The Weight We Carry

by StarlitVesper

Summary

In their final year of high school, Dib and Zim have just barely figured out how to stay friends for long enough to finish their physics homework together. But when Dib suddenly stops acting like himself, it's up to Zim to try and figure out how to get him back to normal. Purely for rivalry reasons, of course! It's not like he CARES about Dib or anything. That would be stupid ... right?

... Oh. Fuck.

Zim's got secrets and Dib's got a laundry list of issues but together, they might just make one functional person. And they're going to have to figure out how to work together fast if Zim wants to stay on Earth past the end of the week.

Notes

Act One: Take Chances, Make Mistakes
This is probably going to take the form of two acts. First one is mainly character-driven and the second one is going to be more plot-driven and adventure-y.
Prologue: Frenemies

Well, one day they'll drop the bomb
Who knows who they'll drop it on
Maybe someone that you love
So before they get to you
Do what you gotta do
KABOOM!
- I Fight Dragons, KABOOM!

“It’s over, Zim! You’re not going to get away with … get away with …” Dib collapsed in the dust, too exhausted to continue. He stared up at the sky as Zim flopped down beside him, panting. “What, exactly, was your plan, again?”

“Eh, whatever it was, it probably wasn’t going to work,” Zim said, waving a hand dismissively. He looked over at Dib, noting the bruise that was already forming under his eye. He hadn’t meant to hit quite that hard. “Don’t we have a physics test tomorrow, or something?”

“Shit. Yeah. I haven’t even looked at the material yet.”

“Me, neither …”

Dib looked over and caught Zim staring at him. “You’re waiting for me to ask you to study with me, aren’t you?”

Zim crossed his arms and looked away. “Am not.”

“Mhmm, sure. Didn’t you fail the last test you studied alone for?”

“I didn’t fail it, Dib-shit; I just missed it and never made it up.” He glanced over at Dib. “But, you know, since we’re both here and all …”

Dib rolled his eyes, used to just letting Zim’s insults go without comment by this point. “Would you like to call an official truce?” He stood up gingerly, wincing a bit, and shook the dust off his coat before holding out his hand.

Zim sighed and took it, allowing Dib to pull him to his feet. “Yes, I am calling an Official Truce so that neither of us gets stuck here for another year.”

Dib held on to Zim’s hand. “How long is this one going to last, Zim?” he asked, his voice quiet but his gaze intense.

“At least until the exam is over,” Zim said, flippantly. He tried to pull his hand away but Dib still didn’t let go.

“Are we just going to keep doing this forever?”

“What do you mean?”

“Beating the crap out of each other and then calling a truce and doing it over and over ad nauseum?
Aren’t you getting a little tired of sometimes being almost friends and sometimes being enemies?”

Zim met Dib’s searching stare for a moment before shuddering and shaking his hand loose. “You made the truce handshake weird, Dib-stink.”

“I’m being serious.”

Zim stared at the ground, thinking. “You want to be friends?”

“It would be better than kicking each other’s asses every other week …” Dib mumbled.

Zim was quiet for a moment, trying to gauge the situation. He gave Dib an inquisitive look. “Why don’t you join me?”

“What?” That hadn’t been what Dib was going for. He stared at Zim in shock.

“Oh, come on, Dib! You hate these humans as much as I do. Don’t you kind of —”

“No.”

“Just a little —”

“No.”

“So you’re telling me you’ve never been tempted to let me get away with something just to get back at the rest of humanity?” Zim shot him a meaningful look. “Tempted to maybe leave them to their … moose-y fate?”

Dib rolled his eyes. “One time in middle school, Zim! I thought about it one time! I’m a bigger person than that, now. I’m not just going to let you hand my planet over to your leaders on a silver platter.”

Zim shrugged. “Fine, fine. But I’ll be sure to remember you when I’ve achieved world conquest.”

“The answer will still be no. Not that it matters, since you have a better record of saving the planet than you do of annihilating it.”

Zim opened his mouth, then thought a moment, then closed it.

“At any rate,” Dib continued, “I’m talking about stopping all this fighting. Getting through this year without any broken bones or black eyes. Maybe instead of dominating the planet, dominating the science fair together.”

He held out a hand and Zim thought things through. Gun to his head, he couldn’t even say what his last few world domination schemes had even been. It was more about provoking a reaction out of Dib than it was about actually winning, lately. And, after all, wasn’t he getting tired of coming home with bruises and scratches and bite marks? They were almost finished with high school and it wasn’t as though Zim expected to continue this on into college, right?

Dib dropped his hand to his side, looking dejected. “Oh, whatever. It was worth a shot.”

No ... wait!!

He turned to walk away and called to Zim over his shoulder. “We’re burning daylight, Zim. You want to go study or not?”
Zim sighed. “Yeah … Let’s go.”
I Don’t Care

Chapter Notes

There are themes of self-harm in this chapter. This kinda started out as a personal project for me to work through some of my own issues with self-harm and depression/bipolar, and grew into ... the monstrosity it is now. So just know all of this comes from a very raw and honest place.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Going nowhere with your strategy
Sit down, relapse, relax you got nowhere to be
I'm longing for another
Running from another side of me
Maybe not as good as it used to be
I'm not myself today

- SONOIO, Enough

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Zim was having even more trouble than usual concentrating in class. Not only was it the time of year where the air was perpetually just cold enough to irritating even indoors -- the heat wouldn't kick on until it was physically required to keep the pipes from freezing ... thanks, school board -- and his energy for almost everything was rapidly waning with the shortening days. He mentally ran through a list of serious earth diseases he hadn’t yet used to skip out on classes.

The history teacher droned on about various folktales and Zim thought that the topic might actually be interesting if literally any other human was teaching it. He leaned back in his seat and his eyes wandered over to Dib, who sitting a couple seats back in an adjacent row, his head on his desk in a decidedly un-Dib-like display of boredom. He’d been pretty seriously moping around for the past few weeks, to the point where it was becoming irritating. Sure, it left the path to world domination clear for Zim, but what fun would that be? The Tallest wouldn’t be impressed by an easy victory. No, he needed Dib to kick whatever funk he was in and go back to putting his attention where it belonged. On Zim.

He slowly stripped off the perforated edge of his paper, balled it up, and covertly flicked it towards Dib. It landed in Dib’s hair and if he felt it, he didn’t show any signs of caring. Zim frowned. He shimmied the eraser out of his pencil and then flicked that over as well.

That one bounced off the side of Dib’s head and he finally stirred and looked around, bleary-eyed and miffed. Zim quickly went back to taking notes and looking busy. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Dib glaring at him.

What? Zim mouthed innocently. Dib just rolled his eyes and put his head back down. Not quite satisfied with that response, Zim folded his notes page into a little triangle “football” like they used to make in middle school. He propped it up between the table and his index finger, closing one eye to
“Am I boring you, Zim?” the teacher asked, just ask Zim flicked the paper football in Dib’s direction.

Dib looked up just in time for it to bounce off his glasses.

“Ye-- I mean no,” Zim said hurriedly, folding his hands in a manner he hoped appeared innocent.

“Maybe you’d like to tell us about the origins of the Dwayyo?”

“Er, isn’t that a song by Harry Belafonte …?”

“That’s Day-O. Zim. Jesus,” Dib muttered, resting his chin on his crossed arms. “It’s a Carribean folk song. The Dwayyo is from Maryland folklore.”

Duh.

“Perhaps the Dib would like to tell us about the Dwayyo, then, eh?” Zim suggested. Anything to get Dib back to normal again. Even if it meant listening to tales about how Dib had seen one in his kitchen last weekend.

The class abruptly shook their collective reverie and suddenly all eyes were on Dib, who went red and looked down. “I would not.”

“But it’s your thing,” Zim prodded.

“It is not my thing. I don’t know anything about it.”

“But I just saw you with a book of Maryland folklore yesterday --”

“If you two are quite finished,” drawled the teacher, “I’d like to get back to this lesson.”

“Fine by me,” Dib muttered, putting his head back down.

Zim frowned, and then proceeded to draw Dib stalking Bigfoot for the rest of the class. As the bell rang, Zim held his drawing up with a grin, but Dib was already out the door.

The two of them had all the same classes together -- a coincidence Zim put down to the fact that the school could only afford one of each upper level course, and he was not about to be stuck with the likes of Torque Smacky if he could help it -- but Dib made a point to put as much space as possible between himself and Zim for the rest of the day, sitting across the room and then darting out the door as soon as the bell rang. Zim thought for sure he could ambush Dib at his locker at the end of the day, but after five minutes of waiting, he still hadn’t shown up. Frustrated, Zim marched out in front of the school, where he finally spotted Dib’s trademark coat rounding the side of the building. Zim figured he must have taken one of the side exits in order to completely avoid the wing their lockers were in.

“Dib-beast!” Zim shouted, jogging to catch up with his trudging nemesis.

Dib glanced sideways at Zim without stopping, forcing Zim to pick up the pace. “What?” he asked, flatly. He seemed too tired to be angry. “You’ve been following me and harassing me and calling me names all day. What do you want?”

Zim hadn’t quite thought that far ahead. “Sulking because you can’t figure out my latest ingenious plan, I see,” he tried. Dib just rolled his eyes without breaking his stride.

“I am so tired of your stupid plans, Zim. It’s like you only ever do this anymore just to get a rise out
of me.”

“I do not and it is not stupid —”

“Fine. Whatever,” Dib snapped with an exaggerated shrug. “Go ahead and blow up the earth with … explosive rubber ducks or whatever stupid plan you’ve come up with now. If you’re successful, you have my thanks,” he added bitingly.

Zim narrowed his eyes. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“God, Zim. Just forget it, okay?”

“No. Explain yourself.”

“Why are you following me? Isn’t your house in the other direction?”

“We’re discussing you right now, Dib-shit. Not me. Explain yourself to Zim.”

Dib spun on his heels and screeched to a halt before Zim had time to react. “I said, back off!” He shoved Zim, hard, and Zim reflexively grasped at the closest thing to prevent himself from careening backwards. Unfortunately, the closest thing happened to be the cuff of Dib’s coat. Zim hit the ground with a pained “oof!” followed by an even more pained squeak as Dib toppled down on him.

“What … the FUCK, Zim?” Dib growled as he got his arms under him. Zim shrunk back almost imperceptibly. He’d never heard Dib so genuinely furious before. Dib moved to stand up, his arm out of the sleeve Zim was still holding. “Let go and leave me alone, already. You are SUCH a pain in my ass.”

Zim, still lying on his back, held the sleeve tighter and glared. “No; you’ve been sulking around for weeks. You don’t get to leave until you explain yourself.”

“I’m not sulking!”

“Are too.”

“Whatever … It’s none of your business whether I’m sulking or not!” Dib sputtered.

“This entire planet is my business, Dib-human. That includes you,” Zim quipped, snidely.

Dib quickly slid his other arm out of his coat and jumped to his feet, grabbing Zim by the collar of his tunic and suspending him a solid foot above the ground.

“Unhand Zim, you stupid —” He looked down and suddenly stopped short, eyes traveling up Dib’s now-exposed arm. It was marked with wounds in various states of healing. White, ropey scars intercut with fresh pink skin, and — most worryingly — scabbed-over red lines that cut angry, horizontal paths across Dib’s thin wrist. It occurred to Zim that he’d never seen Dib without his coat on before. His eyes finally met Dib’s and he stared up at him in confusion.

“I didn’t do any of this. Who hurt you?”

“The fact that you have to clarify should speak volumes about why I don’t want to talk to you right now, Zim,” Dib replied flatly. “Don’t pretend like you care. Didn’t you throw me in a dumpster last week?”

“After you stole my Squidgyblit!”
“Right, a proportional reaction as always,” Dib scoffed, letting Zim drop to his feet.

“Oh that’s absolutely hilarious coming from someone who tried to kidnap and dissect the new kid right off the bat!” Zim snapped back.

“In case you haven’t noticed, you’re an alien invader!”

They squared up again and a few passing students suddenly gave the two a wide berth.

“You didn’t know that back then!” Zim countered. “I hadn’t even done anything! You made the worst possible assumption and immediately acted on it, just like you always do!”

“Right, and if I’d only chosen to react differently, we’d be best friends right now,” Dib said, sarcasm dripping off his words.

“Maybe we’d at least be good enough friends for you to tell me who’s been hurting you!” Zim shouted, fists balled up at his sides. He stood there a moment, breathing heavily. Dib made a dismissive noise and looked away. Zim seemed to wilt slightly in response. “Aren’t we at least kind of friends?” he asked, his tone genuine for the first time all day. “I mean, you said it yourself… We’re friends sometimes, right?”

“Friends don’t beat the shit out of each other every couple of weeks,” Dib replied icily. “They don’t try to take over each other’s planets. They don’t do homework together one day and then attempt to murder each other the next. You can’t just be friends sometimes.” Dib gave Zim a pained expression, then seemed to deflate. “You’ve been on earth how long and you still just… don’t get people, do you? You beat me up, the other kids beat me up. There’s no real difference between you and them.” He picked up his coat and turned to walk away.

In a last ditch effort, Zim scampered in front of him to block his path.

“Did one of the other humans did this to you?” he asked, still undeterred by Dib’s blatant aggression.

“Why do you care?” Dib shouted, ready to be done with the whole situation.

“I don’t care,” Zim vollied reflexively.

“Then fucking act like it!”

They stood there a moment, Zim blocking Dib’s path and Dib shooting Zim a look that could cut diamonds. Finally, Dib shook his head dismissively and moved to skirt around Zim.

“This conversation is over. Go the fuck home.”

“But—” Suddenly he was seeing stars and the ground shot up and knocked the air out of him.

If he had a nose, Dib almost certainly would have broken it. He’d been hit much harder than this before, even just counting his previous all-out fights with Dib. But something about this punch hurt much worse than anything else ever had.

Zim’s vision swam. Dib stood over him, backlit by the afternoon sun in a way that was oddly threatening. “Get out of my face, Zim. I’m sick of this. We’re done.” He spun around and quickly marched down the street in the direction of his house. Zim could only watch from the ground as Dib disappeared from view.

He sighed and lay there in the dirt, gently rubbing the stinging spot between his eyes. It wouldn’t be
the first time he spent a week sporting a black eye because of Dib but he had to ask himself if it was really worth the trouble at this point.

“I don’t care,” he mumbled to himself, but even with no one to call him on it, the words felt like a lie.

Ever since he found out – no, was forced to confront the fact that his mission was all some horrible joke, most of the wind had gone out of his sails as far as world domination. Every now and then, he would be hit with a plan so utterly brilliant, he could convince himself that it would compel the Tallest to take him back and make him a real Invader. But even then, everything always blew up in his face. Often quite literally. Zim had to wonder at this point if his own ingenious brain was sabotaging him. The only time he felt anything these days was when he was fighting Dib, and even that was starting to get confusing. The strange way his insides twisted when he saw Dib, and the way his heart plummeted right into his boots when they inevitably ended up yelling and brawling. Despite their overwhelming similarities, they just couldn’t seem to stop fighting long enough to bond over anything.

He shook his head and slowly got to his feet. The most important person in Zim’s life was Zim. He supposed it only made sense that he’d take a passing interest in someone who reminded him of himself. Though not quite as smart. Or talented. Or good-looking.

… Okay, perhaps Dib was a bit good-l—

“Nope!” Zim said aloud to himself, startling several of his classmates as he made his way off the school grounds. He paused a moment at the front gates, then decided to walk towards Dib’s house. The sooner he could get things back to normal, the sooner he could get these confusing thoughts out of his head.

Chapter End Notes

I promise these chapters get longer.

Also no one will get where my stupid Dwayyo joke came from. I suspect the Venn diagram for people who ship ZaDR and people who listen to the Brohio Podcast is like … two circles on opposite sides of the page. With me in the middle.
Zim walked up to the Membrane house from the sidewalk, looked around and — spotting no one — crossed the grass and approached the building from the side. He had no interest in dealing with the Professor today. Though the human seemed to like him just fine (despite his and Dib’s tumultuous history), Zim knew that he was going to have to catch Dib unawares if they were going to get anywhere, as giving Dib any advanced warning meant giving him time to take evasive action. He hoped Dib had left a window open … Friends did that, right? Drop in through each other’s windows? Zim thought he recalled that from some of the movies he’d watched with GIR.

He scaled the side of the building with his PAK legs, peering into the second floor windows. Most of the rooms looked fairly bland and moderately tidy. They definitely didn’t belong to Dib, then. He moved to the other side of the house. The first window he came upon was blocked by a massive stack of moldy-looking books. Zim could barely see anything inside because of the dark blue walls soaking up the golden sunlight. This had to be it.

Zim gently attempted to pry one of the windows open but it wouldn’t budge. He moved to the next, which appeared to be locked as well.

“I thought humans liked the fall breeze,” he grumbled as the third window also refused to yield. Perhaps Dib hadn’t come home yet? He poked his head up and looked around again, just in time for Dib to turn his music on full blast. Which was still not quite loud enough to drown out his screaming. Zim cringed; Green Day he could handle. Dib attempting to sing along to Boulevard of Broken Dreams, not so much.

Zim sighed and slowly clambered back down the wall of the house, dropping behind some begonias and making his way over to the front door. He poked at the doorbell and attempted to appear nonchalant.

The door cracked open and Zim immediately launched into his spiel. “Hello! I am a friend of the Dib and I —”

“Oh. Hey, Zim,” said Gaz from the doorway, before looking back down at the game she was
playing.

Zim relaxed. “Dib-sister! Perfect. I was worried it would be the tall one. I wish to speak with the Dib.”

“He’s up in his room,” Gaz replied, still otherwise occupied.

“Yes, I know. He keeps the windows all locked,” Zim replied matter-of-factly.

Gaz looked up momentarily and gave Zim a quizzical look before casting her gaze back down again.

“Ooookay. Look, he’s the second door up there on the right. Just use the stairs like a normal person. Please.”

“I am —”

“A perfectly normal human worm baby,” she parroted, motioning him to hurry up and get his ass inside. “I know. Though somehow the least believable part of this is that Dib has friends.”

Zim paid the last bit no mind as he made his way into the house and ascended the stairs. He quickly reached Dib’s door, debating whether or not to knock. The door was vibrating from the bass of something predictably angry by MSI. The music was so loud, he doubted Dib would be able to hear him anyway. He grasped the doorknob, then froze, feeling his guts twinge nervously. What was the matter with him? Perhaps he really had picked up some human disease.

He took a calming breath, turned the knob quietly, and peered inside.

Late afternoon light filtered through the windows, doing little to illuminate the darkly decorated bedroom. Piles of clothing and ancient tomes and strange objects were precariously piled on every available flat surface. Zim glanced around, momentarily confused at the apparent lack of Dib. His bed was empty but his coat was hung up on the bed frame.

Zim took a cautious step forward, trying to avoid stepping on anything that looked like it might be either particularly important or dangerous. One of the piles of clothes stirred slightly on the floor, and Zim froze as Dib raised his head and blearily looked around. He turned down the music and searched around in the chaos for his glasses.

“Gaz, what did I tell you about knocking?” he said, irritably.

He finally fished his glasses out of the mess, and he sprung into a sitting position when he realized who was standing in his doorway. “Zim?? Why are you in my house??”

Zim quickly closed the door behind him to muffle what was clearly about to be a screaming match. He put his hands up in surrender as he slowly approached. “Dib, I just —”

“Why are you in my ROOM ??” Dib leapt to his feet, wobbled, and blinked stars out of his eyes.

“I … well … I used the stairs,” Zim said, exasperated. As if that made it better.

He suddenly noticed the strange way Dib was carrying himself, with one arm cradled protectively up against his chest.

“You need to leave,” Dib said darkly, motioning towards the door with a jerk of his head. “Now.”

Zim wasn’t listening. He staring at Dib’s shirt, the way the light shone off a few darker patches in the fabric. He took a step forward and Dib leaned back.
“I’m warning, you, Zim. If you take another step closer, I’ll—”

“You’re bleeding,” Zim said, softly.

“No, I’m not,” Dib immediately said through gritted teeth.

“Yes, you are,” Zim insisted, stepping closer.

“Get the fuck out of my—!!”

Zim grabbed him by the elbow and — with startling force — wrenched an arm free. Blood ran down from Dib’s wrist and Zim’s grip softened. He let out the quietest “oh, no …” Dib had ever heard, and his expression changed to one Dib couldn’t quite read. It was something softer than pity, with a slight note of curiosity.

Dib pulled his arm back and held it against his chest, looking down to avoid Zim’s violet gaze.

“Who did that to you?” Zim asked, voice still soft.

“Don’t pretend like you care about me,” Dib shot back in a wounded tone, walking over to his bed where he sat down in a huff. Zim took a few tentative steps towards him. Dib just glowered.

“I don’t,” Zim started, out of habit. He gave Dib pitying look and sighed, relaxing his defensive posture. “But I did come all the way here, so you may as well tell me.”

“What, so you can use it against me later?” Dib snarled, looking like injured, cornered animal as he cradled his arm against his chest.

Zim ran a frustrated hand through his hair, knocking his wig slightly askew. “Look, just tell me. So I can go back to not caring,” he said with a wave of his hand.

Look at Zim. Not caring.

“Fine.” Dib looked up, giving Zim a challenging glare. “I did it to myself.” He almost hoped Zim would say something disparaging so he would have an excuse to chew him out again. He wasn't quite sure what to do with Zim's aggressive concern.

Zim’s brows knit together and he regarded Dib with nothing but pure confusion. Self-harm had never even crossed his mind as an option. “Huh? Why would …”

“Because I hate myself, Zim,” he spat. The malice dripping from his words seemed to startle Zim a bit, as he shrunk back slightly. “I just … I hate myself even more than I hate you . Even more than everyone else hates me . I mean, Gaz and my dad … even they don’t want me around. I think they’d be happier if I … if I …” his words suddenly caught in his throat. Zim stood awkwardly in the middle of the room as Dib folded over on himself and started bawling.

Well.

That sure wasn’t something he had planned for. He briefly considered legging it back to his base and leaving Dib be, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that this might be the last time he ever saw Dib if he did that.

Besides … Zim was in charge of annihilating Dib. Dib was not allowed to do that himself.

He silently crossed the room, keeping a wary eye on Dib’s shaking form. He slowly sat down on the bed and watched Dib grow tense, but make no move to get further away.
“Give me your arm again, please,” Zim requested gently, holding out a hand. Dib shrank back and Zim sighed, putting his four-fingered hand on top of Dib’s clenched fist. “I just need to see how bad your wounds are. Please.” Dib relaxed and allowed Zim to move his arm. He kept his face obscured and sniffled loudly between sobs.

“Is it just the one arm?”

Dib nodded.

He pulled Dib’s arm closer and winced as he watched blood ooze out of the sharp, almost clinical cuts.

“Scalpel?” Zim asked, gently turning Dib’s arm.

“Razor blade,” Dib sniffled.

Zim grimaced. “That’s not very clean … and these should have clotted by now. This will need stitches. I can take you to a hospital …”

At that, Dib shot up and pushed himself frantically back towards the wall, dripping blood on the front of Zim’s tunic in the process. “No! No no no … I can’t go to the hospital, Zim! I can’t! My dad … he …” Dib collapsed into a sobbing heap again, leaving Zim wide eyed and out of his depth.

“They’ll put me in the psych wards and I can’t go back there!!” He was sobbing harder than ever, and Zim felt his heart plummet into his boots despite himself. He remembered the last time Professor Membrane had allowed his son to be carted off there. The Dib who had come back had been quiet and reserved for weeks before slowly coming back out of his shell. Zim slowly inched back to where Dib had curled around himself. He was glad Dib wasn’t looking up since his face no doubt looked equal parts terrified and repulsed, but he gave Dib a tentative pat on the shoulder and waited out the worst of the crying.

“Look, I won’t let anyone lock you up,” Zim said quietly.

Dib hiccuped and cast a suspicious glance over his arm.

“But those cuts are pretty bad and if you won’t let me bring you to a hospital, I’m going to need to bring you back to my base so I can stitch you up.”

Dib looked up, breath still hitching, face dripping and his eyes bloodshot from sobbing.

“Ew,” muttered Zim. “You’re going to have to do something about all that, first. I don’t mind the blood but …”

“I’m not letting you bring me to your base, Zim,” Dib sniffled with a scowl.

Zim shrugged. “Your choice, Dib. Hospital or my base. But I’m not letting you sit here and slowly bleed out like a stuck pig.”

“I wish you would,” Dib muttered, darkly.

Zim slid from the bed. “That is precisely why I won’t allow you to.” He looked thoughtful a moment. “Is it just you and … what’s-her-fuck—”

“Gaz, Zim. My sister’s name is Gaz. How are you so bad at this?”

“Right. Yes. Is it just you and Gaz here for the weekend?”
Dib cast him a worried look.

“Oh please, Dib-beast. If I wanted to kill you, you would be dead already.”

“Oh, that inspires confidence,” Dib shot back before slumping, defeatedly, against the wall. “But yeah. It’s just us until Monday.”

“Then grab some … not-bleedy clothes and whatever humans need for the night.” He pulled a communicator from his PAK. “GIR! Prepare a sterile surface and find the medical kit.” He paused a moment. “Okay, no, wait — make yourself sterile, then prepare a sterile surface and grab the medical kit. Then stay as far away from all of that as possible.”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” Came the voice on the other end.

Dib still hadn’t moved. Zim gestured for him to get off the bed. “Well, come on! If you haven’t noticed, this is a little time sensitive!”

Dib slid slowly from the bed and grabbed a wad of tissues to mop up his face. “Why overnight things?” he asked, suspicion still heavy on his voice.

Zim huffed impatiently. “To keep you overnight for observation, so you don’t do anything else stupid. If you won’t let the hospital do it, I guess I’m going to have to,” he said with an eye roll and a long suffering sigh.

“I think I’d prefer the hospital,” Dib said under his breath as he picked through what he hoped was the freshly laundered clothing.

“Up to you!” Zim quipped with a shrug.

“Wait! No!” Dib yelled. He made aggressive eye contact with Zim, who was tapping his foot as a show of his impatience, before finally turning away, grumbling. “Ugh … I guess at least you can’t legally keep me hostage.”

“Not legally!” Zim chirped from the other side of his room.

Dib chose to ignore the implications of that and gathered the rest of his things, shoving them in a couple spare Wizardry Shop plastic bags. He turned around to see Zim unlocking and opening the window over his bed.

“Done being difficult?” Zim asked, looking over his shoulder.

“I’m not … ugh … forget it. What are you doing?”

Zim jumped down off the bed and landed in front of him. “We have no time for walking … up you go, Dib-stink!” Before Dib could protest, Zim hoisted him up, bridal-style, and his PAK legs shot out. They clambered over the bed and hurriedly exited the room via the window. As a chilly breeze nipped at Dib’s exposed skin, they made their way above the rooftops.

Chapter End Notes
There’s just no good way to frame it, but I hear Zim saying “I used the stairs” with the same inflection of “I put the fires out” in “The Nightmare Begins”.

I also have no idea what a begonia is but the flow of the word sounded nice so it’s staying.
Wind whipped past as Zim spider-crawled across the skyline, hugging Dib to his chest. He was grateful for the breeze. Dib smelled like iron and salt and unwashed t-shirt and sadness, which was all a bit of an olfactory onslaught. He could feel Dib’s blood starting to seep into his tunic and he mentally made plans to incinerate both their clothes.

“Won’t people see us?” Dib asked with a touch of concern as he peered out over the town.

“Nobody on this planet ever looks up,” Zim replied with a smirk.

Dib took in the view as the afternoon sun spilled over his neighborhood. The trees were just beginning to show the slightest hint of turning and the breeze made the foliage dance in the golden sun. Beneath them, cars passed and people watered their lawns and and kids played, never looking up above the horizon. Music and conversations spilled from open windows and the shadows stretched long. It was the part of the year when summer finally gave way to the beginnings of fall and the days were growing perceptibly shorter. Despite the beauty, Dib a slight twinge of anxiety for the coming sunset and subsequent darkness.

Zim’s grip tightened momentarily as they hurtled between two far-flung rooftops, landing softly and clambering onwards. Dib felt strangely safe in his arch enemy’s arms. Zim held him almost protectively, shielding him from as much of the wind as he could with his small body as they rushed along. Dib slowly looked upwards, still trying to get a read on the strange situation he’d found himself in. Zim eclipsed a sun soaked sky mottled with pink and purple clouds, looking unperturbed as they leapt and scampered across town. Dib allowed himself to relax a bit, just for the moment.

The cool air distracted him from the growing twinge of pain in his arm. The front of his shirt was now undeniably soaked and he realized that if Zim hadn’t insisted on fixing him up, he would probably be starting to panic about now. He had always been good about cleaning and fixing himself up in the past, but he also had always made a point to not do any permanent damage. He’d been so upset this time around that he hadn’t particularly cared if he cut a smidge too deep. He didn’t have a contingency plan for this sort of situation. He pictured himself still curled up on the floor, alone and facing his own mortality, and involuntarily shivered. He really didn’t want to think about how things
would have gone if Zim hadn’t shown up.

Thinking about things in general was something Dib tried to avoid doing on principle lately. If he could keep some distance between himself and his thoughts, he could at least continue waking up every morning and going through the motions, even if it sucked. He’d never, in all of his nearly two decades of life, been quite so aware of how being a loner meant you were wholly responsible for your own emotional burden. Dib had a limited ability to talk himself off the proverbial rooftop and that was fast becoming an issue he could no longer ignore. Being alone was one thing. Being alone with his thoughts was entirely another. Though it seemed that, for the next 24 hours at least, he would be neither of those things. And that was somehow a much more frightening prospect.

Suddenly, the ground went out from under them and they were falling out of the sky. Dib pressed his face into Zim’s tunic and reached for his shoulder with his good arm, bracing for landing.

With his face this close, he noticed that Zim actually smelled quite nice. Dib had always assumed that Zim literally wore the same clothes every day, but now he figured he must just have an entire closet full of tunics. Or perhaps he just did laundry daily? That would explain why GIR rarely looked terribly dirty … That was a strange thought: Zim, doing laundry. Dib let the absurdity of that mental image push everything else out of his head for a moment.

The PAK legs slowed their impact to the point where there was little more than a slight jolt as they came to a halt. Dib felt Zim’s feet make contact with the ground. He poked his head up to see that they were standing in Zim’s yard, on his quiet cul-de-sac. Zim shifted Dib to get a better hold on him, then marched up and knocked his heel against the door.

“GIR! Get the door, please!”

“You don’t have to keep holding me,” Dib muttered, cheeks flushing.

“I’m not going to have you fainting all over from blood loss and then bleeding all over my floor,” Zim replied as the door opened. “The floor is dirty enough without that.”

“Ooooooh, Master! You brought home a friend!!!” Zim’s poorly disguised robot squealed, jumping and clapping the paws of his green and black dog suit.

“Careful, GIR!” Zim warned as he dexterously edged around GIR to enter the house. “He’s broken … just like everything else in this fucking house,” he muttered to himself.

GIR shut the door and scampered over to the couch. “I was makin’ nacho cheese angels!” he yelled, bouncing happily.

“Before or after you cleaned off a space for the medical equipment?” Zim asked with narrowed eyes and a testy tone.

“After!” GIR yelled, pleased with himself.

“There’s a good GIR,” Zim replied. Dib thought he detected some genuine pride in his voice. GIR turned on the TV and sang nonsensically to himself while Zim carried Dib into the kitchen. The table had a white cloth over it and a small pillow at one end, and a large medical box was sat on one of the chairs. Zim sat Dib atop the table.

“Alright, lie down. I watched you wobble around your room before we left so stop telling me you aren’t a fall risk.”

