From Weirder to Worse

by Kymanatic

Summary

Dib can't accept "crazy" as a diagnosis, no matter how downhill things seem to get. But then why does it feel like he's being haunted every waking moment by nightmares and visions that don't ever go away? And why does nobody else want to believe him? And worst of all, why does it feel like Zim is the only one who might be able to understand what he's going through?

Meanwhile, Zim is dealing with problems of his own: random holes in his PAK's memory, a bizarre detachment from his Irken leaders... and it's both simultaneously pushing him towards his nemesis Dib and pulling him away. How will the two of them cope with this new development in their relationship?
Since escaping the Florpus, things on Earth had fallen back to a relatively normal routine—or at least, as normal as routines could get with an alien infiltrating the planet. Zim didn’t seem too discouraged by his apparent failure either, even after inadvertently dooming his fellow Irken leaders in the process.

He still went on to continue his “education” along with the rest of the student body, even now that they had all risen through the ranks to become almost-graduated Hi-Skool students. Not that Zim actually cared about any of that stuff. He was an alien after all, not a veterinarian or a physician or whatever it was people studied to become. He only ever put up with the torment of having such meaningless Earth drivel hammered into his brain to keep up appearances. And also so that he could continue gathering information on the humans whom he wished to one day conquer.

Although that wasn't to say Zim was always the greatest at exploiting human weaknesses. At least, not in the conventional way.

Like that one time during their freshman year when Zim was convinced that he had given Dib a terrible affliction.

"Cheese touch!"

"Dib whirled around in his seat, surprised to find Zim standing there, jabbing him with a— with a piece of cheese?"

"Wait what?" Dib didn't get it.

"AHA! HAHAHAHAHA!" cackled Zim, who had once again attracted the attention of the entire cafeteria with his outburst. "TAKE THE WRATH OF ZIM'S ALMIGHTY CHEESE YOU REVOLTING STINK BOY!"

"Okay, will you cut that out already!" Dib snapped viciously, swatting the gloved hand away from his shoulder. He cupped a hand over his throbbing ear, which was also starting to ring as a result of the other's screeching. "And did you really have to do that right by my ear? Sheesh..."

"You're not- Why are you not screaming in terror?" Zim demanded, which was juxtaposed by the
uncertainty creeping into his voice. He removed the hand holding the cheese, allowing it to drop down to his side.

"You idiot," Dib laughed, truly at a loss for words. "The cheese touch isn't actually a thing that can harm people. It's just a stupid game kids used to play in middle school." He shrugged, a lot more at ease now that he realized there wasn't a real threat to be worried about. "I'm also kind of immune to it anyways, seeing as I'm already an outcast.

"LIES!" the other yelled again, then immediately doubled back. "Wait no. Nevermind. That's actually true."

Dib could tell the gears were turning inside Zim's head. He looked extremely uncomfortable, but ultimately ditched that expression to give way for a strained smile, which promptly took its place. "Yes of course. Zim knew that, obviously. I was just, well, testing you, Dib-thing."

Dib took a bite out of his apple without breaking eye contact, then quirked an eyebrow. "Testing me?"

"Right!" Zim chirped, shifting his weight to the other foot in an effort to hide his nervousness. "Foolish worm boy. You probably thought this mere piece of cheese was my actual plan. WELL YOU WERE WRONG!" Dib flinched, but let the other continue anyways. "See, I was only doing that to get your guard down. My real plan, on the other hand, is only just beginning. And I assure you, Dib, it will truly blow your puny human mind."

Dib smiled nastily, then turned his back to Zim to resume eating. "Uh huh, suuuure. You have fun with that, space boy."

"DO NOT TRY TO PRESUME YOU KNOW THE WORKINGS OF MY SUPERIOR BRAIN, EARTH FILTH. Because I can assure you that you do not know!" And with that, Zim stormed off, but not before stopping to point at his enemy from across the room. "And I will have fun with it, Dib. I will."

He never did do anything more with that cheese idea of his... But it was still pretty funny to watch him continuously misinterpret pop culture references and take them literally instead.

Still, now and then, Dib and Zim had to work together, as they’d been forced to do a few times before. It wasn’t like they wanted to team up, but sometimes it was a necessary sacrifice. There was also the fact that, with the exception of Gaz, Dib was the only one who knew about Zim’s true identity. Zim had even come so far as to acknowledge the human boy’s intellect as a pretty good match for his own, though he would never willingly admit it.

In fact, the closest Dib ever got to a compliment from the Irken was probably a more or less sincere "You know, Dib. You may be miles away from being as smart as me, but at least you’re smart enough to recognize a genius mind when you see one. It makes defeating you so much more...exciting."

But all and all, the past few years had passed without much scrutiny.

Senior year was when it all started to change.

It was the year in which Dib realized that he couldn’t just switch on autopilot and cruise through
all of his classes anymore. He had studies to focus on, a future to map out, and Zim’s constant presence was only making that process harder.

And although Irkens may possess all of the stamina in the world thanks to their PAKs, Dib was human and only had so much stamina to spare, making it all the more harder to even keep up with Zim’s schemes sometimes.

Plus, he had a boatload of trauma that he’d been carrying around with him for years. Dealing with a semester of Zim was one thing, but they were hi-skoolers now for crying out loud! That's a lot for a teenager to bear.

It didn’t just feel like a game anymore either. Zim was relentless, unbridled, and unshakable. He was also a goddamn mastermind, Dib realized, when he really wanted to be. Years of experience helped with that, too. He may have been a slow learner at times, but Zim definitely learned from his mistakes.

Dib, on the other hand, wasn’t quite as lumber as he used to be. Whenever he got a new injury after one of his fights with Zim, they often hurt longer, sometimes even requiring hospitalization.

But of course, Zim didn’t understand this, or maybe he just didn’t care, and would sometimes even exacerbate the problem while Dib was still healing. Simply put, being on the brink of death just didn't come as a surprise to Dib anymore. He had all the scars to prove it, too.

And frankly, it got exhausting sometimes- both physically and mentally. Especially since he had no one to talk to about anything. Which meant the dam inside Dib's head could only fill up with more and more water. More and more trauma.

But that didn't even compare to the nightmares he suffered from after nearly losing his father and the entire planet to the Florpus hole.

At first, Dib only ever got the nightmares from time to time. They never really affected him that deeply, either.

And then he started getting them weekly. They became increasingly vivid, too. So vivid, in fact, that they often blurred the lines between dream and reality.

One such moment happened while Dib was walking home from Skool with his sister in tow.

“Gaz, I’m serious,” Dib began. "I haven’t touched your stupid Game Slave-”

Before he could even finish his sentence, Dib felt a shadow loom over him in the vague shape of his sister’s head. For some reason, it reminded him of a snake that was getting ready to squeeze the life out of its prey. “What did you just say?” she hissed, leaning over into his space, which only intensified the chilling image in Dib’s head.

Even though he was considerably taller than her, Dib still often found himself shrinking back at the sight of his sister. “N-Nothing!” he squeaked, lifting both his hands in a placating gesture. “Look, I wouldn’t go through your stuff, okay? And even if I wanted to, we both know I wouldn’t dare try. Please believe me. ”

Seemingly mollified, Gaz hmphed and moved away from her brother. Not waiting up for him, she walked on past one more house before beginning to cross the lawn towards their front door. Dib, on the other hand, stood planted on the spot, gaze shifting towards the unfamiliar house in front of him.
“Hey, uh, Gaz?” She stopped in her tracks to glare at him. “Isn’t our house supposed to be right here?”

