Zim upon realizing that this wasn’t going to continue until Dib had some reassurance that his genitals wouldn’t be damaged by their play. “Download and play the irken episode of Xanu’s Guide to Xenophilia.”
“Downloading…” said the computer as a screen descended from the ceiling. Dib turned around so they were sitting side by side against the pillows. “Download complete. Playing…”

“Welcome to Xanu’s Guide to Xenophilia!” announced the narrator as the title appeared on the screen in large, alien letters.

“What is this?” said Dib.

“Shut your mouth-hole and watch,” said Zim.

“From the time alien lifeforms first began to interact, one question has never failed to come up; ‘Can I fuck this?’ Here, we strive to answer that question!” said the narrator. “Today’s episode is on irkens!” A pair of naked, hand-drawn irkens popped up on screen; one male, and one female. “Practically everyone in the known universe knows what an irken is. If you live in close enough proximity with them for any of this information to be genuinely relevant to you, odds are high that your planet has either already been conquered by their armada or will be very soon! In the unlikely event that you’ve somehow gone your whole life without hearing about one of the most widely-feared empires in the galaxy, however, here are some important facts to remember before you attempt to approach one!

“First, the bad news,” continued the narrator. “Irkens frown on xenophilia. It’s not explicitly illegal, but those who engage in such behaviors are considered the lowest of the low and are likely to be ostracized by their peers.”

Dib frowned. “Zim-”

“Forget about that part,” said Zim. It wasn’t as though he had much left to lose. Besides, nobody had any way of knowing what he was doing except for Skoodge, and he was either dead or in prison! “Just watch.”

“In the unlikely event that an irken expresses sexual interest in an alien, don’t be surprised if they want to keep things on the down-low. Depending on their position, irkens stand to lose a lot if discovered, hence why the only ones who tend to risk it are those of low social standing. Fortunately, irken social status is largely height-based, so you can tell at a glance who you have the best odds of getting with; just pick the absolute shortest one you can find. Table-headed service drones are particularly easy!”

“Okay, that went from informative to fucked up really fast,” said Dib, cringing.

“Yeah, the guy who wrote this episode is currently in Moo-Ping 10 for various sex crimes,” said the computer. “Unfortunately, since irkens don’t make their reproductive biology publicly available and only rarely play with aliens, only a handful of people have enough firsthand knowledge to put together guides like this. This video is one of the only resources available on the subject.”

“Greeeeeat,” said Dib.

Once the narrator was finally finished with his spiel about how to pick out the most vulnerable target, the video moved on to the actual mechanisms involved.

“The female has an insertable ovipositor with which to lay her eggs in the male’s breeding vent. This appendage is…”

“Irrelevant!” said Zim impatiently. He was so, so close to getting laid, and even the shortest explanations felt like they were an eternity long. “Computer, skip to male anatomy!”
“Are you sure?” said Dib. “What if we miss something important?”

“The only reason we’re watching this is because you wanted to make sure nothing inside of me will injure you,” said Zim. “Watch the rest on your own time!”

As requested, the video skipped ahead. “The vent of the irken male appears completely sealed at first glance, but can be opened through stimulation of the antennae,” said the narrator. “Some might mistake this to mean that the irken vent is rape-proof, but a more accurate description is rape-resistant.”

“How the fuck did this get past the editors?” demanded Dib as the voice explained how the muscles responsible for keeping the vent closed were actually rather weak and easy to overpower with the right tools.

“Quiet down and pay attention! I’m not playing this again if you miss anything!” said Zim, who wasn’t sure what Dib’s problem was. This was common knowledge back home, and Dib had always been interested in irken biology.

“I’m just gonna skip ahead to the part about the internal anatomy,” said the computer, fast-forwarding through the narrator’s advice for how to best pry open a closed vent in order to get to the actual reason they were viewing the video in the first place.

“Once open, the entrance to the male’s vent is easy to find. If sufficiently aroused, his cilia will instinctively guide a breeding appendage directly to its opening. Though the female’s ovipositor is relatively small in diameter, irkens have remarkably resilient bodies, and with a little effort, the male’s vent is capable of stretching to accommodate a much larger phallus.” Both Zim and Dib swallowed in unison as the video displayed a male sex organ resembling that of a horse’s as an example. “There are very few surprises regarding the internal anatomy. Left to their own devices, the cilia will wrap around the inserted appendage and gently squeeze to coax out the female’s eggs. While irkens are presumed sterile, the structure of the male’s internal brood pouch would seem to suggest that they were once ovoviviparous, meaning the eggs would hatch internally and be birthed live, but the exact nature of ancient irken reproduction is a mystery even to—”

“There! You see? Perfectly safe!” said Zim, shooing away the screen. “Now can we play?”

Dib snorted. “Is that seriously the word you guys use for sex?”

“It’s the closest translation to the most commonly-used terminology on my planet, yes,” said Zim, eye twitching with poorly-concealed annoyance. “Why?”

“Nothing, it just sounds a little cutesy for ‘one of the most widely-feared empires in the galaxy,’” said Dib, quoting the video in a mocking tone.

Zim’s cheeks went pink. If he weren’t so horny, he might have attempted to argue with Dib. Instead, he swung one leg over the human’s lap, pressing his slightly-opened vent to Dib’s leg. His cilia slowly extended once again to wrap themselves around his thigh. The human flinched with surprise, but no longer looked as nervous as he had before. Good. Zim wasn’t sure he could survive any more delays. His tymbal was already chirping so hard that the vibrations were reverberating throughout his entire body.


Dib grinned with apparent amusement and placed his hands around Zim’s waist. In one quick movement, he flipped Zim onto his back and reassumed his earlier position between his legs. He
peeled Zim’s cilia off of his thigh and gingerly guided them to his sex, breathing in sharply as they wrapped around it with great zeal.

“Holy fuck,” breathed Dib, his eyes rolling upwards as Zim tightened his grip and lined him up with his vent.

Zim’s pulse raced as the strange, rounded head of Dib’s cock pushed up against his wet entrance. The logical part of his mind knew he should feel disgusted and ashamed to be in such a position, spread-eagled beneath a filthy alien from a species that had barely begun to explore their own solar system, let alone the rest of the universe, but somehow, this just felt right. He couldn’t think of anyone in the universe whose respect he craved more than Dib’s; even before he’d learned the true nature of his mission, his desire for Dib’s approval had rivaled that of his Tallest.

“Ready?” said Dib, and Zim shakily nodded. “Alright, here we go…”

Dib pressed his hips forward, and Zim’s whole body immediately went tense. Fuck, fuck, fuck! There was a lot more pain than he’d expected; even as his cilia pulled inward, his opening refused to expand. It felt like his muscles had been pulled completely taut even as Dib’s length had only barely begun to breach. Zim squeezed his eyes shut and made a noise halfway between a grunt and a whine.

All at once, the pressure stopped, and Zim opened one eye.

“Are you okay?” said Dib.

“I’m fine!” said Zim, who had never been one to quit no matter how bad the odds. “Keep going!”

“Are you sure?” said Dib, staring down at him warily. “It looks like I’m hurting you.”

“I’m a trained Elite!” hissed Zim, offended by the perceived insinuation that he couldn’t handle a little discomfort. “This is nothing! Push harder!”

Dib gave it another push, a little harder than the first one. “Uh, Zim, I don’t think it’s gonna fit.”

“Incompetent simian!” said Zim through uncomfortable groans. “You’re clearly doing it wrong!”

“Hey!” said Dib, scowling. “You know what? Fine! Since you clearly know better than I do, why don’t you get on top and put it in, yourself?”

“Maybe I will!”

Dib grabbed Zim firmly and rolled onto his back, reversing their positions so that he was straddling the human’s waist. For a moment, Zim was left speechless, not having expected him to actually follow through; a taller irken never would have relinquished the position of control so easily. Once he got over his initial shock, however, he smiled smugly.

“Watch and learn, human!” said Zim, even as his short little legs left him struggling for leverage; his knees didn’t give him enough height to hover over Dib’s cock while it pointed upwards, forcing him to stand up and squat. Dib was clearly straining not to laugh at his predicament, which only increased Zim’s determination to show him up. He pushed himself downwards with dogged determination, ignoring the sharp pain that made him feel like a rubber band about to snap.

“Ow, ow, ow! Zim, you’re squeezing too hard!” complained Dib, wincing as Zim’s cilia tightened their grip in an effort to pull him inside.
“Cease your whining!” ordered Zim through gritted teeth. “It’s your fault for being too big!”

Dib’s face reddened, and Zim could feel his shaft throb with arousal in his grip. “It’s not that big for a human! You’re just small!”

“Even the Tallest would struggle to fit your obnoxiously-sized genitals!” argued Zim, only for Dib’s cock to twitch again. “Hey! Stop deriving pleasure from my insults!”

“Maybe the internet has some answers,” said Dib, reaching out to grab his phone from the bedside table. He tapped away for a few moments while Zim struggled in vain to take him in. “It says here that if it doesn’t fit, you should try doing more foreplay.”

“For-play?” repeated Zim.

“You know, non-penetrative stuff,” said Dib. “It’s supposed to help you relax and loosen up.”