“Seriously. I’m barely even dizzy. I’m not going to faint,” Dib said irritably, as he dropped his bag
on the floor.

Zim rifled in one of the kitchen cabinets and pulled out a small lollipop, which he handed to Dib.

“What’s that for?” Dib asked, taking it with a skeptical look.

“For your blood sugar. So you don’t faint,” Zim replied with a toothy grin. He tapped Dib’s forehead. “Now lie down.”

Dib scowled, but popped it in his mouth and laid back, compliant. It tasted sweeter than he expected, not like anything he’d ever had before.

“Hey, what brand is this?”

“Nothing you’d be familiar with -- it’s from Irk.” As an afterthought he added, “Oh, take your shirt off, as well.”

Dib narrowed his eyes. “Why?” He already felt close enough to naked without his coat. If he had to go much longer even with only his arms exposed, he was pretty sure he’d have an even bigger mental breakdown.

“Because it’s gross,” Zim said. “It’s covered in blood and stinks like you haven’t washed it in a week. I can smell it from here.”

Dib started to say that Zim smelled gross, but stopped himself. He hated that he now knew that wasn’t true. He settled for shooting Zim an unhappy look, then gingerly pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the floor, where it hit with a wet flop. Dib’s chest was streaked with red but the flow from his arm seemed to have stymied a bit by that point.

Zim popped his contacts and wig off, storing them in his PAK. He glanced over to see Dib staring, wide-eyed. “You look like you’ve never seen an alien before,” Zim said with a smirk, his antennae held aloft.

“Honestly? This is somehow less disconcerting,” Dib admitted, still taking in the scene in front of him with blatant curiosity.

Zim pulled his gloves off, then went to wash his hands. Dib looked on, mentally taking notes. Never mind the fact that he rarely saw Zim without his disguise. He’d never seen Zim so casually just … existing as himself. Without the human facade, he actually seemed more relaxed and normal. He returned with pink, 4 fingered gloves on and Dib stifled a laugh.

“What?” Zim asked as he pulled them on.

Dib smiled, one of the first genuine and positive expressions Zim had witnessed on his face in a while. “Nothing, just … appreciating your pink rubber gloves.”

“They’re better than the boring human-colored ones,” Zim said with a dismissive sniff. He rifled in his box a moment, pulling out the folding trays and moving some things around, before pulling out a spray bottle and shaking it. “Alright. Here’s what’s going to happen: this topical spray is going to stop the bleeding, numb you up a bit, and sterilize things. Then I can give you a shot of the better numbing agent. Once that’s done, I’m going to clean you up and then stitch you back together. All you have to do is not move or yell so I can do my job.”

“CAN I YELL??” GIR screamed from the other room.
“No, GIR!” Zim shouted back. “You are also banned from yelling!”

“Oooookayyyyy,” GIR whisper-yelled. And then he turned up the TV.

Zim turned back to Dib with a long suffering look on his face.

“Wow, he’s just … always turned up to 11, huh?” Dib asked.

“You have no idea,” Zim grumbled, getting to work. He shook the bottle and then sprayed up and down Dib’s arm. It felt freezing cold, then settled into a comfortably numb buzzing. Dib watched Zim’s large, ruby eyes as the alien rifled through his equipment. His stomach dropped as it slowly dawned on him that he was alone, spread out on a table in an alien base, at the mercy of someone he didn’t trust further than he could throw, with no one to know or care where he’d disappeared to.

He chewed the inside of his cheek worriedly. “You’re not going to, like … dissect me while I’m here, are you?”

Zim’s antennae spring up and Dib bit his lip to keep from nervous-laughing. Even without pupils, Zim-sans-disguise was somehow expressive to the point of being almost amusing.

“Huh. I didn’t even think of that …” Zim said with a faraway gaze, a smile slowly forming.

“Uh. Forget I said anything!” Dib replied hurriedly.

“No, no, I think you’re onto something,” Zim said thoughtfully. “I can numb everything … you wouldn’t feel a thing. You could even watch, if you wanted!” He seemed to be quivering with excitement that he hadn’t yet noticed was not shared by his abductee.

Dib’s eyes widened. “Oh my god … you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Zim asked, seriously. “Haven’t you ever wanted to see your own squeeoeyspooch before?”

Dib’s mouth went dry as he shrunk back. “Um. No. Can’t say I have.”

Zim regarded him curiously for a moment and then shrugged. “Eh. Another time, then. You’re going to be enough of a project as it is.” He pulled out a syringe and Dib blanched, feeling like he might pass out for real.

Zim glanced over at him as he pulled out a vial and prepped the syringe. “Breathe, human. I have enough on my plate just putting you back together after your own misadventures.”

“It’s just,” he started, turning away as Zim filled the needle, “shots are the one thing I can’t really handle. So tell me when you’re done. And I don’t need you on my case about how it’s funny.”

“Funny how?” Zim asked, his tone genuine. Before Dib could find his words, Zim was already talking again. “Alright, if you want to look away, here’s your warning.”

Dib squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the pinch. When nothing came, he opened an eye cautiously and looked at Zim. “Would you please not leave me hanging like this? It’s just mean.”

Zim waved the empty syringe at him with a grin. “All done!”

“I told you to tell me when you finished,” Dib grumbled.

“Oh, come on -- aren’t you at least a little bit impressed? You didn’t even feel a thing!”
Dib had to admit that he was, at least, a little bit impressed. And more than a little relieved to see that Zim appeared competent, medically.

He relaxed as much as he could, distracting himself by watching Zim get to work cleaning his wounds. He couldn’t figure out what the strangest bit was; the fact that his arm was so numb he didn’t even feel like he was looking at his own extremity, or that fact that his nemesis was the one fixing him up. Zim, to his credit, seemed to be taking his job seriously. Despite the fact that Dib could feel absolutely nothing, Zim’s movements were small and careful.

“You’ve had medical training?” Dib asked, in part because he hated silence and in part out of genuine curiosity. He might never get the chance to pick Zim’s brain like this again.

“The basics,” Zim replied, cleaning the last of the blood from Dib’s arm. “Well, the basics that everyone gets as Irken citizens, and then slightly more specialized basics later on, when I eventually went to Invader Training.”

Dib raised his eyebrows. “Eventually? Were you something else before?”

Zim looked up, regarding Dib curiously for a moment, before delving into the box and pulling out a suture kit. “Yes, I was basically military R&D, initially. I engineered things,” he said with a proud little smirk.

“Oh? Why the career change?”

Zim’s antennae dipped down suddenly at the question and he busied himself with threading a needle, focusing more intently than he needed to. “Let’s just say that they didn’t appreciate my genius,” Zim said, sounding a touch bitter. “So I switched to something where they couldn’t ignore me.”

“Oh,” said Dib softly. He watched Zim’s body language, trying to figure out the most appropriate way to proceed. “You’ve certainly done an awful lot in your life so far,” he said carefully. The compliment came easily since he was genuinely impressed, and he recalled that Zim seemed to respond well to praise.

Predictably, Zim perked up a bit and flashed a smile. “Yes, yes I have. Finally, someone appreciates my efforts.”

Dib returned the smile, though he was wildly aware that he had just complimented the very person who had been trying to take over his planet for the past few years. He glanced at Zim, trying to reconcile the idea of Zim as a fellow high school senior with the idea of Zim as an alien who was already on his second career.

Dib bit his lip to avoid blurting out the question he desperately wanted to ask. It struck him as a bit rude and he was a little concerned about making Zim stabby, considering his current position.

“Just say it, Dib-monkey,” Zim said suddenly, not breaking from his task. “You make this irritating, high pitched noise when you’re trying not to say something. It’s giving me a headache, so out with it.”

Dib realized his breath had been caught in his throat. He shrunk back and blushed. “You can hear that?”

“Harder to ignore when I’m sitting this close,” he said blithely. Dib was silent and Zim looked up momentarily. “Quit worrying. I’m trying to put you back together, remember?”

Dib tried to read Zim’s expression and failed. “How old are you?” The words tumbled from Dib’s
“184.” Zim replied without missing a beat.

“What?!” That was quite a bit more than he had expected.

“Irkens live for like, a shmillion years,” Zim replied with a small shrug.

“Okay, so what does that make you in human years?”

Zim stared at him blankly. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Dib said, slowly.

“Meh, about that many, then.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“No, really. I’ve been studying humans for years, so I would know. And, developmentally, it’s around that much. I *think* …” he trailed off, focusing on tying off the first round of stitches. “We just start in on our careers young. Like if you picked a job in kindergarten.”

“Okay, so you’re like, mostly done growing,” Dib said, shifting slightly.

“Stop moving, smelly,” Zim complained as he started the next round of stitches. He sighed and cast a sidelong look at Dib before continuing. “Yes, this is as big as I get. Thank you for reminding me.”

“… Brain’s probably not fully developed. That explains a lot,” Dib said to himself.

“My brain is several pounds of the finest silicon and metal components Irk has to offer,” Zim shot back.

“But you don’t have, like … a meat brain?” Dib said, stupidly. He mentally kicked himself.

“Of course I have a … *a meat* brain, human,” Zim replied, a smile tugging at his lips. “But it’s mostly … auxiliary. More often than not, it’s just an interface for the PAK. Holds some short term information if I’m ever split from my PAK but since I’m dead without that, my biological brain doesn’t have much purpose on its own.”

Dib was quiet for a moment, watching Zim take advantage of the lull to continue delicately sewing him back up.

“You really sliced yourself up, here,” Zim commented without looking up. “It’s going to be a while yet. Keep the questions coming. They amuse me.”

Dib looked up, suspicious. “Why are you letting me ask all this?”

Zim paused and met his gaze, unperturbed. “You were finally feeling a little better, weren’t you? Your mopiness was getting grating.”

Dib looked chastised.

“Stop acting like this is all some big ruse to kill you.”

Dib raised his eyebrows but stayed silent.
“Come on,” Zim coaxed. “I’m offering you anything you’ve ever wanted to know.”

“Um, okay,” Dib hemmed, thinking. “Do you have a family? A partner? Kids? That would make you older than me on a human scale, probably.”

Zim snorted. “Those aren’t things on Irk. You get grown in some vat, then spit out a tube and have a PAK thrown on you and you join the rest of the smeets in your age group and start downloading information. The Control Brains like to keep it simple.”

Dib thought for a moment, debating whether or not this was a path he wanted to go down. “So no, like, relationships, or..?”

“You are really trying to make me regret giving you this opportunity, aren’t you?”

“Sorry …”

“Relationships …” Zim looked up and regarded him as if he were trying to decipher something behind his eyes. The intensity in Zim’s liquid ruby gaze was thoroughly disconcerting and Dib looked away, suddenly feeling like he was being mentally dissected.

“Not in the sort of … deep and complicated way that humans do,” Zim said, eventually. Something about the way he said that made Dib curious, despite the fact that he felt he was rapidly digging himself a hole he feared he wouldn’t be able to climb back out of.

Fuck it — we’re digging to China.

“What do you mean?” Dib prodded, wondering if he would live to regret this.

Zim sighed and gave him a withering look. “We are still mostly biological creatures with biological needs. You do the math.”

“Oh … oh ,” Dib said, blushing.

“Except me. I don’t have time for those sorts of … shenanigans,” Zim said, snipping the end of the most recent suture with a flourish and a self-satisfied smirk.

“So would that make you asexual or just a late bloomer?” Dib kicked himself as soon as he said it. He really wished he would develop a filter before it got him killed.

Zim shot him a look and took a calming breath before putting anything sharp close to his skin. Dib was grateful for the uncharacteristic restraint. “Why does that matter?”

“I’m trying to figure out where you fall on the human age scale, remember?”

“Okay but you don’t have feelings for anyone of your species,” Zim shot back in a moderately defensive tone.

“Yeah,” Dib huffed. “I’ve already been told I’m weird and I don’t need some alien judging my love life as well. Also how the fuck would you know what I do or don’t feel?”

Zim gave him a stony look for a moment, shoulders hunched defensively. He took a deep breath and suddenly his entire demeanor changed, fast enough to give Dib emotional whiplash.

“I just know,” Zim said innocently, without looking up.

The sudden change in demeanor made all of Dib’s barriers suddenly snap back into place. “Yeah,
right … You’re like the worst at observing human behavior.” He turned to face the other direction, cheeks burning.

“I’ll let that slide for now but you need to stay still,” Zim warned. He gave the back of Dib’s head a pointed look. And then, because Dib couldn’t see him, he gave the back of Dib’s head a pointed poke with his finger. “You don’t even seem to like other humans for friendship. It’s not that difficult to figure out you don’t care for any of them at all.” He started on the next set of stitches before continuing, as innocently as possible, “The only person you spend any time on is, well … me.”

It felt like all the air had abruptly gone out of the room. Dib’s face suddenly darkened and he turned back towards Zim. “What are you getting at?” Anxiety flared in his chest as he felt the two of them rapidly moving in a direction they couldn’t turn back from.

“I’m just saying,” Zim began flippantly, keeping his eyes on his work, “that I’m the only one you seem to expend any energy pursuing.”

Dib was too gobsmacked to speak. When he finally found his tongue, he spit out a hasty and defensive, “I don’t like you, Zim.”

Zim just shrugged coyly, his expression infuriatingly innocent. “Sure, whatever you say.”

“I want to … cut you open and display your insides in a museum,” Dib sputtered.

“That’s awfully intimate.”

“I’m not fucking into you, Zim!” Dib yelled, suddenly sitting up and slamming his fist on the table. The suture Zim had been working on pulled and Dib’s wrist split open again, spilling blood down his arm. Zim fumbled for the gauze.

“Dammit, Dib-worm! You’re bleeding all over again! Stay still when I’m trying to fix you!” He made a grab for Dib’s elbow.

Dib shied out of the way of Zim’s grasp and held his arm protectively against his chest, needle still swinging from the thread in his arm. “What is your deal?” he yelled. “You break into my house —”

“For the last time, I used the stairs!”

“— kidnap me—”

“You came willingly, liar!”

“— and then try to put the moves on me?”

“What ‘moves’? I’m trying to fix you, you ingrate!”

“— After how many years of trying to murder me??”

Zim stood up in a flash. He reached over and pushed Dib back down onto the table so slowly that Dib thought being slammed against the surface would be somehow less menacing. Zim stared down at Dib and pinned him, one hand against Dib’s chest, expression unreadable.

“When I tell you not to yell or move, you do not yell or move,” Zim hissed, leaning in close.

Dib went silent and still, suddenly too terrified to breathe.

“I need you to realize I am holding back,” Zim said, dark anger seething just below the surface of his
words. “I could hurt you. I could break you. I could kill you if I wanted. So if I were trying to murder you, you’d know it. Because you’d be dead.” Dib’s breathing quickened as Zim pressed down harder and he leaned in closer, his tone icy. He was so close now that his eyes filled almost the entirety of Dib’s vision. “Every time you walked away from a battle still breathing, I was holding back. And I am holding back now, when I am trying to rescue you from your own stupid actions and you spit in the face of my efforts.”

Dib sat frozen under Zim’s palm, heart hammering away in his chest and eyes wide, terrified to break contact with Zim’s icy glare. He felt Zim’s fingers twitch angrily against his skin before Zim pulled his hand back and turned away abruptly. He walked off and Dib was momentarily concerned that Zim had just left him there, half-fixed and oozing blood. He watched out of the corners of his vision as Zim pulled his gloves off and disposed of them, re-washed his hands, and retrieved a new pair of gloves. He returned, looking eerily calm, and reached for Dib’s wrist. Dib flinched, but Zim merely extended his arm out on the table. He then pressed a wad of gauze against it, applying enough pressure to stop the bleeding. The motion was shockingly gentle in contrast to his previous display of barely contained rage.

“I am not here to ‘put the moves’ on you. I am not here because I ‘care’ about you. Somewhere along the line, it just became too boring for me to take over the earth without you there trying to foil my plans.” He stared Dib in the eyes again, but most of the fire seemed to have gone out. He just seemed tired and a touch bitter. “You’re only here because you amuse me and my mission would be a bore without your pitiful attempts at defeating me. Remember that.”

An uneasy silence fell over them. Dib could taste the adrenaline as his heart pounded away in his chest. Zim, with his fingers against Dib’s pulse, could no doubt feel it as well. If Dib didn’t want to die earlier, he sure did now. How did they always circle back around to hurting each other? How did they go from semi-friendly banter to Dib almost getting his ass kicked? Why were they like this?

Zim lifted the gauze, dabbed around the cut, then quietly got back to work. Dib didn’t dare make a sound as Zim finished fixing him up. Zim’s antennae stayed low, but his face remained almost irritatingly neutral. Dib thought he saw Zim’s eyes flick in his direction a couple times, but it was hard to tell where, exactly, his gaze was directed.

Just as Dib’s muscles began to cramp and he became uncomfortably aware he needed to pee, Zim snipped off the end of the suture with a curt, “There.” Dib still didn’t dare move, watching as Zim pulled out a roll of stretchy fabric. Zim delicately slid his hand under Dib’s, thumb resting in his palm. Inadvertently, Dib’s hand twitched so that his fingers gently closed around Zim’s thumb. Zim was strangely still a moment, appearing to examine their almost-clasped hands before giving his head a small shake and lifting Dib’s arm so he could bandage the wounds. He proceeded in silence, slowly winding the bandage down Dib’s arm and lightly pressing the edges down so that it formed a seal.

Watching him and sensing the strangely melancholy energy in the room, Dib began to feel slightly bad about his outburst. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought he’d somehow managed to hurt Zim’s feelings.

“That bandage is self adhering and waterproof. Just don’t tug at it. There’s an actual bathroom on the first subfloor.”

Dib flinched as Zim suddenly dropped his plastic bag of belongings directly on his face.

“Go get cleaned up so you stop sullying my house with your human-stink.”
Okay, maybe Dib didn’t feel *that* bad.

Chapter End Notes

“Nobody ever looks up.” What did I steal that from? Something I read as a kid … A Narnia book? The Last of the Very Great Wangdoodles? Something by Madeline L'Engle? It had an umbrella in it, whatever it was. And I always made sure to look up after that.
I'm sorry that this is so short. It was REALLY hard to write. I write Dib as having a lot in common with myself and this chapter made me kinda go to some places I hadn't gone to in a while. At any rate, have some introspective Dib!

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**One day I'll be talking on TED**

About how my youth is dead

And I hated myself, I should've loved me instead

-GIRLI, *Neck Contour*

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Dib hated his body. If it wasn’t bad enough that he practically glowed under a blacklight, he’d done quite a number on most of his limbs. The inside of his thighs were marred with hatch marks and burns. There was still a faint “loser” and “freak” he had inadvertently immortalized in his skin during one particularly horrible middle school night. He had scars in all stages of healing up and down both arms. He looked at his bandaged arm and wondered if the ones Zim had stitched back together would heal better or worse than the ones he had tended to on his own.

Externalizing the pain and watching the blood run down his skin was strangely meditative, not to mention, addictive. He wished he could stop hurting himself, but it had turned into something he *needed* whenever he had emotions that he just couldn’t process. Which seemed to be more and more, lately. So he’d sit down, concentrate all the pain in one area of his body, and let it melt away. And when he was done, he we left feeling empty … if he was lucky. Sometimes he just seemed to be left with a certain type of rare clarity that allowed him to realize just how fucked up and alone and damaged he was.

He stood in front of the mirror, barely able to maintain contact with his own haunted, sleep-deprived gaze. He looked down. Dried blood streaked his chest and there was a small, four-fingered handprint over his breastbone. Dib gently placed his own hand against it.

He didn’t want to think about Zim, but it was kind of unavoidable. Eventually, he was going to have to go back upstairs and deal with whatever was going on between the two of them. He closed his eyes and ran through the last hour or so … Zim picking him up and whisking him away from his house, carrying him, gently tending to his wounds … Zim trying to get a rise out of him, innocently smiling as he prodded … then holding him down with a kind of barely-restrained rage Dib had never encountered before …

*Why, though?*

The more he thought about what Zim had actually said, the stranger the whole thing seemed. What was the point of Zim making sure that Dib knew he kept pulling his punches? Zim had tried to spin it as if he was just toying with Zim all this time, but the whole exchange just made Dib question Zim’s
logic and supposed lack of feelings that much more. Especially given the odd trajectory their relationship had been on of late.

At the beginning of their junior year of high school, there had finally been a break in their near-constant rivalry. It had started with the two of them being assigned as partners for their chemistry lab, and slowly continued as they started to work on homework together more often, sit together at lunch, and hide somewhere on the grounds to skip out on gym. Dib stopped seeing their differences as much, and began to see how Zim’s desperation to please his leaders mirrored — much to Dib’s horror — Dib’s own frantic efforts to make his father love him. By the time Dib realized that seeing Zim was often the best part of his day, he had developed complicated, messed up, gay feelings for the alien invader and he didn’t have the requisite coping skills to deal with it in the least.

This was complicated by the fact that their friendship never fully got off the ground. He had been certain it would when, in the last few weeks of their junior year, he’d skipped gym to go hide in the greenhouse (a not-uncommon occurrence). Zim had disappeared again for the past week, leaving Dib vulnerable to the whims of the rest of his classmates. In the span of that week, he’d been shoved in lockers and toilets, had his glasses broken, been kicked and tripped, and — in one particularly terrifying instance — dangled out of a second story window. He didn’t want to risk getting flattened during whatever barbaric game they were playing that day, so he used his key to get himself into the greenhouse — one of the perks of being horticulture club president and singular member — with the end goal of curling up behind the wheat grass and spending the rest of the day sobbing.

He had just holed up in the corner where he was sure he wouldn’t be seen, when the door opened. He heard it click shut, then a second click as the lock was turned. His heart dropped into his boots and he mentally prepared himself for the beating of his life.

He was taken by surprise when Zim’s voice tentatively called out his name. He stayed hidden and quiet, unsure of what to expect.

“I saw you come in here, Dib.” Zim looked around but didn’t move from the door. “Look, I’m not going to hurt you. Would you please just come out?”

“I’m over here,” he finally replied, just loud enough for his voice to carry.

Zim made his way through the maze of plants, stopping short when he saw the state Dib was in. “You look like shit,” he said with his usual tact, taking in Dib’s black eye and general disheveled appearance.

“Thanks,” Dib said venomously. “Do you believe me now, Zim? This is what happens when you just take off for a week. Where the fuck were you??”

“I had some things to take care of,” he said softly, sitting down beside Dib. “I didn’t think they’d really …” He reached out to touch the bruise pooling beneath Dib’s eye and Dib flinched backwards at the touch.

“But they do, Zim. They do this to me whenever you’re not here. At least when we fight, everyone leaves us alone.” He pulled his knees to his chest and buried his face in his arms. “Every time I’ve tried to fight back against these assholes, I just end up in trouble!”

“Dib …”

“Why are you even here?” he asked flatly, face still hidden.

“I just got back. I was going to try and find you to see if you wanted to skip gym, and I saw you just
as you came in here,” Zim explained, watching Dib carefully. Dib’s shoulders rose and fell as he breathed, but he didn’t do anything to acknowledge Zim’s response. “What were you planning to do for the rest of the day?” Zim asked suddenly.

Dib finally looked up and gave him a strange look. “Hide in here and cry until someone either makes me go to class or I go home?”

“School is for idiots. Let’s just skip the rest of the day.”

Zim stood up and Dib gave him a suspicious look. “And go where? What are you planning?”

“Do you like aquariums?” Zim asked, ignoring the second bit.

“Yes …” Dib replied cautiously.

“Then let’s go. Observe some fish. See those round … dog-fish … thingies that you love so much.”

“Seals?”

“Yes. Those things.” He offered a hand to pull Dib to his feet.

“Why?”

Zim looked away and mumbled unhelpfully. “I … Ugh … look, I feel bad, okay? For your face.”

“For my … ?” Dib pointed to his black eye.

“Yeah. For that. I shouldn’t have left you.” Zim sighed. “Let me make it up to you. I’ll break in and change your attendance record, even.”

That was a thing that Dib was more than capable of doing himself, but he had to admit it was a nice gesture nonetheless. With a sigh, he finally took Zim’s hand and stood up. “Alright. But those seals had better be there.”

That day was one of the best in Dib’s recent memory. It was the first time he could recall actually spending a day out with someone he could reasonably call a friend. He and Zim had gone the entire day chatting amicably and Zim even treated him to lunch. Spending time with Zim felt easy and natural. But Zim was consistently inconsistent and Dib never quite knew what to expect from him. Sure, following that day, he was often more friendly for longer periods, but he still had phases where he would suddenly revert back to his old self, planning to subjugate Earth in the name of the Irken Empire. This would usually lead to Dib trying to stop him, and then a week or two of no-holds-barred fighting. Each time it happened, it hurt Dib worse, psychologically. As much as he cared about Zim, he couldn’t afford to act on it. Zim couldn’t be trusted with his own emotional wellbeing, much less anyone else’s.

They had been right in the thick of another rough patch on the morning that Dib’s father had sat him down to discuss college applications. Dib had been hoping he could quietly apply to some colleges that offered cryptozoology classes on the other end of the country, but suddenly he found himself having to admit to his father that he found most mainstream science to be rigid and unimaginative and all he really wanted in life was to hunt ghosts and be the first person to prove the existence of Bigfoot. This had lead to a fight so explosive, Dib ended up leaving home at 6am to walk to school without any of his things.

Zim seemed to pick up on Dib’s overwhelming depression and, to his credit, had decided to cool it on the whole rivalry end of things. However, he’d compensated by being even more annoying than
ever. Tossing notes at Dib during class, sitting next to him at lunch and then prattling on about the most mundane things, turning up in Dib’s hiding spots when Dib skipped class, and when none of that provoked a positive reaction, he would revert back to trying to get any reaction.

At the time, though, Dib had just found the change in behavior irritating and highly suspect. But now … Most of his actions, in retrospect, were very clearly Zim caring and not quite being sure how to show it. He thought back to earlier in the day when he’d come to school after yet another argument with his father, eyes red from sobbing, and Zim had spotted him from all the way across the green, sprinted over, and started babbling some nonsense about needing help with their calculus homework. It wasn’t how a normal high schooler would have acted upon seeing someone they knew in a bad way. But Dib supposed it was perfectly reasonable way to expect an alien who sucked at human interaction to attempt to show compassion.

He sighed, still unable to trust his own mind, and turned on the shower. His thoughts wandered back to the careful, almost loving way Zim tended to his wounds. Even when Dib had predictably flipped out, Zim didn’t hurt him. Menace him? Sure. Threaten him a bit? Yeah, what else was new? But Zim had collected Dib like a precious package and fixed him up with minimal insults and complaining. (Really, the best one could expect from Zim.) Either he had genuine feelings for Dib, or else whatever he was planning was worth being close enough to Dib to make him gag for several hours.

He let his mind wander to the impossible future where Zim did have complicated, messed up, gay feelings for him as well. What would his dad think? Dib was already treated as the black sheep, the professional fuck-up of the family. If his dad had it out for him just for having a passion for the paranormal, what would he think about his son being gay? Worse, gay for the person Dib had insisted was an alien for the past 6 years? He could just imagine ending up out on his ass before he even graduated from high school.

At any rate, he was getting way ahead of himself. Zim wasn’t likely to even want to spend the weekend on the same floor together unless Dib came back fluffy and sparkling clean and brimming with apologies.

Dib did his best to clean every square inch of his body. On the off chance Zim did have romantic ulterior motives, he at least wanted to avoid any smell-based insults. The apologies, however, were going to be a little bit more difficult.

Chapter End Notes

I think being around Zim is a little like being around a toddler. He just doesn't know how to be a person half the time. Even attempts to be helpful turn into "Hey ... hey ... HEY!!! Lookit me!!!!"

Anyway, the next chapter will be longer and HOPEFULLY what you've all been waiting for ^ω^
Together, We Make One Functional Person

Chapter Summary

Everything you've been waiting for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh, I'm just tryna introduce you
To this idea that I've grown used to
It's like sharing a dream with someone
Once you say it out loud, it can't be undone

- half•alive, The Fall

Humans sure were both incredibly fragile and yet strangely resilient, Zim thought as he curled up on the couch, scrolling through a rather unhelpful guide on suicidal ideation and what to do about it. If nothing else, his base did seem to be the perfect place to keep Dib safe from himself. Zim had none of the usual suicide tools available; no medications or sharp knives (GIR couldn’t be trusted with them) or alcohol (yuck… ) or ropes. So long as he kept Dib out of the sub basement where he kept the doomsday weapons …

He pulled up the cameras on his tablet, just to be sure Dib hadn’t wandered. Wander the base was pretty much all Dib had endeavored to do for years, and here Zim was just turning him loose like some sort of madman.

He sighed a moment, fingers faltering on the camera panel. Why did he care so much? Why did he go to all the trouble — and it was, indeed, an ordeal — of bringing Dib back home and making Dib his problem? Zim also had to ask himself what the hell he thought he was doing earlier, trying to get Dib to confess his undying love for him. Zim definitely assumed that the strength of Dib’s hate for him had to be undercut with some sort of positive emotion, or else they wouldn’t keep yo-yoing back and forth the way they had been. He had to ask himself if he wanted Dib to love him.

Thinking about feelings was giving Zim a headache. He had spent so long trying to convince himself that he only cared about Dib because he needed a bit of a challenge. He’d only recently come around to the idea of Dib as a possible friend. But now … he wasn’t quite sure what he felt or what he wanted, much less what Dib felt or wanted. He poked at the bathroom camera, just in time to see Dib step out of the shower.

Perfect. Surely if he had any sort of romantic inclination towards Dib, he would be feeling …

feeling …

Oh, no.
That strange feeling — one he could now begin to identify as being a mix of both want and desperation — stirred deep within him again. He wasn’t quite sure he liked where this was going. Dib was smelly and loud and moody and just generally difficult to deal with. So why did Zim feel so strangely drawn to him? Where was this feeling even coming from?

He gently touched a finger to the screen.

_Dammit._

He angrily flipped away from the feed, poking at various other camera feeds around the house and swiping through them aimlessly.

Maybe, just maybe, if he had Dib sitting beside him, he could sort this out. Maybe these feelings weren’t what he suspected they were. Zim had never even had a real friend; maybe these were just normal beginning-of-friendship feelings. Yes. Normal beginning-of-friendship feelings that were brought on particularly strong after hot, steamy showers.

Zim sat back a moment and did something he never did: attempt to identify what, _exactly,_ was going on in his head. More than any other emotion, he was definitely still _upset_ with Dib for turning everything on its head and fucking things up like he always did. If he hadn’t gone and gotten all _lippy,_ Zim would never have been forced to torment him back! After all, isn’t that what caused them to become mortal enemies in the first place? Dib’s utterly unhinged antagonism?

He leaned back against the couch. He was tired of all the back and forth, and the fighting, and the not-fighting only to start fighting some more shortly after. Just where was this going to _end_? When one of them _died_? Zim had to admit he didn’t want _that_. Not anymore, at least. Sure, there might have been a time when he would have done anything to get Dib out of the way, but in retrospect, he had to admit that some part of him had _always_ pulled punches just a little. Maybe he was going to have to be the one to put an end to all this nemesis nonsense. Dib certainly couldn’t be expected to, at this point.

It was settled, then. When Dib came back, Zim would be nice. He’d be so _fucking nice_ it would knock Dib’s socks right off. No one would _ever_ be able to match the levels of niceness Zim would —

“Are you okay?”

“Gah!” Zim startled, dropping his tablet and catching it before it hit the floor. Dib had somehow managed to sneak up on him while he was brooding.

“Fuck, sorry …” Dib said softly, shrinking back.