“What are you blabbering on about—our house is here, moron.” She even gestured, but Dib persisted anyways.

“Gaz, we’ve been walking this same route for years. You think I don’t know how many houses down we live from the-”

“Yeah, I know, Dib. I was there. Now are you going to come inside or not?”

Dib opened his mouth to protest, before closing it again as Gaz narrowed her eyes, daring him to waste any more of her time. He was still unconvinced, but then again, how was he ever going to prove this theory to her when their house was literally staring him right in the face? With a groan, Dib scrambled over to where his sister was waiting, warily entering after him.

Still, his paranoia lingered. Rather than running straight up to his room and logging into his computer to check up on what Zim was doing, Dib instead scoured the house from top to bottom, turning up every couch cushion and running his hands across every surface to see if everything was still as it should be.

Dib was not unfamiliar with simulations. This wouldn’t be the first time Zim has attempted to reinvent a new life for him in order to keep Dib distracted, and it sure as hell wouldn’t be the last time. And one thing he knew from experience was that these “new lives” of his always came with a weak spot—a breach in the simulation which Dib could exploit in order to find his way back to reality.

So if that was what was going on here, Dib was going to find that breach. Zim may have gotten better at imitating his sister, even his house, but he didn’t have Dib fooled. He knew something about this day was off, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

But man had Zim outdone himself this time. Even after all his searching, Dib still couldn't find a thing out of the ordinary about the house. Well, aside from the fact that it was an entire lot down from where it had been all their lives. And of course Dib had to be the only one to notice it.

“Goddamn you, Zim,” Dib growled under his breath after finally resigning himself to his bedroom. He knew he wouldn’t be able to keep this up all night, although it still felt like a blow to his ego—knowing that he was trapped but being unable to escape.

Still, knowing Zim, it would probably take him more than a day to execute whatever plan he had brewing, so Dib wasn’t too incredibly worried.

Checking on the cameras he had set up around and inside of Zim’s house also didn’t provide him with any clues. In fact, Dib had yet to see Zim at all, unless the latter was in his basement, in which case, Dib would have no choice but to give up on searching for him since he could never manage to stay down there long enough to plant cameras.

After several minutes (or hours—it was never easy to tell) of inactivity, Dib could feel his eyelids starting to droop shut. And try as he may, he couldn’t stay awake forever.

With a sigh, Dib shut off his computer and climbed into bed, allowing the quiet to fill the room. He wouldn’t be surprised if Zim was watching him right now from the depths of his underground lab, congratulating himself for a job well done.

And somehow, the thought didn’t scare him. If anything, it only strengthened his resolve to break
Not for long, Zim, Dib promised, eyes cast up at the ceiling in determination. I'll stop you. I'll always be there to stop you. Until the day I die.

He woke up three times that night.

The first time was sudden and violent and left his heart hammering against his rib-cage. He had been curled up on his right side with his hands nestled snugly underneath his head to keep it propped. It wasn’t a deep sleep, but it was soft and comfortable enough that Dib could feel the worries drain out of him like a funnel.

But when he was just about to enter the next sleep cycle, Dib was abruptly jerked from his sleep when his hipbone banged against something solid with a loud thump. As soon as his eyes flew open, Dib let out a distressed shriek, and went to sit up in bed. Except, whenever one of his hands reached up to fling the sheets off of his body, he came up with nothing but the fabric of his own sweat-drenched pajamas.

And that’s when he realized that he wasn’t in a bed at all. He was on the floor where his bed should have been—should be. Eyes widening in terror, Dib started to make a grab for his glasses, when a pounding at the bedroom door interrupted him.

“HEY! HEY DIB-SHIT. Are you gonna keep it down in there or what?!”

“Wait, Gaz!” Dib called after her, hand still over his chest as if the mere gesture would somehow slow his accelerating heart-rate. There was no way she’d be able to deny that something was wrong when she saw that his bed had disappeared. “You need to come into my room right now. You need to see this!”

Normally, Gaz would have been gone by now, but something about the desperation in her brother’s voice must have piqued her interest. Only a couple seconds passed before Dib saw the door crack open, a little more, a little more, then finally all the way.

“What?” she snapped, with some urgency in her voice.

Dib blinked at her in disbelief. “What do you mean ‘what’? You don’t see this?”

“See what? My brother’s disgustingly sweaty body and weird bedhead? Yeah, I see it.” She pinched her nose. “I can smell it too, unfortunately...”

Outraged, Dib actually did toss his bed sheets aside this time before throwing his legs over the-

Over the bed. The bed was back. And he was in the bed. It was as if nothing had ever happened. “No... no. You can’t be serious. Gaz, did you really not just see that? The bed literally vanished.”

His voice cracked on the last word: a sign of genuine distress.

Gaz hesitated, sensing the agitation. “What are you talking about? Why would your bed disappear?” A pause. Gaz only wished she could kick herself for letting her worry show so visibly. "Now, I’m going to go back to bed now, and if I so much as hear a peep out of you-“ Dib flinched at this, and Gaz immediately softened her expression.

“Look... it was probably just another nightmare. It wouldn't be the first time you’ve had one since...you know..”

"I know what I saw, Gaz. Or... maybe I don't. God, I don't know..."
She could see her brother's body trembling underneath the bed sheets, which meant it must have been a rougher night than usual.

“If you had to rate each nightmare on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the scariest, what would this one be?” She sat on the floor of Dib's bedroom, leaning against the side of the bed. They both wore their respective pajamas, except Dib had his partly unbuttoned down the middle to help with overheating. The room was dark save for the single light illuminating from Dib’s nightstand.

Everything was calm. Everything besides Dib's racing heart.

Dib clasped both hands on his lap, trying to summon his inner zen. "Can I use decimals too?"

Her response was a shrug and a whispered "Sure."

"Probably...an 8.5 then." There was a beat of silence as Gaz processed this.

She peered up questioningly at him, eyebrows reaching towards her dyed purple hairline. "Seriously?"

"Why would I joke about this, Gaz?" Dib mumbled. "It's really that bad. I don't know how much longer I can take it, honestly."

"Does dad know?"

"No..." he admitted. "I don't think we should tell him either. He'll probably just blame it on me being so obsessed with the paranormal that it finally got to my head."

"You don't give him enough credit, Dib. He might understand. He's changed since he helped us stop the Florpus."

Dib sighed and unlaced his fingers to wring his shirt out of nervous habit. "I guess so... but he just thought that was all a hallucination, remember? I only wish he could see through my eyes for once... see how much I have to go through just to keep this world from falling into Zim's clutches. And I always have to do it alone..."

The next interval of silence was even longer. "You're...not alone, Dib. I'm here for you."

Dib tilted his head. He could hardly believe his ears. "What? What did you say?"

"Nothing. Never mind. Just forget about it." She sounded defensive. Flustered, even. It was oddly endearing in a way.

A flicker of a smile made its way onto Dib's tired, ghostly pale face.

“Just, try to chill out, okay?” Gaz finally said, now that all of her previous anger had dwindled. "And remember, none of it is actually real. Don't forget that, Dib." He nodded. "And try not to bother me again until you’ve at least taken a shower."

The door clicked shut, and Dib was once again left to his swarming thoughts, because really—how could Gaz have missed it? It was as if the bed had reformed itself in the blink of an eye. And Dib hadn't even felt himself move either!
Dib patted the slightly damp sheets covering his lower half, a frown setting on his lips. “I saw what I saw,” he whispered. “I couldn’t have imagined that...right? But that means...I am in a simulation. That has to be it.”