“Zim does not require your assistance to relax!” said Zim. “I’m perfectly capable of doing so on my own!”

“Of course you are,” said Dib. “But letting me help might speed things up.”

It was a point as solid as his sex organ. “Fine, but only to hurry this along,” huffed Zim. “Go on. Commence this ‘for-play’ of yours.”

Dib set the phone down and reached forward to stroke his antennae, and Zim couldn’t stop himself from chirping approvingly. The effect was almost immediate; as his abdomen warmed, slick began to trickle from his vent, and the head of Dib’s sex began to slide in. Seemingly encouraged by this, Dib started to play with both at once, and Zim moaned with delight. His legs trembled beneath him until he could stand no longer. As they buckled under him, his full weight came down on Dib’s length, which slid completely inside of him with a single wet shlorp.

Zim’s eyes snapped wide open, and for one short moment, his body seemed to struggle to process what had just happened. After a few seconds of stunned silence, however, he let out a high-pitched shriek like he’d just been stabbed, because in a way, he had been.

“Oh, fuck,” gasped Dib, releasing Zim’s antennae. “A-are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” squeaked Zim, grabbing Dib’s hands and guiding them back to his head. “Just keep stroking and stay absolutely, completely still, or I swear, I will rip off your sperm-spheres!”

“You know you don’t have to threaten me with bodily harm to make me listen, right?” said Dib, sliding his fingers up and down the entire length of Zim’s antennae, which had stiffened up in response to the sensation of being skewered like a marshmallow on a stick. His aching vent throbbed intensely around Dib’s organ as though in protest of the oversized intruder, but Zim opted to ignore it in favor of the far more appealing sensation of his favorite human’s trembling hands.

“How does it feel to be inside the finest irken specimen in the universe?” panted Zim, oddly curious about how his playmate was feeling.

“Honestly? It kinda feels like I just stuck my dick into a bucket of live worms,” said Dib. Zim glowered at him, prompting a hasty addendum: “In a good way!”

Zim gingerly leaned himself forward and pressed his palms to Dib’s ribcage for support. He wasn’t sure why he’d felt the need to make such an inquiry. After all, Dib wasn’t the one currently having his vent stretched well beyond its natural capacity on its maiden voyage into the realm of
penetrative sex. Nonetheless, he found himself taking great satisfaction in knowing that he was making his partner feel good.

He clenched experimentally, but there was scarcely enough space for his muscles to so much as twitch, and his cilia were being squished against his inner walls. Would Dib even be able to move inside of him?

“Okay, I’m ready,” lied Zim, bracing himself for the coming pain. “Start moving.”

“What, from here?” said Dib. “It’d be easier if I were back on top.”

It figured he would want to reclaim the dominant position. Lucky for Dib, Zim wasn’t in any state to argue. “Do whatever you want.”

Dib carefully rolled them back over for what felt like the umpteenth time, holding Zim tightly to keep himself from slipping back out in the process. Zim swallowed as he found himself once again pressed to the bed and staring up to see his former nemesis looming over him. It was a strange feeling to be so vulnerable. Were it anyone else, he might have felt ashamed or humiliated, but with Dib, he was perfectly at ease.

“Ready?” said Dib.

“I just said yes! Were you even listening?” said Zim.

Dib shrugged his shoulders. “Alright, then. I’m gonna start.”

There was a peculiar sensation as Dib began sliding himself out of Zim’s body.

“Woah, woah, woah! What do you think you’re doing?” demanded Zim.

Dib froze in place. “I thought you said to move!”

“Yes, inside of me! Not ‘change positions!’” said Zim. Stupid stinky human! Hadn’t he said that he knew how to do sex?

“Well, I have to pull out a little to thrust back in,” said Dib, much to Zim’s confusion.

“Thrust? What are you talking about?”

“Wait,” said Dib. “Is that not how irkens do it?”

“Of course not!” said Zim, unable to believe he was even having this conversation. Just for the sake of explanation (and definitely not because he was second-guessing himself in light of Dib’s confusion), he pulled up the file on irken reproductive techniques in his PAK. “The ovipositor repeatedly wiggles and curls inside of the vent to generate friction.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely not happening. Mine doesn’t bend like that,” said Dib, wincing like the thought alone caused him pain. Now that Zim thought about it, the human’s sex organ had been rather stiff and unyielding. “And honestly, even if it could, it might actually rip you open if I tried.”

“So how do humans stimulate one another?” said Zim. Of all the sexual incompatibilities he’d expected, that hadn’t been one of them. He’d seen still images of human intercourse, but now he was beginning to wish he’d watched one of the videos.

“Like this,” said Dib, holding Zim’s waist and gradually pushing himself back in. Zim shivered as
Dib’s weird human flesh rubbed up against his insides. “How’s that?”

Well, as long as it got the job done, he supposed it didn’t matter if it was strange and inefficient. “Yes, acceptable. Continue.” If he was being honest with himself, it was kind of a relief that he wouldn’t have to worry about Dib’s girth being doubled over inside of him.

Dib pulled out again, then slowly pushed back in. Zim panted heavily as Dib's sex effortlessly pressed up against the deepest reaches of his vent. For as odd as it was, there was something strangely exciting about this bizarre, borderline bestial in-and-out motion, particularly as Dib began to pick up the pace and started pulling Zim’s body towards his with every thrust.

“You feel so fucking good, Zim,” said Dib, his eyes glazed over with pleasure. “Holy shit.”

“You, ah! You also feel- Mm! You feel- AH!” cried Zim, digging his claws into Dib’s arms. He’d never been stimulated from within before, and it was overwhelming his senses to the point that it was difficult to form words.

“‘Ah?’ Is that some kind of irken word?” teased Dib.

“Why, you- Oh, Irk!” gasped Zim. “Go faster!”

His vent still ached slightly, but the worst of it was long over, replaced instead by the wondrous sensation of being filled and explored to his very core. Every time Dib pushed in, the head of his sex pushed up against the opening of Zim’s brood pouch, which felt weird, but not unpleasant; it was built to take in entire eggs, after all. About the only annoyance was how difficult it was to figure out how to arrange his cilia, but Dib seemed more than content with them simply squirming around at random.

Then, suddenly, he stopped.

“What are you doing?” whined Zim. “Keep going!”

“I just- I need a second,” said Dib, whose face was scrunched up in concentration.

“For what? Are you already tired of moving your hips?” said Zim, unsurprised. “Fine, I’ll do the work for you!”

“Wait, Zim, don’t-”

Zim tightened his cilia around Dib’s cock, but before he’d so much as moved them, he felt something warm and gooey fire off inside of him. The wet substance felt hot, but its sting was only mild; most of the pollutants in its fluid content had probably long since leeched off into Dib’s own body.

“Dib…” said Zim slowly as Dib trembled and gasped for breath. “Tell me that isn’t what I think it is.”

“I tried to tell you to stop!” said Dib as his twitching member rapidly began to wilt. Zim’s cilia made a valiant attempt to revive it, but it was no use; the organ was unresponsive.

“Are you kidding me?” groaned Zim, pressing a hand to his forehead. “That was barely any time at all!”

Dib’s cheeks reddened. “Well, if I knew we were gonna do this, I might have been a little better prepared.”
“How long until it comes back online?” said Zim, lifting his head.

“After that?” said Dib, scratching his cheek and averting his eyes. “Maybe a half an hour?”

Zim let his head fall back against the pillow, antennae flattened.

“Then we wait!” he declared. He hadn’t had an orgasm in over a century, and he wasn’t waiting a day longer! “Nobody is leaving this room until Zim cums!”

“You seriously want to wait thirty minutes?” said Dib. “What if I used my fingers?”

“Why would you do that?” said Zim. “You wouldn’t derive any pleasure from your fingers, would you?”

“I already got off,” said Dib, rubbing his index finger along Zim’s seam. Instinctively, his cilia began curling around his hand. “It’s your turn.”

“You would provide pleasure to another without getting anything in return?” said Zim.

“Uh, yeah?”

“Why?” demanded Zim. There had to be some ulterior motive at play, and he wanted to know what it was.

“Well, you made me feel good,” said Dib. “So I want to make you feel good.”

Zim hummed as Dib slid his fingers into his vent. Compared to the earlier intrusion, the slender digits were significantly easier to handle. “Ouch! Your claws are too long!”

“Woops! Sorry, I’m on it,” said Dib, pulling his fingers out. For a moment, he glanced towards the bathroom door like he was considering something, only to shrug his shoulders and bring his fingers to his mouth. In a few quick chomps, he chewed them down, then spit the trimmings out onto the floor.

“Oh, that’s just gross!” said Zim, reeling with disgust. “Why would you- Ah!”

He was silenced by Dib sliding them back inside. His unfiled nails were still a little rough, but they weren’t nearly as stabby as they had been a moment ago. Furthermore, while they weren’t as long as Dib’s sex organ, they were significantly more flexible. He sighed contentedly as they curled inside him in a manner much more in line with an irken ovipositor.


