

Crush

By GalaxyDancer

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*A little girl develops a crush on Zim. What will happen? Read to find out!
(Rated PG for mild violence)*

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Another normal day was beginning in the worst planet in the universe: Earth. The sun slowly rose above a small, odd-looking green and purple house, the orange and bright red colors of the sky now becoming visible after fading in from black and dark blue.

It was Saturday, one of the best days of the week. And that meant that the usually school-bound children had no homework to weigh them down. This lovely early morning was perfect for keeping themselves entertained with a playful game of tag.

A pale blue still lingering on the far side of the street, the dew still on the grass, and the birds just now beginning to chirp all caught the attention of a young boy who wasted his time in his room day after day like a lab rat. Taking a moment to look away from his computer which had occupied his time all night, he glanced out the window and noticed a few kids walking in a familiar direction.

"Where are they going?" he asked himself, quite curious why four kids of his age would be interested in heading that way. He was usually the only person who ventured to the area which they were clearly wandering to.

Deciding he had been cooped up for a few hours too many, he hopped up and, grabbing his binoculars on the way, ran down the stairs to the living room to begin this new day with frightful suspicion. He noticed his sister sitting on the sofa with the remote, clicking past channel after channel for no reason at all. It was obvious she had been at it all night by her peeved and exhausted expression.

Giving her actions an uncaring shrug, he ran to the door and quietly opened it, peering out to see if the children were out of his sight or not. They weren't, but might as well have been. They were rather far away now, still strolling down the sidewalk and chatting on about . . . stuff.

He raised his binoculars to his eyes and watched the four kids continue to walk out of sight. They seemed happy enough, not acting as if they dreaded arriving at their destination. Perhaps it was an innocent attempt for them to ask a fellow classmate to come out and play. After all, it was a virtually perfect morning.

Making up his mind to follow them and make sure they didn't get themselves killed or badly injured by the person who lived in the house they were nearing, he raced across the street and dived into a nearby bush. Using his binoculars, he realized he hadn't attracted their attention yet. He wiped away a bead of sweat forming on his forehead and snuck out of the bush only to run and put his back against the south side of a light pole.

"So you remember last Spring when we played the Really Fun Tag Game?" asked Melvin, one of the kids to his three companions. "We played it in this cul-de-sac over here, so that's where we're going!"

Thinking it over, Zita responded, "Yeah, that was the best game ever! I remember that place! It's so wide and open and has tons of hiding places!"

"That's the one!" agreed Keef.

There was a pause as Zita took the time to remember all the details of last Spring's amazing game. "Hey . . . last time, didn't we invite all the kids? Like Jessica, Torque, The Letter M, and . . . Dib?"

Sara shuttered even thinking about Dib, the weird paranoid kid who was believed even to be insane. "Yeah, and I guess 'cause it's tradition, we can get them to come. I already called Brian, Rob, Spoo, and Smeedje to join us. We won't start until they get here."

The four kids continued talking and making their way to a certain cul-de-sac while the concerned and also curious Dib kept them in view. He raced from tree to tree, bush to bush, and light pole to light pole to continue with his stealthy act, hoping they wouldn't spot him spying. He still wasn't completely sure why they were going towards the most horrible place on Earth.

One by one more and more kids noticed the meeting like Dib had, and ran outside to join. Everybody knew what time it was, and everybody was ready for it. Always on the first perfect weekend of Spring, the children of the neighborhood gathered in this one special cul-de-sac and played their Really Fun Tag Game of the year. As tradition, once they had all arrived, they would begin shouting out "not it!" until only one person remained, and that person would be "it". The "it" had to tag another person, as any game of Tag goes, then that person would tag another, so on and so on until it was noon, then they would all stop for a glass of Poop Cola. It happened every year, and every year it was the exact same. Except this year, the kids would initiate a new member of their Tag game, one who hadn't come too long ago.

Now initiation is a whole other thing entirely. To become an official member of the Really Fun Tag Game, the new kid would have to prove his skills by running "The Course". The course is a trail set up for the game that runs from the very cul-de-sac they were all at now, through the woods, loop around the school, and back to the cul-de-sac again. It wasn't hard, especially because the winner of last year's game always went with the new kid. The winner is the only one who is never tagged throughout the entire day. If more than one person remains, the kids continue the game the next day. The longest game only lasted until Monday, a total of three game days.

After not too long, mostly all the kids were together, talking, whispering, spreading rumors and making bets. Dib came out from hiding as he watched even more kids arrive. They were too distracted to notice him, anyway. He still wasn't sure what they were doing, but the whole thing rang a loud bell in his head. Something about this was very familiar.