Then the doubt started to creep in. Had Zim really not come to gloat yet? There was simply no way he could ever bear to see Dib suffer for this long without at least giving him a sign of his presence. Like a calling card of sorts. So why had he gotten nothing but silence this time?

“I’m not crazy,” Dib muttered to himself, settling back into bed. He winced at the pain on his side, eventually flipping over onto his other side. Sleep came again soon enough,

The next time Dib was roused from his sleep was not violent or even particularly painful. It was more of a creeping discomfort—like having a feather tickle against your cheek but having no idea where the sensation was coming from.

Except, it wasn’t even a metaphor. It really did feel like something was touching Dib’s cheek. Or rather, slithering across his cheek.

As soon as the mysterious object brushed his nose, Dib squirmed away, repositioning himself onto his back. His eyelids began to flutter as he slowly started to wake up, although he refused to open them all the way until another tap, this time on his nostril, caused Dib to stir.

“Nng...” was the only groggy, incoherent noise he uttered as Dib finally opened his eyes.

Even without the aided vision of his glasses, what he saw in front of him made Dib’s blood run cold.

“Te-t-t-tentacles?” Rather than scream again, Dib could only wheeze as he watched one of his alien limbs slither across his blanketed stomach, throat contorting in fear. As if somehow sensing his fear, the tentacle also started to tremble, replicating the motion of his body.

“This can’t be real this can’t be real this can’t be real.” He wondered what would happen if he started hyperventilating right then and there. Now fully pressed against the headboard, Dib slowly lifted both his arms—er, tentacles, and brought them closer to his face, as if stuck in a trance. Not sure what had come over him all of a sudden, Dib tried curling them, mystified by the strange way in which they undulated up and down, like they were dancing.

He was definitely still terrified. That much was certain. But that wasn’t all that he was feeling. Curiosity. There was something so intriguing about seeing himself molded together with another creature that was so unlike himself. So...alien. Dib felt his heart skip a beat again. Was this just another vivid nightmare, or was there something bigger going on?

Dib shut his eyes again in rumination. “Why is this happening to me?” He let his arms fall back onto his lap, breathing deeply as the fear slowly began to dissipate.

"It's going to be okay... I'm going to be okay. Gaz is right. It's just a nightmare and nothing else."

A few more minutes passed before Dib found himself in a state of total relaxation. He reopened his eyes, half-expecting to see the tentacles again laying there again.

They were gone. Upon inspecting his own arms, Dib saw nothing out of the ordinary. It was just a pair of normal human arms.

With a groan, Dib drifted back to sleep.
The third and final time he was woken up was when there just so happened to be somebody in the room with him.

“Wh- huh? Zim?”

The twitch of an antennae was the only acknowledgement he got. Dib frowned, grabbing his glasses and pushing them onto his face without taking his eyes off the alien. “Why are you here?”

Zim, who had been perched on the other end of Dib’s bed with his back towards him, said nothing. Dib frowned. Well this is...unexpected.

It wasn’t even Zim’s appearance in his bedroom that surprised him. In fact, he had been anticipating it, since Dib had clearly seen through his deception.

What actually surprised Dib was Zim’s demeanor. His usual air of confidence seemed to be missing, nor was he making any effort to taunt Dib or even laugh in his face for almost fooling him. Instead, he just sat there slouching, with both antennas plastered against the back of his bald head.

It was unnerving in a way, to see him looking so openly vulnerable—with his back to his enemy, no less.

Dib tried again, gentler this time. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on here, Zim?”

“I’m a failure, Dib.” Dib let out the quietest of gasps at this unrestrained response. He rubbed at his eyes, just to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. “Nobody...wants me around anymore. Nobody respects Zim.”

“I-” What was he even supposed to say to that? “I’m sure that’s...not true.” What was going on here? Usually when Dib dreamed about Zim, he dreamed that the alien had finally won, had finally conquered his planet and forced Dib to watch the whole thing go up in flames.

And now...

This time, Zim did actually turn around to look at him, those bright, magenta eyes glistening with tears. For a fleeting second, Dib had the urge to wipe one of those tears away with his finger. It wasn’t a spiteful urge, either.

“Even you don’t want Zim, Dib-human. You just want me to disappear, don’t you?”

“Ahh!” And just like that, it was morning, and Dib was alone in his bedroom again. He wasn’t entirely sure why, but that last dream was the one that had left him the most shaken. Or were they dreams at all?

Dib ran a hand through his hair, some of which was still stuck to his forehead. He suddenly remembered Gaz’s suggestion that he take a shower and decided to follow through with that first.

It was only when he began to dry himself off with a towel that Dib noticed the bruise on his hip, which was already beginning to purple. He prodded it with his finger, wincing at the pain.

That does it. As much as he hated asking for help from the alien, Dib saw no other option but to take this problem to Zim.

Chapter End Notes
And there we go! First chapter complete! I hope you liked it, and I'm sorry for the lack of Zim in this one. He'll definitely have more appearances in the next chapter though!
Chapter Summary

Dib shows up to Skool hoping to confide in Zim about his otherworldly experiences from the other day. That is, until Zim decides to complicate things for the Earth boy with a trick of his own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That same morning during breakfast, Dib tried to approach Gaz in the kitchen.

“Hey Gaz, can I ask you someth-“

Without turning away from the bowl of cereal she was currently pouring herself, Gaz cut him off.

“Did you shower?”

“Did I- oh.” Dib flushed. “Yes I showered! And that’s not the point!” There was a moment’s hesitation as Dib tried to collect his scattered thoughts. “Wait...what was I talking about again? Oh yeah! Gaz.”

“What?” Gaz sat down at the table and assumed her usual disgruntled teenage slouch. Dib made some breakfast of his own and joined her. It was times like this when he silently appreciated not having pudding as an addition to his breakfast, lunch, and dinners. And that only happened once Dib managed to steal back the pod Zim had been using to store Clembrane.

Sure, it was a little mean to be keeping him locked up in there, but they’d let the guy out again sooner or later. Just...not today. Or tomorrow, most likely.

“Hellooo,” snapped Gaz, spoon brandished in his direction. “Earth to Dib. Do you copy?”

Only just realizing that he had been swishing his own spoon around absently in his mouth, Dib spat the utensil back out. “Shit. Sorry. Yes I copy, sister Gaz.” He smiled sheepishly.

Gaz snorted. “‘Sister’ Gaz? Yeah, okay, Zim.”

Dib, who was strongly opposed to being compared to his nemesis in such a casual manner, decided to change the subject. “Listen... have you, uh, noticed anything off lately?”

“You mean besides your episode from last night?”

“It wasn’t an episode! And it wasn’t just another nightmare either!” Dib shot back defensively. “Gaz, this is serious. There’s something I need to tell you. I-“

“Hey, aren’t you kids supposed to be getting to skool?” Dib mentally cursed their dad’s bad timing, but found himself moving of his own volition anyways.

“Kids?” Gaz repeated, setting her bowl down in the sink. “Don’t you think we’re a bit too old to still be called kids?”
“Oh Gaz. You will *always* be my kids,” Dad answered fondly, ushering the both of them towards the door. “Now run along, you two.”

As soon as they were outside, Dib tried to pick up the conversation where they left off. But before that, he gave the house a final once-over, just in case it decided to get up and start walking on two legs. You never know these days.