Zim just glared and went back to swiping aimlessly back and forth on his tablet, mumbling curses in Irken to himself. When Dib just stood frozen in the entryway, Zim eventually gave him a sidelong look. “Is that where you plan on spending the rest of the night?” he asked sarcastically.

_So much for niceness…_

“No … Sorry … I mean … I didn’t mean to scare you, a moment ago. You just … looked a little ill,” Dib said, gaze downcast.

He had a towel on his head like one of the girls from the 80’s movies GIR loves so much. It was endearing, in a weird way, and made Dib look more vulnerable than he normally did, what with the holes in his ears and all the metal in his face and his black nail polish. Zim sighed and his gaze softened. Dib glanced up and made momentary eye contact before looking away again.
“I’m fine. Just … too much on my mind,” Zim said, his voice low.

They sat in silence for a moment, avoiding looking at each other and pretending to very intensely examine Zim’s terrible wallpaper. Dib pulled the towel off his head and draped it over his shoulders. His cowlick sprung up and Zim had to suppress the urge to smile like a lunatic as Dib looked over at him, solemn and serious.

“Why did you bring me here, Zim?” Dib asked, finally. “I know it’s not just about fixing me up — you could have very easily dumped me at a hospital instead of taking me on as your little pet project. You’ve got an ulterior motive.” Before Zim could speak, he added, “No more bullshit about wanting to fight me.”

Zim laughed sadly and looked away.

“I don’t know,” he said, after a moment of trying to find the right words.

“Oh, come on,” Dib groaned, exasperated. “You’ve been progressively more and more in my face for the past two weeks. You can’t tell me you don’t know what your deal is.”

“I really don’t!” Zim looked up, desperation and confusion making his eyes seem even larger than normal. “Believe me — it would make all of this a lot easier if I did. But I don’t.” He held Dib’s gaze for a moment longer before slumping over and putting his head in his hands.

Whatever reaction Dib had been bracing for, it wasn’t that. It seemed Zim’s earlier display of anger had drained him of any remaining animosity. For the first time Dib could recall, Zim actually looked like his defenses were dropping. Dib had never seen him quite so visibly distressed and anxious.

“We’ve done this dance a few times now, over the years,” Dib said, carefully. “So excuse me if I’m just … wary that you’re going to be right back at it, tormenting me next week. Every time it looks like we might actually be friends, you do something to push me away.” He pursed his lips and gave Zim a wry look. “Often literally.”

“You’re blaming me entirely for how things are between us?” Zim asked incredulously.

Dib shrugged, making aggressive eye contact as he did so.

“Don’t act like you haven’t done your fair share of sabotaging any friendly interactions,” Zim said, bitterness creeping into his tone. “I can think of plenty of times you escalated things much further than they needed to go.”

Dib felt his temper flare defensively again. “Says the guy that put me in a holo chamber and made me think I’d lived the life of my dreams, just to get me to confess I’d thrown a muffin at his head during lunch! Or have you forgotten about that petty bullshit?”

“Oh, please! That was back in middle school! You’re not genuinely still mad about that, are you?”

And now Zim was yelling again, too. He was getting very tired of all this yelling.

“Clearly! Or else I wouldn’t have brought it up!” Dib angrily paced around the room.

Just like that, they were right back where they’d always been.

“You know, I’m doing a lot for you here! A whole awful lot more than someone you don’t even see as a friend really should. I mean … just … What do you want from me, Dib??” Zim yelled, exasperated.
“An apology!” Dib screamed.

Everything seemed to grind to a halt as he stood in the middle of the living room, breathing heavily and fuming. He watched, with some guilt, as GIR slid from the couch and hurried out of the room. Zim looked like he wanted to do the same.

“Would it kill you to apologize for any one of the litany of horrible things you did to me? You can’t just decide to be moderately nice and expect someone to forget all the fucked up things you’ve spent years doing! How the hell do you ever expect me to trust you??”

And there it was. Everything that was standing between himself and Zim ever having a normal, non-toxic friendship. Piles upon piles of unaired grievances left to fester in the heat of their resentment.

Zim looked utterly miserable, his antennae pressed flat down the back of his head. “Would it even make a difference?” he asked, so quietly that Dib wasn’t even positive the question was directed at him. “Would it change anything between us?”

“Oh, so you care about ‘us’, now?” Dib asked venomously.

Zim closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He looked up at Dib, deep ruby eyes boring into him. “Yes, Dib, I care,” he said, with soft intensity. He gave an exaggerated shrug and a sarcastic smile. “Okay? Are you happy now? I said it. I care about you.”

Dib crossed his arms and looked away.

“And you have to admit that we both did fucked up things to each other. I am not,” he started, holding up a finger and cutting Dib off just as he sucked in a deep breath, “I am not trying to excuse myself. I just … I want this to be over, alright? For real, this time. I’m so, so sick of doing this dance of truces and then trying to murder each other when we don’t have to.”

“So was I, Zim,” Dib growled. “Ages ago. I’ve tried extending an olive branch so many times and you’ve been completely uninterested.”

“I don’t think that’s a fair characterization …” Zim started, but a harsh laugh from Dib cut him off.

“Oh, alright then! Can we instead say you were less than enthusiastic?”

“I didn’t know how to be friends with you!” Zim admitted, albeit at the top of his lungs. “I still don’t! We are standing in my living room yelling at each other — does it look like either of us knows at all how to be friends with each other??”

Dib directed a very irate look at the floor.

“Should we start with apologies? Would that make you happy?”

Dib didn’t look like anything would make him particularly happy in that moment.

Zim watched him carefully. “I am sorry I used all your life’s dreams against you just to get a stupid confession,” he said, his voice level.

Dib didn’t look up.

“Alright, then,” Zim continued. “I am sorry I stole your organs.”

Dib fixed Zim with a glare.
“Fine … I am sorry I stole everyone’s organs,” Zim said, exasperated. Dib looked away and
continued his stony silence. Zim gave a frustrated sigh. “Still nothing? Okay. I am sorry I tried to
send you to the Moose Room. I am not sorry I tried to send everyone else there — even you would
agree with me that they all suck.” Zim waited for a smirk but was rewarded with nothing. “Okay,
okay … Not in the mood. I get it. In that case, I am sorry I used you to detonate my time dilation
field. I am sorry I put you in the time dilation field to begin with.”

“Is this supposed to feel terrible?” Dib grumbled.

“That’s probably the … the healing?” Zim offered up lamely. “I don’t know! Irkens don’t do
apologies, Dib-beast. I am trying my best here and I am sorry that my best is not up to your
ludicrously high apology standards.”

Dib rolled his eyes and his head in the complete opposite direction of Zim, arms still crossed.

“Aren’t you tired of this?” Zim asked Dib’s back, his tone pleading. Dib dropped his arms to his side
and turned to face Zim.

“Yes. Extremely. I just don’t get why you care all of a sudden,” Dib said, finally holding his gaze.

“Because it doesn’t have to be like this!”

“And why is that? Why now?”

Zim went quiet, making himself seem even smaller than usual. “I just … I want ... I realized that … it
just doesn’t have to, okay?”

Dib looked him over, trying to detect any signs of insincerity. “And the reason you brought me here
today was …?”

“Because I care, Dib. How many times do I need to tell you? Don’t ask me why I care; I’m still
trying to sort it out for myself, okay? But today, walking in and seeing what you’d done to yourself, I
just realized that if anything happened to you …” he shook his head. “I want to work through this,
Dib, right here and now … I’m so tired of hurting each other.”

Dib looked over to see Zim with his face in his hands. A bit of rusty red on Zim’s tunic suddenly
caught his eye, and he realized Zim was still wearing the same blood-spattered clothes he’d had on
earlier. Despite all his gripes about how disgusting Dib was, he hadn’t bothered to go change.

“Ditto,” said Dib, defeatedly, walking over beside the couch and sliding down the wall to the floor.

A strained silence fell over them, the air still thick with unspoken grievances. Dib sat with his knees
to his chest, head down. Zim looked over and registered that Dib was wearing a blue hoodie with
matching sweatpants and ridiculously fluffy slippers. It was a hard left turn from the rather punk-rock
Dib he knew. Well, thought he knew. Zim realized he really didn’t know Dib very well at all.

Dib finally raised his head and caught Zim staring. “What?”

“Oh, erm … why are you on the floor?” Zim asked, feeling stupid.

Dib shrugged. “It’s not my couch? And you’re … I thought you were kinda angry at me ...”

Zim waved his hand dismissively. “Let’s just put the whole thing behind us for now, shall we? Not
to mention that I invited you and I should at least try to be a semi decent host. Especially considering
I’m doing this so you don’t off yourself. GIR!” he shouted suddenly, causing Dib to jump. “Bring
me the fluffy blankets!"

After a moment, Dib heard the kitchen base entrance clang, and in rushed GIR — clearly no worse for the wear after their screaming match — with a towering pile of blankets. He promptly dumped them on Dib with a raucous laugh before taking one and putting it on the floor so he could roll himself up like a burrito.

Zim leaned down and grabbed a blanket to spread on the couch while GIR turned the TV to some innocuous channel with his foot and bounced up on the other side of the couch. Zim patted the spot next to him. "Come, Dib-thing; make yourself a nest."

Dib stood up and draped one of the blankets over his shoulders. "While I’m inclined to believe you actually think humans make literal nests, you’re also not that far off." He draped a second blanket over Zim’s shoulders before layering the others in his spot on the couch. "Depressed humans do like to nest in blankets."

"Are you still depressed?"

Dib gave Zim an odd look as he climbed up onto the couch. "I mean, yeah? It’s less a constant emotion and more like constant background noise."

"You at least look like the shower did you some good."

"That would probably be because, um," Dib stalled, running his hands through his hair and turning red. "It’s kind of the first shower I’ve had since Monday."

That immediately struck Zim as disgusting, but he was pretty sure Dib was wildly aware of that fact. He felt a pang of pity in his chest. A sudden, high-pitched buzzing made him flinch, and he looked over to see Dib watching him out of the corner of his eyes, biting his lip in an effort to hold back his words.


"I … well … look, you apologized," he began, flustered. "So I figure maybe I should, too." He took a deep breath. "I’m sorry for how I treated you earlier. You might have legitimately saved me and I wasn’t very grateful about it."

Zim blinked in surprise.

"I’m sorry I accused you of things. I’m sorry I insinuated that being into you would be the worst thing in the world," he said softly, shooting Zim a look he couldn’t quite read. "I’m sorry I was a dick to you when you’re the only one trying to help me. I just …" he draped himself over the back of the couch dramatically and sighed. "Can we … can we formally agree to stop trying to annihilate each other until I get my head straightened out? Just so I know where we stand? I’m just really confused about a lot of things right now and what I need is just … a friend, I guess. Someone to talk to who gets it. You’re the closest thing I’ve got."

Zim’s expression softened. "Okay," he replied, quietly. "I would like that."

"You do realize that in order for this to work, though, I have to trust you, right? You’ve got to throw me a bone here." Dib gave him a pleading look. "So come on … really. Why the change of heart? Why do you suddenly give a shit?"

"I don’t suddenly…" Zim started.
“Okay…” Dib replied, gesturing for him to get on with it.

Zim wanted desperately to get everything off his chest. He was also aware that he had to tread lightly. “If I tell you,” he began, slowly, “It might change a lot of what you think about me.”

“Is that so bad?” Dib asked. His eyes were plaintive, searching. Zim wondered if he and Dib both ultimately wanted the same things.

“I don’t know,” Zim admitted. “I don’t know if it will be the good sort of different or the bad sort of different. I just know that once I say it … I can’t take it back if it makes things worse.”

“Whatever it is, I promise I won’t be upset,” Dib said, quietly. “I think I’ve used up all my upset for the night. I just want you to finally be open with me.”

“Alright,” Zim sighed. He picked at the hem of his tunic, trying to decide where to begin. “Do you remember that time a few years back, when I missed like a month of school?”

Dib thought for a moment. “The time you said you had malaria?”

“No, I think it was the time before that.”

“Swine flu?”

“No ….”

“Mono?”

“I think it was the year before that …”

“Lyme Disease?”

“Yes, that one.”

“You sure have missed a lot of school,” Dib remarked. “How the hell are you graduating?”

“I really have no fucking idea,” Zim admitted. “Anyway, when I was gone …” He looked at Dib, knowing there was no coming back from this. He’d just have to trust that Dib would keep a level head. “… it was because the Tallest decided to call an early Existence Evaluation for me.”

Dib’s eyes narrowed. “What, like they get to determine if you’re worthy to keep existing just because they don’t like you? That seems a little extreme, even for Irk.”

“No, Dib,” Zim said, his voice rising a little. He gave Dib a look of such desperation and pain that it physically hurt for Dib to hold his gaze. “I need you to understand this … I am defective. I am
broken. I am ... insane. A legitimate danger. The Tallest tried to kill me but ... my PAK can't be deleted for some reason. I am too broken to even die, Dib.”

Dib regarded the little alien in front of him, all big raspberry-red eyes and quivering antennae, twisting the hem of his blanket with barely contained anxiety. Dib had always assumed that everyone on Irk was as frenetic as Zim. He suddenly wondered how much of what made Zim seem alien was because he was Irken and how much was because he was Zim.

“There’s more,” he said, looking down and sounding miserable. “You’re going to hate me and I’m so sorry ...” He looked at Dib, then quickly away. “There’s been so much yelling tonight ...” he said, softly.

Dib put a hand on his shoulder and Zim had never felt more small. “I promised I wouldn’t get upset with you.”

Zim put his hand on top of Dib’s and gave him a sad smile. He hoped Dib could keep that promise, but he wouldn’t blame him if that turned out not to be the case. He was quiet for a moment while he gathered his courage.

“I wasn’t sent here for a real mission.”

He felt his heart drop straight out of his chest finally saying it out loud, and in front of Dib, no less. Nothing but pure anxiety propelled him forward.

“The Tallest ... they lied to me. To banish me. I don’t even think I was supposed to end up on Earth. I think I was supposed to get lost and die in deep space. But I ended up here and I did everything I could to get the Tallest to notice me, acknowledge me, respect me ... Well past the point when any normal person would have realized it was hopeless ...” He trailed off and turned to Dib, who was massaging the bridge of his nose and taking deliberately even breaths.

“How long did you know?” Dib’s voice was quiet, his expression unreadable.

“Dib, I am so sorry ...” Zim’s words caught in his throat.

“Just ... how long have you known about this?”

“Maybe ... some very small part of me ... from the start of it? I don’t know!” Zim threw his head back, looking at the tangled mess of wires that made up his ceiling. “I didn’t want to think it could be true. After they tried to deactivate me, I knew for sure and I couldn’t ignore it anymore. But,” he balled his hands into fists. “I still just thought that if I kept trying ... that if I could find the most perfect, clever, ingenious way of taking over Earth, they would respect me. That it wouldn’t matter if I was defective or not. I wanted to prove myself so badly. I wanted everyone to respect me so badly. ” Zim’s voice broke, and he took a few shaky, calming breaths. “You were such a good distraction from everything, I didn’t want our rivalry to stop. So that part is true ... I enjoyed fighting you. It kept me busy building things and making plans. It kept me from just ... self-immolating. But lately, I’m just tired of hurting you. I don’t know why I’m having a change of heart now ... I just know that I want ...” He trailed off and gave a miserable whine. “I don’t know, Dib. I just feel so strangely these days. About you. And everything. I don’t have the right words for it yet.”

Zim cast a glance at Dib, who had pressed his face into his hands. He sat so still, Zim could scarcely see him breathing.

“I’m sorry, Dib,” he whispered. “I ... I wish I could give you those years back. I’m so sorry I hurt you over nothing.”
He went to reach for Dib’s sleeve, then faltered, hands shaking. All he wanted was to reach out and hold Dib close, and he didn’t understand a bit of it ... because he shouldn’t have been feeling the things he now knew with absolute certainty he was feeling.

“I’m so sorry,” he repeated, hand falling to his side.

“It’s a lot, Zim,” Dib said, muffled from behind his cupped hands. “Just … give me a moment. I don’t … I don’t really know what to do with all this quite yet.”

“I should have put a stop to the fighting as soon as I knew,” Zim whispered, because he had to say something. Maybe if he said enough, the right thing would tumble out of his mouth, make Dib not hate him. Maybe, if he said enough ... he would somehow find the words to fix everything.

Dib finally looked over, a pained expression on his face. “I’m not mad, I’m just … we spent so long at each other’s throats …”

“... For nothing. I know. Believe me, I know ...” Zim tentatively reached out again, before balling up his hand into a fist and looking away, ashamed. “I’m sorry. None of this is an excuse but I hope some of it is a good explanation. Though I can’t reasonably expect you to understand the feelings and motivations of someone as … broken as I am.”

Even if Zim had completely blown it, Dib deserved to know the truth. Zim couldn’t give him back all the years they spent hurting each other, but he could give Dib a future where he could be free to focus on other things. Even if those things weren’t Zim.

He was shocked to feel Dib reach over and pull him into a tight hug.

“No, I understand,” Dib whispered, softly. If he hadn’t said it mere inches from Zim’s antenna, he might not have heard it at all. “I understand why you did it. We have a lot in common ... I’m ... I guess I’m kind of defective, too.” Dib pulled Zim into his lap, wrapping the blanket around them both and holding Zim close.

Zim just let himself be moved and held, too shocked and tired to resist. He wasn’t even sure that, given his full faculties, he would have put up a fight. The pressure felt at once strange and welcome, like it was something he had been missing his entire life without fully being aware of it. Dib held him like he was the only solid object in a raging storm while Zim pressed close and listened to Dib’s frantic heartbeat. For a moment, they sat in deafening silence; two broken people trying to hold each other together.

“My dad,” Dib started, a bit too loudly. He cleared his throat. “I wanted more than anything to prove to him that I could be a real paranormal investigator.” He laughed sadly, and Zim felt a tear drop onto his head as Dib squeezed his eyes shut. “That’s why I cut myself up today, you know. We got into a fight this morning ... again ... because I wanted to go to a college where I could study those things, and he didn’t like it. Said I could do something he approved of or I could forget about him helping me pay for school. And not too long ago, I would have done anything for his approval ... I would have killed you, Zim,” he said, desperation trailing off his words. “I would have killed you, just to get everyone to admit they were wrong about me. And that’s ... that’s scary. It freaks me out to think about it.”

He sucked in a deep breath. “When I went to the psych ward ...” he stopped himself and his tone darkened. “No ... that time my dad let me get taken to the psych ward? They tried to put me on all sorts of medication that just ended up making me sick. Everyone called me insane but on Earth they don’t kill you for that. They won’t even let you kill yourself. You get out when you pretend to be normal. When they think they’ve fixed whatever short circuited in your brain.”
Zim recalled Dib’s return, how he was a husk of his usual self, so quiet and small. It was like they had beaten all of the fight out of him. For a while, Zim had been convinced that the old Dib wasn’t coming back ever again.

“I tried so hard, Zim!” Dib said desperately, voice keening as he squeezed Zim tight, and all Zim could do was squeeze back as he felt his heart ache more than he ever knew it could. He wanted to take Dib and fly him away from stupid earth and his stupid family and all the stupid people at stupid school and then they could go explore the universe until … !!

“I tried so hard to be normal. And when that didn’t work, to at least impress people. And when that didn’t work, either, to sit quietly out of the way. And none of it did anything to make me less of a social pariah and a loser!”

Zim turned and let Dib bury his face in his shoulder, holding him gently as he started to break down again.

“Nobody likes me, Zim,” he bawled. “I know that. I know it … Nobody. Not even my own family. All the kids at school tormented me until you showed up. And when you were gone, they never missed an opportunity to shove me in a locker … or worse. Even on the days I don’t actively want to kill myself, I still just want to become dead, somehow …”

“Dib,” Zim said, gently, pulling back so he could remove Dib’s glasses and wipe his tears away, his desire to provide comfort finally overriding his visceral reaction to human sadness fluids. He was quiet for a moment, wondering if it was okay to finally say the things he knew.

He put a hand on Dib’s cheek and Dib finally met his searching gaze. Zim felt like he was stepping over the edge of a cliff.

“I like you,” he whispered, stroking Dib’s cheek a little awkwardly before pulling him close again. “I’m sorry I said you were just here for my amusement. That was … not very nice of me. I like you and I care about what happens to you … I don’t really understand it, yet. All these emotions are … strange. But I just need you to know right now that I do, very much, like you. Maybe too much,” he sighed, giving in to his impulses and pressing his face against Dib’s cheek. It felt so warm and soft and right. “And I certainly don’t want you dead. I thought if I didn’t bring you back here with me … I might never see you again.” Through his emotional haze, he noted that Dib smelled rather nice right now. A little salty, but his hair smelled like vanilla and flowers.

Dib pulled back out of Zim’s embrace, wiping his face on his sleeve.

“I’m sorry,” Zim said again, looking down as his antennae drooped. Why couldn’t he get anything right when it came to Dib? “Maybe I should have just kept that to myself.”

He looked up, and suddenly Dib was pulling him close and pressing his lips against Zim’s and forcing them open with his tongue. Zim’s eyes widened, but he leaned into the kiss, letting Dib put his hands on his waist and pull him close until their bodies pressed together. Dib’s movements were shaky and desperate, but Zim let himself be gently lead through the motions. He pulled his gloves off behind Dib’s back before sliding his hands up Dib’s neck and working his bare fingers through his hair. It was still slightly damp from the earlier shower and smelled overpoweringly sweet when he was up this close.

“So, when you said you didn’t like me, earlier …” Zim mumbled, breathless.

“I guess I lied, too,” Dib leaned back just enough to whisper. “Sorry about earlier… I thought you were just … look, it’s been a weird day …”
“What’s wrong? What did I say?” Dib asked, worried.

Zim sat up and gave him a searching look. “I just … It has been a weird day. And I … want to make sure you really want this. Because we could try out being friends for real, first, and if that works—”

“I like you now, Zim,” Dib said, desperately. “And you like me. Even though we couldn’t go a month without kicking each other’s asses, I’ve liked you for over a year now …”

“That’s the problem, though, isn’t it? I don’t …” He put a hand on Dib’s cheek. “That’s where we keep ending back up; fighting. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Dib took his hand and kissed it. “So don’t.”

Zim sighed and closed his eyes.

“Everything you’ve done today proved to me that you care about me,” Dib said, his eyes sparkling with intensity. “I mean, fuck … you’ve still got my blood all over you.”

Zim looked down. “Oh. Ew.” He pulled a face, then smiled slightly.

Dib put his arms around Zim’s waist. “Look, Zim … I spent all of today wondering if you were into me or trying to humiliate me. And I’m just … over the moon that it’s the former.” He pulled Zim close again, resting their cheeks together. “You can’t tell me this doesn’t feel amazing.”

Zim whined. “I’m not saying it doesn’t … it feels like a lot of things … I’ve just never felt this way about someone. Anyone. Anywhere. And I don’t know the first thing about human courtship …”

“Hey, you at least finally figured out it doesn’t involve beans,” Dib chuckled.

“True, true, “ Zim said with a slight smile. He hugged Dib tightly, almost two centuries of never having made physical contact with another creature beginning to catch up with him. “It’s just that … You deserve someone who will do it right and … I don’t know how to do it right.”

“I don’t know how to do it right, either. We’ll just have to figure it out together.”

Zim was quiet again.

“Forget all the complexities for a moment. What do you want?”

Zim snuggled close, resting his head against Dib’s chest and listening to his heartbeat. A million emotions swelled inside him, and he couldn’t name a single one. “I want to be the one who makes you happy …”

“You are right now.”

“But five minutes ago I was making you angry!”

“That’s … just going to happen,” Dib said with a shrug. “It’s part of caring about someone.”

“So we were just fighting because we cared too much?” Zim sulked from under Dib’s chin.

“Weren’t we, though?” asked Dib, his tone sincere. “I mean, that was what was going on, right? You were mad because you couldn’t sort out your emotions towards me and I was mad because I couldn’t deal with wanting to fuck an alien?”
Zim sat up and gave him a disgruntled look. “Oh, well, if that’s all it is …”

Dib laughed and pulled him close. “I’m joking. Mostly.” He gave Zim a wink and Zim stuck out his tongue. “My point is … we fought. It didn’t turn physical. No one got hurt. Nothing got broken. We talked things out. I think we’re doing pretty well.”

Zim gave another nervous sigh. “Alright. That’s fair. But …” he shook his head in confusion. “The way I like you … Dib, it scares me, to be honest. I want you to be happy but … I want to be the one to make you happy and protect you and take care of you. And … I feel like I need you …”

Dib kissed the worry lines on his forehead. “Good, because I feel like I need you, too. You’re going to be the best possessive boyfriend a guy could ask for.”

A gentle silence fell between them. Zim relaxed in Dib’s arms, letting his guard down completely for the first time in … well, forever, he supposed. He turned to look upwards at Dib. “It’s agreed, then? We’re going to try and make this work?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Dib replied, snuggling him close. “It’s going to be interesting getting used to you protecting me.”

“I’ll kill anyone who even looks at you funny, you know,” Zim said with a smirk.

“You’re probably going to have to kill most of the kids at school then,” Dib laughed.

“Eh, fuck ‘em,” Zim whispered under his breath, just before Dib put a hand behind his head and pulled him into another desperate kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone who ever watched those Rainbow Dash Presents animations on YouTube knows I pilfered a couple choice lines from "Bittersweet".

This is probably draft 9 or 10 or this chapter. Dib was not originally the pushy one, but I think it works best this way. Zim is emotionally compromised and he knows it; he's also wildly aware that he keeps hurting Dib. Dib is less scared of getting hurt than he is desperate to be loved.
I have "2AM" by Bear Hands stuck in my head, but good things do happen after 2am in this fic, so it's not the song at the top of this chapter. Instead it's something sappy by Waterparks.

I’ll be the silver lining around your fence  
You use to protect yourself from all the world  
And its sharp teeth  
Because I am all for you

- Waterparks, Silver

Zim’s mind slowly drifted back into wakefulness. He was curled up on top of Dib, his head snuggled up in the crook of Dib’s neck. The living room was dark and quiet, so what had woken him up?

Beneath him, Dib shifted and gave a pained whine. Zim immediately sat up.

“Are you alright?”

Dib looked half asleep as he sat up and leaned his back against the arm of the couch, sliding Zim down into his lap.

“My arm is killing me … I think I pulled a stitch or something,” he mumbled.

“Let me see …” Zim gently pushed Dib’s sleeve up and inspected the bandage. “Well, it doesn’t look like you’re bleeding, but I’m not surprised you hurt. This is about when I’d expect the numbness to wear off. Do you want something for the pain?”

“I don’t think aspirin is going to cut it,” Dib said pitifully.

“Pssh, aspirin,” Zim said with a wave of his hand. “Don’t underestimate me, Dib.” He hopped off the couch and disappeared into the kitchen.

“What sort of things do you drink?” Zim yelled from the other room.

“Oh … um … just water is fine,” Dib replied. The weirdness of the whole situation was finally beginning to hit him. He was sitting on Zim’s couch in Zim’s base, not trying to bug the place or stop some crazy world domination scheme, because he was now the boyfriend of the megalomaniac alien who had been trying to conquer earth for the better part of a decade. And said megalomaniac alien was in the kitchen getting him a glass of water and pain medication that was probably illegal in most countries.

Dib attempted to mentally backtrack how, exactly, he had ended up here.
Zim returned with a glass of water and a small, square pill and handed both to Dib.

Dib examined the pill. “Is this a narcotic?”

Zim shrugged. “They’re just what I’ve got in my first aid kit so whatever class of drug it is, you’ll probably be fine.”

“Probably,” said Dib with a raised eyebrow.

“I haven’t killed you yet, have I?”

“You’re definitely batting a thousand in that category,” Dib said, dropping the pill in his mouth and chugging the entire glass of water. He set it down on the floor and Zim hopped back into his lap. Dib gave him a surprised look as he snuggled in close. Feeling Dib freeze, Zim opened one eye and perked an antenna.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing,” Dib stuttered. “I’m just … getting used to this, is all.” He hugged Zim tightly and exhaled and happy sigh into his shoulder.

“Feels good, right?”

Dib slid his hands down to Zim's hips. “So good. I might just have to stay like this.”

“... It's all still a bit weird, though, isn't it?” Zim asked from where he was snuggled against Dib’s shoulder. "It feels easy to slip into being like this, but it's ... still new."

Everything was starting to feel a bit weird to Dib ... weird and soft and almost giddy. He assumed that whatever was in that pill had finally started to kick in as the pain in his arm started to melt away. He enjoyed the sudden warmth flooding through him and the way it made the weight of Zim's body feel against his own.

“I keep waiting to wake up in my bed,” Dib admitted, lazily rubbing Zim's shoulder. “I’ve wanted this for so long, Zim. I don’t really know exactly how or when I started feeling this way about you but …”

“Chemistry class last year, probably.”

Dib laughed. “Do you remember how we both went up to Mr. Gilbert and demanded he give us different partners? I was so mad because I knew he did it on purpose. He was trying to force us to get along. And the insane part is that it worked .”

“I think bonding over our mutual hatred of gym class in the greenhouse is what really did it,” Zim said with a smile.

“Yeah … I feel like I just woke up one day and realized that seeing you made everything less shitty. And I couldn’t even make sense of it because I’ve literally never felt that way about another human. I had kind of an existential crisis over it.”

“Meh, humans suck. No wonder you don’t like them.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I’m one of those sucky humans.”

Zim kissed his neck. “Nah, you’re one of the good ones. Even if you are kind of smelly.”
“I can’t tell what sort of compliment that was.”

“The kind where I tell you that you belong to Zim now, so you will be taking better care of yourself.” Zim leaned in close.

“Oh, I’m yours now?” Dib said, gaze falling to Zim’s mouth before he closed his eyes.

“Mhmm. You’re Zim’s human,” he said against Dib’s lips. “And I’m going to take good care of you.”

They kissed gently and at a much slower pace than earlier. Dib ran a hand up Zim’s back and neck and finally up to gently stroke an antenna. Zim pressed closer in response, and from his throat bubbled a noise that Dib could only describe as a rather contented purr.

He pulled back and his recently laugh made Zim jump. He looked up at Dib with confusion and Dib could only smile back.

“I … sorry … do Irkens purr???”

Zim shrugged and blushed. “I … guess so? I’ve just never been happy enough to do it before …”

“Well, that’s probably the best thing I’ve heard all day,” Dib said softly, resuming the antenna-stroking. Zim leaned in, nuzzling his head against Dib’s neck blissfully. Dib leaned down for another kiss and Zim happily kissed back, their tongues dancing against each other. Dib pulled his legs to his chest, sandwiching Zim against him. The litany of sensations made time move strangely.

Dib’s stomach growled and Zim sat up suddenly, slapping his head. “Oh, my god! I forgot to feed you! Argh! I’m already so bad at taking care of you …”

Dib blushed. “Sorry …”

Zim head-butted Dib’s hand. “You realize that I need to eat, too, right? I just never eat at school because the cafeteria food is just not fit for consumption by anyone. But I’m supposed to be taking care of you …”

Dib laughed and kissed the top of his head. “It’s alright. You’re not any worse at taking care of me than I am. Is anything even open this late?”

“Denny’s,” Zim said with all the certainty of someone familiar with late-night snacking urges.

GIR, who had been sleeping peacefully on the other side of the couch, suddenly shot up.

“Denny’s‽ We goin’ to Denny’s???” he shrieked with a massive smile.

“Well, looks like we don’t have a choice now,” Zim sighed.

Dib gave him a quizzical look.