"Okay everybody!" screamed Zita, the leader of it all. Dib listened. ". . . Not it!"

"Not it!"

"Not it!"

"Not it!"

Suddenly recognizing the cries, Dib whispered to himself, "The Really Fun Tag Game. . ." The experience brought back horrible memories of when he had been banned from ever joining in the Really Fun Tag Game ever again. He sighed, and decided to go back home, forgetting all about his mission. He was too depressed to worry about what kind of terror the new kid would unleash upon the helpless school children.

Inside a dark place, a ridiculously dark place, deep within the Earth, deep, deeper and then some, rested the most advanced technology in perhaps the universe. Most of it was capable of massive destruction, such as lasers, bombs, numerous flightcrafts, and pretty much anything horrible you can think of. There were pods containing hideous experiments, screens showing countless places all over the city, spy cameras, a repair room with robotic arms cleaning up after an atomic explosion, holographic three dimensional models of stuff floating here and there . . . it was simply amazing.

The owner of this sciencey, destructive laboratory was a person that you would never expect. The truth could shock you to the point of death. He came from the mightiest race of conquerors, who went from planet to planet seizing all that they saw . . . one filthy spinning dirt ball at a time. To any normal person who might happen to stumble upon all this weaponry and computer gizmos and such, they would imagine the owner to be an evil genius scientist bent on world conquest with an I.Q. of at least three hundred. They would be correct about half of that information, but as for Zim being smart . . . let's just say he falls into the "idiotic dribbling moron" category. Or somewhere not too far from it.

More or less a stupid genius. In other words, he had unfathomably amazing scientific marvels, but

his ideas of how to use them were those of four-year-olds. It'd be like sitting your pet poodle in a giant robot and telling it to push buttons aimlessly. Ahem . . . smart poodle, if you will. Anyway, back to our story, because any Zim fan reading this gets the point already.

An angered voice cried out from deep in the laboratory, in a room situated for creating evil plans, ". . . GIR! Get in here NOW!"

And the response came from a little annoying android with a squeaky voice who happened to be sitting on the sofa on the upper level of the house watching the game out the window. "I WANNA MAKE BACON!!" Then Gir ran to the trashcan in the kitchen and hopped inside, falling to the lab below and sliding out. He skidded to a stop right in front of his master's feet. Looking up at him, he added quietly and eerily, "Me and bacon are friends."

Zim raised an eyebrow, a little confused by this statement, like all the others that came from the mouth of the insane little robot. Then, getting back to the reason why he had called for Gir in the first place, he asked, "Gir, what did you do to the lawn gnomes? Their video function isn't working properly. Without us monitoring what's going on outside, any of the hideous humans could just walk up to our door and try to . . . I dunno, sell cookies?"

"COOKIES!" screamed Gir excitedly, jumping up and grabbing Zim's face with his hands *and* feet. "Let's bake cookies and send them to Dib!"

"Gah! Get off my head!" cried Zim, prying Gir off of him and tossing him across the room, causing him to crash into the wall and then slide down to end up headfirst on top of the computer console.

Brushing himself off, Zim continued, "No cookies, Gir! We have to find out what's interfering with the gnomes and destroy it! Do you understand? We're NOT baking cookies! Never! Ever!"

Gir looked a little disappointed while still upside down. "Aw, man! What about waffles?"

Suddenly a wave of nausea overtook Zim at the mere mention of the word, and he slapped his hand over his mouth as he tried not to vomit. After not too long, he drew in a deep breath and answered quietly, "No, Gir. No . . . *waffles*. Never again."

A smile slowly spread across Gir's face as he remembered what had happened with the last waffle incident. "Oh yeah! . . . Last time you ate waffles, you-"

"Emergency!" cried the computer, alarms suddenly sounding. "Security breach! An intruder is present."

Slightly panicked, Zim said in a combat voice, "Computer! What is the threat? Who dares interrupt our waffle argument?!"

The computer showed him a view screen of the front lawn, which revealed one child crouching down behind one of Zim's gnomes and giggling. Another child ran passed the camera in a blur. Zim didn't quite understand this, it mostly just annoyed him. He continued to watch as the screen changed the view, zooming out to show mostly all of the cul-de-sac. And it was then that Zim's eyes widened at the awkward sight of kids everywhere, all running from one particular individual who was chasing them.