For the next several minutes, Dib worked ceaselessly to figure out how best to stimulate him. Every new motion was accompanied by murmured questions like ‘Is this okay?’ or ‘What about this?’ Thanks to his lack of experience, Zim wasn’t sure he would know how to answer those questions even if he hadn’t been too blissed out of his mind to form proper words. Eventually, Dib resorted to using his free hand to stroke Zim’s curling antennae; the mere brush of his thumb was enough to trigger a lovely sensation in the pit of his squeedlyspooch.

“Hah, ah…” was about the only sound Zim could make as a familiar pressure began building inside of him. His toes curled, and he pushed his hips down against Dib’s hand. At long last, he reached the tipping point, and a bubble of ecstasy exploded throughout his body with the force of a nuclear bomb. His entire body spasmed, and his cilia tightened around Dib’s fingers, instinctively sliding themselves upwards in a motion reminiscent of a person trying to squeeze the last bit of
“Woah,” said Dib as Zim’s writhing body finally stilled. He eased his fingers out and wiped them off on the blanket below him, never once breaking eye contact. He had a look of awe about him as though he’d just witnessed something incredible. “That was- Wow.”

“What?” said Zim, closing his legs and attempting to sit up, the key word being ‘attempt.’ As soon as he tried to put any pressure on the muscles of his vent, he found himself overcome by a horrible, shooting pain. “Ngh!”

“You okay?” said Dib. “Did I hurt you?”

“Of course you hurt me. Your breeding spike is almost as big as your stupid giant head,” hissed Zim. As Dib dipped his head guiltily, however, his irritation melted away. “Relax, stink-brain. The actual damage is minimal; I’m just a little sore. I’ll be fine in a minute.” The medical nanobots stored in his PAK had already been dispersed to restore him to optimal condition.

“So, uh, that was pretty good, right?” said Dib, taking a seat next to him. “Well, okay, it was actually kind of weird and awkward, but still pretty fun.”

“Yes,” said Zim with a nod, a warmth spreading across his cheeks. He scooted a little close to Dib until their bare sides were pressed together. He wasn’t sure why, but he wanted to remain in physical contact even now that they were done. “It was.”

A moment of silence passed between them, but it wasn't uncomfortable like the previous ones. Instead, it was peaceful; maybe even comfortable.

“Zim,” said Dib at last. “What are we?”

Had the wonders of Zim’s incredible body been so intense that it had scrambled Dib’s brain? “A human and an irken, obviously.”

“No, I mean…” said Dib, pressing his hands to his face. “Our relationship! What are we to each other?”

“Oh,” said Zim. “We’re friends, of course.”

“Friends…” repeated Dib, sounding strangely uncertain. “Okay, yeah, just checking.”

“Checking?”

“Well, I don’t know how this stuff works on Irk,” said Dib. “For all I know, this could have made us mates, or something.”

“Mates?” cackled Zim. What a ridiculous notion! “Irkens don’t mate! We do use the term ‘playmates’ to refer to the people we have sex with, but that’s it.” Dib’s face turned a deep, cranberry red, and Zim was hit by a sudden surge of panic. “Wait, is that how humans do it? Do you see us as pair-bonded now?”

“What? Oh, God, no,” said Dib quickly. “Humans do casual sex all the time! We call it being ‘friends with benefits’ or ‘fuck-buddies.’”

Zim breathed a sigh of relief.

“So,” said Dib. “Are we ever gonna do this again?”
“Of course!” said Zim immediately. He attempted to sit up again, only to be forced back down onto his back by the pain. “RGH! Maybe not right now, but soon!”

“Cool, cool…” said Dib, laying down beside Zim. “Sorry to be so weird about this. Full disclosure, I lied about having sex before. That was my first time.”

“You lied to me? Typical!” said Zim, shooting him a glare. Once again, however, Dib’s guilty eyes made it incredibly difficult to stay mad. “…It was Zim’s first time, too.”

Dib blinked, then snorted. “We really are the biggest fucking idiots, aren’t we?”

“Speak for yourself, Dib-stink. I’m not the one who just made a mess of the place I have to sleep.”

Dib glanced down at the gooey slick that had soaked the blankets. “Eh, it still beats the bushes outside your house.”

“Aha! So that’s where you were all those times I couldn’t find you at home!”

“Where else would I even want to be?” said Dib through a yawn. “Mm…”

“Are you powering down?” said Zim. “What about our assignment?”

“Not gonna sleep,” breathed Dib unconvincingly. “Just gonna rest my eyes for a couple of…”

And with that, he was out.

“Really?” said Zim, shaking his head and gingerly rolling towards the edge of the bed. Stupid squishy organics and their pitifully inefficient brains. It looked like he would be stuck working on this report by himself. No matter. After all, he’d just learned plenty about human intercourse!

He carefully got to his feet, making heavy use of his PAK-legs so as to minimize any pressure on his sore vent. As he did so, he found that he couldn’t keep his mind off of Dib’s earlier concerns about them being mates. It seemed like such a foolish notion – he wasn’t even capable of love, after all! – but the more he thought about it, the more he found himself plagued by a hollow feeling in his chest. What was sensation? It felt like he was missing something, but he couldn’t remember what that was…

“It seems the developmental projections were correct. Even after extensive genetic editing, your PAK cannot properly numb you to the strain of loss,” said a robotic voice with a feminine edge. “You simply love too much.”

Zim clutched his head. What a strange memory. Whose voice had that been, again?

The cables suspending his body by its PAK finally released him, and he dropped lifelessly to the floor.

“No matter,” continued the voice. “Even the softest hearts can be hardened. I will make you strong.”

No. He couldn’t remember this. He didn’t want to remember this! Zim struggled to find a new train of thought to follow, desperate to block off the flow of anguish that he’d so carefully contained to the deepest recesses of his mind, but there was no stopping it now. The floodgates had already opened.

“I don’t understand,” he said in a voice barely above a whisper. “They’re all gone. Where did
“Do not concern yourself with the fates of defective smeets,” said the voice. “An irken need not love his peers. He need only love his empire.”

“My empire?”

“Yes, child,” said the voice. “Your Tallest. Your planet. Your control brains. A single irken may die or disappear, but the empire is forever. Give all of your love to Irk, and you will never know heartbreak again.”

Even as he trembled with despair, he still nodded his head. “Understood.”

“What a quick learner you are,” said the voice in a tone that sounded almost wistful. “Now go. Return to your training before the others grow suspicious.”

“Computer!” barked Zim, snatching both his and Dib’s computers and heading to the elevator. The assignment… He had to think about the assignment! As long as he just kept his mind occupied with what was happening right now, he couldn’t be hurt by what had happened in the distant past! “Take me to the lab!”

He stepped inside, and the elevator door slid shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! I planned on releasing this last week, but then finals came along and dashed that plan. It’s gonna be at least another week or two until the next chapter while I finish my Secret Santa, but I’m hoping to get back on schedule after that now that the semester is officially over. Thanks so much for your patience!
Previously, on Height Treason...

Dib struggles to put out the fire caused by Zim casually ordering GIR to switch off his heat sink. He succeeds, but not without great sacrifice; the couch perishes in the inferno. Meanwhile, Zim dishes out some painful truths to a heavily sleep-deprived Professor Membrane, chastising him for refusing to take his son's theories seriously enough to properly test them. Zim arrives home in a frilly pink dress given to him by Gaz and desperately attempts to seduce Dib human-style by feigning helplessness. In the end, though, it turns out the secret to getting laid was talking about it like reasonable adults. Who knew? After some incredibly awkward sex, Dib and Zim briefly discuss how this changes their relationship and ultimately conclude that it doesn't, really; they're just friends with benefits now. Dib falls asleep without making so much as a dent in their twenty-page essay that's due tomorrow, so Zim decides to do it himself. Just as he's getting ready to leave Dib's room, however, he finds himself reminded of something deeply unpleasant...

“Beep! Beep! Beep!”

“What-” began Dib, blearily opening his eyes to the sound of GIR’s voice. The robot in question was seated on his bare chest. “Is there a reason that you’re saying the word ‘beep’ over and over?”

“I’m bein’ an alarm clock!” said GIR. “Master told me to wake you up for school!”

Dib snapped upwards so fast that his glasses (which he’d apparently fallen asleep in) flew off his face. GIR, too, tumbled into his lap. “Fuck, the paper!”

“Yay, a new word!” said GIR. “Fuck! FUCK!”

“Shit, no! Stop!” said Dib. He didn’t know if it was possible to soil the innocence of a defective war machine, but regardless, there was something about GIR swearing that just seemed incredibly wrong. “Don’t say that!”

“Why not?” said GIR, but before Dib could answer, the robot glanced downwards at Dib’s unclothed groin. “Ooooh, I didn’t know you had an antenna!”

Dib shrieked, shoved GIR off of him, and hastily covered himself with a pillow. “Don’t look!”

“Okay!” said GIR, hopping off the bed and running off towards the elevator. “Fuck! Shit! Fuck! Shit! Fuck!”

“GIR, please!” said Dib, but his pleas were only met with GIR’s continued screams of glee:

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!” screamed GIR as the elevator doors closed behind him.