“So, um, about what I was trying to say earlier...” Dib began.

Gaz didn’t even look at him. “Dib? Save it. Dad’s right. We’re going to be late, and your talking is only going to slow us down.”

“But—“

“Dib—“

“Okay, okay. Fine,” Dib surrendered. The quiet didn’t last for long, however. It was simply impossible. Not when he was practically bursting at the seams. “Right, of course. Silly me. It’s not like someone’s bed *disappearing* is a huge deal or anything. I mean, why would it be?”

He laughed humorlessly, and the words continued to tumble out. “But hey, that’s okay, ‘cause I’m obviously just imagining it all! Stupid Dib and his stupid, messed up head! I mean, why take a guy like me seriously, huh? Like the fact that Zim’s an alien! Ridiculous, isn’t it? He’s just like any other guy that goes to our skool, right? Green skin and all!” Dib slowed down to catch a breath.

The next part was said in a much lower, much quieter hiss. “Just, *c’mon*. What kind of lousy excuse is ’skin condition,’ anyways? I’m telling you, Gaz. One of these days our classmates are going to realize that green skin isn’t normal.”

“So, um, about what I was trying to say earlier...” Gaz turned around to address her brother, but nearly forgot what she was going to say when she saw how sunken his eyes were in their sockets. If she had to guess, he hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep last night after she’d left. "...start walking away now before the urge to punch you after listening to your stupid tirade becomes too strong to ignore.”

But even as she said it, her words held no real malice to them. There was no way she would punch Dib- maybe on a good day, but certainly not while he was in this state.

Dib, who had only just realized they were at skool, nodded and bid her farewell.

“Oh, um. Okay, See ya later, Gaz.”

“Whatever.”

With a sigh, Dib made a sharp detour towards his locker. Truthfully, he hadn’t been expecting an outcome that much more different than this one. Gaz hardly listened to him to begin with. And she listened *even less* when the topic was anything paranormal. Still... it would have been reassuring to have someone on his side for once.

And the worst part of all was that now Dib *really* had no other choice. He *needed* Zim’s help.

But of course, Zim wasn’t going to make that easy.

“Hey! Dib-thing!”
There was still five minutes left until the bell. Dib had just finished gathering his stuff from his locker when a familiar voice called out to him.

Dib flinched, and with a mild sense of foreboding, turned around to meet the other with a glare.

"Zim," he said, raising a skeptical eyebrow when he spotted the hand slowly inching behind Zim’s back. “Whatcha got there?"

“Oh, nothing,” Zim said in a voice that clearly meant it was something. For a moment, he seemed to be mulling something over, but then Zim's gaze shifted not-so-subtly over Dib's shoulder. "Well hello there Gaz-sister," Zim greeted politely. "What was that you said? You want to talk to Dib?"

Dib, who isn’t usually the gullible type, felt his pulse quicken at the idea of his little sister coming over to potentially beat him up. She couldn’t still be mad about earlier, right? Whipping around to search the hallways, Dib blurted, “What? Where?”

Having succeeded at getting Dib to fall for his bait, Zim brought out the item that he had been hiding behind his back and flung its contents at the unsuspecting human. He cackled at the screech Dib let out as his books slipped from his hands and onto the floor. At first, Dib simply stared in trepidation at the viscous green liquid that was dripping down his person, perhaps waiting for it to burn him or otherwise inflict some other sort of bodily harm. But Zim knew neither of these things were part of his design.

Eventually, Dib’s expression morphed into one of pure incredulity. “Did you- did you just slime me? Seriously? ”

Zim shook his head, frowning at the other’s gall. “Foolish human. This is no mere slime I have thrown on you. This is a special kind of—” Zim quickly cut himself off before he could reveal any more of his genius plan. “Well, you’ll just have to find out now, won't you?”

He waited for a response as Dib searched his face. However, his intuition told him that there was something else plaguing the human’s inferior mind. For one, he looked like he was ready to collapse from exhaustion right then and there. Now, normally this would have added to Zim’s amusement, but this time he was just perplexed. He hadn’t even gone near Dib the other night. He’d been in his lab, planning his next move...which, admittedly, wasn’t one of his best evil schemes. But it would still be something of an inconvenience to the boy.

Nonetheless, Zim couldn’t help but be drawn to the haunted look in the other’s expression. He desperately wanted to know what had caused that expression—what the human was so frightened of, so that he could use it to his advantage.

_What are you hiding, Earth boy?_

“Okay, but why though? I didn’t even do anything to you this time!” It was true too. There had always been a sort of pattern to their rivalry. Usually Dib was the first to invoke the alien’s wrath in an effort to expose him, and then Zim would respond with some sort of retaliation. Rarely was it ever the other way around.

“Yes you did! You were plotting with someone.”

“What are you talking about? Plotting with who?”

“Yesterday I saw you and that female Earthling sitting with your heads together. Explain that, Dib.”
Dib’s eyes lit up with understanding. “You mean Gretchen? That’s not conspireing. We were just talking! She was having a really bad day and needed someone to comfort her...” He frowned at the memory.

Zim crossed his arms, still wearing that suspicious squint. “I don’t believe you.”

“Yeah well, you know what I don’t believe?” Dib gestured down at his body in exasperation. “This. Now I’m going to have to take two more showers just to get this crap off of me. Thanks a lot, space boy. I hope your little prank was worth it.”

Just then, Dib bent over to pick up his books, only to be puzzled by their pristine condition. Of course, the Irken standing in front of him was the only one who knew that the reason for this cleanliness was because his concoction was specifically meant to target Dib’s skin cells and nothing else. Which meant in the event that anything else came into contact with the liquid, it would simply slide off rather than adhering to it.

But what really caught Zim’s attention was the brief flash of pain that crossed Dib’s features as he was regathering his things. Dib recovered himself quickly, seemingly brushing the moment off like it was nothing, but Zim remembered.

“Rough night, huh Dib?” Zim teased with a hint of inquisitiveness creeping in his voice, which Dib may or may not have picked up on. The latter flinched at the question.

“I don’t know,” the Dib said, sizing him up. His eyes, although they were narrowed suspiciously, still held a shred of fear, much to Zim’s delight. “You tell me. You were there. Probably having a good laugh too—until...” Something in Dib's expression shifted as he trailed off, but Zim could not pinpoint what this foreign emotion was that he was seeing. “Anyways, I’m going to go clean this green gunk off of me now, so.”

And with that, he shouldered Zim brusquely to the side and marched straight towards the bathroom, leaving Zim to process what he had just heard.

As soon as the bathroom door shut behind him, Dib rushed to the sink and ran the water before hastily shoving his arms underneath.

“Stupid Zim. He just had to go and make things difficult for me.” Dib hardly noticed the other student at the sink next to him, eyeing him strangely when he resumed talking to himself—a habit from his childhood which had quickly become a ritual of sorts. If anything it was his coping mechanism, much like all those times he had recorded himself when he got some dirt on Zim.

“ Weirdo, ” was all the boy muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Dib to hear. The latter opened his mouth, ready with a retort, when all of a sudden the boy’s eyes widened into saucers. For a moment he simply stood there with his mouth agape, and Dib, now visibly bewildered, took a step towards him. That only caused the boy to scurry out of the bathroom, screaming something about an alien trying to attack him.

Dib could feel a bead of sweat forming on his forehead as he slowly turned back towards the mirror. Oh no...