"Wha. . . what's happening?" asked Zim, confused, shocked, and overall frightened. He watched as the one child touched another as they ran by, calling "You're it!" then running away as the new "it" started chasing everybody like the last. It was as if the "it" was infected with some sort of horrible disease that spread from person to person by physical contact. Zim had heard of such things, but never witnessed them before.

Gir was having fun watching the live video feed. "Woo! Lookit 'em go!"

Zim gulped. "Something must be done about this . . . Before the humans find out about our secret base!"

Nervously looking out the window on the upper level, now with his disguise on, sure he was not being watched himself, Zim curiously wondered about the reasons for which the human children were

running about like this and touching each other then running off again. It definitely freaked him out. They seemed to be everywhere, like a replay of last October's Halloween without the candy and costumes and trick-or-treating.

Zim squinted his eyes and scowled while he cautiously watched the events from the window. He was half ducked down and peeping over the ledge to ensure his privacy. Sure he was alone, he muttered to himself, "Oh, those terrible human smees! They think they can scare me with their battle cries and acting as if they are infected with the Germanian Spots Virus! Well, I'm not falling for it. There is no way any Earthenoid will be allowed to mess with the mind of ZIM!"

Popping up out of nowhere right next to his master, Gir screamed, "Go outside and play with them! It looks like fun!"

Startled, Zim jumped backwards and caught his balance quickly by landing on his knees with a hand on the floor. Quickly recovering, he cried, "'Fun'?! 'Play'?! Gir, I don't think you understand just how serious this is! From what I've seen, I have come to conclude that whoever this 'it' child touches quickly becomes infected with some sort of *parasite*, or *disease*, or *something* of horrible outcome! Words like 'fun' and 'play' do not apply in the slightest!" He walked in front of Gir, who was still looking outside.

Gir stared past Zim out the window through his lime green doggy costume. "Aw, look! One of them's making a samich!"

A bit confused and somewhat curious, Zim turned around to see nothing more than what he had seen earlier: the kids running amok and putting the Irken's entire mission for world conquest on hold. In no way did any of this pertain to "samiches" or sandwiches or whatever Gir had called them.

Zim shook off Gir's weirdness. He took one last look out the window, preparing for what he knew awaited him in the future. Then, his eyes burning holes into his little innocent robot's, he said darkly, "I . . . am going to put an end to this chase. Now. *No* one will be able to say *Zim* is a coward!" And with that, he slowly stepped up to his door, and opened it.

He took a few steps out and for about five seconds nobody seemed to notice. Then, without warning, a child ran up to him from the side and touched his shoulder, giggling, "You're it! Can't catch me!" then turning to run away in a whirl of laughter.

Immediately after the child got the first half of the statement said, Zim screamed and ran forward, accidentally tripping over his own feet and landing his face flat on the pavement. He painfully propped himself upright with his arms and looked at his surroundings. Kids had gathered in a tight circle around him and were whispering, sending a chill up his spine.

He shuttered. He felt his life would be ending all too soon now that he had been touched by an infected "it" kid. Watery eyes looking up at Zita, who was standing in front of him, he asked, "How long does it take for the infection to prove fatal? I want to get to destroying the Earth before then."

Zita was confused. "What are you talking about, Zim? You just fell on your face. So what? It's not the end of the world."

A few moments went by as the Irken took the time to compute this new information. In that time, he climbed to his feet and looked at all the faces around him. It took almost a minute for him to realize an important detail. "You mean you're not running from the 'it' child because he is infected?"

"Uh, no. Haven't you ever played Tag before? I mean, *everybody's* played Tag!"

There were a few comments from the audience of children, agreeing. Zim cleared his throat, his mistake clear and visible now. It was all just a game! A harmless Earth game! How stupid of him, worrying over nothing. He had let his fears get the best of him once again. "Of *course* I've played Tag!" he said in a half mocking tone, hoping to be convincing. "It was oh such a fabulous game of Tag, yes! And so challenging! The Astros lost, though."

Many eyes stared at the green kid before everybody burst out laughing. Zim couldn't figure out why.

"What?What'd I say?"

It didn'ttake long for Zim to explain he didn't want to play, just sit on his owndoorstep and watch. And the children agreed, deciding they had no need to havehim initiated if he didn't even want to join. After about fifteen minutes ofjust sitting by himself, Zim began to understand how the game was played. Itrequired a lot of energy, which he definitely had, and also skill, evasiveactions, and most of all quick thinking. He decided he didn't have the time tocontribute to playing with the humans. He had other more important work to do.

A littlegirl noticed Zim was all alone, and walked up to him and sat down next to him.He gave her an odd look, but she just stared back at him. For some reason thisparticular smeeet made him uncomfortable.