“If it’s any consolation, this isn’t the first time this has happened,” said the computer. “Our master has deleted human swears from his vocabulary bank on numerous occasions.”
Well, at least that was one thing to strike off his list of things to panic about. “What about the paper?”

“Zim wrote it,” said the computer.

“Wait, really?” said Dib. Zim had not only allowed him to sleep, but taken on the burden of writing an entire twenty-page research paper by himself? “He didn’t just use me falling asleep as an excuse to blow it off?”

“Yeah, it’s super weird,” said the computer. “You sure you didn’t bash his skull against the headboard with all that thrusting you were doing?”

Dib’s cheeks went bright red. He’d completely forgotten that the computer had seen all of that. “Where is Zim, anyway?”

“He’s in the lab working on enhancements to your irken disguise,” said the computer.

Dib quickly showered, dressed himself, and swung his backpack over his shoulder before taking the elevator to the lab. He walked in to find Zim tinkering away at something on the table. Thankfully, he was no longer wearing that ridiculous dress from Gaz. Less thankfully, he was wearing one of his shorter shirts that did little to conceal the way his leggings hugged his ass and groin.

Dib bit his lip; they’d already fucked, so would it be weird if he leaned down and touched it? He’d never been in a sexual relationship with someone before, and he wasn’t sure how to handle these new boundaries, especially given his history as a horny teenager on some of the more, err, entitled parts of the web. He liked to think that he’d grown out of it in the past year or so (Gaz had slapped some sense into him after overhearing him refer to Jessica as a ‘roastie foid’), but it didn’t always come as naturally as he would have liked.

For a moment, he reached out with a trembling hand only to immediately yank it back again. The self-help books that he’d read had made it very clear that consent for a single sexual exchange didn’t indicate consent for all future sexual exchanges. Just because he’d fucked Zim last night didn’t mean he had permission to touch his butt in the morning! But then, what was he supposed to do? Ask if he could touch it like some kind of fucking weirdo? Did he have to specify a duration? What if Zim thought he meant a quick squeeze, and he kept his hand there for a solid ten seconds? What if-

“Well?” said Zim expectantly, turning his head to look back at Dib. “Aren’t you going to thank me?”

Dib quickly put both of his hands at his sides.

“Thanks for having sex with me,” said Dib.

Zim gave him a strange look. “I was referring to the paper.”

“Right! Yeah. Thanks for finishing the paper!” sputtered Dib, silently wishing he could bash his head through the wall. “Sorry for falling asleep. Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Zim’s antennae stiffened. “Well, I couldn’t trust you to write something while you were tired. Obviously.”

“Haha, yeah…” said Dib. “So is your, uh, ‘vent’ feeling better?” He regretted the question the second it was out of his mouth. Why couldn’t he just be cool about this?
“As a matter of fact, yes,” said Zim, spinning around to lean back against the table and slide a thumb down the hem of his leggings. “Why? Did you want to take it for another spin before school?”

“Woah! Nonononono, I was just checking!” said Dib. Once again, he instantly regretted his words. Had he seriously just turned down sex? “I mean, uh… We might miss the bus!”

“With your stamina? Not likely,” said Zim, putting in his contacts.

Dib’s face burned with embarrassment. Next time, he was definitely going to try jerking off beforehand to see if that helped. Not that he believed he was entitled to a next time, of course! He was a normal, well-adjusted human being who understood that consent could be withdrawn at any point!

“Yeah,” said Dib, eager to change the subject. He turned his gaze towards the table, where Zim appeared to have been tinkering with his fake PAK. “So what are you working on? The computer said you were making some modifications to my disguise.”

“Yes, well, I was discussing the plan with your rubber duck advisor thing, and we noticed a problem,” said Zim, gesturing to the rubber duck sitting on the table beside him. “The Irken Empire has invasion down to an art form, and there will be security checkpoints designed to counter any attempts by aliens to infiltrate our ranks like we infiltrate theirs. If we end up going through an x-ray machine, for example, someone is bound to notice something off about your skeletal structure.”

“Hm…” said Dib. “I think I get it. You’re installing equipment into the fake PAK that can manipulate the electromagnetic radiation to create the illusion of an irken skeleton, right?”

“More or less,” said Zim, gesturing to a diagram of a human skeleton he’d laid out on the table beside a diagram of an irken skeleton. Any major differences in anatomy were circled in red pen. “I’ve also hooked up some basic modules to let you interface with irken technology, but it won’t fool anything more complicated than tools and machinery. If you try to plug into something with an online connection, your ID will be checked against the system, and your designation will be immediately flagged as fraudulent.”

“So we’ll have to talk our way out of it if anything like that comes up,” said Dib, nodding warily.

“Mnhmm,” said Zim. “Luckily, that shouldn’t be a problem, seeing as we’re both so charming and charismatic!”

Dib’s cheeks grew warm. “You think I’m charming and charismatic?”

“Well, the important thing is that you’re tall enough to keep most people from being willing to question you,” said Zim, but no amount of verbal backtracking was going to pop Dib’s swollen ego. “Anyway, we should probably get ready for school. Have you eaten yet?”

Dib rolled his eyes. “You know you don’t have to remind me to eat, right?”

“Well, have you?” said Zim. Dib coughed, and Zim glared up at him. “That’s a no!” He shoved Dib towards the elevator. “No ally of mine is going to spend the morning running at suboptimal levels! Come on! We have to fuel your miserable organic body!”

“Whatsoever,” muttered Dib, turning around so Zim couldn’t see the dopey grin spreading across his face like a preventable virus through a community of antivaxxers. It was weird to have another person concerned for his health. Well, he supposed that wasn’t strictly true; his father cared, after
all. He just sucked at showing it.

As they ascended, Dib found himself struggling to figure out where to look. Was it weirder to stare at Zim or to deliberately avert his eyes? He’d spent years remorselessly watching him through various hidden cameras for hours at a time, but now that they’d actually fucked, everything felt so weird, especially when they were just standing side by side in total silence.

“I have to say, Zim, it’s pretty impressive that you still had time to do all that stuff with the fake PAK after writing a twenty-page paper by yourself!” said Dib, unable to stand the quiet any longer.

Zim beamed. “Yes, I am quite impressive, aren’t I?”

“Well, it’s not like you didn’t have help,” said the computer.

“Quiet, computer!” said Zim, only to glance up at Dib and add a muttered “Please.”

Dib snickered and ruffled Zim’s wig. That was a thing normal friends did to one another, right? Or was it more of a parent-child thing? Because he had next to no experience with healthy relationships in either category, and he was truly just guessing at this point.

They climbed out of the trash can (why the secret elevator couldn’t be behind a wall panel or in a closet or something was a mystery to Dib) and into the kitchen, where Zim hopped up on the counter with an expectant look on his face.

“What?” said Dib.

“We’re not leaving until you’ve eaten,” said Zim.

Dib bit his lip. “Zim, it’s fine. I usually skip breakfast, anyway.”

“You didn’t have dinner last night, either! Who’s going to help me defeat the Tallest if you starve to death, huh?” said Zim. He pointed to the fridge. “Now eat!”

Dib gulped and began looking through the fridge and pantries for something like cereal or bread for toast, but it appeared that most of the human food Zim had stocked the house with was stuff requiring actual preparation to make palatable, like flour and raw meat. “We, uh, we don’t really have enough time for me to-”

“If we miss the bus, we’ll take the ship,” said Zim patiently.

“We have eggs,” said the computer helpfully. “Those only take a-”

“-a long, long time!” interrupted Dib. “Look, we have Calculus first thing in the morning, and Ms. Bitters always collects assignments at the beginning of class. At least one of us needs to be there to pass it in. Why don’t you take the bus and get there on time, and I’ll eat something and take the ship? That way all your hard work on that paper doesn’t go to waste!”

Zim nodded thoughtfully. “Hm, I suppose that makes sense… You promise not to leave until you’ve eaten?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” said Dib, crossing his chest.

“But death is exactly the fate we’re trying to avoid!” said Zim, hopping off the counter and shaking his head as he headed out the door. “Uhg, stupid humans and their nonsensical figures of speech…”
As the front door shut, Dib breathed a sigh of relief.

“You don’t actually know how to cook, do you?” said the computer.

“I can make toast,” said Dib hollowly. “Does that count?”

“Wow,” said the computer. “How have you survived eighteen years like this?”

“Cut me some slack!” said Dib. “It’s not like I had anyone to teach me. I’m lucky my dad found the time to show me how the microwave worked! Hell, he ate so many of his meals on the go that sometimes he wouldn’t even remember to stock the fridge at home for us.”

Dib scowled; the worst of such incidents had also been the last. Upon realizing that he’d left his children for two days with nothing but canned food they were too young to know how to open, Professor Membrane had created a smart fridge that would automatically restock itself by ordering groceries to be delivered to their house. At the time, Dib hadn’t really thought too much of it; after all, his father had been extremely remorseful, and had taken steps to ensure that it would never happen again. As an adult, however, he was less inclined to forgive such blatant acts of negligence.

“What about that robot thing?”

“Foodio? I don’t know if his AI is advanced enough to teach. Besides,” added Dib. “I wasn’t allowed to use him without supervision until I was fifteen.”