If anybody had noticed Dib’s suspiciously late entrance to class, they didn’t comment on it. Nor did they comment on the fact that Dib had been keeping his head buried below the collar of his trench coat, as if he was trying to hide something about his appearance. Which he was.

Zim, on the other hand, did notice. Only, he purposely waited for all the seats in the classroom to
fill up so that everyone would be present when he finally called attention to it.

Even before the teacher had time to open her mouth to begin lecturing, Zim’s hand shot up into the air, and he began to stand up, waving it back and forth with rigorous effort even though he was already in the teacher’s direct line of sight.

Ms. Honey, who was young and sunny and the polar opposite of their old teacher Ms. Bitters, blinked at the alien-in-disguise with bemusement. “Yes, Zim?”

“Does anyone else notice something... different about the Dib-human today?” Zim punctuated his “innocent” question with a gloating smirk in Dib’s direction.

All eyes turned towards Dib, who was staring daggers through his coat, which he had clenched in both fists like a lifeline. This only caused Zim’s smirk to widen until his zipper-teeth were openly showing. Mission accomplished.

“Hey...now that you mention it, Dib is looking kind of green,” one student observed. Dib, who must have clearly heard the comment, shrank further into his seat.

“Yeah,” another student chimed in. “What’s up with that? I mean, Zim’s skin is green because of his condition, so what's Dib's excu-”

Unable to contain his anger anymore, Dib threw aside the collar he had been clutching and slammed both palms on his desk, seething. “HE. DOES NOT. HAVE A SKIN CONDITION.”

One moment, Dib had been desperately trying to cover himself up, but now his luminescent green skin was on full display for the other students to gape at.

"Woah, look at him! He's a freak!” someone shouted.

"Yeah! And his skin is glowing too!” another chimed in, each of their comments like a jab to Dib's reputation. And even though his blood was boiling, Dib could do nothing but watch as they each jumped to the same, terrible conclusion.

"So the kid with the big head was right all along. Aliens do exist, and he's one of them!"

"I still can't believe we've had an alien going to school with us all this time... can you imagine?"

Somewhat ashamed of his outburst, Dib lowered himself back down to a sitting position, resisting the urge to meet eyes with the real alien sitting across the room. Now everybody was staring at him. “I...” Dib cleared his throat and felt a flush arriving on his cheeks, which must have clashed in a very unbecoming way with the green. Deciding that he may as well roll with it, Dib faked a cough. “See, I’ve been feeling really sick lately...”

“Oh dear,” Ms. Honey whispered, nodding her head solemnly. She sounded sympathetic. “I’m so sorry to hear that. Maybe you should go down to see the nurse...yes. I suppose that would be best.” Reaching inside one of her desk drawers, she procured a hall pass, which she handed to Dib as soon as he got up. “Be sure to take the rest of the day off if you need to, Dib. I hope you feel better.” She offered him one of her most sincere smiles, and Dib couldn’t help but return it, even if it may have been mostly forced.

“And Zim-” The other green-skinned boy snapped to attention, not expecting to have the attention diverted from Dib to himself. “You should be ashamed of yourself for pointing out Dib’s sickness like that. He is clearly very self-conscious about his skin. I think that’s something you should be
able to empathize with.”

“Empathy?!” Zim repeated, incredulous. “Zim does not feel weak, sappy emotions such as this empathy you speak of.” Even the word itself felt like poison on his tongue. He gagged.

Thankful for the opportunity to avoid being the center of attention for the rest of the day, Dib graciously accepted the pass before shuffling towards the door. Unable to resist this time, he caught Zim’s gaze on the way out, sticking his tongue out in triumph just before the lock clicked shut.

*It seems you didn’t have the last laugh after all, space boy.*

Regardless of his small victory, Dib’s previous apprehension lingered as he made his way down the hallway towards the nurse’s office.

What was Zim thinking, anyways? He wasn’t actually planning on hurling Dib into another explosion, was he?

Dib glanced around at his surroundings, then at his own footsteps. Well, there must not have been a stasis effect this time, since Dib was walking at the same speed as everybody else. But then why turn him green? Was it supposed to be a warning of some sorts?

Even though class had another fifteen minutes or so left, there were still a few stragglers hanging out in the halls. Dib averted his eyes bashfully, trying to keep his cool even as he felt their stares on the back of his head. So maybe the prank hadn’t harmed him physically, but it would still make him a laughingstock just the same. It wasn’t as if Dib hadn’t already been ostracized by his fellow peers; now he’d really stick out like a sore thumb.

And to think it was all because he decided to make enemies with the not-so-friendly neighborhood alien when he was twelve years old. Figures.

After finding himself in front of the nurse’s office, Dib finally came to a stop. This was all becoming too much too fast. He should have just talked to Zim about what he’d seen last night as soon as he’d been approached at his locker. Maybe that way he could have avoided this mess altogether.

When Dib came out of the nurse’s offices ten minutes later with an early release form, he wasn’t expecting somebody to be waiting for him on the other side. But sure enough, his rival was pacing back and forth outside the door, appearing agitated over some internal conflict. He was grinding his teeth together and muttering something under his breath that Dib couldn’t quite catch.

“Uh,” was all that Dib could manage at this strange spectacle. “You’re blocking my way.”

“Ah, Earthstink.” Zim began to clear his throat, straightening his posture to make himself look taller, although Dib still had a couple of inches on him anyways. “Zim has been waiting for you. I’ve come to- to-” He faltered, seemingly losing whatever confidence he had mustered earlier.

The next time he spoke was through clenched teeth, when his discomfort was practically glaring Dib right in the face. “I’ve come to apologize.”

Dib wasn’t sure whether it would be more appropriate to laugh or scream. “Sorry, could you just repeat that one last time.”
Before he had time to protest, Dib felt himself being shoved up against the nearest wall, with a growling alien leaning in so close that their foreheads were nearly touching.

“Zim does not appreciate your tone, human filth, nor will I be repeating myself, so you’d better listen closely to what I'm about to say.”

Dib cringed away, not liking having someone this close to his face—especially someone who has made repeated attempts to kill him. “Okay, okay! You have the floor. Proceed.”

“Zim does not understand what significance floors have in this conversation, but I shall continue anyways, whether you decide to make use of your hearing holes or not.” He loosened his grip on the human slightly, and Dib found himself exhaling a breath that he didn’t realize he was holding.

“I am-” he began, wincing before even finishing his sentence. “sorry, for defiling your stinky human body with my green goo of amazingness.”

Dib nearly choked on his own spit at the wording of that apology. He could feel a laugh bubbling in his throat, but decided it would be safer to swallow it down instead.

“Yeah, okay, sure. And I accept your apology.” Dib breathed a sigh of relief, glad that was finally over. He still had his suspicions though. "So, glowing green skin, huh? That's so original of you, Zim."

"What do you mean?"

"Uh, helloo?" Dib gesticulated. "You trapped me in a stasis field after catching me sneaking into your base? And then I guess something went wrong while I was in there, and then you kidnapped me after I escaped because you needed me to speed up the explosion- which, by the way, was a really stupid idea on your part. You nearly cooked us all alive, including yourself." As he was explaining all this, Dib frequently checked for a flicker of recognition in Zim's eyes. There was none. "Is this seriously not ringing any bells for you? I mean, I know it happened sort of a long time ago, but still. It took you days to get your house back to the way it was before."

Dib noted the frown line that had just emerged on the Irken's face, which was usually devoid of any wrinkles or creases. This was no act. He really couldn't remember.

