A statue for the Empire and everything was cold, calculated. That's okay with Zim because that's all he's ever known. Until, he met Dib and then everything had meaning.

Zim's toes were the only thing that moved, wiggling in his boots as he stood at attention. The other Irkens did the exact same thing, chin up, back straight and eyes straight forward.

They were statues to the Empire, permanently in their salute. And Zim didn't dare move even a millimeter, wouldn't dream of doing so, not when it could bring shame to himself and his people.

The commanders and generals walked past them, an inspection. They hardly gave Zim a glance, almost missed him entirely for he hardly qualified to be a soldier, standing chest height with many of the others.

Cold eyes passed over him and then continued. He relaxed minutely. Another test passed. And there had been many up until then, leading to this great moment when the newest generation of smeets would graduate from the Academy and lead the rest of their lives above the surface of Irk or beyond the stars, exploring the universe.

When they called his name to 'officially' encode him with his duty, Zim almost missed it. But, after a small moment of embarrassment he stood up for the entire class to see, a gigantic smile on his face because he was an Invader at last and he would bring glory to the Empire.

The wires slid down from the ceiling and plugged into his PAK, changing his status from Smeet to Invader with a flash and a buzz.
For the next 80+ years Zim was at attention, loyal to the Empire and forever their soldier even if there was a few misunderstandings involving destroying half his planet and some sort of 'banishment'. But, Zim never questioned his orders. He did what they told him to do. He was what they needed as all Irkens were. They lived and breathed for the Empire.

The Empire told them what they needed to do, what they needed to think, where and what they needed to be.

Zim needed to be on Earth; needed to conquer the hideous place and he would do so. And that never seemed anything but perfect to Zim until a certain big headed boy stumbled into his life. Okay, well, stumbling wasn't the right word. Yelling and pointing with fervor and crazed eyes into his life, making him feel afraid for the first time since he'd been on the filthy rock.

A mission for the Empire suddenly turned into a personal grudge. The Dib became his worst enemy, the bane of his existence, and a gigantic mystery. Despite the other human who were so blind, this one was not. This one spoke up, threw himself into a cause stupidly and without any forethought but, that he wanted something and damn the consequences. Zim reluctantly admired the tiny boy and never paid attention to how it affected his own motives. Suddenly it wasn't Earth he wanted to destroy but, the Dib.

He protected it and made it impossible to gain any ground. Soon, Dib became Earth. He was what was to be conquered, destroyed and smooshed under his boots. But, even as Zim plotted ways to defeat him there was a gigantic question mark around the human, and that question burned and burned in Zim's brain. This little worm was a giant variable that made no sense and Zim's curiosity was probably the only thing that kept Dib alive.

Even more years passed, so many years that the tiny boy was now taller than him, with a deeper voice and 'facial hair'. Today was a normal day for him. Another argument that he'd so cunningly brought up and now the Dib was responding in full, arms flailing, and face so serious, tawny eyes burning with enthusiasm. His point was boring but the important thing was that Zim had put that expression there, lit that passion. He wanted to laugh but, covered his mouth for fear of interrupting the human. It didn't stop a smile from trying to form.

They had stopped their physical fights long ago. It got neither of them anywhere but, bruised and bloody. Now they battled using their wits. Zim crossed his arms and kept grinning, only to stop in confusion. Something was off. He surveyed the boy-man-thing before him and couldn't find anything but, the normal scrunched face, ugly pink flesh and dark clothing.

It was only then that Zim realized he wasn't cold. In fact the exact opposite of it. It was like he was on fire.

And Zim had been on fire before. Many times; there was that time during his science study on planet Vort where he'd set the whole wing alight and managed to trap himself in with it. Or when Gir had set off those 'fireworks' and it had landed on the couch. With Zim still on it. This was like that. Except for much less pain. His teeth didn't chatter, no shivers to be violently suppressed. It was happening inside. Coming from his spooch and curling outwards.

Unbelievably, he stared blankly at the Dib who in turn raised an eyebrow. Was it his turn to respond to the debate? What were they fighting about again?

"Uh. Your feet are stupid." The eyebrow got even higher which Zim guessed meant that that hadn't been the right answer.

"I completely destroy your theory on harnessing atoms for nuclear farming and you're only response is that my feet are stupid?" Gold eyes looked him up and down. "Are you okay?" EW. No. Concern.
Not good. The Dib was uncannily good at seeing straight through him and even if Zim had no idea what was happening, he didn't need the human to meddle.