"Hi,"said the little girl with a squeaky voice, stretching out her words as a smilewas smeared across her face. "My name's Lin. Who are you?"

Zimscooted a little away from the girl. "Eh, Zim. What do you want, stinkbeast? Away with you!"

For somestrane unknown reason, Lin began giggling and giggling while staring intoZim's big eyes. Zim was not amused, and felt the annoying child was getting onhis nerves, and creeping him out. Her noise became louder with the second, thenshe took a deep breath and said, "You're funny! Wanna see my collection ofmood rings?"

There wasa pause, then Zim asked, "What are these 'mood rings' of which you speak?Are they some form of weapon that can destroy all mankind?"

Sighingdreamily, Lin answered, "They can be anything you want because I like you!I'll even give you one, and every time you look at it, you can think ofme!"

Zimshuttered. He was not yet completely sure what this weird girl wanted from him,but sure as Hell he did not want to find out. "Could you . . . uh, kindago away? Now?"

The girljust stared with a dreamy grin on her face, which creeped out the alien to apoint of no return.

Still notunderstanding, and by now almost frightened, Zim gulped and added, "BeforeI destroy you? I will, ya know. I'll kill you. Without hesitation. And I won'tcare. And I definitely won't regret it."

Lin saidabsolutely nothing, did nothing, thought nothing. She hadn't moved.

Undeniablyfearful now, Zim stood up and screamed while pointing at Lin, "Don't youfeel any fear about me threatening to murder you? At all? Huh? Answer me! Icommand you! Reply to Zim!"

Still,Lin simply stared with that smile.

Fearturned into panic, Zim cried as he pressed his back against his front door,"It isn't normal! It isn't anything anywhere *near* normal! IT'SPOSESSED BY A DEMON FROM THE EIGHTH DIMENTION!!" And with that, he openedthe door and raced inside, slamming it behind him and keeping his back againstthe inside of it now. He was breathing hard, as if he had just escaped ahorrible beast that had been chasing him. Slowly, he calmed down, and allowedhimself to slip down to the floor, where he sat and stayed for a while with hishead down.

Girwalked in, doggy disguise now on, carrying in one hand a taquito and in theother an Irken fast-food drink. He made his way over to Zim, who had ridhimself of his fears and was now simply sitting with his head still downthinking about what to do of this child monster.

He lookedup and sighed, saying to Gir for no reason other than to simply talk, "Ibelieve I have met something scarier than the Dib. She is a horrible thingcalled 'Lin', who seems to talk of things even insane than him. There must besome way to annihilate her without anyone knowing, but what?" As Gir cameup to him and stopped to stand in front of his face, Zim snatched the drinkfrom the little robot's hand and took a sip of it. Gir did nothing in reactionto this.

Thinkingaloud, Zim continued more to himself than his android servant, "Perhaps ifI were to receive assistance from the Dib monkey, we could together destroy Linonce and for all. She would no

longer be a bother to me." He took another sip of the drink, then yelled at the idiotic SIR unit standing right in front of him, "Gir! Come here! I have devised yet another ingenious plan to kill off one more annoying Earthenoid pest!"

Gir squealed, then cried, "You want to eat my taquito?!"

"What? No!" Zim stood up and vigorously sucked at the straw coming from the lid of the soda drink. "We are going to call upon an old enemy for a little . . . eh, what's the word?"

Shrugging, Gir answered with a short, simple hum. "Help?"

"Be quiet!" ordered Zim angrily. "I'm trying to think! Let's see . . . no, that's not it . . . maybe . . . Gir, could you *help* me here?"

Suddenly remembering something very important, Gir squealed, "My tacos! I didn't feed them yet! TACOS! DON'T GO AWAY!!" And Gir ran into the kitchen screaming for some reason that nobody would ever know.

"Hmm. . . ah, yes, 'help'. We are going to call upon an old enemy for a little help. And since you've . . . left . . . already . . ." Zim noticed Gir was gone. "I'll just . . . go down to the lab, and . . . think some more. That's it. I'll think about how to approach the subject, so the Dib will suspect nothing! He will fall helpless to my grasp, and I will force him to assist me!" Zim laughed evilly for a short moment, then ran off to think up an amazing, ingenious, unfathomably flawless way to begin talking to Dib.

That evening, things were almost normal. And using the word "almost" usually means not at all. In fact, could things get even less normal?

Dib heard a knock on his door. Automatically, he got up and ran to it, excited. This could be his big chance!! It would be perfect!