“There’s no arguing with him unless you want to hear him scream himself back to sleep,” Zim explained.

Dib held up his hands. “I’d really rather not. Denny’s is fine.”

“Whee! Waffles!” GIR yelled, running laps around the room.

Zim pulled out his disguise, popping the contact lenses back on while Dib leaned down to rifle in his
bag and pull out a red and purple knit hat. He handed it to Zim. “Here, try this. That wig always looks so itchy.”

Zim gave Dib a quizzical look but took it and pulled it onto his head. “Hum … There is a lot more room under here … and it’s soft … how do I look?”

Dib grinned. “Like an alien wearing a beanie.”

Zim sniffed dismissively and began fishing around for his missing gloves. “You clearly have astute observational skills not common in the rest of your species.”

“You know, I’m beginning to wonder if you’re right,” Dib admitted. He looked around for wherever he’d tossed his shoes. “Are we walking there?”

“Yayyy walk!!!” GIR shrieked, bouncing around the room, the hood of his dog suit flapping behind him.

Zim turned to Dib, deadpan. “Yes. Yes, it would appear we are.”

“Are you gonna be warm enough in that, then?” Dib asked. “You always show up to school in a parka in like October.”

“It’s not quite cold enough for the parka,” Zim said with a wave of his hand.

“You also sort of look like you just murdered someone,” Dib said, looking at the blood spatters on the front of Zim’s tunic. He turned and dug around in his bag and then draped his spare hoodie over Zim’s head. “Try this.”

“That is going to be huge on me …”

“That’s the point!” Dib replied with a grin.

Zim pulled it on over his existing clothes, pushing up the sleeves so his hands were visible. The hem hung just below his knees. He turned to Dib, who was practically glowing.

“That’s adorable,” he said with a massive grin. “You’re getting dressed in my clothes more often.”

“It is rather comfy,” Zim admitted. “And purple. I can appreciate the purple.”

Dib grinned. “I knew it!”

“What?” Zim asked.

“That’s your favorite color, isn’t it?”

“Yes …” he said slowly.

Dib shrugged. “I figured. Because of the contacts. It’s a weird color for eyes so I kinda assumed … It’s totally not why I brought purple clothes … if you were thinking that …”

"Oh, but I was the one with ulterior motives," Zim joked.

Dib shrugged. "Can you blame me for wanting to stay on your good side?"

“If you want a cookie for you astute observational skills, I’ll give it to you this time,” Zim said with a smirk. He turned and dug around under the couch cushion and pulled out a red vest. “Come here,
GIR. What do you need to do when we go out to eat?"

GIR took a flying leap onto the couch. “Put on mah vest cuz Imma service dog!”

“And what do good service dogs say?”

GIR was quiet but did a little dance like he was wagging his tail.

“Very good, GIR!” The little robot held his arms out so Zim could secure the vest on him. Zim looked over to see Dib covering his mouth to keep from laughing.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispered. “I think that cured my depression.”

Zim gave an exasperated sigh. “Well, if I knew it was going to be that easy …” He gave Dib a little smile then grabbed GIR’s leash from the floor and clipped it to his collar while Dib pulled on his Converse. They walked out of the house and before Zim shut the door, he turned around and shouted back inside.

“Computer!!”

The sound of snoring emanated from somewhere inside the house. Zim rolled his eyes.

“Put yourself into Guard Mode while we’re away.”

“Five more minutes …” the machine mumbled.

Zim shot the house a nasty look and then closed the door. “I really need to just buy a proper lock,” he grumbled as they started off down the street. “Do you know how long it took me to realize that everything the Tallest gave me was shitty and broken on purpose?” he fumed. “The house’s computer sass me. They don’t even make Voot Cruisers anymore. And then there’s --” He looked down at GIR, who was happily toddling along at the end of his leash. Zim sighed. “Well, let’s just say that some things have grown on me more than others.”

“Wait, everything they gave you was broken?”

Zim looked thoughtful for a moment. “Yes, I think all of it was either old or sabotaged or stolen from the reject bin. I don’t think there’s a single working thing in there that I didn’t make myself.” He suddenly noticed Dib’s surprised expression. “What?”

Dib blinked and held his hands up. “Nothing … I guess I’m just impressed.”

“Impressed why?”

“That you did so much with such shitty equipment. I mean, I know what you did was mostly try to conquer earth, but you still have my respect. You know, as the son of a Real Scientist and all.”

“I fixed what I could and built what I didn’t have,” Zim replied with a shrug.

Dib laughed. “Dude, that’s even better. Honestly, I’d go into a respectable science’, ” he mimicked his father and used heavy air quotes, “if it meant learning from you. I think your planet made a mistake letting you leave R&D.”

Zim cast him an odd look. “If I’m being perfectly honest, the move was highly suggested due to my propensity to … blow things up.”

“Isn’t that what they wanted from you?”
“I think they were hoping I’d do the blowing up a little further from Irk,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Oh,” Dib said softly.

Zim shook his head sadly. “I don’t know if it was a property of Irk, itself, but something about being there just made me … out of my mind. The more time I spend away from it, the clearer my head feels and the less I find myself fucking up horribly. On Irk, I couldn’t even breathe without blowing the power for half the planet. Did I ever tell you I was banished? Before this, I mean.”

“They banished you twice??” said Dib, incredulous.

Zim nodded. “After I stole a battle mech and wrecked half of Irk, the Tallest decided they were done with me and had me re-encoded as a food service drone and sent to Foodcourtia. Looking back, I’m shocked they didn’t do it sooner. Not even just because of all the things I blew up, but because … well, you’ve noticed I’m not very tall, right?”

Dib smiled down at Zim, putting a hand on his head. “For what it’s worth, on earth it just makes you sickeningly cute.”

“Yes, well, glad it came in handy eventually,” Zim said with a blush. “On Irk, though, it puts me on the lower tiers of society. No matter how hard I work or how well I do, I will always be hobbled by my height. There are just certain levels I’ll likely never attain.” He looked away for a moment, bitter. In front of him, GIR tripped over a crack in the pavement and toppled over. Zim broke from his brooding and sprung over to pick him up and set him back on his feet.

“Careful, GIR.”

“Don’t step onna crack or you’ll break yer momma’s back!” he giggled. He bounced to Zim’s side. “Did I break yer back??”

Zim patted him on the head. “Not quite.” He spotted another gap in the pavement and lifted GIR over it. Once his little legs hit the ground again, he bounded back to the end of his leash.

“So, how do you feel about kids, momma?” Dib asked playfully.

Zim stuck out his tongue. “No smeets for me — I think my hands are more than full.”

For once, Dib let the silence drape over them and didn’t attempt to break it. He reached down for Zim’s hand and interlaced their fingers, giving a gentle squeeze that Zim returned. Every time they touched, now, Dib’s heart swelled with a million emotions. Happiness and comfort and overwhelming want and lingering fears and a desire to just wrap Zim up and protect him from the world. Being in love ached in a way that felt so satisfying. Walking along at 2am with Zim and his strange little robot minion/dog/son, Dib felt like he actually had a family that wanted him around. Sure, Zim was a wildcard and GIR still thought Dib’s name was Mary, but at least here he was a black sheep amongst black sheep.

He finally gave Zim a gentle nudge with his hips. “Do you want to finish your story?”

Zim shook the faraway look from his eyes. “Sure … where was I?”

“The Tallest banished you to Foodcourtia?”

“Ah, yes,” Zim said. “And then I un-banished myself.”
Dib burst out laughing. “You did what??”

“I heard that Operation Impending Doom II was starting, and despite the fact that I had no reason to be picked, I was convinced that the Tallest had just … forgotten to invite me to the Great Assigning.”

Dib cocked his head. “Not everyone gets an assignment?”

Zim shook his head. “They pick only the most elite Invaders to go ahead to a select few planets. I just sort of … barged my way on stage and demanded a planet. Somehow I never noticed that I was never actually re-encoded as an Invader. Everything just happened so fast. I believed the Tallest when they told me that all the broken equipment was a cover … The longer I’m here and the more I go over those memories, the more stupid I feel,” Zim admitted. He gazed up at the stars and sighed. “Part and parcel of being broken, I suppose.”

“ Fuck the Tallest and fuck Irk,” Dib said angrily. “You’re smart, Zim. I’ve watched you build and improvise a million different things over the years. I’ve honestly been a bit jealous. I wish I had half the skill you do with engineering.”

Zim beamed up at him, then chuckled. “You say that, until I accidentally create a monster that ends up eating not one, but two world leaders.”

Dib stared at him, trying and failing to sort out whether he was joking or not. “You’re messing with me.”

Zim gave Dib an utterly serious look. “I’ve technically assassinated two world leaders and committed war crimes and acts of terrorism on my own planet.”

“Really?”

“ Really really.”

Dib chewed the inside of his cheek. “I feel like I’m being warned off, here.”

Zim shrugged. “It wasn’t on purpose. There just seems to be … an awful lot of collateral damage around me. I don’t feel like I have a lot of control over it.” He looked up at Dib, then held their enmeshed hands to his face. “Look, I can’t promise that weird shit won’t happen when you’re around me … Actually, I can absolutely promise that weird shit will happen when you’re around me. And I’ll do my best to protect you, but you are squishy and human.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Dib said with a shrug. “And I’m not that squishy.”

“Dennyyyyyy’s!” GIR suddenly squealed, pulling on his leash. The bright sign glowed from about a block away and GIR was determined to make a beeline for it.

Dib held on to Zim’s hand to prevent him from eating pavement. “GIR! What kind of dog are you right now?” Zim chided once he had his feet properly under him.

“Uhhhhmmmm … Service dog!”

“And what are you supposed to be doing?”

“Radiating calm and providing comfort!” GIR said in his duty-mode voice.

“Very good. And how does a service dog walk to Denny’s?”

GIR moved to walk by Zim’s side, tiny legs attempting to match Zim’s marching stride.
“Perfect. If you can continue to be this good, you will get all the waffles you want, okay?”

They made their way over to the restaurant and Dib was amused to find that Zim asked for a table for three. No one seemed to think it odd that the dog required his own seat. Or perhaps service dogs were granted strange privileges like that. Dib certainly didn’t know. They were led to a booth and once Dib slid in, Zim and GIR slid in beside him.

“Aren’t couples supposed to, like, sit across from each other?” Dib asked with a grin.

“Why? So I can stare at your face the whole time?” Zim asked with a raised eyebrow. “That sounds like an awful lot of eye contact while chewing.”

Dib laughed. “Glad we’re on the same page. Besides, now I can do this.” He leaned all the way over on top of Zim, and sandwiched him in a tight hug.

“You’re squishing me! Stop that!” Zim yelled, struggling.

A few late-night patrons looked their way. Usually, attracting an audience made Dib want to crawl into a hole and die. But tonight, he could enjoy giving Zim a good-natured ribbing. Besides, he had a feeling that part and parcel to dating Zim was getting used to all the yelling and attention that usually came with it.

“Aaw, I know you could throw me across the room if you wanted, but you like me so you won’t,” Dib taunted sweetly.

“Don’t test me!”

“Hi … um … can I get you guys something to drink?”

They turned around to see a small, nervous server staring at them. Zim pushed Dib off of him and straightened his beanie. He started rattling things off before Dib could even think.

“Three milkshakes; one strawberry, one peanut butter banana, and … Dib, what do you want?”

Dib stared blankly at him.

“You need calories, Dib. You’re too skinny so you’re getting a milkshake. Do you like Horchata?”

“I do …” He gave Zim a quizzical look. “Why do you know that?”

“I have studied the ways of your people, Dib,” Zim said simply, before turning back to the bewildered server. “Make that third one Horchata, then.”

The server scurried away.

“ She didn’t think I looked like an alien in a beanie, Dib,” Zim said with a grin.

“The way she was looking at us? I’m pretty sure she thought we were all aliens.” Dib suddenly gave Zim a look. “I’m paying for all of this, aren’t I?”

“I’d be a bad boyfriend if I did that to you, Dib. I have cash monies,” Zim replied simply.

“What? How? You don’t have a job.”

“I don’t need a job in order to get earth monies,” Zim said with a conspiratorial smile.
Dib held up his hands. “You know what? I don’t even want to know. When the cops come and raid your house, then I can honestly tell them I have no idea what you get up to.”

“At least bask in the ill-gotten fruits of my labor, Dib,” Zim said with a toothy grin. “You can order as many pancakes as you like.”

Dib stuck out his tongue. “3am is much too early for all that sugar, thanks. Just get me one of those breakfast grilled cheeses with hashbrowns.”

“Alright, fine. More pancakes and french toast for me.”

GIR stood up to whisper to Zim, “I want twelve waffles!”

“Twelve whole waffles! Hmm,” he tapped his chin. “Have you been good enough to earn all those waffles? What do you think, Dib?”

GIR wagged his tail.

“Aw, he’s doing his job so well! He deserves it,” Dib said, stifling a laugh.

“Yeah, well, get ready for when we go home and the vest comes off and the sugar kicks in.”

The restaurant was busy for the middle of the night, and the cafe ambiance buzzed around them. Dib, having only slept a couple hours, was finding himself rapidly waning. He scooted down in his seat and gently rested his head on Zim’s shoulder with a yawn. Zim played with his hair and prattled on about something Dib couldn’t quite follow but he nodded along. He let Zim handle the server while he briefly dozed off.

Zim poked him awake when his food came.

“No sleeping until you eat that,” Zim said, tucking into his french toast. “I know you didn’t eat at lunch today.”

“Was all your recon about how bad I am at self care?” Dib asked.

“Well it is now,” Zim said, kissing his cheek and leaving a dusting of powdered sugar.

Dib ate diligently so that Zim would stop fretting over him like a worried mother, but all the carbs and calories just served to put him into a food coma. He was leaning with his eyes closed over the table when he sensed Zim reaching over his plate. He looked down to see syrup drizzled all over what was left of his sandwich.

Wait, wasn’t there more of a sandwich there just a second ago?

“You looked like you were full, so I’m helping,” said Zim, mouth full and his face covered in syrup and powdered sugar. “Eat the rest of that. It’s delicious.”

“If I have any more sugar before the sun comes up, I’m legit going to hurl,” Dib whined.

Zim shrugged and shoveled the rest of the sandwich in his mouth.

“I don’t understand at all how you can eat like that,” Dib said, shaking his head.

“And I don’t understand why you earth people insist on under-seasoning most of your food so badly.”
Dib just stared at him for a moment, a slight smile tagging at his lips.

“Is there something on my face?” Zim asked.

“I mean, yeah, you’re covered in powdered sugar. But I was just … enjoying this moment.”

Zim started trying to wipe off all the wrong parts of his face when Dib stopped him, took the napkin from him, and started cleaning him up. Zim rolled his eyes but his slight blush indicated he was secretly enjoying being doted on.

“You’ve probably guessed at this point that my family kinda sucks …”

Zim put a hand on his shoulder. “Dib, I regret to inform you that your father is terrible.”

“You’re not wrong,” Dib admitted. “And Gaz is … well, dad likes her better and it’s influenced how she treats me. I don’t really blame her; it’s not her fault. It’s just that, we don’t have many family moments, and when we try to, it’s really just an excuse for Gaz and dad to bond at my expense.” He sighed and looked away for a moment, trying to get a handle on his emotions before they bubbled up and choked him.

“But tonight, when you’re making sure I’m actually eating and you’re treating GIR so nicely … it’s different. It’s what I feel like a family should be doing. I just …” he looked over at Zim, eyes full of sadness but also hope and yearning. Zim reached over to brush away a tear before it rolled down Dib’s cheek. “I could get used to this, you know?”

Zim smiled. “Me, too.”

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for this basically being "Zim Eats Waffles: Fanfiction Edition"
Wide Open Skies

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait on this one. Everything has been in editing hell for longer than I wanted it to be.

I also let my inner card-carrying physicist out a bit for this one so ... apologies in advance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nice to know my kind will be on my side
I don't believe the hype
And you know you're a terrible sight
*But you'll be just fine*
Just don't believe the hype

- Twenty One Pilots, *The Hype*

“We’re close to the edge of town,” Zim said as they walked out the door and onto the quiet streets.

“Want to head up the hill a stargaze a bit before the sun comes up?”

“Zim, I am so outrageously tired right now,” Dib whined, trudging along behind him.

“Come on … It’ll give GIR a chance to burn off some energy before we go home,” Zim pressed.

Dib grumbled something he couldn’t quite make out. “There have to be some things I know about astronomy that won’t put you to sleep.”

Dib sighed. “Alright. Just as long as you promise to carry me home when I do, inevitably, pass out from exhaustion.”

Zim stopped and looked up at him as Dib finally caught up.

“What’s that look for?” Dib asked.

“Did you just call my base ‘home’?”

Dib blushed. “Huh, sorry. I guess I did.”

Zim reached for his hand and continued down the street. “Don’t be sorry.”

The night air had a bit of a chill, but crickets sang from the corner of every block and the katydids gave their stuccato call in the distance. A few lonely cicadas droned from the tree tops. The moon was almost a full silver disc and the dry air made for excellent sky-viewing.

As they approached the edge of town, Zim reached down to unclip GIR’s leash and take off his vest. “Ew, GIR … you’re really sticky,” Zim complained, wiping a hand on his pants. “When we get
“Home, I’ll trade you some cookies for your dog suit.”

“You got more Girlie Ranger Cookies?” GIR asked.

“A whole box and it’s all yours if you’ll let me do the laundry. Do we have a deal?”

“We got a deal!” He clapped his hands together and spun in a circle.

“Sounds good,” he said, patting GIR’s head lightly. “Alright. Don’t run too far ahead and come right back if you see anyone else out there, got it?”

GIR was already halfway down the block before he yelled back a shrill, “Ooookies!!”

Zim just shook his head and put an arm around Dib’s waist as they started up the hill.

“Man, I’m honestly just impressed he stayed calm and quiet long enough for us to eat out,” Dib said, watching GIR spin in circles up the hill.

“He’s actually pretty good about things if you give him a job with a few — and I do mean few — clearly defined tasks and a concrete reward,” Zim replied. “As long as you stay on top of him about it, that is. SIR units are just information-gathering drones that help their masters blend in better with the planet. And GIR can do that. He picks up on little details quickly and he’s uncommonly good at blending in, himself … everyone loves him for some reason. It’s crazy how he can have all the attention in the world focused on him and never be close to being found out.

“The problem is that he has the attention span of a pencil and he doesn’t know how to utilize the information he gathers to do anything the Irken Empire would consider ‘productive’. Oh, and he screams any time things don’t go his way or you disrupt his schedule or try to wash anything he owns.” Zim sighed and cast Dib a long-suffering glance.

“And yet, I’ve never tried to deactivate him. Improve him? Sure. But actually getting rid of him? I could never. I’ve always felt … varying types of affection towards him. Don’t get me wrong. He’s a terrible minion. But … he’s kept me from sinking into a terrible place these past few years.”

“Aw, you love him,” Dib said, intending to make Zim flustered. As soon as it was out of his mouth, however, he realized it was entirely true.

Zim sighed. “Yes. Yes, I suppose I do.”

Dib smiled down at him. “You’re a good dog-mom.”

Zim gave him a playful hip bump.

“If you take half as good of care of me as you do GIR, I’ll consider myself to be in good hands.”

“You’re lucky I’ve had several years of experience with someone who refuses to bathe and eats at irregular hours.”

“I like to think I’m at least a little bit lower maintenance than that,” Dib joked, but there was a slight note of concern in his voice that Zim picked up on.

“You’re not putting me out, you know,” he said, looking up. “Remember that I willingly chased you down and brought you back with me. And today was, I assume, nothing close to what’s involved in normal human upkeep. You came with some assembly required.”

Dib smirked. “And absolutely no instructions.”
They walked the rest of the way up the hill in comfortable silence. GIR, having beat them to the top, came rolling down the grassy incline past them, squealing with joy.

“Between the blood and grass stains, I’m soaking everything we’re wearing in an entire bin of OxiClean tonight,” Zim sighed at they finally crested the hill.

Dib turned and took in the glowing cityscape beneath them. It sparkled far out into the distance and on the opposite side of the valley, red cell tower lights winked on and off lazily. A few silent planes made their way across the open sky. He looked back down to see Zim sitting on the grass and motioning him over.

“Lie back on me a moment; I want to show you some things,” Zim said. Dib sat down in front of him and then leaned back until his head was in Zim’s lap. He smiled up lovingly as Zim gently tousled his hair. “How are you emitting that much heat?”

Dib shrugged. “I’m just a human space heater, I guess. Too warm for you?”

“Nah, it’s chilly out. This is perfect.” Zim pulled out a laser pointer and pointed it upwards. A bright blue beam extended upwards from it, motes of dust sparkling as they passed through it.

“Is that an earth astronomy laser pointer or …?”

“It’s an earth laser pointer,” Zim replied. “So far this is the only planet I’ve been on that has harnessed the power of lasers just to point at things. If it was Irken tech, something would have exploded by now.”

“We don’t use them just to point at things … we use them to detect gravitational waves and do surgery and … play with cats.”

“Clearly the most important application of them all,” Zim said with a smirk. “Here, take this and find … I think your people call it the constellation of Orion. I’ll show you roughly where my neighborhood of the galaxy is.”

Dib searched the sky for the bright stars that made up the belt. The moon wasn’t quite overwhelming enough to dampen their light and he traced the constellation with the blue laser beam.

“You know,” Zim said, “you’re one of the few civilizations to look up there, decide that clusters of stars look like animals or people or objects, and then decide that’s the best and most useful way to chart the stars.”

“Do you have a better system?” Dib asked, sounding a bit irritable.

Zim stroked his hair. “I’m not making fun of your culture, Dib. Humans are creative and I appreciate that about you. It’s just also amusing.”

Dib’s expression softened.

“What’s the human name for that big, orange star?” Zim asked.

“What, Betelgeuse?” Dib asked, laughing. “Please don’t tell me you’re from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse …”

“Huh?”

“Have you ever read The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy? Or seen the movie?”
Zim gave him a bewildered look. Earth entertainment wasn’t really his forte.

“Douglas Adams? No? Oh, man. You’re missing out! I think you’d love it. I’ll lend you the book series and then we can watch the movie when you’re done. It’s one of my favorite things.”

Zim hadn’t seen Dib this animated about something outside the realm of the paranormal just about ever. “Only if you take responsibility for the fact that any movie you bring into the house, GIR will watch eight thousand times and you will be entirely sick of it by the end of the week.”

Dib flashed a grin. “Not possible, since I’ve also watched it about eight thousand times and I’m not sick of it yet.”

Zim shrugged. “Your funeral. Anyway … I’m not from anywhere near Betelgeuse. I’m from a system so far behind it, your earth telescopes have yet to even pick up on it.”

“To be fair, you did say that the Tallest had no idea Earth was all the way out here, right?”

“Yes, well, even they can’t know everything,” he said. “And you should probably be thankful for that. They are aware of this general sector, though. Which is how I know that there are plenty of systems roughly in your neighborhood with intelligent — or, arguably intelligent — life on them. You see Aquarius up there?”

Dib searched for a bit, before finding it down near the horizon. “I’m blaming you if I’m pointing this thing at someone’s house right now.”

Zim put his hand on Dib’s and shifted the beam a little. “Right about there is a star system that has some startlingly earth-like planets with some startlingly not-earth-like inhabitants.”

Dib stared out in wonder.

Zim smiled down at him. “Want to go there some time?”

“Could we??” Dib said in awe.

“I’ll take you anywhere you want. All of the galaxy and beyond is yours for the exploring.”

“Just not Irk, right?”

Zim grimaced. “Never Irk, nor any of the Irken-controlled planets. It seems the Tallest have mostly forgotten about me at this point, but I’d really rather not push my luck. If they ever figure out how to actually delete my PAK, I’m in huge trouble. I really only passed my last Existence Evaluation on a technicality.”

“Do they have like … Double Jeopardy on your planet? Where you can’t be tried for the same crime twice?”

“You’re only supposed to be evaluated once, but they already pulled some malarkey where they pushed up the date. So I wouldn’t put it past them to try and evaluate me again.” His antennae perked over his head and he did his best impression of his Tallest. ‘Oh, sorry Zim! Seems we miscalculated your Evaluation! Isn’t that funny? Anyway, next one’s in a month! Have fun waiting to die.’” He blew a raspberry and crossed his arms.

Zim’s over-the-top reaction shocked a laugh out of Dib, which he quickly tried to choke back down. “Fuck, sorry. I know it’s not funny at all.”
“It’s a constant concern, Dib.”

“I know,” Dib said, sounding guilty. “I’m sorry. It sucks and it’s bullshit.”

Zim’s scowl softened as he looked down at Dib, who — not knowing what to do about Zim’s rather serious banishment conundrum — reached up and pulled him down for a kiss, stroking his antennae gently between his fingertips. Zim slowly relaxed against him, purring softly against his lips.

“This isn’t, like, something terribly intimate in your culture, is it?” Dib mumbled suddenly.

“What, the antenna-stroking?”

Dib nodded.

Zim thought a moment while Dib planted sleepy kisses on his cheek. “I suppose it’s not any more intimate than a kiss? That’s a hard one. We don’t really do either. Not a terribly romantic species, in case you couldn’t have guessed.”

“What I’m hearing, then,” Dib said, running his fingers up and down Zim’s antennae in a way that made his toes curl and a purr bubble up from his chest, “is that I’m the first person to hear an Irken purr.”

Zim relaxed into another kiss. “Mmm … very possibly,” he mumbled against Dib’s lips. He faded out a little, enjoying the sensation until he felt Dib’s hand slow and his grip slacken. Zim pulled back to find his human almost fully asleep.

“You want to nap for a little bit before we go back?"

Dib nodded, then yawned and snuggled against Zim’s leg. Zim ran his fingers through Dib’s hair; it was quickly becoming his favorite thing about Dib. His hair was thick and soft and it felt to Zim like petting a rather fluffy dog. Dib closed his eyes and smiled at nothing in particular.

Zim stared up at Betelgeuse and let it sink in that there really was no going back to Irk at this point. Now that he had admitted his feelings for Dib and they had been reciprocated, he had no reason to conquer earth and no reason to call in to the Tallest ever again. He would effectively be accepting his banishment as a permanent state of being. He had expected to feel more of a sense of loss in admitting that he would never gain the Tallests’ favor. There was still a deep ache left in the place once occupied by his frantic desire for their approval, and he expected it would be a long time before that went away completely. But he felt more of a desire to do right by Dib than anyone else. After all, Dib had showered him with more genuine compliments in the past few hours than Zim had received in most of his life.

So he’d never be able to return to Irken-controlled space. So what? Hadn’t that been the case for a while? He suspected that, even if he had conquered Earth and the next ten adjacent inhabited planets, he would always be too short and too much of a liability. Not to mention, he would always be defective.

That word still made Zim’s insides turn to lead. The idea that there was something inherently wrong with him, a lifelong defect that could never be fixed, was nothing less than horrifying. Especially considering it had alienated him from his people so thoroughly and nearly gotten him killed more than once. He didn’t even fully understand how or why he had ended up this way, or the full range of functions it affected.

Zim looked down at the pale, gangly human napping peacefully in his lap, suddenly wondering if the mechanism that made him so defective in the eyes of his own people might also be responsible for
his strange feelings of affection for Dib. Could being defective really be so bad, if it gave him someone to love? Especially someone who loved him back? Zim was certain in that moment that he wouldn’t rather be anywhere else in the universe. Even just the thought of losing Dib ached more than finally giving up on winning the favor of his Tallest.

Dib stirred in Zim’s lap and, as if sensing his emotional turmoil, pulled one of Zim’s hands to his mouth and kissed it gently. Zim looked down to see Dib staring up at him, sleepy-eyed and smiling.

“Ready to go home?” Zim asked.

“I’m still too tired to walk back right now … let me nap a little longer and then we can.” Dib closed his eyes again.

“I’m getting cold, though,” Zim said with a frown.

Dib rolled off Zim’s lap and onto his side and held his arms out. “I’ll keep you warm.”

Zim laid down and Dib pulled him close, exhaling a long, warm, happy sigh across his antennae.

“Pull your legs up into your hoodie,” Dib mumbled sleepily. Zim did as he was told, and Dib pulled his knees up towards his chest, wrapping most of his body around Zim. “You’re so small,” he said with a smile. He felt Zim tense and kissed his head. “Calm down. That’s not an insult. I love that I can just … hold you like this. I love that you’re portable. I love that I can put you in my clothes and they’re all big and floppy on you.”

Zim nuzzled against his neck. “Do you love me?” he asked softly. It was so off-hand he was clearly expecting a simple “yes”.

Dib froze, suddenly, and was quiet for long enough to make Zim nervous.

“Humans usually wait a little bit to say that,” he eventually said, sounding suddenly much more awake.

“You need longer to figure out if you love me?” Zim asked, quizzically. At this point, Zim had done enough soul searching that he was positive that he was in love with Dib. So how dare Dib not be certain he loved Zim back just as much?

“It’s not that … it’s just not usually a thing you say when it’s been like … less than 24 hours since you’ve started dating someone.”

“Why is that considered too early if you really love someone?”

“I don’t know …” Dib said, flustered. “To avoid scaring the other person off?”

“Why is that considered too early if you really love someone?”

“I don’t know …” Dib said, flustered. “To avoid scaring the other person off?”

“I’m not scared,” Zim said, slightly exasperated. He thought for a moment. “Are you scared?”

Dib finally leaned back to give Zim a searching look. He ran a hand through his hair and tilted his head towards the sky. “Everything about this scares me, Zim,” he whispered. “The way I feel whenever I touch you. The way you look at me. Thinking about how we’re inevitably going to fight and what the hell that’s going to look like. How my dad will take this when I finally tell him. How everyone at school will react to this on Monday. And then I’m just left wondering if I made the right choice to drag you into everything because dealing with me is just such a massive clusterfuck.” Dib chewed at his cheek to try and stop the tears that threatened to spill over. Why was this all so confusing? “The way I feel about you … I don’t ever want to not be with you. But I’m scared we don’t have the coping mechanisms for this and my dad already hates me and so does everyone at
school so …”

Zim put a hand on his cheek. “Dib …”

“What?” he said, still looking up at the sky. Zim could see little pinpricks of light reflected off his eyes.

“Look at me …”

“If I look at you I’m gonna cry, Zim. And I don’t want to. I’ve cried too much today.”

“It’s a new day.”

“Fine. But I don’t want to start it by crying. It makes me feel gross and human.”

Zim propped himself up on one arm so he could look down at Dib. He pressed their foreheads together and closed his eyes. “You’re not gross. But you are human and that’s okay.”

Dib nodded, and Zim laid back down on his side. Dib finally turned and pressed his face into Zim’s hoodie, head resting just below his chin. Zim held him close and played absently with his hair.

“Maybe neither of us currently have the necessary coping mechanisms, but we’ll figure this out as we go along,” Zim said, tucking a wisp of hair behind Dib’s ear. “If it makes you feel better about us, we can agree to some ground rules. Say, if any disagreement turns into yelling, we stop and go cool off for a bit in different rooms.”

“We yell a lot …” Dib said, muffled.

Zim kissed his cheek. “We’ll learn to yell less, then. I think it also goes without saying that I’m banned from world domination you’re banned from putting my organs on display.” He heard Dib laugh a little and smiled. “And absolutely no physical violence for any reason.”

A soft breeze rustled the grass and ruffled Dib’s hair. Zim shivered and Dib held him a little closer, rubbing his back slowly.

“I want to get better at talking things through in general,” Dib said softly. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve lived in my own head an awful lot up till now.”

Zim nodded. “We can work on that.”