"Zim hears what the Dib-human is saying..." the other began. "But no. It is not possible. Although it is true that I have been working on creating a stasis field in the event that you do try to infiltrate my base again, the only subject who I've gotten to test it on is GIR, and that was an accident."

Dib could feel his whole world crashing down around him. "I don't understand. How can you not remember? Wasn't it like, Probing Day for all the Irken Invaders, or something? And I know how important that is to you. You couldn't have forgotten about that."

"Probing Day?" Zim snorted. "What kind of a ridiculous title is that? And how DARE you assume I don't already know ALL of the customs of my people, Dib. Don't you think if this 'Probing Day' existed, I would have been informed of it by my Tallest?"

If Dib hadn't already been reeling from this sudden outpouring of information, he probably would have experienced a stronger reaction. Or simply throttled the other until he remembered again. But the shock was severely muting those emotions, so Dib instead shook it off like a bad dream. "You know what? Don't worry about it." His voice sounded weak and faraway. “But seriously, you’ve gotta let me go so I can get home and figure out how to reverse this...stuff you put on me.”
Probing Day...Probing Day? Zim prodded his memory, distraught with this- this blank space he was finding. A PAK malfunction, perhaps?

Or...it could also be that Dib was messing with him, and this was the reaction he was hoping to get out of him. Well! Zim wasn't going to let the worm boy make a fool out of him that easily.

When Dib mentioned a cure for his condition, Zim scoffed condescendingly in a way that implied he possessed some hidden knowledge that the other didn’t. “As if.”

Dib struggled against the gloved hands. Too caught up in his thoughts, he had nearly forgotten how uncomfortable the position was that he had been forced into. “Zim...what are you saying? There is a way to reverse this, right?” Only, his tone made it sound more like a threat than a question.

“Hey, will you two get a room already!” Both beings flinched at the sound of a voice. Zim craned his neck to shoot a glare at the Earth scum who dared to interrupt them.

“Zim does not wish to 'get a room,' Zim snarled, still not releasing his hold on Dib. ”Everything I want to be said can be said right here. Do you dare oppose Zim’s wishes?”

The worm child, who Zim identified as Jessica, merely sneered at the pair of them and snapped a picture with her cellular device. “Honestly, I don’t really care what you two do, as long as you’re not making out in the hallways. Because that would be gross.”

Zim could feel the Dib squirming in his grasp, to his increased annoyance. As soon as Jessica was out of earshot, Zim turned back around, ready to snap at the human for being so uncooperative. He stopped mid-sentence.

“Umm, why does your face look all weird?”

Dib, who was fed up with this day as a whole, quite literally shoved the alien off his person, smoothed his collar, then shot Zim an indignant glare. “My face looks weird because you turned it this color with your stupid slime!”

“No, no,” Zim insisted, pointing again. “I mean, why is it red? I didn’t do that.”

Clearly not expecting the question, Dib spluttered some sort of idiotic response that Zim didn’t entirely completely catch—not that it was relevant. Still, he decided to make a mental note of it before finally getting back on track with their previous conversation.

“Anyways, what I was trying to say before is that yes, Earth smell, there is a way to reverse it.”

“Oh thank god,” Dib breathed, only the relief didn’t stay etched in his features for much longer than a second. “You’re not going to tell me what it is, are you? Fine, Zim. Just tell me what you want.” He hurried to modify that statement before the Irken could open his mouth again. ”And it can’t be the destruction of my planet, sorry.”

Zim seemed to consider this, tapping his chin thoughtfully with a clawed finger. “Hmmm. What Zim wants is for you to tell me how you got—” he paused in order to poke Dib roughly on the hip. “that.”

“Oh!” Dib reacted instantly, rubbing at the sore spot. “Wait, for real? That’s all you- okay, wow.” Zim almost regretted what he said, since it meant seeing Dib satisfied again. “In that case, it’s a deal.”
Zim squinted one eye at the outstretched hand before settling his gaze back on Dib’s face. Obviously he still had trust issues from the last time the human had proposed a truce.

Nonetheless, he shook it anyways.

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh, someone's having trouble remembering. Hmm curious. Not gonna lie though- I had totally forgotten that episode was a thing until I was about halfway through this chapter. So I'm not totally sure where I got the idea for a glowing green Dib then, lol. Oh well. It still fits into the story I have planned nonetheless. And don't worry! It'll only get weirder/trippier from here. So that'll be fun.

But anyways, I hope you enjoyed :)
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

As per the conditions of their truce, Zim takes Dib back to his base so he can reverse the effects of his strange, alien mixture, and Dib holds up his end of the bargain by explaining how he got his bruise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t very often that Dib and Zim found themselves walking side-by-side, but of course, there had been a lot of things weird about the past couple of days.

Still, Dib sort of wished he didn’t have to do it all while his skin was practically glowing. Being seen consorting with the enemy was one thing, but what was even more embarrassing was being seen looking like the enemy. They must have looked like two peas in a pod with their matching—albeit not identical—green skin.

Actually, the color reminded him a bit of the Membracelet after Zim’s modification. Dib subconsciously rubbed at the part of his wrist where he once wore the device. The device that started it all. And to believe that fight with Zim and the Florpus hole happened five years ago.

Suddenly, he felt a nudge to his ribcage. “Hey, Dib-thing.” Dib glanced up questioningly. “Didn’t you notice? We’re here.”

“Huh?” Dib shook his head, peering out towards the unusually empty lawn. “Sorry, I just—hey, wait a second. What happened to your gnomes?”

Zim blinked. “Gnomes? What gnomes?”

Feeling a stab of irritation at the other’s obviously feigned “confusion,” Dib threw his arms up in exasperation. “Oh, c’mon. You don’t have to play this game with me, Zim! It’s just a question. What is it? Did the gnomes try to start an uprising against you? Or did you accidentally cause a malfunction in their programming and decided to get rid of them altogether?” He puffed up his chest. “Well, either way, probably not a good idea on your part. Now I’ll have an even easier time getting into your base, so take that!”

Zim didn’t seem to be particularly enjoying this conversation either. “Zim doesn’t understand the meaning of this pointless Earth squabble of yours. I have never owned any variation of those pointy-hatted dwarf...things...nor do I see a purpose in utilizing them as lawn decorations.” He started to walk away.

Dib gaped after the retreating Irken, rushing to catch up with him. “You’re not joking, are you? You’ve really never owned gnomes that could shoot lasers out of their eyes?” He tried to replicate the action by cupping both hands around his own eyes.

Except Zim never got the chance to answer his question, as they were interrupted by a green blur that came to greet them at the door.
Zim growled at the approaching blur. “Not now, GIR. I’m busy.”

"Aw man," whined the robot, who got quickly sidetracked after noticing Dib’s presence. He pulled down the head of his dog costume. “Oooo, you brought the big-headed boy with you? And he’s greeen, just like mastah!”

“Yes, yes. The Dib is here to... assist me with one of my experiments. Now shoo. Go back to watching one of your weird shows. I have things to do.”

"Umm, Zim?"

"No more questions," grumbled Zim, latching onto Dib's wrist since he wasn't budging. Zim wrenched him towards the kitchen just as the piece of furniture lifted itself up for them.

Even though he still had plenty of questions swirling around inside his head, Dib let the subject be for now. “Okay,” was all he whispered, falling silent as he was dragged onto the elevator.

He glanced down at the hand still clutching his wrist. The sensation of claws digging into his skin was somewhat unpleasant, but it also grounded him in a way. That means... I can't still be dreaming, right?