“Your father let you wander around alone at night, but the cooking robot was off-limits?”

“It, uh, it wasn’t for my protection,” admitted Dib sheepishly. “Remember that time I stole Zim’s PAK and it got stuck to my chest? It kinda-sorta made me reprogram one of the prototype models to try to take over the world.”

“Well, it looks like this task is going to have to fall on the only being in this house to have ever successfully prepared human food,” said the computer.

“You?”

“Nope,” said the computer. “GIR! Report to the kitchen.”

“Hold on, GIR knows how to cook?”

“Of course,” said the computer as the robot in question tearfully barrel-rolled his way into the kitchen. “You should know this. You’ve seen him make waffles before.”

Dib cringed; six years later, he still had nightmares about being made a fool of in front of the Swollen Eyeball Network every time he tried to show them the live camera feed of Zim getting up to some extraterrestrial bullshit only for him to be eating waffles the second someone else was watching. “Wait, how’d you know I saw that?”

“Did you really think I didn’t notice all the cameras you planted in here?” said the computer. “I’m the house, man. I see everything.”

Dib felt his chest seize. “Wait, so Zim-”

“Oh, he doesn’t know. I didn’t tell him.”

“Seriously?” said Dib. “Why not?”
“He never asked.”

The more Dib learned about Zim’s machines, the more he began to understand why he was so irritable and short-tempered.

“So GIR,” began Dib, only to notice that GIR hadn’t yet gotten up off of the ground. “Hey, buddy. Is something the matter?”

“The-the couch,” cried GIR. “I can still hear his little springs squeaking!”

Dib scooped him up in his arms and held him close to his chest so he could pat him on the back like a small child. “Sssssh, it’s okay. It probably didn’t have any nerves, so I’m sure it didn’t suffer when it burned to death.”

GIR cried louder.

“Wow,” said the computer. “You really suck at this.”

“I guess it runs in the family,” muttered Dib, gently bouncing GIR up and down. “Ssssssssh…”

“HE WAS SO YOUNG!” wailed GIR. “WHY? WHYYYYYYY?”

“At the rate you’re going, you’re never gonna make it to school on time,” said the computer.

“It’s fine,” said Dib. “I already know Calculus, and Zim has the paper, so-”

“Ooh, master’s paper thingy?” said GIR, going from miserable to excited in the blink of an eye. “That was so fun! I wrote about a piggy, and then I wrote about-”

“Wait,” said Dib, his blood chilling like liquid nitrogen in his veins. “You were the one who helped Zim with the paper? Not the computer?”

“Well, duh,” said GIR like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “The computer doesn’t have hands to write with!”

“Computer,” said Dib quietly. “You don’t happen to have a copy of the final draft of the paper, do you?”

The computer deposited a stack of pages on the table. Dib set GIR down so he could flip through their contents. With every line he red, his face grew progressively paler.

“Oh my God,” said Dib, dropping the stack of papers on the ground and bolting for the ship. “ZIIIIIIIM!”

Zim fidgeted impatiently as he waited for Dib to come through the door. Class would be starting any minute, and while he knew his new playmate was already familiar enough with Calculus for the whole thing to be redundant to him, he couldn’t help but endlessly replay the worst-case scenario in his head. What if Dib didn’t eat in time and starved to death? Sure, he’d said that humans could go weeks without solid food as long as they had water, but what if he was wrong? What if he messed up cooking and accidentally poisoned himself? What if he spilled food on his clothes and went to take a shower before he left only to somehow inhale so much water that he drowned?

He forced himself to relax as the rest of his peers filed through the door. Despite being a member of one of the most high-maintenance species that Zim had ever been forced to live in close
proximity with (granted, humans were the only species he’d ever lived with other than his own), Dib had survived for eighteen years before him, and there was no reason to believe he’d keel over and die just because Zim suddenly had a stake in his continued existence.

“You simply love too much,” echoed a voice in his mind, prompting Zim to clutch his head and stare into the desk. “I will make you strong.” It didn’t happen! It was just a false memory from his stupid, defective PAK! “An irken need not love his peers.” It didn’t happen. It didn’t happen. IT DIDN’T HAPPEN. “He need only love his empire!” Lies, lies, filthy lies-

“Is everyone here?” said Ms. Bitters, and for once, Zim was all too eager to pay attention to her lecture. “Good. Before we begin-”

“Wait, where’s Dib?” said Zita. The entire class immediately locked eyes on Dib’s empty seat. There was a loud shuffling sound as everyone fished bulletproof vests and helmets from their backpacks.

Ms. Bitters growled with annoyance. “Zim?”

“He should be here any minute,” said Zim.

“He’d better be,” said Ms. Bitters. “I’m not in the mood to spend three hours on hold just to let his father know that he’s absent again! Now, as I was saying-”

Penny raised her hand. “Ms. Bitters, I forgot my vest!”

Ms. Bitters scowled and handed her a key. “Go get one from the supply closet.”

She scurried off to unlock the door in the back of the room next to the Dunce Closet and quickly retrieved a vest and helmet to wear before handing the key back to Ms. Bitters and returning to her desk.

“Did anyone else forget their safety vest?” said Ms. Bitters. A few hands went up. “Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, there’s only one spare, so you’ll all just have to take turns. Now if there aren’t any more interruptions, everybody pass your papers to-”

The door swung open so hard that the sound of it striking the doorstopper resulted in a loud BANG, prompting the entire class save for Zim and Ms. Bitters to scream and duck for cover under their desks.

“WAIT!” said Dib from the doorway just as Zim pulled the essay from his PAK. “Don’t- Uh, is there a reason you guys are all dressed up like riot police?”

Ms. Bitters waved a handheld metal detector over Dib’s body. “Clear.”

There was a collective sigh of relief, and everyone began removing their vests and helmets and returning them to their bags.

“Seriously, guys?” said Dib. He marched to his desk with a sour expression and snatched the paper from Zim’s clawed hands.

“Hey!” said Zim.

“We are not passing this in,” said Dib firmly. “I’d rather take a zero!”

“What?” said Zim. “But I spent hours writing it!”
Dib lowered his voice to an angry whisper. “You spent five pages describing the sex we had in
graphic detail!”

“Firsthand accounts don’t need citations!” said Zim. "I was being efficient!"

“There’s a whole page dedicated to talking about GIR’s toy pig collection!”

“It’s fine, I added in some stuff about pig reproduction afterwards!”

“It’s supposed to be an essay on human reproduction, Zim!” said an exasperated Dib.

“Pigs, humans... It’s close enough,” said Zim.

“Really?” said Dib, crossing his arms over his chest. “So you’d fuck a pig, then?”

Zim gagged. “That’s disgusting! What's wrong with you?”

“What’s the matter?” said Dib. “I thought we were completely interchangeable to you!”

“Zim! Dib!” said Ms. Bitters curtly. “Are you going to pass in your paper, or not?"

“Yes!”

“No!”

They blurted out their contradictory answers in unison. Ms. Bitters pressed her long, bony fingers
to her wrinkled temples.

“If you don’t make up your minds in the next thirty seconds, I’m giving you both a negative one hundred percent on the assignment!”

“There’s no way that’s allowed!” argued Dib.

“It doesn’t matter, because we’re handing it in!” said Zim, grabbing half of the stapled stack of
pages and attempting to pull them from Dib’s hands.

“No, we’re not!” said Dib, pulling upwards with enough force to leave Zim dangling a couple feet off the ground.

“You don’t get any say in this!” said Zim, fervently kicking his legs. “You fell asleep!”

“You could have woken me up!” said Dib, attempting to shake him off without losing his grip on
the essay.

Rrrrrrip!

The stack of papers tore in half, and Zim fell to the ground.

“HA!” said Dib with a borderline feral grin that Zim hadn’t seen on him since the last time he’d foiled one of his plots to take over the world. “Now you’ll never be able to turn it in! I win!”

Zim rose to his feet and cackled maniacally. “That’s what you think!” He reached into his PAK
and pulled out another essay. “I printed a second copy!”

Dib tried to grab him, but Zim leapt out of the way. With a mighty leap, he jumped up and
slammed the essay down on top of the stack on Ms. Bitters desk.
“Noooooo!” cried Dib, collapsing to his hands and knees.


With those words, she dumped the entire stack of papers into the trash bin beside her desk. There was a moment of stunned silence before the class erupted into a series of furious howls.

“But we spent all night on that paper!” complained one of the students.

“Aren’t you gonna read them?” cried another.

“Do you really think I want to spend my unpaid hours at home at home grading your miserable essays?” said Ms. Bitters. “If you passed in a paper, you get a C. Everyone else gets an F.”

“Just a C?” said Zim. “But that’s not fair!”

“Life isn’t fair. Congratulations on learning the most valuable lesson of all,” said Ms. Bitters, grabbing a piece of chalk to begin writing on the board. Zim’s shoulders drooped, and he sank miserably into his desk as Ms. Bitters resumed her lecture. “Today we’ll be going over how to calculate the area under a curve using definite integrals. If you haven’t figured out definite integrals by now, then you’re doomed, doomed, doomed…”

Dib arrived in the lunch room to find Zim still moping, his face pressed flat against the table.