He idly played with Dib’s hair, listening to his uneven breaths and the too-fast beating of his heart. He was clearly stressed out, still. “Why are you so afraid of what other people will think of us?” he asked softly.

“Zim … I’m tired and it’s complicated.”

“Please?”

“It really will make me cry …”

“So you’ll cry and I’ll be here for you and we’ll both be alright.”

Dib took a deep, shaky breath. “I just … don’t know how my dad will react to me being gay. I mean, I think I’m gay? You’re the only person I’ve ever liked. Liking you makes me gay, right?”

Dib let out a short laugh despite himself. “Well, aren’t you evolved.”

“Your father wouldn’t really be upset over that, would he?” Zim asked, quizzically.

“I really don’t know. As it is, he just finds every little reason to criticize me and tell me I’m wrong. Nothing I do is right to him. I kind of feel like whoever I dated he’d have a problem with it. But being crazy and gay might be a step too far.”

Zim kissed his nose. “You’re not crazy.”

“But I am gay … I think …” Dib held him close and went quiet again, heartbeat still pounding away at a breakneck pace.

“You haven’t told me why you’re so worried about what everyone at school will think,” Zim said, quietly.

Dib scoffed. “Do I really have to?”

“I can’t help if you don’t talk to me. I’m not in your head, remember?”

“You’ve already seen the outcome of the sorts of things they do to me when you’re not around as it is. I just don’t want another target on my back. They just …” he looked up with tears in his eyes. He couldn’t push the hurt down any more and it started to bubble up, making him feel vulnerable and stupid again. “I don’t want to go into detail but … they did really awful things to me. I don’t even know if it could get worse but I’m really scared that it will. I don’t even want to …” he broke off with a sob. He really wished he could go one day without crying. His only consolation was that Zim held him close, still stroking his hair.

“I’ve got you, Dib. It’s going to be okay …”

“Is it, though?” Dib wailed. Zim’s heart broke for him. He had a feeling that he couldn’t even guess the full picture of everything Dib had been through.

“We’ve got the same class schedule and I won’t let you out of my sight. No one gets to put a hand on you. No one gets to even look at you funny. No one will ever get the chance to hurt you again.” Zim rubbed Dib’s back. “As for your dad … I mean, I’ve been to your house. He likes me, right? I think I can win him over. And if I can’t … you can come live with me until we finish high school and then we’ll run away and explore the universe.” He looked down at Dib, who was still sniffling and shaking and holding on to Zim for dear life. Zim held on right back, just as tightly.

“There are so many stars out there, Dib,” he whispered. “So many things that defy logic and imagination. So many possibilities I want to share with you. So many places I can take you that will make you forget all the horrors you’ve suffered on earth.” He leaned over to kiss Dib’s tear-streaked cheek. “I love you, Dib, and I’ll do anything it takes to make you happy.”

He held Dib close and did his best to comfort him, hoping that, in time, he’d figure out how to make things not be terrible. His human seemed to have an awful lot of trauma, and Zim felt his guts twist at the thought that he might have been responsible for some of it.

He wondered if, ten years from now, Dib would still be scarred by the things his classmates had done to him or his dad’s disappointment or the awful way Zim had treated him for all the years leading up to now. Would Zim still be spending nights letting Dib sob into his shirt, wishing to fix everything? Or was there a possible future where Dib’s traumas had finally faded so far into the rear view mirror that they were less real than the ghosts Dib spent weekends hunting?
Dib’s sobs eventually faded into sniffles and shaky breaths. “I’m sorry …” he whispered, finally looking up.

“It’s okay,” Zim said softly, brushing Dib’s hair out of his face. “You’ve been hurt so much more than any person should have to deal with. I wish I could fix everything for you.”

Dib looked up at him through sparkling eyes. “You care and you’re listening and I feel like you actually understand, and that counts for so much.”

Zim held him close, listening to his breathing gradually slow down as his body relaxed. Zim was pretty sure that Dib had drifted off again.

“I really do love you, Dib,” he said softly. “And I understand if you can’t say it back yet. It’s just important that you know how much I care about you.”

He was surprised to feel Dib respond by pressing a little closer. “I know …” he replied, just as softly.”And ... I love you, too, Zim.”

Chapter End Notes

Zim is just on a race to hit as many relationship milestones in the shortest period of time and he doesn't even know it.
To Write Love on His Arms

Chapter Summary

Dib finally opens up to Zim about his mental health struggles. Gaz warms up to the idea of Zim following her brother around like a lost puppy.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the major delay in posting. Since I'm writing this from the perspective of someone who struggles with mental illness, this chapter got pretty personal and I was dragging my feet on finally releasing it. It was hard to put so much of myself out here into the public eye. Maybe it will strike a chord with you ... maybe it won't. Everyone's experiences are different.

Trigger warning for self-harm themes, but I'm guessing you already knew that if you made it in this far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So I put a bullet where I shoulda put a helmet
And I crash my car 'cause I wanna get carried away
That's why I'm standing on the overpass screaming at myself
Hey, I wanna get better!

- Bleachers, I Wanna Get Better

Dib awoke slowly, the memories of the past 24 hours filtering through his head. He remembered Zim confronting him at his house before whisking him away and fixing him up … their fighting and their subsequent reconciliation … all the kissing … the late night dinner and then out to the hill at Zim’s behest. He rolled over and got a face full of sun that made him wince backwards. He blearily opened his eyes to find himself curled up on Zim’s couch. He tried to remember how he’d gotten there from the star gazing hill, but was drawing a blank.

“G’mornin’ Mary!!” yelled GIR from the other side of the couch. He didn’t have his dog suit on and he had a bowl of cereal in his lap.

“Morning …” Dib mumbled, looking around for his glasses and failing to locate them in the blurry chaos of the room. His stitches ached and when he finally extricated his arm from the nest of blankets, he realized he was wearing only a t-shirt and boxers. He searched around in the blanket nest for the rest of his clothing but all he found was his phone down by his feet. He pulled it out to check the time and discovered he’d slept well into the afternoon. His lack of memories about the trip home he could deal with; it was the lack of memories about when he had been divested of his clothes that really worried him.
“Um, GIR? Where’s Zim at?”

GIR shoved a spoonful of cereal into his mouth and pointed upwards.

“That’s …” Dib wrapped himself in a blanket and made his way to the second floor. He could recall a time not too long ago when getting to wander around the base unfettered would have been the highlight of his week. Now he just felt uneasy wandering around without Zim by his side.

The second floor was just as much an organized disaster as the rest of the base. Tables with all manner of devices in various states of repair lined the walls. Dib was pretty sure he recognized some of Zim’s failed world domination projects amidst various other unidentifiable pieces of junk. Directly to his right was Zim’s ship, but he didn’t see Zim.

“You up here?” he called out, peering around.

“No need to yell; I’m right here,” came Zim’s voice from under the Voot Cruiser.

“… Where are my clothes and why don’t I remember coming home?” Dib asked, nervously, before Zim’s feet had even fully come into view.

Zim finally pulled himself back out from under his ship and stood up. He was back in a clean tunic and out of his disguise.

“In the wash, and probably because you were deliriously sleepy. Respectively.”

Dib still looked apprehensive and Zim perked an antenna.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just don’t remember much of anything after going stargazing last night …” Dib said, a slight edge of panic in his voice.

“Well,” Zim said slowly, trying to stave off any full-blown anxiety attacks, “what’s the last thing you remember?”

Dib looked away. “Crying on you again,” he mumbled.

“You dozed off again shortly after that. The sun started coming up and you were still too tired to walk home so I picked you up and carried you back here myself while it was still dark enough to do so discreetly. You asked me half a dozen times to carry you home, remember?” Zim was smiling but Dib cast his gaze downward, still looking uncertain. Zim’s smile fell and his brows knit together in concern.

“I didn’t do anything to you, Dib, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Zim said softly, stepping closer and reaching for Dib’s hand. “Honest. We came directly back here and I put you to bed. Your clothes were covered in grass stains so I had you give them to me to put in the wash. I may have kissed you after I got you settled in on the couch, but that’s it. I promise. I didn’t even sleep next to you. I’ve been up here all morning trying to fix my trash heap of a ship.”

“Did I take my clothes off in front of you?” Dib asked worriedly.

Zim managed to override his desire to roll his eyes. He couldn’t keep track of all the human modesty customs but he made a mental note to at least make it clear to Dib that Irkens didn’t share the same hangups.
“You were under the blankets when you took your hoodie and pants off,” Zim replied patiently. To his credit, he was being a good sport about being grilled. “Is there something in particular you’re concerned about?”

Dib licked his lips nervously. “Did you … did you see all of my scars?” he asked, his throat going dry.

Oh. So that’s what this was about.

“The ones on your arms,” he replied, voice soft and full of pity. “But I’ve already seen those. And it’s not like I was looking for more.”

Dib shifted nervously. “… Can we talk?”

Zim raised a confused antenna. “I thought that’s what we were doing?”

“No, I mean like …” The room felt like it was spinning and Dib felt breathless. “Oh fuck, I need to sit down,” Dib said, abruptly dropping where he stood. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe normally as Zim sat down next to him.

“Any time you want to tell me what’s happening here, that would be … super,” Zim said worriedly.

“Okay … yeah … sorry,” Dib stuttered. “Um … nobody else knows that I’ve struggled with self harm. You’re the first and only. But …” He nervously met Zim’s concerned gaze. “I’ve been doing this for a long time. My whole … Everything … is kind of a mess. It’s not great to look at but presumably, at some point, you’re going to and I just … don’t want it to scare you off.” He looked at the floor, morose. “I’m so sorry … I know you’d never take advantage of me. I’m just … I hate what I look like. What I’ve done to myself.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to keep things from me,” Zim said sadly. His heart ached for his human, so soft and vulnerable. “I promise it won’t scare me off. You have to remember why I brought you back here in the first place.”

Dib nodded, still looking forlorn.

“What if you just showed me now?”

Dib’s head shot up suddenly, eyes wide. “What?”

“Just get it over with?”

“I don’t know about that …”

“Are you going to be less nervous about it if it comes up later?” Zim asked.

Dib bit his lip. “No, probably not … you’re just … kind of asking for a lot here …”

Zim held up his hands. “Alright, that’s fine. I won’t push you.”

Dib was quiet, nervously staring past the far wall. “Okay, you know what? Let’s just get it over with. Because you’re right; I’m going to panic about it otherwise.” He dropped the blanket from his shoulders and stood up.

He watched Zim’s eyes widen as he stood up as well and took in the damage; the litany of old and new scars up his unbandaged arm, the burn marks on his arms and legs, the ropey scars on the inside and outside of his thighs …
“Oh, Dib …” Zim said, softly. “Oh … I am so sorry …”

Dib hadn’t been prepared for that reaction. “It’s not your fault …” he assured him. “None of those are because of you, I promise.”

“But I didn’t make it any easier for you, either,” Zim replied, guilt heavy on his voice. He gently reached over and touched just below Dib’s shoulders, fingertips just barely tracing over circular purple scars. “What did this?”

“Cigarette …” Dib mumbled. “I used to smoke. But I kind of hated it. Also burning yourself feels really awful and not as cathartic as I’d hoped …”

Zim ran his fingers down Dib’s arm, his hip, then over the letters spelling out “loser” and “freak” on his legs, whispering, “Oh, Dib … my poor Dib …” to himself. He rubbed his fingers across the words like he might be able to erase them from Dib’s skin. “You’re not a loser or a freak.”

“Would you believe those are some of the tamer things I’ve been called at school? I mean, you probably picked up on the fact that I’ve never really got along with the other kids.” He gave Zim an embarrassed glance. “I actually got kicked out of kindergarten the first time around. That’s why I’m 18 right out of the gate in the senior year of high school.”

“I’m sure whatever you did, they deserved it,” Zim said with a scowl. Dib sat back down and pulled Zim into his lap, wrapping the blanket protectively around both of them. Zim’s heart hurt more than he could put into words, but all he could do was hug Dib’s arms to his chest.

“It wasn’t even that,” Dib said. “I just hid all the time. I’d run off during recess, sneak out of the room during nap time, hide under the tables at lunch. The other kids didn’t like me and I sure as hell didn’t like them. No one realized I was being bullied. They just suggested I try again next year.”

Zim leaned back against Dib and put his head on his shoulder in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. “You’re not alone anymore, Dib.”

Dib hugged him close and sighed. “I know. It feels good to finally be able to talk to someone about this stuff. And thank you for not freaking out. I was … terrified to finally let someone see what I’ve done to myself. I’ve been hiding all that for years.”

Gently, Zim reached for Dib’s unbandaged arm and held it to his lips. He kissed down the length of it, ending in a lingering kiss at Dib’s palm, which he then held gently to his cheek. “You’re not allowed to do this anymore,” he said resolutely.

Dib groaned. “It’s not that easy …”

“Too bad. Zim commands it.”

“I would love it if my coping mechanisms respected you, Zim. But I don’t have anything healthier to fall back on.”

“Then we’ll find better coping mechanisms and we’ll find a way for you to unlearn this one.”

“How?” Dib asked, exasperated.

“Any time you even think about hurting yourself, tell me. Immediately.” Zim looked up at Dib, completely serious. “I don’t care where you are or what I’m doing. I will drop everything and sit with you to talk through it until the urge passes.”
Dib gave a sad sigh. “Zim … I’ve been doing this because it’s the only way I know how to process the negative attention and fallout from all my fuckups. And … I don’t know how else to say this but sometimes I deserve to hurt.”

“No, you don’t!” said Zim forcefully, standing up. He turned and sat down in front of Dib so he could look him in the eyes. “Not over what other people say and not over your mistakes. If other people don’t like you, it is their loss, not yours! Any mistakes you make, we’ll move past together. Because there is nothing—No, Dib, look at me,” Zim said, as Dib started to look away. “There is nothing that is worth hurting yourself like that over.”

He climbed back into Dib’s lap. “No more hurting, Dib.” He sensed Dib was about to argue and cut him off. “Would you please just stop being difficult for two seconds and let me love you?”

“Alright, alright …” Dib rested his head on Zim’s shoulder with a huff.

“No sulking, either,” Zim chided. “No hurting and no arguing and no sulking.”

“What am I left with, then?” Dib asked, but this time Zim could sense a hint of a smile.

“Let’s do something to cheer you up. What would make you less sulky? Oh, and happy ‘going 24 hours without dying’, by the way.”

“That’ll be hell to find a card for. And … fuck, I don’t know. Maybe we could go out to the mall for a bit,” Dib said, finally. “Watch some people. Buy some bubble tea. Eat a gross mall pretzel.”

“Hmm … I’ll pass on your weird earth breads but we do need to fix the whole problem of you only having two shirts.” His antennae sprang up above his head. “Well, one now, seeing as I had to burn the one from yesterday …”

Dib pulled back in a panic. “You did WHAT?? That was my favorite shirt, Zim!”

“Oh, calm down. I’m joking. It’s in the wash with all the other borderline biohazards we’ve generated in the last day.”

“Jerk…” Dib muttered, but it didn’t have the bite it used to. “And I own more than two …” He went back to sulking while Zim cuddled up under his chin.

“Come on, Dib. I have the monies, remember? Let me spoil you.”

“Alright, alright. On one condition.”

“If it will cheer you up, then anything.”

“We pick out some things for you.”

Zim made a face. “Anything except that. I have enough uniforms to last me until my dying days. Which, as you may remember, are a long while off.”

Dib leaned around and made puppy eyes at him. “Come on … it’ll make you blend in better.”

“I have been blending in fine for years, Dib.”

“By sheer dumb luck!” Dib countered. “Please?? You like the hat and the hoodie …”

“Yes. And those are mine now.”
“We can find you more stuff like that.” He looked more animated than he had all morning and Zim was having a tough time saying no. Dib’s eyes sparkled with possibilities. “Let me make you adorable, Zim.”

“Am I not adorable enough for you already?”

Dib kissed his cheek. “You are. You can just always be more adorable.”

“Alright, fine,” Zim said, finally giving in.

“Then we have a deal,” Dib said with a smile. “Let’s go back to my house so we can grab my car. Somehow I think the Voot might be a little conspicuous.”

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Dib rifled through the drawers of his dresser while Zim did his best not to step on anything too important on the floor. Which was difficult. He spotted homework assignments and what he could only assume were ancient relics scattered between piles of dirty laundry and Snickers wrappers.

Dib finished shoving all the crap he had pulled out back into the drawer and closed it with a groan. “Fuck, I think I left my keys downstairs …”

He looked over to see Zim staring into space, invisible brows knitted together and antennae quivering.

“Um, hello? Earth to Zim?” Dib said, waving a hand in front of his face.

Zim abruptly snapped out of it and looked blankly at Dib. “Sorry … say what?”

“Everything alright?”

“Ah, yeah,” Zim said, shaking his head like he was trying to dislodge a particularly troublesome thought. “I just had a weird feeling, like I’d forgotten something. But it’s gone now, so no worries.”

“I guess I’m a little relieved that weirdness is just a universal trait of brains,” Dib said with a smile. “Anyways, the keys aren’t up here. I think I left them downstairs.”

“Do you want me to wait up here?”

Dib shook his head. “Nah, I think Gaz is gone for the weekend working on some project and dad won’t be back until Monday. We need to go through the garage to get the car anyhow.”

They made their way out of his room and down the hall to the stairs. Most of the curtains were pulled, making the interior of the house rather dim. Despite the relative dark and quiet -- and much to Zim’s chagrin -- Dib kept pausing every few dozen feet to check that the coast was clear. He stopped short right at the bottom of the stairs, causing Zim to collide with him.

“Dib, why are we sneaking? This is your house! Open a window or turn on some fucking lights!” Zim said irritably, giving him a little push.

“AND JUST WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL WEEKEND??”

The sudden booming shout caused Dib to nearly fall backwards while Zim shrieked behind him. Gaz popped up over the back of the couch, eerily silhouetted in the gloom and laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes.
“Oh my god, that was so much better than I pictured it in my head!” she cackled.

“That’s not funny, Gaz!” Dib yelled back with a scowl. “You just about gave me a heart attack!”

“Serves you right for disappearing on me yesterday. I hope kissing Zim was worth it.” She looked behind Dib and gave an over the top wave. “Oh, hi Zim.”

He flipped her off from where he leaned against the wall, hyperventilating.

Dib sputtered. “Excuse me??”

Gaz smiled. “Come on. Everyone could see this coming from a mile off. And it was adorable how he turned up at our door yesterday all worried about you.”

“Hey,” Zim wheezed, pointing a finger at Gaz. “Not funny.”

Gaz put her hands up. “I’m not saying it is. I’m saying it’s cute how much you care.”

“What are you even doing here?” Dib asked, frazzled.

“I live here, dumbass.”

“Yeah, unfortunately. But I thought you had a group project or something.”

“Meh. I did but then I realized they’re all idiots so I’ve been working on it here by myself. And watching the security feed. Which is how I know Zim snuck you out of the house yesterday. Actually, Zim, you should probably be a little more sneaky about crawling out windows with your creepy cyborg legs. Someone might think you’re an alien or something.”

Dib held up his hands. “Look, Gaz, we can talk about this later. I’m just going to find my keys and then I’m going to leave. I’ll be back tomorrow and you can grill me then, alright?”

Gaz dangled a key fob in front of him. “The Yaris keys? Sure, you can have those …”

“Gaz …” Dib said, his tone dangerous.

“… Just admit you’re dating Zim.”

“Would you please just give me my —”

Zim marched over and stood between Dib and his sister, having had just about enough of the whole situation. “As Dib’s boyfriend, I am telling you to back off. You have no idea what kind of day he had yesterday but he certainly doesn’t need to be taking shit from his own family right now. He has enough on his plate worrying about how the Professor is going to react!”

“Oh my god … Zim, please …” Dib groaned, rubbing his temples and wishing his boyfriend would stop giving Gaz more ammo.

Gaz’s entire demeanor changed. “Wait, what?” She cast Dib a strange look. “Do you mean because you’re gay, or …?”

“Yeah, Gaz. The fuck else would it be about?”

“Why would dad care? He hasn’t been bothered at all about my girlfriend.”

Dib’s mouth hung open. “Wait. Your what?”
Gaz rolled her eyes. “You really aren’t all that observant, are you? No, Dib — you’re not the only gay sibling and you’re not even the first to come out. Actually, I guess this makes you the last to come out.”

“Since when?”

“Six months, give or take.”

“How did I not know about this??”

“Because you’re not observant.”

“No, because you never told me —”

Gaz tossed the keys at him and Zim caught them before they hit Dib in the face.

“Dib, we’re leaving. Come.” Zim grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the garage door.

“Don’t you dare tell dad before I get a chance to talk to him!” Dib shouted over his shoulder as Zim dragged him off.

“Alright, fine. I will not tell dad you’re dating your mortal enemy.”

“You’re not allowed to tell him I’m gay, either!”

Dib could hear the eye roll from across the house. “I will not tell dad you’re gay for your mortal enemy.”

He opened the garage door and heard a sarcastic, “You’re welcome,” before he slammed the door shut. He leaned back against it and slid all the way down to the floor.

“I know I should be relieved, but I just know the only reason he’s okay with it is because it’s Gaz. As soon as it’s me, I swear it’s gonna be a whole other thing,” Dib muttered. Zim sat down across from him and held his hands. “I just want him to accept me. Us. And if he won’t accept us … then that’s it. I’ll just have to leave and my relationship with Gaz will always be shitty and …”

He looked up to see Zim peering at him sadly.

“I don’t want you to lose your family over this,” he said softly. “I didn’t think that far ahead when we decided to do this. But if it’s going to be a problem …”

Dib crossed his legs and tugged Zim towards his lap. “Come here.” Zim didn’t need to be told twice. “I don’t suppose I’d be any less gay if we weren’t dating right now, so don’t think for a second that I regret this or it isn’t with it. My family has always been …” he searched for the kindest word possible, before deciding on, “difficult. If it’s not over this, it would be over something else.”

He looked down at Zim before gently pulling his hat back and kissing the top of his head. “At least I have someone who loves and understands me, now. That’s worth a lot. You still willing to let me come live with you if my dad kicks me out?”

Zim leaned back and nuzzled against Dib’s neck. “Of course. And if you can’t go to college, we’ll just fuck off from earth and explore the galaxy. I’ll teach you everything I know. You’re already pretty handy, right?”

“Oh man, you have no idea.” Dib reached for his phone. “This might not be very impressive to a guy who regularly builds doomsday devices, but check out what my car looked like before I fixed it.”
He handed Zim his phone, with a picture of a very smashed blue Yaris.

“I knew there was no way in hell I could convince my dad shell out the money to buy me a car, so I bought this one off a guy for basically pennies. All the damage was cosmetic so I replaced all the broken parts and then figured out how to give it a tune-up. The result is that it’s … probably not a death trap.”

Zim looked up at Dib, positively beaming with pride. “I’m impressed,” he said, because he was. He didn’t know the first thing about earth vehicles.

Dib blushed and nervously ran his fingers through his hair. “I mean, I’m sure you do more impressive work on the Voot…”

“Yeah, but someone taught me how to repair ships. You just did all this yourself. If I taught you everything I know, I bet you’d need a new teacher within a week.” He leaned in to kiss Dib’s nose. “You’re very smart, Dib, and I am very impressed with your work.”

Dib blushed and smiled, then grabbed Zim’s hat and put it back on his head. “Ready to take it for a spin?”

“That depends. What percentage of ‘not a death trap’ do you suppose it is?” Zim asked with a smile.

“Oh, at least 75%, for sure.” Dib stood up, picking Zim up with him.

“Hey! Whoa! What are you doing??” Zim asked, wiggling in his grasp.

“Carrying you,” said Dib with a smirk.

“I … can see that. Why?”

“I was just curious if I could. How much do you weigh, like 60 pounds, maximum? Oh, shit, can you even legally sit in the front seat?”

Zim could tell from Dib’s smile that he was messing with him. He was about to reply when Dib suddenly sandwiched him between the car and his body and leaned in for a kiss. Zim was still a moment, surprised by the sudden display of affection and the abrupt change in mood.

“Alright, fine. I’ll put up with the carrying for this.” He kissed back, wrapping his legs around Dib’s torso and his arms around Dib’s neck, pulling him close. He felt Dib’s hands move slowly up his sides, around his PAK and then up his bare neck, sliding under his hat to stroke his antennae. A happy shiver ran through his body. He relaxed into the feeling, leaning back a little and biting Dib’s lower lip — taking care to avoid his piercings — as he exhaled a soft purr.

Dib pressed his body close with a low moan and Zim kissed him again, running his fingers through Dib’s hair, sharp nails tickling his scalp. Zim kissed him deeper, listening to Dib’s breathing and heart rate increase as his movements grew more frantic, his calloused fingers trembling as they moved down the length of Zim’s antenna. Zim could feel himself getting lost in the heat of Dib’s body and all the little sounds he made when Zim held him tighter, pushed his tongue deeper, bit his lip, gently tugged at his hair, ran his nails down the soft skin of Dib’s neck …

He could hear Dib panting and feel hot breath against his skin, each exhale loud and close. Dib pressed up against him again with a sort of barely contained desperation, rolling his body in a way that made every bit of Zim tingle. He could feel the waves of electric desire rolling off of Dib, and it suddenly occurred to him that Dib was pushing past normal just-kissing territory.
Finally, Zim pushed him back gently and gave him a curious look. “What, exactly, are you going for here?”

Dib, red-faced and breathing hard, looked away sheepishly. “Sorry. I guess I got a little carried away.”

Zim planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek. “It’s fine. This just didn’t seem like a great time or place for more than kissing.”

“You don’t feel like losing your virginity in the back of a 2009 Toyota Yaris?” Dib asked playfully, wiping alien drool off his cheek.

Zim just stuck out his tongue. “Don’t be gross.” He shook his head and sat back a little, giving Dib a curious look. One of the benefits of Zim wearing his disguise was that Dib actually had half an idea where Zim was looking, and right now he could tell he was staring with some interest at Dib’s half-inch tunnels, as if he was just noticing all of the hardware for the first time. He gently put his finger through one of the tunnels, then touched the rest of the piercings in Dib’s ear.

“Did all that hurt?” Zim asked suddenly.

“I mean, it involves getting stuck with a needle so all of them hurt at least a little,” Dib replied. “But especially the lip piercings. There’s an awful lot of nerves there, it turns out.”

Zim brushed his fingers over Dib’s lips. “Why do you do these things to yourself?”

Dib shrugged. “I like the aesthetic?” He wiggled his fingers with their chipped black nail polish in front of Zim. “I enjoy the pain a little bit … but mostly I just like the way it looks.” He gave Zim a searching look. “Does it bother you?”

Zim tucked a stray tuft of hair behind Dib’s ear. “Nah, It’s part of what makes you Dib. I just don’t like the idea of you hurting yourself. Even for the aesthetic.”

“I can maybe cool it on the piercings until I get the self harm issue straightened out. Would that make you feel better?”

He laid his head on Dib’s shoulder and nodded.

“Can’t really say no to you when you’re being this cute.”

“My secret weapon,” Zim said with a smile. They sat there a moment, enjoying the closeness. Zim’s antennae perked when he heard Dib’s stomach growl.

“Fuck!! I forgot to feed you again. Why don’t you remind me when you need to eat, human?” he asked with a gentle swat at Dib’s face.

“Ack! Hey, no hitting!”

“I’m not hitting! I’m reprimanding.”

“Ugh, fine,” he said, catching Zim’s hand before it could smack him again. “I’m just bad at listening to my body, alright? I have like … no executive functioning skills. Half the time I forget to shower and eat and put different clothes on most of the time if there’s not a physical person standing over my shoulder telling me to.”

Zim sat back and looked at him. “Are you requesting my assistance?”
Dib ran his fingers through his hair nervously, blushing. “I … I guess? I mean, I feel bad. Asking you to take care of me like that. That’s sort of a lot, right out of the gate …”

Zim rolled his eyes. “You keep telling me that everything I’m doing is ‘a lot’, so maybe I owe it to you, hm?” He leaned in and pressed his forehead against Dib’s. “But this does mean you’re going to start bathing daily, smelly.”

“Okay, okay. That’s fair.”

“Alright, let me down, already. Let’s go get you more than two shirts to wear so you actually launder your things between uses,” Zim said with a pointed look.

“How can you tell —”

Zim raised his non existent brows, one antenna cocked at an angle. “You come to school smelling like Febreeze and sadness, Dib. I don’t even need to observe your laundry habits.”

“I’m always depressed so don’t I always smell like sadness?” he grumbled, pushing his glasses up.

Zim head-butted his hand in a distinctly feline fashion. “No. Sadness smells like Snickers, a microwave burrito, and a shirt you’ve worn for 7 days in a row.”

“You leave the Snickers out of it, Zim. I’m very sad and I need chocolate to deal with that sadness.”

“It’s more about the end result of the junk food and lack of washing. Also, you belong to Zim now; you’re getting fed better,” he said, folding his arms resolutely.

“Better than what? You took me to Denny’s last night!” Dib replied, exasperated.

“Better than nothing! It was the only thing open and you needed calories!”

They stared at each other for a moment before Dib cracked and laughed, leaning in and pressing their cheeks together. Zim tensed, bewildered, and just let the moment happen. He was more than a little confused when he felt a tear slide down Dib’s cheek.

“Are … you alright?” he asked with moderate concern. “You’re a little … all over the place today …”

Dib shook with laughter, collapsing against the car and squishing Zim a bit. “I’m fine … I’m fine. It’s just … I don’t know. I would never have guessed we’d be sitting in my garage, yelling about how to best take care of me.” He lifted his glasses wiped his eyes on the back of his hand before resting his head on Zim’s shoulder and lightly kissing his neck. “Thank you for taking good care of me, Zim. I don’t even know how we got here, but I love you.”

Zim shook his head, bewildered, then hugged his human gently. “I love you, too. Even if you confuse me, sometimes.”

Dib finally set him back down on his own two feet and unlocked the Yaris. He hit the button on the garage door opener while Zim looked at his reflection in the side view mirror and straightened his hat.

Dib shifted the car into reverse and glanced over at Zim. “Seatbelt on, space boy.”

Zim crosses his arms. “Seatbelt? Pfft! Zim needs no seatbelt.”

“Yeah, ya do.”
“Why? The Voot doesn’t have seatbelts. Besides, I’m sure you’re a — GAH!!!” he shrieked as Dib suddenly punched the car in reverse down the drive, slamming the brakes just before they reached the road. Zim’s head pinged off the dashboard and he came up swearing.

“I was ABOUT to say that I’m sure you’re a competent driver, but clearly I was WRONG!” he screeched.

Dib was doubled over with laughter.

“What the FUCK, Dib??” he yelled, rubbing his head. “That wasn’t funny! What is the matter with you today??”

Dib gave him a look that suggested Zim was overreacting. “Geez, Zim. Sorry … I mean we used to play rough all the time …”

“Maybe now that we’re dating you could ease up a little, hmmm?? Cease and desist in your bruising of Zim???”

Dib shrank back, then tossed the car in neutral and pulled the parking brake, sensing that this might take a while.

“Are we fighting? Should I get out?” Dib asked, nervously. “Because I can leave …”

Zim didn’t directly respond. “Ugh!! Well at least now I have a nice matching bruise for the black eye you gave me yesterday!” He turned away, sulking and gingerly rubbing his head. “You’re acting so weird … stupid human …”

Dib froze. Was he? He felt good for the most part. Better than he had in awhile, in fact. A little wired and twitchy, maybe. But definitely still good.

“ Weird how?” Dib asked cautiously.

“You’ve been all over the place all morning and it’s like you’re not thinking before you do things!” He fixed Dib with a glare before adding, “Even less thinking than usual!”