“Hey, let go of me,” Dib finally snapped, jerking his wrist away. All that earned him was a grunt from Zim, who quickly peeled off both his wig and contact lenses before handing them over to his PAK legs to take away.

There was an awkward tension that filled the small space as they rode down the elevator in silence. Dib, now feeling that impulse to do something with his hands, instead crossed one arm over the other in order to repress the urge. He started to turn away to stare at the laboratory as it came into view on the other side of the glass.

“Dib, what does it mean to ‘make out’?”

Oh no. No no no no.

“Ummm-” Deciding he’d rather stall for time than answer the question, Dib pretended he was formulating an in-depth response, then quickly made a beeline for the lab once the elevator door opened again. “Not now,” he called over one shoulder. “You’ve gotta help me get this green stuff out of my skin so I don’t have to stay a freak forever. Now c’mon.”

Zim, who was not satisfied with having his question deflected, simply quirked an emotive antenna and followed him out. “Fine. Come with me.”

After waiting up for him, the two entered the expansive room.

“Rather impressive, isn’t it?” Zim grinned, gesturing all around him. “It must be difficult beholding something so advanced, huh, Earth filth?” Dib opened his mouth to respond, but was promptly cut off. “That’s right, Dib. Even your primitive monkey mind couldn’t begin to comprehend Irken technology like this.”

“Uh, Zim? I’ve been down here before, you know. More than once, actually.”

Zim seemed taken aback by the lack of praise. “Oh yeah. Right. Ahem... no matter!” Dib followed him to a table—which had just risen out of a trapdoor-like hole in the floor—filled with beakers and bubbling liquids. He considered going around and pressing random buttons just to piss Zim off, then thought against it. It was probably not the best idea to antagonize an extraterrestrial being in
his own base, especially when Dib had no idea what most of the strange gadgets did anyways.

“Drink this, human.”

Dib eyed the flask warily. “You’re telling me that drinking a green liquid is going to reverse the effects of another green liquid?”

“That is correct.”

“Are you sure it’s not going to poison me?”

Zim clearly took offense to this, placing both gloved hands on his hips. “Well that’s an idiotic question. Do you really think I’d let you die to something as pathetic as poison? You should know that Zim’s plans always involve a bit more...pissass than that.”

Dib snorted, now holding the flask and swirling it around idly in one hand. “I think you mean pizazz, space boy. ‘Pissass’ just sounds mildly inappropriate.” He watched the liquid slosh to one side, shrugged, then tilted his head back, unsure whether it would be worth it to plug his nose or not. “Well, bottoms up.”

For some reason, Zim was discomforted by the amount of trust that the human boy was displaying by gulping down the liquid without even forcing Zim to test it on something else first. As soon as Dib finished, he shoved it back into Zim’s hands and waited.

“So...like...how long does this stuff normally take, anyways? A couple hours? A whole night? A-woooah.” He lurched violently to one side, not expecting to feel tingles erupting all over. ”What the-

Dib almost never paid attention to the way his own body responded to stimuli, seeing as how it had been performing the same, boring functions all his life. But now- what was even happening to him right now? That green slimy stuff had started to seep out of his skin through the tiny orifices. Gross, yet also fascinating in a way. Dib could even see a few patches of his normal pigmentation starting to show through. Could it be that he was watching a chemical reaction happening inside of his own body? So cool!

Dib stifled a laugh, completely unaware of how ridiculous he appeared hopping from foot to foot. It must have looked like he was performing some sort of absurd chicken dance. “Ah! It....it tickles...”

Although he had assured the Earth boy that his formula wasn’t toxic, Zim could not have been completely sure what was going to happen. Sure, he had prepared a counteracting solution just in case something ended up going wrong, perhaps even backfiring on himself somehow, but the thought of testing it on a human subject hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“Z-Zim, w-what is this stuff?”

Even Zim was perplexed by the strange fits of giggles emitting from Dib’s mouth. “I uh, don’t know if this is supposed to happen,” he admitted a bit quietly. Well, at least if the human did spontaneously combust, Zim could carry out the rest of his mission with ease and not have to worry about it being constantly jeopardized.

But that didn’t mean he wanted Dib to die now—not while he still had information that Zim needed to collect. “Computer!” he barked. “Why is he behaving like this? I need you to run a diagnostic.”
“Ugh, fiiiine.”

A few digital beeps later, a holographic projection of the Dib suddenly appeared in front of him.

"I'm not quite sure I understand it either, if we're being frank. But it seems to me like some sort of defense mechanism was activated to combat the foreign substance invading the boy's body," the Computer explained. "*Normally* this "ticklish" sensation is triggered by physical touch, and it only affects certain, vulnerable areas of the body."

"And now?"

"*Now it's affecting, well, everything.*"

“Okay, and? How do we fix it?” Out of the corner of his eye, Zim noticed that Dib was edging dangerously close to the alchemy table, about to lose his balance.

Zim growled in frustration, not liking this new, clumsier version of his enemy. “Can’t you just stand still for one measly second so I can focus? Stupid, disobedient meat sack....”

But it seemed that the Dib could not, in fact, stand still—or even listen to simple instructions, evidently. It was like he was experiencing the effects of a hundred different drug doses at one time, with the product being a giggly, bumbling mess of a human. Not being one to wait until disaster struck, Zim promptly caught the boy by the torso with one of his PAK legs, whisking him away from the table and up into the air.

Dib apparently found this all very entertaining. “Hey, haha, put me down, space boy!” Laughing, he swung his legs back and forth, trying to wiggle himself out.

“Not until you stop behaving like a moron,” scowled Zim, wrapping another PAK leg around Dib's waist in order to keep him steady. “Computer! Why have you not responded to Ziiim yet?”

“Sorry,” the Computer replied in a voice that suggested the opposite. “*You seemed preoccupied.*”

“Why, yes, Computer—I *am* preoccupied. Because apparently nobody else here is competent enough to help me when I need it!”

“Okay, okay. Sheesh. What do you want me to do? Knock the boy unconscious?”

Zim pondered this as Dib continued to thrash in his grasp, all the while never letting up that wheezing goose laugh of his. The only other adjective that came to Zim’s mind to describe it was *dorky* —something that he had occasionally heard other humans call each other. “Hm, yeah—I suppose you could do that. Anything to make that *horrid* noise go away.”

“Whatever you say, *sir,*” came the snarky response.

The room filled with silence once more, and Zim could finally relax now that his concentration was no longer being impeded on. “Finally...” Zim muttered, relinquishing his hold on the teenager so he could retract his PAK legs.

Dib sat sound asleep with his head propped up against one of the legs of the table, only stirring when his body came in contact with the floor. Zim settled on a spot next to him and tilted his head to the side to examine Dib briefly.
Huh. The Dib’s head wasn’t quite as big as he had remembered. It was actually a bit more proportionate to the rest of his body now. His shoulders were broader too, though he was still lanky and long-limbed, so there was still that to make fun of.

Has it really been that long since they started trying to destroy each other?

Once he'd finally averted his eyes from Dib's zonked state next to him, Zim began typing something into his tablet. And though he never would have admitted it, the quiet snores were actually not all that unpleasant to listen to.

Can’t...move....limbs. Body....too weak....

“Nnng...” Overcome by nausea, Dib sat up and pressed a hand to his distressed stomach, resisting the urge to vomit. His glasses must have slipped from his nose while he was unconscious, since the only thing Dib could make out around him was blurry shapes.