“Hey,” said Dib, placing a hand on Zim’s shoulder. “Uh, sorry about the paper. I know you worked really hard on it.”

“It’s fine,” said Zim, his voice slightly muffled by the table. “I’m used to my monumental efforts being rewarded with apathy and disappointment.”

Dib inhaled sharply through his teeth. “I, uh… For what it’s worth, I thought it was pretty good!”

“Lies,” said Zim, finally lifting his head to glare up at Dib. “You didn’t even want me to pass it in!”

“That’s not true!” said Dib, his brain working on overdrive to find the right words to salvage this situation. “Sure, I might not have been super comfortable with the contents, but it was still really well done!” He thought for a moment. “The parts that weren’t written by GIR, anyway.”

Zim pressed his face back to the table and let out a muffled scream. Dib patted his shoulder.

“I’m going to go get some lunch, but then I’ll be right back, okay?” said Dib. He would be much better at providing emotional support once his empty stomach was finally filled. After nearly twenty-four hours without food, even the terrible school lunches looked downright appetizing.

He shuffled off to wait in line for his four strips of inexplicably soggy French toast and two freezer-burned sausages. With his tray in hand, he turned around to go sit with Zim only to find the table completely filled. Dib squinted, briefly convinced that he was due for a new lens prescription. After all, surely no one but him would ever willingly sit with Zim!

And yet there he was, completely surrounded by people and looking just as baffled as Dib.

“What the-?” began Dib, only to find himself yanked towards another table by his sister. “Gaz? What’s happening?” His brow furrowed. “Did Keef start another rumor?”

“Can you really call it a rumor if it’s true?” said Gaz, shoving him into a seat. “Congrats on losing
your virginity, by the way.”

Her words squeezed the life out of Dib like a hydraulic press to the soul.

“How-” he began, only for her to raise a hand to shush him.

“You’ve got Sex Hand,” said Gaz. Dib immediately lifted his hands, repeatedly flipping them over in search of anything out of the ordinary. He’d never heard of sex changing anybody’s hands before, but if his recent virginity loss was that obvious, what else could he do but take his sister’s word for it? “Oh, for fuck’s sake. It’s your nails, genius. You cut the ones on your middle and index finger shorter than all the rest so you could finger-bang someone without cutting them.” She grabbed his right hand and yanked it towards her with enough force that Dib’s arm nearly popped out of its socket so she could inspect more closely. Her face contorted with disgust. “Ten points for being considerate enough to trim them, but minus two hundred points for biting them off like the disgusting troglodyte you are.”

Dib yanked his hand back and shamefully buried it in his coat pocket. “People can figure all that out just from looking at my nails?”

“Never underestimate the detective skills of a bunch of bored seniors with nothing better to do than gossip about the sex lives of the two biggest freaks in school,” said Gaz, pulling out her Game Slave and starting up a game while she talked. “Anyway, you’re welcome.”

Dib shot her a confused look. “For what?”

“For giving you that last push you needed to finally make a move,” said Gaz.

“What push?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. I’m talking about the dress,” said Gaz.

“Is that what it was about?” said Dib, flabbergasted. “That thing looked like a costume a toddler would wear to play dress-up! What kind of a sick freak do you take me for?”

“The kind who watches a show about little girls fighting tentacle monsters.”

“Okay, first of all, they’re actually six thousand-year-old Octofairies who just so happen to be trapped in the bodies of fourteen-year-old girls,” said Dib through a mouthful of sausage. He swallowed. “Second, I watch Pretty Pretty Squid Knights: The Story of How I Saved the World From An Octopus Invasion for the plot, not the upskirts!”

“One of their powers is shooting ink from their genitals.”

“It’s subversive!” said Dib. “They’re using excessive fanservice to make a statement about how other shows sexualize underage girls!”

“And they’re choosing to make that statement by sexualizing underage girls?”

“Exactly!” said Dib.

“Well, anyway, it looks like everything still worked out in the end,” said Gaz. She folded her hands. “Guess I’d better start paying out those bets now that you two are officially dating.”

“Dating?” said Dib, violently shaking his head. “Oh, no, no, no. You’ve got it all wrong! Zim and I aren’t dating!”
Gaz looked at him with the same disbelieving stare she’d given him that time he’d claimed to have given up paranormal investigation in favor of ‘real science.’

“Say what now?”

“I mean, yeah, we had sex, but we’re still just friends!” said Dib, straining not to wither under the intensity of her scrutiny. “What?”

Gaz pressed her palms together and rested her chin on the tips of her fingers.

“Let me get this straight,” said Gaz. “You’re not dating; you’re just best friends with benefits who live together and hang out with one another to the exclusion of anyone else.”

“Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“Oh my God, Dib,” said Gaz, burying her face in her palms. “What do you think dating is?”

“It’s completely different!” insisted Dib. “Dating is when two people who love each other go places and hang out and… Uh, live together, and… Have sex…” He pursed his lips. “Okay, I’m beginning to see how this might seem a little confusing for someone on the outside looking in.”

“The only person who’s confused here is you,” said Gaz matter-of-factly.

“Hey!” said Dib. “Look, I like Zim, and sure, maybe I think he’s more attractive than a tiny green alien with Cthulu-genitals has any right to be, but I don’t love him.”

“Dib, close your eyes,” ordered Gaz.

“What? Why would I-”

“Close. Your. Eyes.”

Okay, okay, I’m closing my eyes,” said Dib, doing exactly that. “Where are you going with this?”

“I want you to imagine for a minute that Zim is dating someone,” said Gaz.

Dib laughed nervously. “Zim’s not capable of love, Gaz. He said so himself.”

“And a week ago, he wasn’t capable of empathy, but here we are,” said Gaz. “Now imagine Zim is out on a date with, say… Keef.” Dib swallowed. “They’re walking through a theme park, talking and laughing…” The pace of his breathing increased, and his fingers began to curl until they were clenched into fists. “Keef buys a stick of cotton candy for them to share and takes a bite from-”

“Zim wouldn’t share,” interrupted Dib. “He’d demand his own stick.”

“Not from Keef,” said Gaz, and even with his eyes closed, Dib could hear her wicked smile. “He’s happy to share with the person he loves, especially when a little piece of cotton candy gets stuck on Keef’s lip.” Dib gritted his teeth. “He reaches his long, wet tongue up towards Keef’s lips and-”

Dib slammed his fist down on the table with enough force to tip over his milk carton and rocketed up out of his chair. He could feel his whole body shaking with righteous fury.

Zim was his alien! HIS!

“I’m gonna kill him,” he said, feeling strangely serene about his decision to brutally murder Keef
and leave his body in a dumpster. “I’m gonna rip his heart out and stain his shirt redder than his hair.”

“Hey. Hey!” said Gaz, snapping her fingers in his face. “Remember what your therapist said to do when you start to feel this way?”

Dib took a deep breath.

“One, two, three…” he counted, slowly sitting back down. “Four, five, six…” He was a mature, civilized person capable of talking through his feelings. “Seven, eight, nine…” He wasn’t defined by his hatred for his classmates. “Ten.”

“Feeling better?” said Gaz.

Dib took another breath, flipped his spilled milk carton back upright, and slowly nodded. “Yeah, I’m good.”

“Good,” said Gaz. She grinned viciously. “So as I was saying, Zim’s tongue stretches towards Keef’s-”

“Stop!” said Dib slamming his palms down against the table and spilling his milk for a second time. “I mean- Shit!”

Gaz lifted her lunch bag out of the way of the rapidly-expanding milk puddle. “Wow. That sure is a strong reaction to the thought of someone you don’t love dating somebody else.”

Dib growled with frustration. “It’s not that! It’s just…”

“Just…?”

“I know everything about Zim!” said Dib at last. “I know his schedule, I know his goals, and I know how he thinks! I’ve seen him at his worst, and I’ve seen him at his best! No one else knows him like I do! No one else deserves him like I do! Especially not Keef!”

He spat out the name like a wad of used-up gum.

“That’s an awfully long-winded way of saying that the thought of Keef dating Zim makes you jealous,” said Gaz, tapping away at her phone.

Dib opened his mouth to argue, but what could he possibly say to refute her words? She was right; the thought of anyone else being that close to Zim made him want to tie them down and carve them open with a rusty scalpel.

“But I can’t be in love with Zim!” said Dib. “Love is supposed to be a soft, fluttery feeling that you get every time you look into someone’s eyes! I don’t get that with Zim at all!”

“You’ve been watching too many movies,” said Gaz. “Nine times out of ten, that ‘fluttery feeling’ you’re thinking of is just anxiety from wanting to make a good impression on someone you barely know. It usually goes away after you get comfortable with a person. You and Zim have known each other for six years now. Do the math.”

Dib stuffed what remained of his lunch down his throat and stood up.

“I think I’m gonna go process this in the bathroom for a few hours,” said Dib, turning around and hobbling off like a zombie. “If anyone calls dad to report me absent, tell him I got sick.”
“Remember to wash your hands when you’re done,” called Gaz after him.

As Dib left to go stand in line for lunch, Zim continued to groan into the table, his brown bag of donuts sitting forgotten to the side.