“Oh … oh no … shit. Um,” Dib sputtered, realization dawning on his face. “I can explain … maybe …”

“I’d love to hear it!” Zim shouted angrily, throwing his hands in the air.

“Remember when I was talking about getting put on all those medications?”

“Uh-Huh.”

“And you already know I’m, like … clinically depressed, right?”

“Yep.”

Dib nervously ran his fingers up and down through his hair.

“I’m maybe kind of bipolar and I don’t take my meds,” he said in a rush, looking away. Zim stared at him blankly, attempting to parse the sentence Dib had said in one breath. “Excuse me?”

Dib looked reluctant at the prospect of having to restate himself. “Ugh … Okay. I’m diagnosed with bipolar disorder and I don’t take the medication I was prescribed. Alright?”
Dib reached out and Zim shied out of the way of his hand. “Dib, I need a moment, okay?” he huffed. “Talk, don’t touch.”

“I … okay. I’m really sorry …”

“I know you are. Just … explain to me. Please.”

Dib looked crestfallen. “Okay. I, um … I have the kind of depression where you also get these, like … periods of time with too much energy where you’re either happy to a terrifying degree or really irritable. And you talk to fast and do stupid shit because any and all impulse control goes out the window. That’s a manic phase. And I have meds to even out the mania and depression but I don’t take them because they suck.” He was sitting up nervously now, running his fingers through his hair and tugging at his piercings and shifting in his seat. He noticed Zim watching him and resolutely sat on his hands, attempting to sit still. “Sorry … talking about this makes me nervous.”

“I … can tell,” was all Zim could think to say.

“Fuck. Sorry. I hate this. I don’t feel like me when this happens but I don’t feel like me on meds, either.” Dib slumped over, looking miserable.

Internally, Zim was panicking. Why were humans so complicated? Just when he felt like he understood Dib, he had to go and do … whatever this was.

“What’s wrong with the medication?” Zim asked, trying to be compassionate and hoping he wasn’t missing the mark too badly.

Dib gave a sort of frantic half laugh, half whine. “I’ve been on a bunch of them and they all make me sick and too out of it to function. Sometimes it makes it feel like the whole world has gone grey. At least right now I feel something.” He looked up, fear and sadness evident on his face. “Even if that something is really, really scared. I’ve never gone through this with someone close enough to be collateral, Zim. Usually I only end up hurting me … I really don’t want to hurt you.”

“Well you can stop worrying, since it already happened,” Zim grumbled. He looked up at Dib’s horrified expression and immediately wished he could take it back.

“I just wasn’t thinking … I’m really sorry,” Dib whispered.

“It’s fine. I’ll be alright. The bruise from yesterday is almost gone, anyway. I’m sure this one will be gone by Monday.”

Dib’s eyes were plaintive. “Would an ice pack help your head?”

Zim sighed. “Probably?”

Dib cut the engine. “Alright.” He got out and walked around to Zim’s door to open it. Zim gave him a pitying look and hopped out, still feeling like he only barely had a handle on the situation.

As they made their way back inside and into the kitchen, Gaz—who had what looked like a week’s worth of homework spread out on the kitchen table—looked up, saw Zim holding his head, and gave them an exasperated look.

“Did you two manage to get into a fight on the way to the car??” she asked, sounding disappointed
in both of them. “And here I was, expecting more from you …”

“I’m not in the mood, Gaz,” Dib said shortly as Zim trailed behind him.

“Aw, Zim, come here … what did my brother do to you?”

Zim was still miffed at her for earlier but he was also a sucker for attention and slightly more miffed at Dib at the moment. He took his hand off his head and she pushed his hat back and ran her fingers along the bruising on his face before turning to Dib, shocked.

“Did you hit him ?!”

“No, it’s okay … the black eye is from yesterday,” Zim explained. Dib facepalmed behind him, wondering if Zim was being deliberately obtuse about how he sounded or just the normal amount of obtuse.

Gaz gave Zim a horrified look.

“We weren’t dating yet!” he explained, as if it somehow made it better. “The other one is from hitting the dashboard because he hit the brakes to teach me a lesson about seatbelts.”

Ah. Deliberately obtuse, then. Whatever … Dib was pretty sure he deserved what he had coming to him.

Gaz whipped around, eyes wide. “Dib!!!”

“Can I help you?” he asked sarcastically as he handed Zim an ice pack out of the freezer.

“Did you apologize to him??” she demanded.

“Yes! I did! Profusely!”

She turned to Zim, who nodded. “He did apologize profusely. And I forgive him because he’s manic and he can’t help it.”

“Jesus Christ … Zim!!” Dib turned to see Zim giving him a wry look. “In case it was up for debate, you are absolutely crossing a line right now--”

“All I’m saying is what you told me, Dib,” Zim said with a shrug, ice pack held to his head.

“That doesn’t mean you can just go --”

“Oh my god … Dib!!” Gaz yelled in frustration.

“What, Gaz … Dib!!” Gaz yelled in frustration.

“What, Gaz?? What ??”

“This is what happens when you go off your meds!” She got up to go dig through the pantry and emerged a few seconds later, hurling a pill bottle at Dib. Which he caught. Barely. She grabbed a glass from the cupboard, filled it with water, and shoved it at him as she walked back to the table. She sat down and gave him a pointed look. “Go on; take them now.”

Zim was getting the distinct feeling that he really had crossed a line as he watched Dib’s entire demeanor shift.

“Or what , Gaz?” he asked icily. “I’m 18. I’m an adult. And that means I can’t be threatened with the system anymore.”
“Take them or I’ll tell dad.”

Zim watched as Dib’s expression darkened and Gaz just sat, reclined, with her arms over her chest. He felt wholly responsible for the rather uncomfortable scene playing out before him and wished he could slink out of the room without being noticed.

“You’re really punching below the belt right now,” Dib said, staring at the bottle.

“Better than having you punching Zim,” Gaz said, lifting the ice pack and inspecting the progress of the bruise blooming between Zim’s eyes. She turned back to Dib with an incredulous look. “He’s tiny, Dib. You could really hurt him.”

Zim looked slightly rebuffed.

“Have you missed the part where he routinely kicked my ass for six years?” Dib said, flabbergasted. “No offense, Zim,” he added as an aside. “Still shouldn’t have sent you flying. But I think we both know you’re both damn near indestructible and very capable of taking me in a fight.”

Zim nodded. “He’s not wrong.”

Gaz stared at them a moment. “You two are just … absolutely something else.” She slumped over on the table, head in her hands. “Ugh … Dib. Look. I don’t know how to explain to you that you can’t just cause him bodily injury like you’re still rivals. It’s not as though he’s going to fight back like he used to.”

Dib looked chastised. “Yeah, it’s a poor excuse,” he muttered. “You don’t have to tell me … I know.”

“Good. Then start acting like it.” She stood up and turned to Zim. “I think I have some costume makeup from Halloween last year that matches your skin tone. Let me see if I can at least cover all that so no one thinks my brother is abusing you.” She turned to Dib. “And you; take those. Now.”

Dib glared at her and she raised her eyebrows expectantly.

“I’m waiting …”

Dib angrily opened the bottle of pills. “This is going to make me puke, you know. I haven’t eaten today.”

“Don’t care.”

“You could at least wait until they’re not guaranteed to make me nauseated.”

“You lost that luxury when your recklessness started involving other people.”

Dib tossed a pill in his mouth and chugged the glass of water. When he was finished, he slammed the empty glass down on the table. “I’ll be thinking of you when I’m pulled over on the side of the road, puking.”

Gaz gave him a sarcastic thumbs up. “Go grab a breakfast bar or something while I fix your poor boyfriend up.” She turned on her heel and walked briskly out of the room.

Dib grumbled all the way to the pantry, picked up something he thought wouldn’t taste awful the second time around, and went back to the table in a huff. He angrily munched a mint chocolate Cliff bar while Zim sat across from him with his head resting on his folded arms, looking small and
unhappy.

“I’m sorry, Dib,” he said softly. “I was messing with you because I was still a little pissed off but I didn’t mean for it to turn into … a whole thing.”

Dib shoved most of the bar into his mouth in one bite. “No, I’m sorry. I deserved every bit of that. I was acting like a psycho. I’m sorry I pulled that stunt in the car and — since I never apologized for it — I’m sorry I hit you yesterday. I didn’t know how to interpret your concern and I wouldn’t have known what to do with it at the time if it had.”

“That makes two of us,” Zim said, with a melancholy smile.

“I’m so shitty at caring about you,” Dib said quietly. “I really didn’t anticipate being so spectacularly bad at just … not injuring you for one fucking day. You chased me down when I was belligerent and suicidal and fixed me up so I didn’t have to go to a hospital and made sure I ate and carried me home and tucked my delirious ass into bed and did my laundry and … how do I repay you? With a mild concussion!” He took his glasses off and angrily combed back his bangs with his fingers. “Good job, Dib.”

“I mean, you’re glossing over the part where I did heavily imply I would do you bodily harm yesterday,” Zim admitted.

“You somehow managed to menace me in the most gentle way possible after I punched you for trying to help me, so it's forgiven. I bounced you off my dashboard for laughs. I think that makes me worse.”

Zim hopped down off the chair and climbed up into his lap.

“Touch is okay now?” Dib asked nervously.

“Please just hug your Zim … I think we both need it.”

Dib complied and held him close, taking comfort in the way Zim relaxed into him. “It won’t always be like this, I hope,” Dib mumbled from where his head rested on Zim’s shoulder.

“It’s worth remembering that we’re less than 24 hours into a relationship after more than half a decade of being mostly rivals,” Zim pointed out. “A year from now, this is going to look different. Really, a week from now, this will probably look different.”

Dib gave a long sigh in response.

“I’m not mad about the black eye,” Zim said, reaching over to stroke Dib’s cheek. “What I am a little miffed about is your omission of pertinent health information.”

“I didn’t think it was relevant,” Dib said sadly. “I’ve been purely depressed for about two years now. I can’t even remember the last time I was manic. It just happens so infrequently. And you already knew about the depression so I thought that was enough. I wasn’t trying to hide anything.”

“Okay,” Zim said quietly. “As long as you know you don’t have to hide things from me. I promise I’ll never be mad at you for being human.”

Dib hugged him gently. “I’m going to learn to do better, you know. I’m going to learn to take care of you and love you in the healthiest way possible. I’m going to …” he groaned suddenly. “I’m going to probably throw up in a couple minutes. Ugh. Sorry. That medication has a greater than 50% chance of making me yak.”
“I can see why you wouldn’t want to take it.”

“I wish there was something that worked. I hate being like this,” Dib whined. “I hate either being a massive spaz or too depressed to function. I hate hurting people I care about because I’m just not thinking straight. I wish there was something out there that could fix me but I’ve tried damn near everything and I’m just so burned out on it.”

Zim turned and looked at Dib, biting his lip. “Do you … want me to try?”

Dib blinked. “What?”

“I could … I mean, look. I cannot promise it will work … but I can try to come up with something that will regulate your mood issues without … gastrointestinal upset and other associated unpleasantness.”

Dib’s eyes went wide. “Would you, really?”

“I have a lab and if you’re a willing test subject, then let’s give it a try.”

Dib hugged him close. “God, I love dating a mad scientist.”

“Since I’m going to be literally picking your brain, anything else I should know about?”

“Uh, ADHD, some sensory processing issues … I don’t know. Dad had me tested for damn near everything. Those are the ones that have stuck.” His stomach growled dangerously and his face suddenly fell as he quickly released Zim. “Oh fuck …”

“One step ahead of you!” Zim said, leaping out of Dib’s lap as his poor boyfriend sprinted for the bathroom. He sat back down, feeling a bit helpless, as Gaz finally came back down carrying a makeup box.

She looked around. “Where’s Dib?”

Zim jabbed a thumb down the hallway. “Throwing up in the bathroom,” he said, tactfully.

Gaz sighed and flopped down in the chair next to him. “Fuck. I was really hoping he was bluffing. I feel mean now …” She cast Zim a worried look and then hung her head backwards over the chair with a groan. “It’s just frustrating … Sometimes I feel like he doesn’t want to get better!”

Zim looked at his feet. “He’s pretty upset about the whole ‘braking hard enough to slam my head into the dashboard’ thing.”

“I’m sure he is,” Gaz said. “But he doesn’t do anything to prevent stuff like this from happening in the first place.”

“To be fair, the medication doesn’t seem to agree with him.”

“It’s not just that,” Gaz said as she opened the box, dug around, then held up a few different shades of green costume makeup to Zim’s face. “He has no actual sleep schedule and forgets to eat and basically does all of the things that make his condition worse. And he doesn’t seem to realize what an issue it is until it comes back to bite him in the ass. It’s just that …” she leaned back a moment, frazzled. “This is why our dad is harder on him, you know? He just acts like a total lunatic sometimes and it’s frightening to watch from the other side. As a parent, you probably feel like you have to try and do something about it before somebody gets hurt. Not to mention that dad thought his insistence on you being an alien was evidence of psychosis that needed to be managed, so that hasn’t
helped.”

Zim looked away guiltily.

Gaz looked up from the tube of costume makeup she’d just opened. “It’s not your fault he couldn’t figure out he needed to stay quiet about it.”

“Quiet about what?” Zim asked defensively.

She raised an eyebrow. “I know you’re an alien, Zim.”

He pursed his lips.

“I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“And I’m not going to subjugate your planet for the glory of the Irken Empire anymore,” he replied evenly.

“That’s nice of you. Especially considering you’re dating the one person who might actually be okay with destroying all humans.” She got to work gently covering the bruises on Zim’s face and he sat, eyes closed, patiently in front of her. “Are you taking better care of him than he does himself?” she asked softly. “I noticed you got him to shower.”

“For the most part,” Zim replied, trying to stay as still as possible. “He …” Zim opened his other eye and looked Gaz over. “Look … we barely know each other. Honestly, I barely know Dib. I already fucked things up just now so … can I trust you not to use what I’m about to tell you against him?”

“I like messing with my brother because he’s a hot headed pain in the ass, but I don’t want to hurt him. So don’t worry.”

Zim kicked his feet nervously. “I took him with me yesterday because he’d … hurt himself really badly. And I needed to fix him because he wouldn’t let me take him to the hospital. He’s fine now,” Zim said hurriedly as Gaz’s expression grew concerned. “I took care of him. But … you’re probably going to be seeing a lot of me, now. I need to keep an eye on him. Take care of him. He seems to need an awful lot of that …”

Gaz gave him a grateful look and nodded. “I appreciate that. I’d be a little pissed if he died. You’re sure you’re up to the task, though?”

“I care about him a lot,” Zim replied softly. “He’s worth the effort.”

“So did he finally confess his undying love to you before or after you whisked him away?” Gaz asked with a grin.

Zim closed his eyes as she dabbed green paint around the edges of his eyelid. He laughed softly. “I see now … you’re cornering me for gossip.”

“How the hell else am I going to get it out of you? Now, come on! Details! Dib is sure as fuck never going to tell me.”

“Oh, fine. It was after. After I fixed him up and we yelled at each other a bit and he said no one liked him and I said …” Zim looked suddenly sad. “… I said I did. I didn’t know if he … but he did. And … Gaz, he is really not happy at home,” he blurted out. Gaz pulled back a moment and sighed.

“He’s really not happy anywhere. That’s part of the problem.”
“I know, but …” Zim shot her a worried look. “He said your family would be happier without him.”

“That’s not true …” Gaz said softly. “Like I said. He’s a pain and I enjoy messing with him. It’s just how we are. But I’ll ease up if it’s really that bad.”

“He’s really scared to tell your dad about us.”

Gaz leaned in, covering up the visible bruise just above Zim’s eyes. “He shouldn’t be. Dad’s not discriminatory like that. Plus he likes you just fine.”

“That’s what I said!”

“See? Nothing to worry over.”

“I mean, it isn’t just that. He’s worried he’s going to get beat up at school”

“What is the deal with everyone in your grade? They’re a special kind of awful. But they’re at least afraid of you, right?”

Zim puffed up a little. “If they aren’t, they really should be.”

“Good. Then just don’t leave him alone for any reason. That’s an order.”

“Can do.”

“Un-crease your brows a moment … thank you. And … that should do it.”

She handed him a small mirror and he looked at himself, turning his head to try and see where the makeup ended and his skin began. “That’s … really impressive,” he admitted, handing the mirror back.

“Where were you two headed?”

“The mall,” Zim said. “To buy Dib enough clothes he stops re-wearing the same t-shirt five times in a row. And so he can play dress-up with me…” he muttered.

Gaz held up a purple eyeliner pencil. “In that case, want me to do you up real nice before you leave?”

“How do you people keep guessing—”

“It’s the contacts. Now are you going to let me do this or no?”

“Bleh.”

“Come on …” Gaz coaxed.

Zim rolled his eyes. “Oh, fine. If you must …”

Gaz grinned. “Shut up. You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Zim looked embarrassed but nodded. She uncapped the pencil and he closed his eyes.

“Our dad will be back on Monday,” she said as she gently moved the pencil across his skin. “Then you two can tell him and finally get this over with. Honestly, I think he’ll be happy Dib’s finally found someone.”
“Even if that someone is me?” Zim asked, cautiously. “Dib’s right. We did spend the last six years beating on each other.”

“For better or for worse, I think dad has always assumed that Dib instigated most of it. And you’re not going to do that any more, right?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Good. As long as neither of you turns up with any more bruises, you should be fine.”

“He didn’t do it to be mean, you know …”

Gaz heaved a sigh. “Yes, but you have to think about how it looks to a parent, regardless. You’re just going to have to be careful. Especially since you apparently bruise like a peach. That’s something else you two maniacs have in common. You’re both delicate fucking flowers …”

“Understood …”

“Just come here after school on Monday with Dib and talk to our dad and get it over with as soon as possible. Especially because Dib will eventually work himself into a panic attack and then it will never get done.”

“That sounds like my Dib …”

“Okay, hold your breath a second …” she dusted Zim’s face with a soft brush and a light, glittery powder. “There we go — finished!”

“Wow, how did you talk him into that?” asked Dib from the doorway. Zim wondered how long he’d been standing there. He was wearing different clothes than he had been earlier and he looked a bit pale. He walked over and Zim hopped off the chair and tugged on the hem of his hoodie. Dib shrank back.

“Ugh, Zim, I brushed my teeth like twenty times and washed my face and changed my clothes but I know how you are with smells and I still feel like I smell like vomit …”

“You don’t …” Zim said with a pout. He did, kind of. But it was heavily masked by pine-scented deodorant and mint toothpaste and Zim wanted physical comfort from his human so he figured he was telling the good kind of lie.

“Okay, fine.” Dib sat down and Zim clambered onto his lap, snuggling close. “Someone’s feeling huggy out of the blue,” Dib said, raising an eyebrow. “She wasn’t mean to you, was she?”

“Oh, don’t even. You can tell I took good care of him. He looks better than when you left.”

Zim flashed him a smile, glittering contentedly.

“You two are so sickeningly cute, I’m going to have to leave before I developed diabetes,” Gaz said, packing up. “Oh and Dib? I’m picking out what clothes you buy for you and Zim, so send pictures. I’m not letting you two go to school on Monday looking frumpy. If you’re going to be a gay power couple, you’ve got to look the part.” She left the kitchen with a wave of her hand.

Dib stared at Zim, taking in the purple winged eyeliner and general sparkliness of Zim’s face. “What …. in the fuck … just happened?” he asked in bewilderment.

Zim shrugged. “We had a chat. It was nice.”
Dib just shook his head incredulously, choosing to let Zim’s misinterpretation go without mention. “Alright. Well, you okay to get going looking like that?”

“What’s wrong with looking like this?”

“Nothing at all,” Dib said, backtracking hastily. “You’re adorable.”

“And you’re looking a little off, still,” Zim said with his usual amount of tact. “Are you going to be well enough for me to feed you?”

Dib looked a little green at the prospect. “I hope so.”

Zim absently picked at some lint on his hoodie, then turned his head to look upwards. “She didn’t mean to make you sick, Dib.”

Dib looked away, glaring at the kitchen tile. He gave a noncommittal grunt.

“Really. She felt bad about it. She just worries about you.”

“Funny way of showing it,” Dib muttered.

“I know,” Zim said gently, stroking Dib’s cheek. “But don’t write her off completely just yet, okay? I talked with her about toning things down with you.”

“Oh, is that why she was borderline friendly when I came back?”

Zim nodded.

“Alright. Thank you for talking with her. I guess I’m lucky everyone else finds you so damn disarming…” He stared at the tile, lost in thought until Zim gave a pitiful whine from his shoulder.

“Can we please get some actual food now?”

“Alright. But you’re wearing your seatbelt this time. Especially because the car will ding at me if you don’t, and I’m not about to listen to that for the next ten minutes.”

Zim stuck his tongue out. “Alright, fine. I will abide by your silly human transport rules.”

“You’re lucky I don’t put you in a booster seat.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

Chapter End Notes

I told you the chapters would get longer!

Also absolutely no offense meant to those for whom psych meds are enormously helpful. There just happen to be some of us who can’t take them. And it's a frustrating place to be.
Paper Dolls and Paper Hearts

Chapter Summary

A fluffy chapter about bonding, Dib being introspective, and reasons why you should just learn to stop worrying and let your 184 year old alien boyfriend break gender norms.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry that I promised this like a week ago and then ... totally failed on the follow-through. My mental health has kinda sucked lately.

Anyway do you like fluff? This chapter is just //brimming// with it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*I'll sing that song,
  a little bird in your throat,
  swallowed by love,
  Down in your lungs,
  I give you all of my notes to carry on*

- Glowbug, False Metal

Dib munched on his tikka masala from the grocery store hot bar, feeling slightly better now that he’d had a proper meal. Beside him, Zim ate quietly and kept an arm firmly around his waist. Dib rested a hand on Zim’s head and he looked up.

“Are you okay?” Dib asked gently. “You have been really quiet and clingy ever since we went back to the house.”

Zim leaned against him, looking nervous. “Remember earlier when I said I had a weird feeling I’d forgotten something?”

“Mhmm …”

“It came back. I tried to ignore it but it’s just getting worse and … grounding myself with you is the only thing that makes it any better.”

Dib rubbed his back. “Your people don’t have like … ESP, do they? Clairvoyance?”

Zim gave him a curious look. He sometimes forgot that Dib considered that sort of thing a perfectly acceptable question to ask.
“I don’t think so … At the very least, I’ve been told I lack even basic self awareness,” Zim grumbled. He shoveled the last few bites of his food into his mouth, then chased a lone grape around the plate with his fork. “So … edgecase …” he started, without looking up. “If your dad doesn’t approve of us, for whatever reason, are we going to break up?”

“That’s not what has you worried, is it?”

“No, but it popped into my head. I figured I’d ask.”

“I already said I’d leave if he was unsupportive.”

“Yes, but you were also upset with Gaz and acting strange at the time so I just … figured I’d double check that nothing had changed.”

Dib pulled him into a gentle hug, one hand on his back and the other behind his head. “No. You’d have to do something pretty crazy for me to leave you at this point. Besides, if I go live with you and we can watch movies every night and learn to actually cook and do each other’s homework so we have more free time to cuddle and hunt monsters and build things and go to other planets.”

“When you put it like that, it makes me kind of hope he’s going to be difficult about it,” Zim said with a small smile.

“We can still do all that no matter what, you know.” He cocked his head. “You really want to come hunt ghosts and monsters with me? I haven’t been able to get anyone else to even humor me.”

“Now that you’re through hunting me, nothing would make me happier.”

Dib kissed him and then went to toss their plates in the compost bin. In the time it took him to come back, the anxiety had settled back in and Zim was looking worried again.

“I’m moderately certain that I’ve forgotten something extremely important,” he mumbled, starting to get frustrated on top of things.

“What’s that old saying about how if you forgot, it wasn’t important or it was a lie?” Dib quipped. Zim shot him a grouchy look and he held up his hands. “Alright, geez, sorry. It’s clearly neither of those things if you’re this worked up about it.”

“It feels very important, whatever it is,” Zim grumbled.

“Did you leave the oven on or something?” Dib kissed the side of Zim’s scowl.

Zim flinched away. “You are really testing my patience right now, Dib-thing.”

“Oof. Clearly. Haven’t been called that since before you declared your undying love for me.”

Zim turned away in a huff.

Dib sighed and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Sorry. Humor is my defense mechanism … I wasn’t trying to have a laugh at your expense. I just wanted to lighten the mood.”

Zim was still feeling sulky so he didn’t respond.

“I’ll be right back.”

He felt Dib’s hand slide off his shoulder as Dib stood up and walked off. Zim put his feet on his chair and pulled his legs up to his chest, then crossed his arms and put his head down on the table,
resolutely stewing in his own misery. The feeling made absolutely no logical sense but was so completely overwhelming that he couldn’t let it go. If it was bothering him this much, there had to be some reason behind it, right?

He had already ruled out all the usual culprits. He didn’t particularly care about school, so that couldn’t be it. (Nevertheless, he had mentally run through his school checklist and could think of no stray homework assignments, forgotten projects, or upcoming exams.) None of his world domination schemes were on a timer. (Zim wasn’t that sloppy.) Probing Day had come and gone without any indication the Tallest planned to check in on his “progress”. He had managed to dodge parent-teacher night this year by claiming his parents were on sabbatical in Japan. For once, it looked like Zim had all of his ducks in a row. So why wouldn’t this feeling just leave him alone?

He jumped as Dib set a bag down on the table in front of him.

“Sorry!” Dib yelped as Zim shot up, looking around blearily. “I thought maybe …” Dib pushed the bag closer to Zim. “This might help?”

Zim pulled it open, curious despite his gloomy mood. Inside were assorted candies.

“I had to kind of guess, because I don’t know what you actually like that we have here,” Dib said anxiously, “but hopefully I got it at least kind of right?”

Zim pulled out a bag of fruit flavored jelly beans and looked up. Dib was holding one hand out nervously in front of him and Zim gently nudged it with his head.

“You already know me too well. Thank you.” Zim was more than willing to hold a grudge indefinitely, but Dib was clearly trying his best. Not to mention, Zim was nothing if not food-motivated so the fact that Dib’s best included sugar definitely factored in.

“Does this mean I can finally coax you over to the mall?” Dib asked hopefully.

Zim fixed him with a withering look. “You’re going to make me walk all the way there, aren’t you?”

Dib had been rather insistent that there was no reason to drive to the other parking lot after they ate; it was a waste of gas and they could make it across the busy intersection just fine on foot.

“Nah. But I’m not driving 30 seconds down the road, either. Hop up; I’ll carry you.” Dib picked up the shopping bag turned around.

Zim rolled his eyes, but stood up on his chair and wrapped his arms around Dib’s neck. “Give me your legs … there we go.”

Zim ducked his head as he noticed people staring as they walked past. “You’re embarrassing me, Dib.”

“They’re just jealous of how much I love you.” He kissed Zim’s arm.

They made their way out into the parking lot, where the sun was starting to hang low on the horizon. Zim looked up and popped a few jelly beans into his mouth, chewing noisily in Dib’s ear. Luckily, Dib had figured out quite a while back not to let Zim know he was being successfully irritating. It would only encourage him.

“That’s one of the things I really like about Earth, you know,” Zim said finally, pointing to the sunset. “Irk is just sort of covered in smog all the time, so we don’t get to see much of our sun. I’ve been to other planets where you can see the star they orbit, but Earth sunrises and sunsets are
Dib dug in his pocket for a moment, then pulled out his phone. Zim groaned. “I didn’t mean to prompt you to take a selfie …”

“Aw, come on. To celebrate the first successful day of our relationship and not annihilating each other? Please?”

Zim tossed more jelly beans in his mouth and munched moodily over Dib’s shoulder.

“Gaz made you look pretty so we should at least send her a photo as proof of life, don’t you think?”

Zim sighed. “Alright, fine.”

Dib held up the camera with the sunset as a backdrop and smiled. Zim looked over at his ridiculous human, face full of metal and holding up a peace sign, and felt a dopey grin spread across his face despite himself.

“Perfect!” Dib pulled up the picture to show Zim. Dib was facing the camera but Zim was very clearly smiling in his direction. Zim’s slightly over-the-top makeup shimmered in the golden sun and the two of them couldn’t have possibly looked more mis-matched if they tried.

“You actually look happy,” Zim said, sounding surprised.

“Huh, I wonder why that could be,” Dib replied with a grin, resuming their trek to the mall.

“In all the years I’ve known you, I think you’ve mostly just looked miserable.”

Dib turned and kissed his cheek. “Wonder why that could be.”

“Well I’m making you happy now so that has to count for something,” Zim grumbled.

He stared up at the sky as they walked, and his antenna perked under his hat as he heard a melodic rumble in Dib’s throat as he began to hum quietly. Zim listened closely to see if it was anything he recognized. He was shocked to find that Dib could actually hum on key, so why couldn’t he sing —

Dib started singing softly under his breath. “We live and front porches and swing life away, we get by just fine here on minimum wage —”

“You can actually sing??” Zim said a bit too loudly in Dib’s ear.

Dib flinched. “Ow … yes, I can, thanks. Who the hell told you I couldn’t? I’d like words with them.”

Zim blushed. “I may have listened to you yell along to Boulevard of Broken Dreams the other day. It was not your best work.”

He could almost hear the gears turning in Dib’s head as silence stretched between them. “Hey Zim?”

“Er … yeah?”

“How long were you standing outside my door yesterday?”

“I may have tried to get in through a window before I rang your doorbell,” he mumbled into Dib’s shoulder. “Sorry … I thought you wouldn’t talk to me if I didn’t have the element of surprise on my
“I mean, you’re not wrong …”

“Are you mad?”

“That you tried to break into my house?”

“That’s … rather unfair phrasing …”

Dib chewed his lip. “Yesterday was … really weird,” he said, looking at Zim out of the corner of his eye. “I don’t think it would be fair of me to be mad about it, especially considering your motives seem to have been pure. Never mind the fact that you might have genuinely saved my life. You … you cared enough to try and break into my house when nobody else even noticed I was thinking of killing myself. I’ll forgive all the weirdness just for that.” They finally reached the doors to the mall and Dib stopped. “You want down?”

Zim shook his head.

“You’re lucky you’re not very heavy,” Dib said with a smirk, pulling open the door and venturing inside.

Zim leaned over Dib’s shoulder, bracing his elbow against Dib’s chest. “… I’m glad you’re not dead.”

Dib laughed. “Me too. And that’s something I never thought I’d actually say. Suddenly I’ve got a whole lot more to live for.”

Zim rested his head against Dib’s neck and let his arms hang down. “You know, you should sing more often. It sounded nice.”

“I actually play guitar, too, you know. That song I was singing earlier?”

“I actually know that one … ‘Swing Life Away’, right?”

“Fuck, I’m impressed. You actually like Earth music?”

“Well enough,” Zim said, blushing.

“Anyway, I was learning that one. Hoping I could go play at a coffee shop or something. But I didn’t have anyone to practice in front of beforehand and people are … terrifying.”

“I could be convinced to listen to you.”

“I’m very lucky to be dating someone so supportive of my musical endeavors,” Dib said with a grin. He stopped in front of the mall directory and Zim finally slid down off his back, dumping the rest of the jelly beans into his mouth and riffling through the bag Dib was holding for something else to eat.

“You seem better, by the way,” Dib said cautiously.

“I guess. It seems to come and go … but I’m fine for now,” Zim said with a shrug.

“Maybe it’s just anxiety? Our lives have had a bit of a major overhaul in the past 24 hours.”