“What...happened?” muttered the human in a raspy voice. After regaining the strength to move, Dib rubbed profusely at his eyes, blinking away the stars. He could feel one of the arms of his glasses prodding at his gut. As he went to retrieve them, memories of the past couple of days rammed into Dib like a freight train. His heart raced.

Wait...he was still in Zim’s lab, wasn’t he? What had that alien bastard done to him now?

Speaking of which—Dib's eyes darted around the laboratory...where was Zim anyways?

Well, his skin seemed to be back to its normal color, at least. So that was a good sign. Finally getting to his feet, Dib started scoping out the lab. Maybe Zim just went into another room or something.

It all happened in the blink of an eye. At first, everything was normal—only slightly distorted in the places his eyes weren’t focused on. But that all could have been a trick of the light. It wasn’t like Dib hadn't been expecting side effects after forcing himself to ingest...whatever that stuff was.

And yet that still couldn’t have prepared Dib for what he saw next. The room, it was melting away.

Fear began to prickle at the confused teenager, who automatically took a step backwards, breaking into a cold sweat. “H-hey, what’s going on? Zim! Are you going to come out and explain to me what you drugged me with, space boy?!"

There was no response—the room only disappeared more rapidly, with the edges appearing to fray just before fading from existence. Eyes widening, Dib continued backing up, terrified of the approaching darkness. “This can’t be happening.” Now in full panic mode, Dib felt his spine brush up against something solid. The edge of the table. Nonetheless, his legs continued to carry him on their own until he was falling over with the table, stumbling over shards of broken glass and crawling backwards like his
life depended on it. He didn’t even want to imagine what kind of toxic substances he was dipping his hands into, instead concentrating all his remaining energy on getting away from the bigger horror in front of him.

It was no use. There was no way he could escape a black hole. He may as well submit himself to it and hope that it would be quick and painless. The thought of being turned into human spaghetti, although it wasn’t exactly appealing, was still far better than dying at the hands of Zim. Or so he thought.

Expecting to be swallowed up at any moment, Dib shielded his face with an arm and squeezed his eyes shut, body tensing as much as humanly possible.

At first, there was nothing. And then—weightlessness.

Even though his heart was still beating frantically, Dib coaxed himself into opening one eye, and then the other, finally lowering his raised arm as the shock began to set in.

What the...?

Stars. So many stars. Twinkling all around him.

Was he...in space?

Dib went to open his mouth, then felt a strange tightness in his chest which only got worse the more he struggled to breathe.

This was how he was going to die. Not quick and painlessly, like he had initially thought. No—he was going to suffocate in the vast blackness of space. Slowly and painfully.

Zim. Where was Zim? He was the only one who knew that Dib was here, right? He must have seen what happened.

“Dib-human!”

Zim!

“Hey! Wake up!” Something struck Dib square on the cheek, causing him to jerk forwards, eyes flying open.

“AHHHHHHH,” Dib screamed, still not sure which parts were real and which ones weren’t. Still under the impression that he couldn’t breathe, Dib began clutching at his throat and making choking sounds. He could see a pair of magenta eyes peering into his own, which only reignited that burning desire to be saved.

Another slap. Then he felt both shoulders being grabbed. Next thing he knew, Dib was being shaken like a rag doll.

“Oh god oh god oh god don’t let me die,” he groaned, head lolling backwards before abruptly jerking up again.

“I won’t,” Zim replied sincerely. “At least...not yet.” That was when Dib noticed he was being straddled. Too fatigued to make any sudden, jerky movements, Dib merely repositioned his hips so that his leg wasn’t being crushed under the other’s weight.

“Zim...are you real?” It was a stupid question, but it slipped from his mouth before he could stop
“Real enough to be your worst nightmare,” grinned Zim a bit mischievously, moving off so that he was sitting in front of Dib rather than on him.

Dib exhaled, mouth twitching into a relieved smile.

But wait. Wasn't he forgetting something very important? “Oh my god Zim, your lab! It- it disappeared. There was this black hole thingy too. I thought I was going to get swallowed up by it! And then I was in space. And- and- and I couldn’t breathe. It was insane! You should have seen it!” Still out of breath, Dib lifted his eyes, locking them with the alien’s. “Where were you, anyways?”

Zim waited for him to finish, then sighed. “Well I was hoping to still be here when you woke up, just in case you decided to go snooping around Zim’s things. But I guess I hadn’t... anticipated just how long my formula would take to work. So I went back up to- do some stuff, and came back to more of your infernal screaming.”

Dib pursed his lips. Of course. Zim probably just thought he was having an episode, like Gaz.

To further emphasize the severity of what he was going to say next, Dib leaned over and placed both hands on Zim's shoulders, who flinched immediately. “Listen, Zim. I know this is going to sound crazy, but you’ve got to listen to me. I think...there’s something weird going on here.”

Zim said nothing, so Dib continued. “You wanted to know how I got this bruise, right? Well, I'm going to tell you, so no funny business until I'm finished.” A nod. “Okay, so the other night I was coming home from Skool when-”

Five minutes later. “-and now I have no idea what to do or what could even be causing these strange anomalies in space-time, so I thought maybe...you...would know something...?”

Zim seemed to really reflect on this for a moment. It wasn’t often that Dib saw him concentrating so hard unless it was on something evil. Could that mean...did he actually somehow manage to get through to Zim with his story?

Suddenly, the Irken stood up. Dib did the same. He could feel the excitement bubbling within him. For once—for once, somebody actually believed him. Even if that somebody was Zim! It still counted. Anything was better than being insane.

“Hm...nope! Can’t say I know anything.”

It was like a balloon had deflated in his chest. At first, Dib couldn’t believe it. He didn't want to believe it.

No...it doesn't make any sense! Dib could have sworn he saw some sort of recognition pass over Zim's feature when he was telling his story, even if it was fleeting.

“What? But- but- no! That can’t be true! You have to be lying! I saw it- you had that look on your face like you knew what I was talking about!” He hated how pleading he sounded, but it was true. Dib was that desperate to have somebody on his side—to assure himself that it wasn't all in his head.

"Nah," Zim replied breezily. "It could also be that, oh, I dunno...your feeble brain is merely rotting away?" Dib's eyes widened. "Yess, Dib. Be scared."
Zim stalked towards him. "Think about it. Your grip on reality is slipping away, little by little." Another step. "And who knows how much longer you'll be able to stay sane."

Sweating, Dib remembered how real it had felt when Zim's lab was being swallowed by darkness. How vivid those stars had been...

But he stood his ground. "Oh, shut up! I know you're just trying to scare me, Zim. Well it's not going to work!"

Zim sneered. "Hey, I'm just saying. Don't you think it's a little odd that nobody else seems to be experiencing the same things as you?"

"Well it's not my fault everybody else is too stupid to notice! They probably have experienced something like this and just haven't thought anything of it!" But it seemed no matter how relentless Dib was in his conviction, Zim wasn't going to let him have this one.

"You know what- screw you, Zim! I don't know why I even come to you for help sometimes. But I'm still going to get to the bottom of this, with or without you!"

"Works for me," Zim shrugged, stepping away so Dib could get on the elevator. "I was just about to kick you out anyways."

"FINE!"

"FINE!"

They both glared at each other from opposite sides of the glass door, not stopping until Dib was out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if any of you have heard of the Amazon Prime series "Undone," but writing this fic has reminded me a lot of that show. Would definitely recommend you give it a try if you've got Prime. The episodes are pretty short, too.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!