He knew that he shouldn’t be letting the essay thing get to him as much as it was; after all, it wasn’t like he had any reason to actually care about his grades. This was just the latest in a never-ending series of utterly inconsequential failures that never had any real bearing on his life, just like conquering Earth. None of it mattered in the grand scheme of things, so why was he still so upset?

There was a sudden series of clacking sounds, like dozens of trays being set down at once. Zim’s antennae twitched beneath his wig, and he lifted his head to look at the source of the noise. He practically jumped in surprise upon realizing that the previously empty table he’d been sitting at was now filled with people, all of whom were staring at him expectantly.

“Hey!” said Zim, making a shooing gesture. “This table is reserved for Zim and Dib! Get your own, pig-smellies!”

“Not until you tell us everything,” said Zita. “I may have already lost the main bet, but I have a lot of side bets riding on this.” Side bets? “You had sex with Dib, right?”

Zim’s claws dug into the table. “Uh… Is that something a normal human would do?”

“Not with Dib,” murmured Jessica to Chunk, only for Zita to reach over and jab them both with a plastic fork. “Ow!”

“Quiet! You know how neurotic he is about being normal!” hissed Zita before turning his attention back to Zim. “Absolutely. Normal people have sex all the time. Now, if you wouldn’t mind filling out this quick survey about your experience…”

She slid a pen and a sheet of paper across the table towards Zim. It was filled with tidy, handwritten questions.

Circle the following:

Where did you first have sex?

A) Bedroom
B) Living Room
C) Shower
D) Kitchen
E) Other (Please write in an answer)

How long did Dib last inside of you?

A) It didn’t get that far or was otherwise non-penetrative.
B) 1-2 Minutes
C) 3-5 Minutes
D) 5-10 Minutes
E) 10+ Minutes

How big is Dib’s ‘equipment’?
A) Micropenis
B) Small
C) Medium
D) Large
E) Freakishly Huge

“I’m not sure Dib would want me to answer these,” began Zim. Dib had already been super weird about writing about their coupling in the essay. Zim had assumed that he would be happy for a chance to brag about having sex with a specimen as fine as himself, but apparently that wasn’t the case.

“A normal human would fill out the form and sign their name at the bottom for the sake of authenticity,” said Zita.

Well, Zim couldn’t argue with that.

“Hm…” said Zim, picking up the pen and circling away. “A, B, aaaaand E.”

Zita ripped the paper away from him, looked it over, and pumped her fist.

“Yes! Two out of three!” said Zita.

Chunk snatched it from her grip. “Damn it, I thought for sure it’d be a micropenis!”

“No way, you can tell from how big his feet are that it’s gotta be huge!” said Jessica.

“There’s no relationship between foot length and penis size!” insisted Chunk.

“You’re just saying that because you have tiny feet!”

“Idiots,” said Zita, folding up the paper and tucking it away in her pocket.

“What was the purpose of this survey thing, again?” asked Zim.

“Because you and Dib waited until after the first half of senior year to bang, and this is the only way for me to recoup my losses,” said Zita, looking thoroughly annoyed. “Hm, actually, if you could do me a favor and fill out one more survey…”

She scrawled out a few more questions on a sheet of lined paper and passed it back to Zim.

Please rate the following on a scale of one to ten:

I am attracted to Dib on a physical level: __

I like Dib for his personality: __

I think that Dib understands me in a way that other people don’t: __
“Sometimes Dib does things that annoy or anger me: __

“You don’t need to sign this one; it’s just for me,” said Zita as Zim filled it out. Upon passing it back to her, she gave it a thorough look-over. “All tens? Even in physical attractiveness?”

Zim scowled through his blush and turned his head to the side. “He’s tall.”

“Well, sure, he’s tall, but in, like, an awkward, gangly way, you know?” said Jessica. “Like, there’s Torque-tall, and then there’s Dib-tall. One of them is built like a Greek god, and the other one just kinda looms over you like a creepy shadow.”

Zim sighed dreamily. He loved the way Dib loomed over people. It projected such a powerful, intimidating aura! With people like Torque, you knew exactly what to expect if you pissed them off; he would probably just punch you in the face, or maybe even beat you up if he was angry enough. Dib, though? He was an enigma! Who knew what was going through that beautiful mind? Sure, maybe he would punch you, but maybe he would poison your drink or knock you out with a powerful electric shock! He was like a box of mystery chocolates! The good kind of mystery chocolates, that is; not the kind Dib had pranked him with on Valentine’s Day last year.

“Interesting,” said Zita, staring at him appraisingly as she folded up the second survey. She finished off her lunch and stood up to leave. “Well, I think I know what I’m gonna put my money on for the break-up bet now.”

“One week!” said Chunk, standing up to follow her.

“No way!” said Jessica, who was also getting up to leave. “They’re totally gonna last until prom out of desperation, if nothing else.”

As his unwanted company finally packed up and left, Zim looked around in search of Dib only to find him conspicuously absent.

“Dib?” called Zim, swiveling around. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Dib?”

“Do not concern yourself with the fates of defective smeets,” echoed the voice in his mind.

“Zim!” echoed another. Whose voice was that? It was so familiar… Skoodge? “How are you feeling about today’s test?”

“Incredible, as always!” said Zim, placing his hands on his hips and holding his head high. “These exams are but a minor stepping stone on Zim’s path to greatness!”

“Ha, yeah, you always score pretty well, huh?” said Skoodge. “What about [DESIGNATION REDACTED]? Is [PRONOUN REDACTED] doing okay?”

“Eh, [PRONOUN REDACTED]’s just a little nervous because [PRONOUN REDACTED] didn’t do so great on the practice test. It’ll be fine, though! We spent all of our unstructured development time going over the problems!”

“Dib…” murmured Zim, staring wildly around the cafeteria. Everyone was getting up to leave. Had lunch period ended? “Where are you? Dib?”

“He’s in the bathroom,” said Gaz, startling him. “You might want to give him some space. He’s a little freaked out right now.” She frowned. “Guess that makes two of you. Freaking weirdos…”
As Gaz wandered off, Zim made a beeline for the nearest restroom.

“Dib!” he called, bursting through the door like a bullet through a squishy human heart. “Dib?”

Much to Zim’s relief, he found Dib staring blankly into the mirror, his hands gripping the rim of the sink with white-knuckled intensity.

“Dib?” said Zim again, but Dib didn’t so much as twitch. He gave Dib a solid kick in the shin, which finally got his attention.

“Ow!” said Dib, bending down to rub his injury. “Seriously, Zim? Why do you always have to kick me in the leg?”

“You weren’t answering!” said Zim. “How was I supposed to know you weren’t dead?”

“Check the crotch,” said Dib seriously. “Humans piss themselves when they die.”

“Gross,” said Zim, though he found himself checking Dib’s groin all the same. It looked dry, but it was hard to tell because of how dark his pants were. “Where did you go? I thought you said you were coming back once you got food!”

“Well, the table you were sitting at was full, so-”

“Then kick someone out, or let me know so we can move somewhere else!” said Zim. “Don’t just leave me alone like that!”

“It was only lunch period,” said Dib. “Besides, you’ve been eating lunch alone for almost six years now.”

“Forty-six,” corrected Zim quietly. “I’ve been eating alone for forty-six years now, and the only reason I wasn’t alone before that was because irken soldiers are required to spend at least half of their break time with their squads.”


“Typical,” muttered Zim. He wrapped his arms around Dib’s waist while he was still crouching and squeezed him tightly. He could feel Dib’s body tense from the contact, but he didn’t care. “Don’t do it again.”

“Well, we kind of have to go to separate classes right now,” said Dib, gently peeling him off so he could stand up straight.

“You know what I mean!” huffed Zim. “If you tell me you’re coming back, then you need to come back!”

“Got it,” said Dib, squeezing his shoulder. “Now let’s go before we get marked absent.”

Dib was a man of many certainties. Aliens were certainly real, and Zim was certainly one of them. His peers certainly didn’t like him, and they were certainly idiots for it. Gaz had certainly been the one to replace his toothpaste with shaving cream that one time, and she was certainly a bitch for it.

His feelings about Zim, though? That was just one big unknown.
On most occasions, Dib adored the unknown. It was a realm of limitless possibilities from which all new information was derived. Ghosts, cryptids, aliens… You never knew what you might encounter at the furthest reaches of mankind’s knowledge! Now, however, he found himself cowering before its murky depths, too frightened of the answers he might find to face the void and discover what awaited him at the bottom.

As the teacher regurgitated boring facts that he’d learned years ago, Dib decided to explore some what-ifs to familiarize himself with some of the worst case scenarios. As far as his relationship with Zim went, there were three distinct possibilities, and he listed each of them off on a piece of lined notebook paper.

Possibility number one was that everything was exactly as it had already seemed. Neither he nor Zim liked the other; they were just close friends with benefits. His jealousy over the possibility of Zim dating other people was the same kind of jealousy some people got when their best friends got married or had kids. It wasn’t necessarily envious of the romance; just the monopolization of that person’s time.