"Zim is fine, Dib-Dork." Zim sniffed and straightened himself, chin high, eyes straight ahead and put the mask down over his expression. The position he'd been taught to fall into when in doubt. The same pose he'd taken a thousand times.

He spoke to the Tallest later. Just as Zim did every few days. Normally, he would be thrilled because even a few words with them were of the highest honor. But, it was suddenly filled with empty words and orders that really meant nothing but reminded him of every conversation he'd had before with anyone ever. Everyone but, the Dib.

And he was cold again.

But, this was normal. Zim was used to the cold. He'd been cold his whole life. Not just temperature wise but, somewhere deep in his chest that was hard and empty. Why was it such a problem now?

The scientist in his demanded a search for answers to this mystery, perform a whole experiment. Then there was the coward part of Zim that wanted to shove all of it away and live in denial, create a new lie, bury his uncertainty and insecurity in that little hole in his chest.

The coward won even if Zim would never admit it.

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Death. It wasn't a foreign concept to Zim. Especially as an Irken, who was taught from hatching that he was expendable. You lived, served the Empire, gave your everything and if you were lucky you would die for it. And the second you did, your name would be grabbed and put back into the automatic generator and given to the next smeet to pop out of the hatcheries.

Someone would replace you. You weren't important. A teeny, tiny piece of the machine. So, Zim wasn't afraid of death. He'd faced it tons of times in the form of explosions, angry beavers, crazed wanna-be invaders, hydrogen oxygen, and a frantic, human boy. Dib.

Dib.

Suddenly, death didn't seem so acceptable. Zim tried to gasp in air, move his charred flesh, pull himself from the puddle of chemicals that his own tampering had landed him in. Not that he would ever admit that. It was someone else's fault. Probably Gir's.

It couldn't end this way. Gold eyes flashed before his eyes. The cold ache of death stretched and heated. Zim reached up and tried to grab at the edge of the table. His pak wasn't functioning properly. Probably frozen from the explosion.

He couldn't die. Not when he had a mission. Earth must be destroyed. Dib must be annihilated. There was so much to do. And none of it would happen without him. His rubber gloves, charred and melted, gripped at the edge and even as he tried to pull himself up, the slick surface had him slipping back to the puddle.

A groan escaped Zim and he grimaced. The edges of his eyes were blacking out. No. This couldn't happen. But, the dark and the cold kept coming, slowly blocking out the image of those amber eyes and dampening the heat of some imaginary fire.

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Irkens didn’t dream because they didn’t sleep. But, they could shut off everything and ‘rest’, let their paks work through new information. And occasionally these rests caused memories to replay.

Zim wondered if this was what humans called it when their ‘life flashed before their eyes’ when they died. He’d never heard of it happening to an Irken before.

But, it seemed to be happening to him. Maybe he’d been on this planet too long because suddenly he could see everything. All of his days in the Academy, a statue for the Empire and when laughter had been frowned upon. When they were punished for touching each other in even the most innocent way or wanting to be anything more than what their height demanded.

Zim had been assigned to be a food-service-drone from hatching. It had been okay, learning about the different kinds of grease and salt. Snacks were yummy and he was good at it. But, he’d longed to be something more. And then they’d told them about Invaders in class one day.

Anyone could be an invader. Any height. You just had to pass a test. A very brutal test. Zim hadn’t cared. He’d known right then that it was his destiny to go out and invade planets for the Empire, and then have his name recorded in the history files for every newly hatched smeet to see.

He could be an Invader until he became Tallest.

The test was brutal, as promised. But, he passed it with flying colors, taking out the competition and coming out with only a few scrapes. And the day when he was supposed to be encoded with the occupation of ‘Food Service Drone’ he was instead named as an Invader for everyone to see. It had been the proudest he’d ever been.

What did that say about him? Zim could see himself as the newest Tallest were named and he remembered being vaguely distracted with some sort of suction cup device. He loved his Tallest of course. But, he hadn’t felt as proud.

And there was the day when they’d taken over Vort. Cool. But, nothing in comparison to his own Invading conquests.

Operation Impending Doom 1. The first big universal invasion. And his Empire had needed him so he’d done what had to be done and in turn was taken and banished to FoodCourtia. Suddenly, he was a food service drone again. Zim didn’t remember feeling angry or betrayed. In fact, it had been a vacation. What had he been thinking?

But, that was okay because he would be an Invader again soon.