“I don’t get anxiety,” Zim grumbled, sticking his face into the shopping bag. “Irkens don’t get anxiety.”
As much as Zim had accepted Earth to be his new home, he was still reluctant to let go of his identity as an Irken.

“Alright; my apologies.” Dib handed the bag to Zim and pulled out his phone. “Gaz says you look adorable.”

“Damn straight,” Zim said, ripping open a bag of Skittles.

“Ugh, she also says no Hot Topic. Or FYE.”

“Eh?” Zim mumbled through a mouthful of candy.

“Fuck you, Gaz; that basically leaves me with nothing,” Dib grumbled. “I have an image to uphold, here.”

“And what image would that be?” Zim asked skeptically.

“You wear literally the same clothes every day, Zim. You don’t get to question the look I’m going for.”

“I’m serious!” Zim insisted. “You just look sad all the time. That’s not what you’re going for, is it?”

Dib looked crestfallen.

“Oh no … is it??”

“I was going for dark and mysterious …” Dib said, sounding a bit hurt.

“I … er … you have the ‘dark’ part down,” Zim assured him, patting his arm.

Dib sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “Probably time for a new look, huh?”

“Lose the coat for good and go for something a little more punk rock and a little less … ‘most likely to blow up the school’,” Zim advised.

“I mean, I probably am,” Dib muttered under his breath.

“Fair. But you probably don’t want to advertise that.”

“Okay, fine. New look it is. What’s even out there that isn’t horrifically preppy?” He searched through the directory. “Target sells clothes, right?”

Zim dumped more Skittles in his mouth and shrugged. Dib took his hand and they made their way over to the other side of the mall. He was rarely in any large store for anything outside of microwave burritos and emergency sugar, but it turned out clothing took up a solid half of Target. He hunted around for some shirts he didn’t hate, first, before diving headlong into the presumably arduous task of trying to find some things Zim would tolerate having put on him. Luckily, Zim’s only specifications seemed to be soft fabrics and bright colors. Bonus points if it was shiny.

He wandered around for a bit touching various clothing items while Dib tagged along, watching with barely concealed amusement. Every time Zim viscerally recoiled from something Dib had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing.

“Mm, I want this,” Zim said, rubbing a purple sweater against his face.

“Toss it on the stack,” Dib said, gesturing towards the massive pile he had over his shoulder. Zim put
it on top and then immediately turned his attention to the next brightly colored thing.

“What about this?” he asked, holding up a hoodie covered in holographic flippy sequins. He ran his hand up and down it, grinning.

A majority of the things he’d chosen just happened to be from the girl’s section, but Dib was not about to attempt to explain gender norms to an almost two-century old alien who had been on earth for over half a decade. Plus he was moderately certain that if anyone tried to pick on Zim, they would probably get a knee to the groin. If Zim wanted pink sparkly things, he was getting pink sparkly things, society be damned.

“I can’t say no to something that makes you smile like that,” Dib conceded and Zim tossed it on the precarious pile as well.

“I think we’re nearing the legal limit for what they’ll allow us to take into the fitting room, so let’s call it good for now and go try on some stuff.”

“Eh? We can just skip straight to buying. I’m paying for all of your fineries, Dib.”

“As much as I’d love to skip this part, Gaz will have my ass if we do, and she’s just started being moderately nice to me so I don’t want to ruin it.”

“Fine, fine.”

They walked in and Dib dumped all of Zim’s clothes on the bench. “Just make sure we get Gaz a picture of everything you want to buy. So she feels … I dunno. Included in the process, or whatever.” He picked up his own stack of clothes and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Zim asked. “Don’t you have things to try on, too?”

Dib gave him a perplexed look. “I was trying to respect your privacy …”

Zim gave him a perplexed look right back. “Is this a weird human modesty thing? We’re dating and I’ve seen your body, Dib.”

“You saw me in a t-shirt and boxers like two hours ago. It’s not quite the same as stripping down to our skivvies in front of each other,” he replied skeptically, but he shut the door nonetheless. “I’ve never even seen you out of your uniform.”

“You’re making this seem weirder than it is,” Zim said, pulling his tunic off. Dib turned, blushing, to face the other direction.

“Are you sure this isn’t actually just weirder than you think it is?” Dib asked, pulling off his shirt.

“For fuck’s sake … I’ve never seen your arms, I don’t know how you fit things over your PAK —”

“If you just turned around, you’d know.”

“—I don’t even know if Irkens wear underwear —”

“All sufficiently advanced life forms wear underwear, Dib,” Zim said, suddenly appearing beside him. “Don’t be silly … Wait, did you pierce your navel? That’s weirder than anything I could show you.”

Dib had been trying to keep his eyes up, but failed as soon as Zim started poking him in the stomach. He sighed and looked down to see Zim, wearing purple galaxy leggings and no shirt, examining his
belly button piercing.

“I think you’re the first person besides the piercer to actually see that one.”

“What’s the point if no one else is going to see it?” Zim asked, walking back behind him.

“I don’t know,” said Dib, pulling on a shirt. “I guess it just makes me feel attractive.”

“You are attractive, Dib. What about me?”

“What about you, what?”

“Am I attractive?”

He turned around to see Zim in an oversized pink shirt with an alien on the front.

“The alien is ironic,” said Zim with a grin.

Dib smiled back. “Alright, get over here. Gaz is going to get a kick out of that one. I think we can both get behind you trolling all of humanity. And you’re fucking adorable, for the record.”

All in all, Dib got his entire pile of shirts approved -- including the handful of cheap flannels he’d picked out at Zim’s behest and an extra pair of jeans -- and Zim got his massive stack the stamp of approval as well. This included, much to Dib’s chagrin, a pair of pink camouflage leggings, overalls, rainbow knee high socks, and the hoodie with holographic flippy sequins.

Do you want us to get our asses kicked? Because that’s going to get our asses kicked, Dib texted Gaz.

You can tell him no if you want to, but he looks happy so I wouldn’t, she replied. Besides, he can handle himself.

Dib had to admit that he highly doubted any form of teasing would be effective against whatever abomination Zim wore to school. He also had to admit that as much as it clashed with his own style, Zim looked adorable in pinks and purples.

On their way up to the register, Dib detoured over to the nail polish.

“You should do something other than black for once,” Zim said, having picked out something predictably purple and glittery for himself.

“I think I’ll stay boring for now …”

“What about this?”

Zim shoved a bottle in Dib’s face. It looked black, but as he turned it over in his hand, there was a slight red shimmer.

“You’re like a fucking magpie,” Dib said with a laugh. “No shiny thing can escape you.”

Zim pushed it into his hand. “We’re getting you this. It’ll make you look less gloomy.”

“I thought my proximity to you took care of that. All I have to do is stand within five feet of you, and I’ll be covered in more glitter than a craft shop.”

Other than nearly having a heart attack when he saw the grand total, and a second heart attack when
Zim paid for everything with a suspiciously large stack of twenty dollar bills, Dib could safely say that he’d made it out of his first shopping trip in quite a while relatively unscathed. After a brief stop at Hot Topic for a couple more shirts that Gaz didn’t need to know about, and a detour to a froyo place because Zim saw a poster that showcased their rainbow marshmallows, they were finally back at the car.

“Do you mind if we spend the rest of the night at my house?” Dib asked. “Since Gaz doesn’t have it out for me right this moment and the house has food and my bed?”

“Is my couch not good enough for you?” Zim said with mock hurt.

“I know you’re joking, but I also feel the need to point out my mental health requires a proper night’s sleep.”

“Your house it is, then.”

Dib looked over. “You don’t have to stay the night if you don’t want to. If you need a break from me, there’s really no reason I can’t drop you off at home.”

He was suddenly aware that he called Zim’s base “home” again. Even with Gaz easing up on him, Dib still had to admit that he felt much more comfortable at Zim’s base. His own house was just the building that happened to have his bed and most of his belongings at the moment.

Zim gave him a skeptical look. “I think I’m still supposed to be keeping an eye on you.”

Dib shrugged. “I’m doing better.”

“In the depression department, sure …”

“You can’t protect me from myself all the time, Zim.”

“That’s … what I’m concerned about, in the grand scheme of things,” Zim said softly. “But if you’re so insistent … Look, do you want me to leave?”

Dib gave him a nervous glance. “Not really, no … I’m enjoying being with you and I don’t really want it to stop.” He reached for Zim’s hand. “You’re the first person I’ve spent more than a couple hours around without wanting to murder. Which, I suppose, is a bit ironic …”

“Dib, have you ever had a friend?” Zim asked with a curious expression.

“Wow, Zim. Thanks …”

“No, I’m asking this seriously.”

Dib thought for a while, staring out the window. “I guess not. I’ve really been alone for most of my life. I mean, I’ve been around people. But it’s always been like … I’m on a frequency they can’t see or something. So I guess it’s a little weird that I’m dating my first close friend.”

“I haven’t had many experiences with friendship, either,” Zim admitted. “Okay, any. Ever. I’ve had colleagues and people who had to put up with me and that’s about it.”

“What about Keef?”

Zim shuddered. “I … don’t wanna talk about Keef. I think that only exemplifies why I’ve been without friendship for so much of my life.”
“Well,” Dib said softly, “I’m certainly not just putting up with you.”

“Turns out we work pretty well together, under the right conditions.” Zim gave Dib’s hand a comforting squeeze.

Dib stared out the window, chewing his lip and lost in thought. “Do you think similar people are … universally drawn to each other?” he asked, quietly. “Like there’s some cosmic force pulling people together, no matter how far away they are? Maybe that’s stupid …” He looked over and was surprised to see Zim peering at him with curiosity rather than derision. He continued, feeling a little less ridiculous. “I just say it because … maybe there’s not a single person on earth for me. Maybe every moment since you landed on earth was leading up to this.” He looked away again. “I hope that wasn’t weird … sometimes I forget not everyone is into the same woo-woo shit I am.”

Zim smiled and kissed his hand. “I don’t mind the woo. I like it. It’s a nice thought.” He had spent so much time lately thinking about his trajectory in life as a series of blunders. Reframing it as the universe conspiring to send him to Earth specifically to love and be loved by Dib made him feel an awful lot better.

“Will GIR be okay at home by himself?” Dib asked, suddenly concerned.

“Oh, he’s fine. He’ll probably just keep watching the same movie over and over again until we get back. He’s pretty easily amused.”

“Okay, good,” Dib said, relieved. “We’ve got pizza at my house. Is that going to be okay with you? I can pick you up something else if it isn’t.”

“It’s not Bloaty’s, is it?” Zim asked with a cringe. “I’ve adapted to most earth things, but there are enough preservatives in there to make it last until the next ice age and it always makes me sick for a week.”

“Nah, Gaz is on some weird organic, environmental kick now because dad’s off promoting green energy or something like that,” Dib said, waving his hand dismissively. He didn’t pay a ton of attention to what his dad’s latest “thing” was at any given moment. He could just turn on the news and find out if the mood ever struck him. “ Anyway, the positive side effect is that the leftovers have gotten better.”

“Good. Because the way to my heart is paved with cheese.”

“And here I thought it was paved with Skittles.”

“It can be paved with many things.”

“Do all Irkens have the metabolism of a 20 year old college student? Are you going to end up getting fat some day unless I stop letting you eat pizza and waffles and candy?”

“Are you saying you won’t love me if I end up getting fat?” Zim asked playfully.

“Nah, it’ll be more of you to love. I just need to know if my days of letting you ride on my back are limited,” Dib replied with a smirk.

Zim gazed at him lovingly and smiled. “Expect to be able to tote me around until our dying days, Dib.”

In the back of his mind, he made a mental note to do something about the pesky issue of human mortality.
Zim had predictably herded Dib off to the shower as soon as they arrived home and Dib begrudgingly complied. He supposed the cost of having Zim operating as his auxiliary executive functioning skills could have been higher. He returned back downstairs to find Zim dressed in an old pair of Gaz’s purple pajama bottoms and his new sequined hoodie, which he’d clearly taken a pair of scissors to since his PAK was visible. He was sitting at the kitchen table where Gaz was painting his nails with the glittery purple nail polish he had honed in on earlier. Dib was surprised to see that he’d taken his contact off and was talking animatedly with Gaz sans disguise. It looked like most of the sparkly disaster on his face had been removed as well.

Dib felt a twinge in his guts when he saw the fading bruises on Zim’s face. Most of it was nearly gone, but it was still an ugly reminder of how poorly controlled his emotions could be. Even so, Zim’s face clearly lit up as soon as he walked into the room, so he could at least be content in the knowledge that he was wholly forgiven.

“Did you make me go shower just so you could bond with Gaz?” he asked with a smirk.

“No, I made you shower so you don’t smell,” Zim said, sticking his tongue out. “I’m going to be sleeping next to you, so I’ve got my own interests to look out for.”

“Better enjoy that while you can,” Gaz said. “You guys know that’ll never fly once dad comes home.”

“We’re assuming he won’t find any issues with my exiled 184-year-old alien boyfriend in the first place,” Dib replied nervously.

“Yeah, I would refrain from bringing any of those things up when you talk to him,” Gaz said pointedly, “but other than that, you really should be fine.”

“It’s all true, though,” Zim said with a shrug.

“Sometimes people don’t need the whole truth … especially when that’s a great way for Dib to get himself Baker Acted.”

“Yeah, let’s not,” Dib said hurriedly. “I’ve seen the inside of enough mental health facilities to last a lifetime, and I’m pretty sure Zim counts as a weapon so I won’t be able to bring him along.”

“Just tell dad you’re gay and you’re dating Zim,” Gaz said, exasperated. “It’s seriously not that hard and then you can stop freaking out over it. You shouldn’t even be freaking out about it now. Just enjoy your secret sleepover and chill out.”

“Point taken,” Dib grumbled, resting his arms on Zim’s chair.

He leaned over and ran his hand up and down the sequins on the front of Zim’s hoodie, then drew a little heart.

Zim looked up at him and smiled. “So … You smell better,” he said brightly, then turned to Gaz. “Positive reinforcement, yes?”

“You’re doing stellar, Zim,” Gaz said dryly.

“I’d sure hope so, after that checklist you gave me. Hey, how come you never have to shower?” Dib asked, poking him. Zim swatted his hand away.

“I do, but the base has a full filtration system that I don’t think your human dwelling is equipped
Dib gave him a blank look. “Yeah, it is. The whole house is hooked up to a reverse osmosis filter. You don’t think our dad would just let us bathe in the nasty city water, do you?”

Zim’s eyes got wide. “Well, then. This opens up new possibilities…”

“You can tell him about them later, Zim. Sit still,” Gaz said, rolling her eyes.

“Why do you never let her paint your nails, Dib? I bet they’d look better if you did,” Zim told him as Gaz finished up his last finger.

Dib gave Gaz a nervous glance, and he almost blurted out, _Because I’m pretty sure she hates me 90% of the time._

“Stop looking at me like that and get your ass over here,” she said, rolling her eyes.

Zim vacated the seat and as soon as Dib sat down, hopped back up on his lap.

“Ack … Zim … you’re going to be in the way…”

“He’s fine,” Gaz said with a smirk. “Besides, you’re like his emotional support human.”

Dib stuck a hand out on the table and let her get to work removing his poorly applied nail polish. “He’s been like this off and on all day,” Dib said, resting his chin on Zim’s head.

“Would you two quit talking about me like I’m not here?” Zim asked irritably.

Dib pulled the hat off and kissed the top of his head. Gaz made a gagging noise and rolled her eyes. “Sorry,” he said, putting the hat on his own head and leaning on Zim’s shoulder. “Hey, did you ever remember whatever it was that was bugging you earlier?”

“We were discussing that right before you came down. But no. The reason is still … evasive,” he grumbled, antenna hanging low.

“You two should join me for pizza and movie night,” said Gaz. “It’ll take your mind off it.”

“Isn’t pizza and movie night like … your weekly date with yourself?” Dib asked, skeptically.

Gaz shrugged. “It’s self-care night. And I figure, you need to take better care of yourself and Zim needs a distraction.”

Dib watched her for a moment as she rubbed a cotton ball against the multiple layers of cheap nail polish on his fingers. “Why are you being so nice to me?” he asked quietly.

“Are you seriously complaining right now?”

“It’s just a complete 180 from how you normally treat me. And Zim, come to think of it. Usually you can’t stand either of us.”

He watched Gaz carefully and she avoided his stare, focusing intently on opening the bottle of nail polish. Zim shifted nervously in his lap and look between the two of them.

“I didn’t try to kill myself because of you, you know,” Dib said, his voice low. “I know Zim told you what happened and why I disappeared last night.”
Gaz sighed but continued to keep her eyes averted. “I had no idea you were feeling that low. Zim did. By all accounts, you two were more enemies than friends, and yet he’s paying enough attention to how badly you were doing that he tries to break into the damn house to check on you. I was right downstairs while you were bleeding away on the floor and I never even knew it.”

“It’s not your fault,” Dib insisted softly. He was thoroughly confused over how to deal with this sudden emotional outburst.

“That’s not what I’d be telling myself if you were dead right now.”

“I … geez, look. I’ve been depressed for years, Gaz. I’m sure it just became background noise and that’s not your fault. It’s just how brains work. Zim only noticed because he’s obsessed with me,” Dib said with a smile, attempting to lighten the mood.

“Guilty as charged,” Zim chirped.

“I just don’t want to be one more reason you hate living here, alright?” Gaz said, finally looking up at Dib. “You’re fun to mess with but if it’s making you miserable, I’ll back off. You’ll be leaving for college soon and I don’t want things to end up irreparable.” She glanced at Zim. “Plus, it turns out you two aren’t the absolute worst people to spend a Saturday night with. Zim is pretty chill when he’s not bent on world domination.”

“High praise,” Dib said with a cautious smile.

“I could get used to having him around, so you two better actually try and make this last. If either of you breaks the other’s heart, I’m going to have to do some ass kicking.”

Zim looked up at Dib, who kissed him between the eyes before giving him his hat back.

“So far, no one has died and Zim hasn’t gotten tired of me yet. So I’ve got hope for us yet. Dare I ask what the movie is?”

“IT Chapter 1.”

“Wasn’t last week Scream? Is it always horror movies?”

“Sometimes self care is watching a movie where everyone has it worse than you,” Gaz said with a shrug.

“Can’t really argue with that logic.”

Zim looked up with a quizzical expression. “Aren’t you afraid of clowns, Dib?” he asked.

“Yeah, but Pennywise isn’t a clown, he’s an eldritch horror,” Dib pointed out. “There’s a difference.”

“So you’re not afraid of ghosts or monsters or aliens but you are afraid of clowns?” Zim asked with a bewildered expression. He turned to Gaz. “Are all humans this illogical or is it just mine?”

“You certainly got a special one,” she replied, shaking her head.

“I’m one of a kind,” Dib said, leaning over Zim’s shoulder. “You should feel lucky.”

“Alright, give me your other hand and don’t touch anything with that one for a couple minutes.”

Dib looked at his hand, noting that the paint job definitely looked better than normal. The red
shimmer caught the light and Dib thought it actually looked rather classy. He looked up and raised an eyebrow at Gaz.

“Hey … are we … having an actual family moment, here?”

“Don’t make it weird, Dib,” Gaz warned without looking up. “Besides, I’m not sure Zim wants to be family. We’re not exactly a super well-adjusted bunch over here.”

“Have you met Zim?” Dib asked. “If anything I think that just makes him qualify more.”

Zim turned around just to stick his tongue out.

“Fair point — Zim, you’re honorary family now,” Gaz said as she re-capped the bottle of nail polish. “Just don’t do anything to make me rescind that.”

Gaz pointed at Dib’s nails. “Let those dry. I’m going to grab the pizza and then we can get this show on the road.”

She got up and Dib rested his head on Zim’s shoulder. “I’m really sorry about what I did to your face …” he murmured.

“Eh, it’s fine. If anyone mentions it, I’ll just tell them I fought off a chupacabra with you or something.”

“That sentence contains so many reasons why I don’t deserve you,” Dib said with a smile.

Gaz returned with pizza and herded the two of them into the living room. Dib realized that he and Gaz had never willingly sat down and watched something together up until this point. Gaz might have waited out Mysterious Mysteries so she could steal the remote, but the two of them had never mutually decided on something they’d actually both enjoy.

“Hey … thank you for being nice about things,” Dib said as Gaz handed him a giant slice of pizza. “It’s almost weird to be at home and have things not suck.”

Zim settled in comfortably close next to Dib and leaned against him. Gaz looked at the two of them and then gave Dib a look he couldn’t quite read. “Well … it’s almost weird to see the two of you this happy. I’d hate to derail it.”

“That, and Zim is your new best friend, right?” Dib replied with a grin.

“Oh absolutely. If you’d brought home anyone else there’s no way I’d approve.”

They tossed on the movie and between the cheese and the blankets, Zim ended up zonking out not fifteen minutes in. He had curled up with his head in Dib’s lap, feet over the arm of the couch and Dib’s hand in his. Dib was happy to at least have someone to hold on to every time the movie made him jump. Gaz’s banter throughout made everything less terrifying than it likely would have been alone. He was surprised to find that, when his sister’s wit was pointed elsewhere, she was shockingly funny. By the time the credits rolled, the two of them were talking animatedly while Zim snored in Dib’s lap.

“If I hadn’t read the book, most of that subtext would have gone straight over my head,” Dib said.

“It’s not easy to spell out ‘I’m a creature older than time itself locked in battle with a being that
appears as a giant turtle’ without completely breaking the mood,” Gaz pointed out.

“It is if you’re not a coward,” Dib replied with a grin. In his lap Zim stirred slightly, then settled back in. Dib was quiet until he was still and snoring again.

He looked up to see Gaz looking the two of them over, a small smile on her face. “You genuinely love him, huh?”

Dib blushed. “Yeah … I’m probably more shocked than you are.”

“How long were you waiting for this?” she asked with a curious look. “No offense, but you’ve been pretty clearly pining for him for a while. I mean, I noticed, at least. You know how aloof everyone else can be.”

Dib ran his fingers through his hair. “You remember last year? When Mr. Gilbert decided that putting us together for chemistry would be a good idea?”

“And literally no one else did? Yeah. He clearly thought he was going to fix you two.”

“And I thought that was bullshit. But maybe he had the right idea. Once we started actually working together on things and spending time together outside of class? I guess I fell for him pretty hard. Even though we were still fighting pretty regularly.” He looked down at the tiny Irken curled up and snoring in his lap. “It sounds like neither of us really knew what we wanted at that point.”

Gaz was thoughtful a moment, staring off at nothing. “What’s the deal with that mission he was always on about? I’m guessing this means he’s given it up for good.”

“How much did he tell you?”

“About that? Very little. Just that his leaders have forgotten about him and he’s fine with that.”

Din chewed his lip, watching to make sure Zim was really asleep. “I guess he was kind of a disaster back on Irk. He got sent here under the pretense of a mission but it was really just the easiest way to exile him. And then, somewhere along the line, his leaders decided that wasn’t enough because … they tried to kill him a few years back,” Dib said softly.

“What??” Gaz blurted, loud enough that Zim seemed to wake up for a moment before rolling over and pressing his face into Dib’s shirt.

“This is going to be a bitch and a half to explain,” Dib said, pushing his glasses up to rub the bridge of his nose. “How much do you know about Irken biology?”

“Probably a whole lot less than you,” Gaz said with a smirk.

Dib looked like he was about to counter that, then thought better of it. “There is … no good way to answer that. Touché.”

“Really, though. I’ve spent the last few years ignoring the two of you as much as possible.” She made a face. “Aaand now I’m trying to make up for that. So start me at the beginning.”

“Irkens are … geez, I guess they’re essentially cyborgs,” Dib said as the full extent of the weirdness washed over him. “Basically their brain is their PAK, so they are whatever data gets uploaded into it, personality and all. Zim was just … given bad data. He’s … buggy.”

“That sure explains an awful lot,” Gaz said quietly. “But that really carries a death sentence?”
“Sounds like it was more because he accidentally killed two of his former leaders and generally caused nonstop chaos.”

“Okay, that shocks me a little less.”

“They held a trial, he got declared Defective but apparently … they can’t wipe his PAK. So he got sent back here. I don’t know much else because he’s still pretty fucked up about … well, all of it. So I don’t really want to bring it up.”

Dib stared down in a sort of horrified wonder as he spoke. It was strange to think that he loved this soft, warm little alien and meanwhile, Zim’s entire personality and memories and being were housed in the metal beetle shell on his back.

“Does the whole ‘cyborg’ thing freak you out?” Gaz asked quietly.

“Huh? I hunt monsters in my spare time. What are cybernetics to Bigfoot?”

“Yeah, but you’re not in love with Bigfoot.”

Dib tried to find the words. “It’s weird,” he admitted finally. “Irkens literally can’t survive more than 10 minutes without their PAKs but I still sometimes wonder who he’d be without it. It weirds me out whenever I realize that I’m talking to a hyper-advanced AI that’s speaking to me through a biological life form.” Dib shook his head like he was trying to shake away the thought. “Anyway. Seems like he hasn’t been in contact with his leaders for a while now. Which makes sense. His mission has mostly been annoying me for the past couple months.”

“He cares about you. Watching the way messed with you these past few weeks, it’s clear that he just didn’t understand what to do for you.” Gaz suddenly looked a bit defeated. “Can you blame him? I didn’t either.”

Dib looked over curiously.

“I feel really bad about making you sick earlier today,” she whispered, looking at the floor. “Sometimes your episodes are scary and I don’t know what to do to help you.” She looked up, eyes pleading for the first time Dib could remember. “If you could just try some different meds …”

“I’ve tried almost everything, though,” he said, looking frazzled. “I really did my best to try and power through the side effects. Just … Look. If you can accept that you’re just allergic to all antibiotics, I don’t know why it’s such a leap to understand that psych meds do not agree with me.”

Gaz raised her eyebrows. “You know what? That’s fair.” She sighed and gave Dib a searching look. “So what are you going to do?”

“Have Zim help me stay on top of self care and … maybe let him see if he can’t come up with a solution,” Dib said, bracing himself for her reaction.

“You’re going to let him tinker with your brain?” she asked flatly. “Really? Zim? With control over what goes on in your head?”

“I … I guess? Look. I’m desperate and … you realize he’s actually very smart, right?”

“Of course. It’s just that he’s always been a bit of a delusional spaz with impulse control issues on top of being a genius.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” Dib said, deflating a bit.
“You seem like you’re on a bit more of an even keel now, though. Both of you.”

Dib smiled. “He’s really good for me, Gaz. Having someone around to take care of me … didn’t realize how much I needed that.”

In his lap, Zim suddenly stretched and yawned.

“It’s over already? What a short movie …” he mumbled.

“You slept through the whole thing, you silly bug.”

“I don’t sleep,” Zim argued, opening one eye to give him a pointed look. “I nap.”

“Oh, well then, my apologies,” Dib said with a smirk. He turned to Gaz. “I was going to play some guitar upstairs for a bit — you’re not going to bed any time soon, are you?”

“Nah, all my Splatoon friends are online about now. I’m not sleeping for a while.”

“Awesome. And …” he trailed off, looking at the floor. “This was fun. I wouldn’t say no if you wanted to do it again.”

“I think I can be convinced to tolerate it on a weekly basis.”

Dib scooped up Zim and stood up.

“Hey!! What do you think you’re doing??” Zim said, squirming. Dib struggled not to drop him. “No carrying!”

Dib dumped him back on the couch unceremoniously. “You rode on my back for like ten minutes earlier today!”

“Riding and being carried are not the same, Dib,” Zim replied, getting to his feet.

“He’s got a point,” Gaz said with a stifled laugh.

“Allright, fine. In that case, you’re taking the plates back to the kitchen.”

Once they’d finished tidying the living room, they went back upstairs. Dib cleared off some space on the floor and grabbed his guitar.

“Does Irk have musical instruments?” Dib asked as he tuned the strings.

Zim shook his head. “We mostly just … outsource our music making.”

Dib gave him a strange look. “So you steal it from the people you conquer, then.”

Zim looked a bit hurt. “Well I don’t. It’s not really fair to blame me for everything they do. If anything, I’m responsible for preventing them from conquering more planets.”

“I know. Sorry … that was insensitive of me.”

Dib nervously picked at the strings, feeling stupid. It was strange, knowing that Zim came from a colonizer race that brutally overtook whatever planets were in their path and then trying to reconcile that with Zim, who clearly had a soft spot for earth and was willingly giving up conquering the planet. For love, no less.
Dib’s fingers finally settled on a melody and he started in on *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, if for no other reason than to prove to Zim he could sing it. He closed his eyes and lost himself in the rhythm and the lyrics and the feeling of the steel strings against his calloused fingers. He could feel Zim’s attention turn to him but strangely, it didn’t make him feel nervous or judged.

He finished the song and finally looked up. Zim was staring at him, eyes bright.

“Your voice is … it’s good,” Zim said with a smile. “Do something else I know.”

“Well, which ones do you know?” Dib asked, leaning on the guitar.

“Hmm … *Time of Your Life*?”

“The one also known as *Good Riddance*? Isn’t that a breakup song?”

“Oh, fine then. *Dark Blue*?”

“Points for *Jack’s Mannequin*. I’m intrigued now … what else?”

“Er … *Welcome to the Black Parade*?”

“A classic. Of course.”

“*Everything’s Magic*?”

“*Angels&Airwaves* … Tom DeLonge’s less-successful side project, but still one of my favorites. Damn,” he said with a grin. “It’s almost eerie how many of my favorite songs you know.”

Zim’s eyes went wide and he looked away.

“I was kidding,” Dib said with a suspicious look.

“I … have to tell you something,” Zim mumbled. “But you have to promise not to be mad!”

“Last time you said that, you told me your mission here was a joke…”

“It’s not as bad as that! It’s …” Zim looked nervous for a second and then used one of his PAK legs to drop a small, silver object into Dib’s lap. It almost looked like …

“Wait. Is that the iPod I lost?” Dib asked, shocked. He turned it over in his hands. It had seen better days by the time he’d bought it second-hand, and it looked no worse for having been missing for so long.

Zim nodded, looking away and fidgeting.

Dib gave him a bewildered look. “Why did you have my iPod, Zim?”

Zim drew nervous spirals in the carpet. “You dropped it and I was going to give it back when we stopped fighting about … whatever it was we were fighting about. Then I figured I’d listen through some of the songs on it so we’d maybe have something to talk about … and then I just enjoyed having something that was *yours*, I guess. Not in a mean way. In a … well, I thought it was a friendly way.”

“You stole …”

“*Borrowed*,” Zim corrected, and Dib gave him a look.
“You borrowed it so you could talk to me about music?”

Zim looked frazzled. “Yes, Dib. I thought it might be better to talk about My Chemical Romance than chemistry homework. I was trying my best.”

Dib scrolled through the artists and noticed a few he didn’t recall adding. “Why is there Kesha and Charlie XCX and Alanis Morissette on here?”

Zim gave him a withering look. “Do you hate fun, Dib? Because you’re sounding like you hate fun. Also Alanis gets me, so please back off.”

Dib suddenly looked up and gave Zim a look that made him feel like he was under a microscope. “You know … I lost this thing like a year ago …”

Zim held up his hands. “I know … I know … I wasn’t planning on keeping it for this long.”

“No, not that. I’m just wondering … how long did you like me for??”

“Seeing as I only came to terms with how I felt about you yesterday, I feel like I’m not the right person to answer that question. Put my introspection down as a work in progress.”

Dib shook his head incredulously, but he was smiling. “Alanis gets you, huh?” he asked, playing the intro chords to Head Over Feet and giving Zim an expectant look.

Zim raised his eyebrows. “If you’re trying to make me sing … that’s not going to happen. Not in a million fucking years.”