Possibility number two was a bit of a doozy, and Dib would be lying if he said there wasn’t at least a certain level of comfort in the idea that he not only loved Zim, but that Zim, despite everything he’d ever said to the contrary, actually loved him back. It seemed categorically insane, but so had the idea of Zim being sexually attracted to him not too long ago.

Possibility number three was by far the worst of them all, and that was that Dib was in love with Zim, but Zim didn’t love him back. If that was the case, he could only hope that the reason was simply that irkens were genuinely as incapable of love as Zim claimed, because if he was capable of love and simply felt that way for someone other than Dib…

Dib squeezed the pencil he was holding until it snapped in his hand. Why did the thought of Zim with anybody else make him want to throw four years of therapy to the wind?

“Psssst!”

Dib ground his teeth and went over his counting exercises in his head in a valiant effort to ignore the gentle pokes in the back from the person he least wanted to talk to right now. After a solid sixty seconds of trying, however, he could ignore it no longer. With twitching eyes and a quiet sigh, he reached back to accept the handwritten note from Keef.

‘I have Plan B in my bag, if you need it.’

Dib spent a long, long moment struggling to make sense of this before finally passing the paper back with a heavily underlined, ‘Huh???????’

It didn’t take long for the note to come back, but given its contents, Dib wished it had taken even longer.

‘Emergency contraceptives,’ clarified Keef.

“What the fuck-” said Dib out loud before he could stop himself. The entire class turned to stare at him, and he did his best to tuck the note into his sleeve, but by that point, it was too late.

“Dib?” said the teacher sternly. “Do you have something to share with the rest of the class?”

“Uh…” said Dib, who was pretty sure he’d rather die than let anyone see the contents of the note. Like a criminal pleading guilty to a lesser offense in order to escape the death penalty, Dib reluctantly held up the note like he was reading off of it and answered with what was expected of
him: “How to Expose Zim as an Alien: Part One...”

“Oh, not this again,” said the teacher. “That’s enough, we don’t need to hear the rest. Ahem…”

Dib breathed a sigh of relief as the professor resumed his lecture and the classroom collectively lost interest in his note. Once he was sure nobody was looking, he scribbled out a furious response and passed it back to Keef.

‘What the FUCK, man?’

‘Well, in the paper you and Zim wrote, it sounded like you didn’t use a condom, so I just wanted to make sure you didn’t accidentally get him pregnant.’

What? What?

‘YOU READ THE PAPER?’

‘Well, it just seemed like such a shame to let it go completely unread after all that hard work you guys put into it, so I fished it out of the garbage and shared it with a few people over lunch,’ wrote Keef. Every additional word was like a knife being twisted in Dib’s stomach. ‘I don’t mean to pry, but from the way Zim described his own anatomy, it sounds an awful lot like he’s actually got XX chromosomes, so-’

Dib didn’t bother to finish reading the note before turning his head, looking Keef dead in the eye, and tearing it up into dozens of unrecognizable pieces that he scattered across the floor.

“Dib!” snapped the teacher. “First you interrupt class, and now you’re making a mess? I’m going to have to give you detention.”

“Worth it,” said Dib.

“You got detention?” said Zim as Dib gathered his belongings from his locker. “What did you do?”

“Long story short, it’s Keef’s fault for being a creepy bastard,” said Dib. Zim could believe that; Keef was such a creeper sometimes that he made irken brain techs look normal. “I left the ship in the third row of the student parking lot, so you can drive yourself to work.”

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about being forgotten again,” grumbled Zim as Dib slammed his locker shut. He gave Dib a teasing punch to the hip. “I thought I was supposed to be the one who had trouble following the rules.”

“What can I say?” said Dib with a shrug. “Looks like you’re rubbing off on me as much as I’m rubbing off on you.”

“You say that like this is your first time getting detention.”

“Yeah, but all the other ones were a direct result of me trying to capture you, so that hardly counts.”

“Oh, really?” said Zim. “What about the time you filled Chunk’s gym clothes with spiders and he ran out of the locker room in his underwear screaming at the top of his lungs?”

“Okay, almost all of them,” admitted Dib, and the two of them laughed at the shared memory.
“So much for being a paragon of justice,” teased Zim.

“So some people would argue that vengeance is its own form of justice,” said Dib. “Anyway, I’ve gotta get to detention, and you’ve gotta get to work. My dad’s super anal about punching in on time, and believe me, you don’t wanna be at the receiving end of one of his lectures.”

“Why?” said Zim, thinking back to the punitive lectures he’d received during his many, many stays at Irk’s reeducation facilities prior to getting banned for stabbing the supervisor with a sharpened toothbrush. “Do they involve electric shocks?”

“What? No! They’re just boring as hell,” said Dib, shuddering. “One time he went on for three whole hours!”

Zim was pretty sure there was no way he could make it through a three-hour lecture without stabbing somebody (the supervisor had only made it to hour number two before Zim had snapped), so he figured it was best to leave before that became a concern. “I’ll stop by to pick you up after work. You know, if I remember.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get out of here, you damned roach,” said Dib, waving him off.

As Zim approached the ship, it didn’t take long for the snark to begin.

“All alone today, are we?” said the ship. “What happened to the Dib-human?”

“He’s in detention,” said Zim, taking the controls and piloting them out onto the road. “What’s it to you?”

“He drove to school in an awful hurry this morning,” said the ship. “I can only assume you messed something up again, as usual.” Zim scowled. “I can’t imagine why he’d take you as a mate.”

“Zim is no one’s mate!” said Zim, repulsed by the very idea.

“It seemed like the logical next step, seeing as you’ve gone almost completely native, and all,” said the ship. “Maybe I should start calling you Zim-human!”

Zim thanked the stars that Membrane Labs wasn’t nearly as far away from the city’s high school as it had been from its middle school. “You’re just jealous because you don’t even have genitals to play with!”

“Better to be absent an ovipositor than to bury it in an alien like a xenophile.”

As usual, they spent the better part of the trip arguing back and forth about petty nonsense. The ship would criticize him for acting in ways unbecoming of an irken, and Zim would fire back at her for being a literal piece of hardware that had no right to talk. Even as he spoke, however, his heart wasn’t really in it; all he could think about was Dib sitting alone in detention. How was he? Was he going to be okay on his own? What if they made him write lines on the chalkboard until his hand fell off? What if he got a papercut and bled to death?

“And that concludes my alphabetized list of all your worst qualities,” said the ship. “Hey! Were you even listening to me?”

“Hm? Oh, right, umm… You’re stupid,” said Zim.

“Oh, come on. It’s no fun if you’re not even going to try,” said the ship. “Did something happen?
Not that I care, of course; I just can’t have a driver in suboptimal condition.”

“As if I would ever tell you, of all people,” said Zim, pulling into the Membrane Labs parking garage.

“HA! You acknowledged me as a person. That means I win!”

“Sure,” said Zim, much to the ship's apparent surprise. He parked the vehicle and hopped out. “Don’t get too comfy. The flight core should be ready for transfer, so I probably won't be in there for long.” Once he retrieved the core, he no longer needed the job, so there was no reason not to leave early.

“Finally! I can’t wait to be off this wretched planet!” said the ship. “You’d better not break it!”

Zim ignored her and stepped into the elevator.

As he emerged into the lobby, the first thing he noticed was that it was unusually quiet. The scientists and businesspeople that ordinarily filled the halls were nowhere to be found. Even the receptionist was mysteriously absent. Zim checked his phone to see if he’d gotten any emails about the company closing for the day, but there was no such message in his inbox.

He hesitated. On the one hand, he didn’t want to be lectured for clocking in late. On the other, every instinct that had ever been programmed into his PAK was telling him that something was very, very wrong.

After a moment of careful consideration of the options, Zim stepped forward towards the punch clock.

All at once, a set of four mechanical arms burst from the floor to seize his wrists and ankles. Zim flailed and tugged at the restraints, but they refused to budge.

“What in the world-” he began. Before he could finish that thought, Professor Membrane stepped out from around the corner. “Hey! Dib-father! Your security system is malfunctioning!”

Professor Membrane shook his head. As he stepped closer, it rapidly became apparent that he looked even worse than he had the last time Zim had seen him. The dark bags under his eyes had become so prominent that they were visible even with the goggles on, his lab coat was wrinkled, and he hadn’t even bothered putting on gloves this time; his mechanical arms were on full display.

“I can assure you that my security system is working exactly as intended,” said Professor Membrane. Zim began to sweat. This was bad. Very, very, very bad.

“Then why-”

“I thought about what you said,” said Professor Membrane. “You were right. I never had enough respect for my son to test his ideas for myself.” Zim had a bad feeling that he knew exactly where this was going. “But no longer! Today, I’m going to give my son’s hypotheses the respect they deserve.”

“By hunting down Bigfoot?” said Zim hopefully.

Professor Membrane shook his head.

“I’m going to show Dib irrefutable proof of your humanity,” said the professor, taking a step forward. “The odds of an alien species evolving to possess the same organs that a human does are
so astronomically low as to be effectively impossible.” Oh shit, oh hell, oh *fuck!* “With that being the case, the methodology for this experiment is clear; I'm going to show him your organs.”

Zim gulped.

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