Zim’s life flashed before his eyes and every single time he talked to someone, anyone, whether it be Irken or Vortian or Meekrobian…there was a cold feeling there. It was so very empty. It meant nothing to him. He didn’t realize that this whole time he’d been waiting, thinking that there was something more to everything. Something besides height, besides empty conversations filled with empty words and dull people.

Then Operation Impending Doom 2 came and he went to Earth, thinking this was his chance. His true chance to prove he could be an invader. To show everyone that Zim was great. He’d felt excited, then like he was dying because of Gir, but then there was Earth, so horrible that it was beautiful. It disgusted him, but nothing had ever been greater. This planet was his. It would go next to his name on the History file.

Invader Gran, Dilora->Judgementia.
Invader Jil, Hiu->Devastis.
Invader Duble, Bish->Dirt.
Invader Zim, Earth…

He shuddered with the gloriousness of it all. But, he'd still been cold. Stone and a statue. Up until walking into that classroom, up until he'd heard those words. "Am I the only one who sees the alien sitting in class?"

They had changed his life. Made him terrified, terrified enough to consider pressing the BRB and ending his existence. Dib had made Earth difficult, a challenge and all at once his veins had gone aglow, setting his spooch on fire. Everything was a blaze and it meant something.

Dib changed him and Zim suddenly wanted to claw his way from this horrible flash back thing because there was the fights, the arguments, the laughter and a thousand words filled with infinite hatred. These last couple years, equivalent to the tons that came before it.

Zim wanted to escape the memories of what he no longer had, of what used to be fire and was now ice.

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"Oh good. You're awake. How you even managed to nearly kill yourself on accident, I'll never know." That voice. Not a memory. It was new and as horrible as ever. Zim's eyes shot open and then nearly snapped back shut because it was so bright. But, he was stubborn and kept them open, examining everything with a squint.

A soft click from beside him and Zim's neck snapped to the side to see Dib switching off a light. It was cold on the metal table. He wasn't tied down like the other times he'd been here before. But, a quick once over of himself revealed he was in pain, covered in bandages. And naked but covered in a white sheet.

"I did my best." Dib said, taking off rubber gloves and dropping them into a trash can. "You were pretty bad though. Melted a lot of your skin with those chemicals. Oh, and your uniform was coated in the stuff. I washed it off the best I could. You owe me a new washing machine."

Zim grunted and tried to sit up; hissing when he realized that was a horrible idea. Dib scowled and poked at his forehead until the alien laid back down, an unhappy frown on his face. "I can sit up."

"Yeah, right. Not too long ago you were practically just bone. I have a feeling the only thing that kept you alive was your Pak." Dib crossed his arms, as if daring Zim to deny it.

He didn't.

"I'll be fine. My pak is already filling me with anesthesia." He didn't ask why the human saved him. Or how he got into his base. That was old hat by now. It had happened more times than either of them cared to mention.

"Good. Because I didn't know what to give you if anything. I figured maybe some pain might do that ego of yours some good." Dib smirked, reaching down and grabbing his backpack, before throwing it around his shoulders. "You missed skool. I knew something was up."

Zim merely nodded and then sat up again, despite the protests he knew would come. Once up, he there his legs over the side, keeping the sheet clutched to himself. It did hurt. But, not as bad as it had. He glanced up at the human, wondering if he should do that thing where he said thank you. Nah. One day, Dib would get the favor returned. That would be enough. And it would happen.

They were both too dangerous for their own good. Zim glanced up and caught the boy's eyes, frowning harder when he remembered what he'd been thinking seconds before 'dying' or nearly
dying. If only he could see those eyes again, he had a job to do. All over again he felt that fire start in his gut and work its way through his veins.

Zim's confusion faded away into satisfaction, a grin eating up his face. By now, Dib didn't really bother wondering why the alien did things and just ignored it with a small shake of his head. "Your stuff is on the table next to you. You can let yourself out." He said behind his shoulder as he ran up the stairs.

The alien looked over and grabbed his nearly cleaned, stitched up uniform. The Dib had tried to fix it. How…weird. It was ruined. Oh well. He would order another one. Zim put it on for now and escaped from the household into the cool night, the fire raging in his gut.

He knew why it was there now and what it meant. It was mysteries, inane arguments, saving each other's life over and over again despite all logic; it was pride in being himself, knowing and golden eyes. Zim understood this fire and he never wanted it to go away.

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