“I know you know the words,” Dib said, before diving into the song so animatedly that Zim almost felt more awkward not joining in.

“I can’t carry a tune, Dib!” Zim shouted over him, flustered.

“*And don’t be surprised if I love you for all that you are; I couldn’t help it, it’s all your fault,*” Dib sang, giving Zim a huge grin. Zim rolled his eyes in response but started mumbling along with his arms folded over his chest, determined not to enjoy it.

“Can’t hear you!” Dib interjected.

“Ugh! Fine!” Zim grumbled and sang louder, giving the wall a death glare.

There was only so much grouchiness he could throw against Dib’s new irritatingly sunny demeanor, though, before he was genuinely singing along. By the time they’d finished, Zim had an embarrassed smile on his face.

“I’d say you can carry a tune,” Dib said as Zim blushed.

“That was coercion and I do not appreciate it,” he mumbled.

“Pfft … lies and slander. You can’t convince me you weren’t having fun.”

Dib set the guitar aside and pulled Zim into his lap, hugging him tightly. “You know … It’s been interesting, reframing all the weird shit you’ve done over the past year or so” he said softly as Zim relaxed against him. “It might sound strange, but thank you for putting in the effort.”
“Sorry for starting fights with you in between my attempts to put in an effort,” Zim mumbled.

“I think we’re both still learning how to be people,” Dib replied. “We’ve both been on our own for so long. And I know I have an awful lot of trauma. Sounds like you’ve still got an awful lot of trauma. But we’re getting there one step at a time.”

“Not bad for the past 24 hours,” Zim said as he snuggled against Dib, breathing slow and even. He ran his hand up Dib’s neck and into his hair, running it through his fingers. “Why does this feel so good?” he asked softly. “I feel like … I need to be in contact with you and when I am …” He trailed off. “I don’t know how I lived so long without this.”

“You’re touch-starved,” Dib replied, as if it were obvious.

“I’m … excuse me?” Zim said quizzically.

“It’s … I dunno. I always thought it was kind of bullshit because like … who needs people?” Dib rambled. “But it’s this idea that you need physical contact with another person and if you don’t get it … it’s bad for your emotional health. Or something.”

“Sounds human,” Zim said flippantly. “Irkens aren’t like that.”

“Oh, really?” Dib ran his fingers over both of Zim’s antennae and watched as his eyes closed and his body trembled. “So you’re telling me this doesn’t feel amazing?”

“Unf … Dib, that’s not fair!!”

“I guess if you don’t need it …” He pulled his hands away and looked down. Zim was glaring up at him, still shaking. He mumbled something under his breath, then turned and put his arms around Dib’s neck.

“Fine. I need it, okay?” he muttered. “I like it and I … I need you. Even if it makes me … bad at being Irken.”

“Why do you care how you compare to the rest of them?” Dib asked gently. “They … kinda suck, Zim. You’re allowed to need me and … need to be touched by me.”

He ran his fingers under the hem of Zim’s hoodie and against the small of his back. He slid his hands upwards and Zim pressed against him, making soft noises under his breath.

“Take off your shirt …” Zim whispered.

“Hmm? Why?”

Zim was already leaning back to pull his off. “Just do it and lie back.”

Dib did as he was asked and laid back, Zim lying down on top of him. Their stomachs pressed together and Zim softly kissed Dib’s neck. Dib slid his fingers over Zim’s skin, up to his neck from his back. He ran Zim’s antennae through his fingers and listened to the soft purr rumbling in Zim’s throat as their lips pressed together. Zim’s fingers were combing through Dib’s hair as he gently bit at Dib’s bottom lip and tugged. The soft, desperate noise Dib made in response urged Zim onwards, and he gently opened his mouth against Dib’s, sliding his tongue inside. He heard Dib’s breathing grow more rapid, felt his human’s hands shaking as they caressed him.

Dib kissed him desperately and Zim slid his tongue down Dib’s throat. Dib’s hands momentarily pulled away, but as he relaxed into Zim’s kiss, his hands came to rest on Zim’s waist. He gently ran
his thumbs under the elastic of Zim’s pajama bottoms, lingering for a moment, before sliding them back up. Zim finally slid his tongue back out and Dib lay back, breathing heavily.

“Am I ever going to stop needing you like this?” Zim whispered.

Dib took his hand and pressed it to his lips. “I hope not. I hope you always need me.”

He stifled a sudden yawn that completely broke the mood. “Fuck, sorry. What time is it?”

Zim looked over at the alarm clock next to Dib’s bed. “A little after eleven.”

“Are you going to be bored if I went to bed now?” Dib asked, holding Zim to his chest as he sat up. “I feel bad …”

“Dib, I biologically need less sleep than you. I told you, I’ll never be upset at you for being human,” he said with a soft kiss on Dib’s chin.

Dib got to his feet and tucked his guitar away. “Want me to grab you a book or something?”

Zim shook his head. “I’ll lay down with you for a bit.” He tossed Dib’s shirt to him before pulling his hoodie back on.

Dib climbed into bed, reaching over to turn off the bedside lamp and then holding the covers up so Zim could cuddle up in front of him.

“You know,” Dib said with a smile, pulling the blankets around the both of them, “maybe we should just let my dad think we’re friends now so we can have officially sanctioned sleepovers when he gets back.”

“Gaz said you’d just about die of an anxiety attack if we didn’t tell him as soon as possible,” Zim said skeptically.

“He’s barely here … I can put it off until I go to college,” Dib replied.

“Can you, really?”

Dib pulled a frustrated face that Zim couldn’t see. “... Ugh, no. Gaz is right. I’m bad at lying and I’d probably live in a constant state of anxiety, worried he’d find out somehow.”

“You know all you have to do is keep the window open for me, right? No one else ever has to even know.”

“True.”

“Just another perk of dating me.”

Dib smiled and put an arm around him, feeling happier than he had in a while. Unlike the intense, racing high of mania, this was a deeper happiness that he felt he could anchor himself to. Even this soon into things, Zim felt like home to him. Touching him was at once overwhelming and satisfying, fulfilling some innate need Dib wasn’t even aware he had.

“One of many,” he said softly, kissing Zim’s neck and closing his eyes.

Chapter End Notes
I honestly don't know who needs who more at this point.
I’ll Show You Mine if You Show Me Yours

Chapter Summary

I posted this chapter a while back to test the waters on NSFW content. It's gone through some slight revisions between then and now.

It's 50% emotional intimacy and 50% smut. And so the reason for the Explicit rating becomes all too clear.

(This chapter is not heavily plot-relevant, so if smut is not your thing, please feel free to skip this one! On the other hand ... if you like alien genitalia and Dib going down on Zim, then this is for you!)

Chapter Notes

You could play "Spot the difference" between this and the version I posted early, but where's the fun in that?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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This night's a perfect shade of
Dark blue, dark blue
Have you ever been alone in a crowded room?
When I'm here with you

- Jack’s Mannequin, Dark Blue

“I want to try something,” Dib said suddenly, pulling Zim close.

“Eh?” Zim said, perking an antenna.

“Ack, no, keep those still a moment, you silly bug,” Dib said as he kissed the top of Zim’s head, making his way over to one of them. He kissed the base and then gently ran his tongue along it to the end. In front of him, he felt Zim shiver. Dib stopped and propped himself up on one arm, looking down at Zim with concern. “Is that okay? I can stop …”

Zim shook his head. “No, please keep going … That was a pleasant shiver …”

“Sorry, I just wanted to check …”

Zim reached back and patted his shoulder appreciatively. “That is what makes you boyfriend material.”

Dib snuggled up behind Zim again, this time running his parted lips down the length of Zim’s
antenna. He gently took the end of it in his mouth, sliding his tongue around it, and sucked on it as he slid his hand up Zim’s shirt, placing it on his chest. Zim pressed back against him, shifting slightly. It was easy for Dib to lose himself in the near sensory-overload that was all the soft little noises Zim made, every tiny movement in response to his own, the warmth of their bodies pressing together.

Suddenly, Zim placed a hand on Dib’s hi.

Dib stopped and pulled back. “Mm?” he mumbled, eyes still closed. His mind almost immediately wandered back to the way their legs had tangled together.

Zim rolled over to face him. “Dib? Do you … want to have sex with me?”

Dibs eyes shot open. “Um, like right now?” he asked, panicked. He was hoping he had at least a couple weeks to acclimate to the idea before jumping all the way in.

“I meant in general …”

Dib stared at him like a deer caught in headlights, perplexed and a little terrified.

“I just mean …” Zim fixed him with a slightly self-conscious look, his antennae dropping downwards. “… You were kind of poking me in the back …”

Dib swore and quickly grabbed a pillow to stuff between them. Zim watched him curiously, a little surprised by the reaction.

“I’m really sorry … holy shit …” Dib’s face burned and he fought the urge to dart from the room. There were precious few practical options for saving face. “I guess just the sounds you were making and the … well … everything about you …” he trailed off, at a loss for words. He couldn’t meet Zim’s gaze so he hid his face in the pillow. Almost immediately, he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“I mean … we can do it, if you want,” Zim offered.

Dib poked his head up, eyes narrowed. “You realize that this is an involuntary reaction, right?”

“Yes, I just thought --”

“Zim, that’s just moving a little fast,” Dib interjected, cutting him off. “We’ve been dating for two days. You told me you loved me yesterday. It’s a lot.”

“I don’t understand why that’s a lot.”

“Just … everyone says not to move that fast, okay?”

“Why do you care what other people say? No one else is going to know about this, anyway.”

“It’s just a bad idea!” Dib said, getting increasingly frustrated with what he saw as moderately inane questions.

“But why?” Zim looked utterly bewildered. Were there strict timeframes on various human dating milestones? No one had informed Zim about this.

“Because, Zim, I’m already absolutely infatuated with you and it’s going to get a million times worse as soon as I make myself as vulnerable as I possibly can be and … and surrender myself to you.” He was quiet for a second before quietly continuing, still muffled. “What if you break up with
me? What am I going to do then?"

“Dib, I would never—”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do, though …”

“How???” Dib looked up, frustration creasing his brow. “How can you be so sure? How can you
know you love me and you want to be with me forever right now?”

“Yelling …” Zim cautioned him.

Dib made a frustrated noise into the pillow.

“Is this turning into a fight?” Zim asked worriedly. “Do you need me to leave for a bit?”

Dib was silent for a few beats before giving a grumpy, “No…” and finally looking back up.

Zim reached over and gently swept Dib’s hair out of his eyes. “What do you think I’m going to do,
Dib? Find another human?” He made a face. “Find another Irken capable of love?”

“Find some other alien to love?” Dib said moodily.

“Ew, no.”

“Be alone forever?”

“After feeling what I do whenever we touch? I wouldn’t go that route willingly.” Zim lovingly
caressed his cheek and Dib felt himself getting sucked into those twin berry-colored pools. “I’ve
been to so many places and I’ve just … never met someone so much like me. Who understands me.
When I touch you, I feel like I’m home, wherever I am. I just … I just know. I want you forever,
Dib.”

“… Alright…” Dib muttered, turning red and looking away.

Zim’s antennae dropped. “Do you … not feel the same?”

“No, that’s the thing. I do … exactly the same. I’m just … ugh. Putting my heart in someone else’s
hands is terrifying.”

Zim gave him a loving look as he reached over and began playing with his hair. “I promise not to
hurt your heart, Dib.”

Dib stayed quiet for a while, trying to clear his head by focusing on the feeling of Zim’s fingers
combing lazily through his hair. He had a lot of nebulous feelings swirling in his guts, and no
available words to express them.

“Do you believe me?” Zim finally asked, his voice a soft whisper.

“I want to. Believe me, I really want to,” Dib said, a note of sadness in his voice. “It’s … hard for
me to trust people. I’m sure you can relate.”

Zim nodded. “Which is why I hope you can understand that I won’t hurt you. I know what it feels
like. And … I love you, so I don’t want you to go through that.”
“Yeah …”

“But I also know I shouldn’t rush you. Besides, we’ve got time.”

“Okay,” Dib whispered with a melancholy smile.

Zim smiled back and was silent for all of five blissful seconds.

“… So do you want—”

“God dammit, Zim, please! I really don’t know,” Dib whined. “Just let me think a minute.”

“Alright, alright …”

“I feel like you’re trying to do a relationship speedrun and it’s disorienting.”

“Eh? No … It’s just about being close to you.”

“I’ve never let anyone get that close …”

Zim shrugged. “Neither have I.”

Dib used several very colorful swears under his breath. “Okay, look. One of the complicating factors here is I don’t even know what you have between your legs,” he admitted. “I’ve been trying to stay modest about it, but if I’m being honest I am really curious how we’d even do this.”

“Oh, is that why you were acting so weird earlier?” Zim seemed suddenly amused.

“That and I didn’t feel like walking around with my dick hard for the rest of the shopping trip just because I looked at you without a shirt.” He put his face back into the pillow and whined. “I just find you really attractive and I feel like I’m the only one having this problem!”

“I assure you, you are not the only one having this problem,” Zim replied, trying to maintain his patience. “Dib … If you want to know what equipment I’m working with, that’s easy enough to arrange.”

Dib huffed, but eventually popped his head up again, biting his lip. “Is this going to turn into an ‘I’ll show you mine if you show me yours’ situation?”

“If you want it to?”

Dib rubbed the bridge of his nose before finally looking up. “Alright. Fine. But what happens if we end up having sex? I already want to spend every waking moment with you. I’m warning you … it’s going to get worse. What if you get sick of me?”

“I think you’re worrying too much,” Zim said, already pulling his hoodie off.

Dib went red but managed to fight the urge to hide again. “Oh my god are we really going to do this?”

“Dib, if you want me to stand naked in front of you and give you an Irken anatomy lesson, I will do that,” Zim said, completely serious. “If you want to have sex, you have my consent. I’m not going to push you either way, but you’re acting like this is an ongoing problem and I’m trying to be helpful about it.”

Dib paused, thinking things over, then started taking off his clothes. “Look, I don’t know what I
He turned to Zim, who was sitting, open-legged and naked, across from him. His brain tried to register what, exactly, he was seeing, and promptly bluescreened in confusion.

“*Oh my god.*”

“What?”

“You don’t have a dick,” Dib said with quiet horror.

Zim rolled his eyes. “Should I say the same about you?”

“What?” Dib was still in the process of questioning everything he knew.

“Dib, would you just get over here already and kiss me or something so I can show you properly and you can stop feeling inadequate?”

Dib nodded, eyes still wide. He sat in front of Zim, breathing quick and nervous, not quite sure what to do.

Zim leaned in close and stroked his cheek. “It’s okay, Dib. If you need anything to stop, just tell me.”

“Okay…” Dib whispered, confusion and desperation rolling off his body in waves. Zim’s face was so close that all he could see were sparkling pomegranate eyes staring into his. Zim’s lips gently brushed against the corner of his mouth.

“Can I kiss you?”

Dib just closed his eyes and nodded. Zim put one hand on Dib’s back and the other on his neck, before leaning him backwards into the bed and kissing him. Dib ran his fingers up Zim’s back, marveling for the millionth time in the past 24 hours at how soft and velvety Irken skin was. He gently ran his fingers over Zim’s antenna and listened to Zim’s muffled purrs against his mouth.

Dib pulled back a little, eyes wide, as a sudden realization hit him. “Fuck … that’s a turn on for you, isn’t it?” he said, accusation sneaking into his tone.

“I guess …” Zim murmured, blushing and averting his eyes.

“Oh my god … why didn’t you tell me??” Dib was starting to panic again, thinking of all the times he’d inadvertently been the source of sexual frustration.

“Because it felt nice and I was enjoying it? Kissing has clearly been a turn on for you but you didn’t try and stop it.”

Dib looked away. “… I guess we’ve both been making each other sexually frustrated …”

“Seems a bit late to worry about it now, hm?”

Zim put a hand on Dib’s cheek and kissed up the side of his neck, down his jawline, and finally over to his mouth. He went deliberately slow, placing a few lingering kisses on Dib’s lips before gently grazing them with his tongue. He heard Dib’s breathing become faster and smiled. He kissed a little harder, pulling back when Dib’s movements became more desperate. He gently bit Dib’s bottom lip and listened to him whimper, feeling him press his body desperately upwards. He let go and gave the
corner of Dib’s mouth a quick peck before finally pressing in for another full-mouthed kiss and parting Dib’s lips with his tongue. Dib moaned, running his hands along Zim’s body and arching his back in response.

With Zim’s hips pressed against him, Dib started to feel something moving.

“I could show you now but … do I have permission to get you off?” Zim asked softly, next to his ear. “I’m more than happy to just stop things where they are now but I thought that I might be able to help you out a bit …”

“You realize I’m not going to last very long, right?” Dib asked, turning red.

“Why would that matter? The goal is just to get you off …”

“It’s just embarrassing, you know? Not having any stamina …”

Zim pulled back and looked at Dib with utter confusion. “Why is being _that_ in love with me an indication of anything you should be ashamed of?”

“Huh?” Dib finally opened his eyes and gave Zim a bewildered look right back.

“That’s the reason you wouldn’t last long, right? Because you love me and you’re very attracted to me?”

Dib felt a little chastised. “I mean, yeah. I suppose.”

“Then I consider it a compliment.” He leaned down and tickled Dib’s ear with his breath. “And I love you too, silly human. Now, are you going to let me help you out or not?”

Dib nodded, finally giving in to his desires. “Alright, fine … I mean, _please_ … but only if you really want to …”

“I really do,” Zim assured him. “Now, just let me lead and don’t fight back.”

Dib was midway through a bewildered, “Huh?” when Zim’s lips covered his. He was more than a little surprised when Zim resumed kissing him and, despite feeling Zim’s hands on his chest and face, something wrapped tightly around his cock. Dib would have liked to ask just what the hell was happening, but Zim was kissing him too deeply for him to get any words out. He made a little “Umph!!” of surprise when Zim pressed even deeper and practically shoved his tongue down Dib’s throat. Zim kissed him with unrestrained passion and started rolling his hips frantically.

Dib was still utterly bewildered about what was going on, but he finally relaxed under Zim’s touch and decided that, _whatever_ was going on, he had to admit it felt amazing. He surrendered and let it happen. He put one hand behind Zim’s head and the other at the small of his back, then bucked his hips up against Zim’s, making high, desperate noises against Zim’s mouth. Zim replied by pressing down and grinding against him that much harder.

Dib could feel the pressure building between his legs, and he squeaked out a warning that was muffled by Zim’s tongue in his mouth. He put a hand on Zim’s chest but Zim just reached up and interlocked their fingers before pinning Dib’s hand next to his head, pressing into the mattress. Dib’s breathing grew faster and he tried again to push Zim back, but Zim just took that hand and pinned it as well.

Zim finally pulled his mouth away and Dib choked out a hasty, “Zim, I’m going to —!”
“That’s the point, Dib,” Zim said in his ear, his voice low. “Now stop fighting me and just let it happen.” And with that, Zim was right back to kissing him and frantically jerking his cock off. All Dib could do was desperately thrust his hips up to meet Zim’s as he let out a muffled cry of pleasure, his cock exploding between them. He kept his back arched, waiting for the waves of ecstasy to pass, before finally collapsing back onto the blankets, empty and satisfied. Zim finally slid his tongue out of Dib’s mouth, gently kissing him on the lips one last time before pulling back completely. Dib barely even responded as he lay still, completely blissed out and breathing hard, eyes closed.

“If you insist on doing that again, we might need a safe word,” Dib mumbled.

“Sorry … I just wanted you to sit back and enjoy it without breaking the mood.” Zim put a hand on Dib’s heart and felt as its beats began to slow.

“Sorry I got us both kinda nasty …” Dib said with a creeping blush.

Zim snuggled against his chest and kissed under his chin. “It’s fine. I kind of expected it.”

Dib just nodded, eyes still closed.

“That … was definitely not how humans have sex … but I don’t care … because it felt amazing,” he said breathlessly, lightly running his fingers over Zim’s warm body.

Zim gently stroked Dib’s hair for a moment before shaking his head. “I almost forgot the reason we were doing this …”

Dib nodded, finally opening his eyes. “Same … Alright. Show me. Before the suspense ends up killing me.”

Zim pushed himself into a sitting position, then moved up to sit on Dib’s stomach and rocked backwards, leaning back on his hands, so Dib could get a proper look.

Dib tried to make sense of the arrangement in front of him. The tentacle-like appendage was clearly a phallus, but below it …

Dib cocked his head to the side in confusion and looked up. He recalled how differently Tak had looked compared to Zim, and how he had assumed that Irkens were sexually dimorphic. What he was currently looking at suggested otherwise. “Wait, are all Irkens hermaphroditic, or just you?”

Zim tilted his head a little to avoid looking Dib directly in the eyes, a blush creeping up his cheeks. “We’re a sexually dimorphic species so … I think it’s just me.” He finally met Dib’s curious gaze. “Is that weird? I’ve never had to stop and consider if it was weird, before … And, I mean, you are gay. So I have to ask if this is a deal breaker or exceptionally weird to you? I didn’t seem to be an issue …” he trailed off nervously.

Dib was smiling, eyes full of adoration. “Everything about you is attractive to me, Zim.”

“I’m struggling to reconcile that with you being gay …” Zim said, feeling out of his depth.

At that moment, Dib realized he could no longer avoid explaining gender norms to his nearly 200 year old alien boyfriend.

“I’ve only ever been attracted to you, Zim,” Dib said softly. “That’s purely what my orientation is based on. And your presentation … reads mostly as male to people. Look … Society sees the two of
us as gay, so that’s the main reason I’ve been using the term. What you have between your legs isn’t important to me. But at any rate … You’re not weird. You’re beautiful.”

Zim looked at him with overwhelming love. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Dib looked down, then away, then nervously met Zim’s eyes. “Do … do you mind if …” his hand twitched in the direction of Zim’s crotch. Zim nodded, and Dib reached a hand down between Zim’s legs, curious. “You have a complete range of motion on that?” he asked, as Zim’s tentacle-phallus curled around his finger.

“More impressive than a human, right?” Zim said with a grin.

“So does that mean …” Dib’s eyes went wide. “Wait … fuck … never mind! I feel like this is too invasive or insulting to ask …”

“Can I take a guess?” Zim gave him a knowing smirk and sat back a little further. Dib watched in fascination as Zim slid his cock inside himself, eyelids fluttering and toes curling in pleasure. He arched his back a little, gripping the sheets and breathing quickly, clearly enjoying himself. He slowly slid it back out and opened his eyes to see Dib with his mouth hanging slightly open.

“You’re drooling, Dib,” he said with a grin, eyes half-lidded and hazy.

Dib closed his mouth and blinked. “I just … wait wait wait a second! You said I wasn’t the only one having arousal issues all day. Just how often have you been doing that???”

He thought of all the times in the past 24 hours he had kissed Zim or played with his antennae, then pictured Zim just … taking care of things himself. Dib wondered how long that image would be replaying itself in his head.

“I have to have some secrets, Dib.” Zim gave Dib a self-satisfied wink.

“Alright. Fine.” Dib shook his head, still looking spacey. “Well … you got me off. I feel like I should return the favor …” He shot Zim a sheepish look. “Mostly because I’m absolutely dying to go down on you right now …”

Zim looked at him as though he’d just suggested something supremely strange. “I mean, if you’re sure you’d like to do it that way …”

“It’s not because I don’t want your alien bits near my human ones. Seriously … let’s please make a habit of that. It’s just that …” he took a deep breath before whispering, “there are so many terrible and wonderful things I want to do to you with my tongue.”

Zim laughed softly. “Putting mouths in places they don’t belong is such a distinctly human thing.”

Dib shrunk back. “I won’t if you don't want me to …”

Zim put a finger under Dib’s chin, lightly running his fingers along until they brushed against his lips. “No, please … show me these terrible and wonderful tongue-things.”

Dib sat up, holding Zim in his lap, and arranged a couple pillows so that Zim could comfortably lay on his back. He looked down at Zim and then pulled him into a hug for a moment, running his hands up Zim’s back.

“Sorry to break the mood. I just love how your skin feels against mine.”
Zim pressed close and kissed his neck. “That’s not breaking the mood.”

Dib kissed the top of his head and then gently laid him down before sliding further down until his face was level with Zim’s lower body. He gently lifted Zim’s hips off the bed. “Put your legs over my shoulders … there we go. Comfortable?”

“You’re doing most of the work here,” Zim said with a blissful smile.

“If you don’t like what I’m doing at any point, just tell me to stop.”

“I don’t think that will be a prob— ah!” he exclaimed softly as Dib suddenly slid the entirety of his cock into his mouth. “A little warning next time!” Zim gently swatted at Dib’s head but quickly leaned back again and melted onto the bed. Dib’s face was flush with Zim’s hips as he moaned and sucked at Zim’s delicate member with unrestrained lust.

“God, you taste so good,” Dib mumbled, losing himself in the warmth between Zim’s thighs.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Zim whispered back, eyes closed and toes curling. He let the sensations envelop him as Dib breathed hot and hard between his legs. He let Dib’s tongue trailing up and down the underside of his dick and he arched his back as his arousal grew.

Suddenly, Dib’s tongue slid down past his base, lingering a moment, before slipping up inside him. Dib pulled back, eyes worried, drool trailing from his mouth. “I’m sorry … was that okay? I should have asked …”

Zim laid back down, breathing heavily. “I did not ask you to stop, human …”

“What I’m going to need some verbal feedback going forwards …” Dib said, nervously.

“If I want you to stop, you’ll know it.” Zim reached up behind Dib’s head and pulled him back towards his waiting dick. A smile grew across Dib’s face and he dove back down with increased vigor, lips sliding down Zim’s shift and tongue flicking in and out and around and up and down.

“Perfect …” Zim said, voice soft and high, as he crossed his legs behind Dib’s head, trailing his toes up and down Dib’s shoulders and clutching the blankets in his hands. Dib’s mouth was warm and wet between his legs, his breath coming in hot jets as he pressed his face deep between Zim’s legs. Every now and then he would slide Zim’s cock back out of his mouth and tease the tip with his lips and tongue — staying just far enough away that Zim couldn’t use his rather impressive reach and dexterity to part Dib’s lips himself and slide back into his mouth — and Zim would have to frantically grab for a tuft of hair so that he could pull Dib back down onto him.

Dib pressed his mouth all the way to the base of Zim’s dick and sucked, tongue rhythmically massaging the underside. Dib was surprised to find how much going down on Zim had in common with kissing him. With every movement Dib made, he could feel Zim reacting as his cock curled and danced around his tongue. Zim extended his cock out a little further, until it was partially down Dib’s throat. He waited until Dib moaned in approval before sliding it a little deeper. Dib swallowed hard against it and slowly swirled his tongue in circles inside Zim.

He slid his mouth up to the tip, wetness running down his chin, and slowly ran his tongue up and down every inch of Zim’s undulating member. Zim ooohhh’d and squirmed in Dib’s grasp, feet kicking gently behind his back. Dib trailed his tongue downwards, then kissed up Zim’s belly. He
stopped to stare blissfully into his boyfriend’s eyes.

“Had to come up for air a moment,” he said with a smile. His mouth and chin glistened with saliva and Zim’s own fluids.

“Fuck, you’re a mess,” Zim said, low and breathless.

“So ungrateful,” Dib said playfully, kissing his way back down. He licked up the length of Zim’s trembling cock and kissed the tip, gently flicking his tongue out.

Zim almost wriggled his way out of Dib’s hands. “Would you … please just … stop teasing me like that?” he whined. He reached out with both hands and shoved Dib’s face back down between his legs, watching with satisfaction as Dib’s lips parted and his entire hard length disappeared into Dib’s mouth. Dib sucked it obligingly, sliding his tongue back down into Zim and pushing it in and out rhythmically.

“Oh, Dib … Fuck … I love you so much …” Zim moaned plaintively as he thrust his hips up towards Dib’s mouth, shoving his dick down his throat once more. “I’m close …” he whispered with sudden urgency. “You don’t have to … If you don’t want me to …”

Dib looked down at him, then slowly closed his eyes as he swirled his tongue inside Zim, who thought that response was pretty clear. He reached up to grab a fistful of Dib’s hair, wrapping his fingers in it. Dib, face fully enveloped by Zim’s body, made a desperate noise in response, sucking harder than ever and pushing his tongue in as deep as it would go.

The only further warning he got was a soft and high, “Ah … Dib!” before Zim trembled and emptied himself out into Dib’s mouth.

Dib hungrily held Zim’s hips to his face as he swallowed once, then again, then again, then again, listening to the enraptured noises Zim was making below him and feeling Zim’s body shake with every pulse of his throbbing cock. Finally, Zim’s muscles went slack and Dib gently lowered him to the bed. He was breathing heavily, cock retracted and invisible once more, looking completely wiped out as lay spread out on the quilt.

Dib curled up beside him. “Are you alright?” he asked gently.

Zim looked up, starry-eyed, and lovingly wiped a bit of stray drool and spooge from Dib’s chin with a trembling hand. “I’m fine …” he said softly. “Do you mind holding me for a little while? That was all … very intense. And I just want you close right now …”

Dib rolled onto his back and pulled Zim up on top of him. As an afterthought, he draped a blanket over Zim to keep him warm, then cuddled him close. “How are you feeling?”

“Sticky and very wet,” Zim said with a sideways look. “You slobbered all over me.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Dib said with a small laugh, kissing his head.

Zim pressed against Dib’s chest. “I’m feeling a lot of things … you were right. About the feelings getting more intense.”

“Yeah,” Dib whispered. “It’s a little overwhelming.”

Zim looked up and brushed Dib’s sweat-streaked bangs off to the side. “Are you scared?”

“Less scared now that I know we’re going through this together,” he said with a small smile. He
gently rubbed Zim’s back, lightly tracing around where his PAK connected to his spine.

“I really won’t ever leave you, you know.” Zim said softly. He pressed his cheek against Dib’s neck. “I promise. I love you too much. You’re my human and I don’t want to ever not be with you.”

Dib blushed. “The sex was that good, huh?”

Zim popped his head up to give Dib a withering look, then licked up the side of his face. “Guh!! Zim!! Yuck!! What are you doing??”

“And that,” Zim said, “is how I feel when we’re having a moment and you insist on ruining it.”


Zim glanced between their bodies. “I think we’re both kind of nasty …”

“Shower?” Dib asked. (**remember to write in that both Zim and Dib have RO machines hooked up to the water supply)**

“I’m glad you said it, so I don’t have to tell you that you smell like sweat and cum,” Zim said, sticking his tongue out.

Dib pulled him close, wrapping both his arms and legs around him. “Mm, on second thought, I’m just gonna stay here and cuddle you …”

“Ugh, Dib!” Zim shrieked, trying to get his face as far away from Dib’s armpits as possible.

Dib pulled him into a kiss and Zim stiffened.

“Really, Dib?” he muttered against Dib’s lips. “Right after you had your face all up in my—” he paused, then suddenly melted into Dib’s arms, kissing back. When Dib finally pulled back with a contented sigh, he saw Zim blushing all the way down to his neck.

“Is that what I taste like?” he asked, eyes wide.

Dib smiled and gave a little nod.

“Hmm … okay. Your human mouth sex makes a bit more sense now … I suppose I can permit it more often.”

Dib snuggled him close. “Sounds like a plan,” he said, closing his eyes with a yawn. Zim was warm against his chest, his weight pressing down in a way that made Dib feel overwhelmingly comfortable. He let his mind drift sleepily.

“Hey Dib?” Zim whispered, pulling him back from the edge of sleep.

“Mm?”

“You still smell.”

“… Jerk.”
There's going to be more where this came from.

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