"Maybe it's Mysterious Mysteries! Maybe it's Crop Circles Magazine! Finally, someone has come to their senses and believed me about something! I can't wait to see the look on Zim's face when he realizes I got a visit from-" Dib opened the door and immediately his happy mood was destroyed. ". . . him."

Zim didn't look happy either. "First of all, *Dib*, I want you to know that coming to you was *not* my first idea."

"Yes it was," interrupted Gir, standing way behind him in the lawn and listening in on the conversation.

There was a pause. Zim turned around, outraged, and yelled, "BE QUIET, GIR!"

Dib shook his head. "If this is one of your stupid computer problems, or Voot Cruiser glitches, or if you need me to fix your satellite again, then count me -"

"Not this time, horrible Dib thing," Zim answered before Dib could finish his sentence. "This time it's *different*."

Dib stared with a bored expression. "Let me guess. You're here to destroy me again, right?"

Zim crossed his arms. "Fortunately for you, no, but it's the next thing on my list."

Now Dib seemed slightly interested. He wasn't as bored. So he listened to what Zim had to say.

"There's this strange Earth girl, Lin, who earlier stared at me until she forced me to threaten to kill her! She asked me about 'mood rings', and . . . what else? I . . . think that's it. But my point is, Dib, that -"

Dib suddenly burst out laughing. But Zim looked as if he'd been slapped. How could anybody find any of this the slightest bit humorous at all? This was horrible!! It was an outrage! He had a big problem here. He had a REALLY big -

"Crush on a girl!" laughed Dib, pointing at Zim though he was four feet in front of him. "Who would have guessed?"

Zim thought Dib was insane. Well, more than usual. But then he realized there was plenty of truth to Dib's words. "Crush? Yes, of course! That's it! Dib, your insane weird babbling has given me the

perfect idea! So, I no longer need your assistance. See ya." He turned and began his walk home from his enemy's house. Then, as he neared the edge of Dib's property, he stopped and said, turning to face Dib, "Oh, and I'll be back to destroy you."

Dib was on the floor pounding on it, tears in his eyes from laughing. "Why? So I can't tell everybody your stupid secret crush? Geez, Zim, they say love is blind, but isn't this . . . a *little* . . . too much intermixing?!?"

Zim gave him an odd look, not understanding half of what he was talking about for more than one reason, one of them being that his words were all blended because he was trying not to laugh while he said them.

Gir stopped poking the electric fence and electrocuting himself to look at Dib, then fell to the ground laughing just as hysterically for no reason. After a few minutes of Zim staring at him, he got up and ran to his master's side.

"You done?" asked Zim dully.

"LET'S GO SHOPPING!" cried Gir. ". . . for squirrel babies!"

"That's what I thought. Let's go."

Gir marched next to Zim like a soldier on a mission with a goofy expression. Dib continued to laugh.

Twenty-four hours had passed since we began this story. Yes, everybody, I am generally saying that it is now yet another beautiful morning, today's belonging to Sunday, also one of two cherished weekend days, sadly the second.

There was no noise anywhere. It seemed time had come to a complete halt as suspense hung in the air, each second bringing new tension and fear.

And a little girl skipped happily down the street with a flower in hand. She was as happy as anybody could be, her young heart filled to bursting with the love she felt for a special someone. Childhood memories she was creating, but for the one she had her eyes on, "childhood" was merely the part of his life which he spent underground in the horrible learning facilities to train for his future life as an invader, and that piece of his history was long over for him.

She had no idea of how little they had in common, nor how much he despised her despite only meeting her yesterday. All she knew was that she loved him from the very start; she hardly knew why. She was blind to the fact that, even after living at least five times longer than the life-span of a human, Zim had never "loved" anything. In fact, he hated everything to an extent that was virtually unreachable for humans. It is only fair to say that anybody watching our blossoming little couple would feel sorry for the child.

Zim was in the "kitchen", if you can even call it that, sitting down at the table. He was in his human disguise because he had one of the windows open due to it being a lovely sunny morning. His attention was focused on looking over a few papers he had received in a transmission from the Almighty Tallest. They were assignments he was to complete, but some of them were baffling to him.

"Hmm. . . what do you suppose they mean by 'explosion of your choice'?" Zim blinked and gave the papers a confused look. "'Explosion'. . ."

Suddenly the doorbell rang, an awkward tone to an Irken, but Zim had adjusted to it and now recognized it as the humans' way of letting him know one of them was at the doorstep of his fortress and wished to tell him something.

Zim got up, papers still in hand, only half concentrating on what he was doing, and automatically went to answer the door. He opened it without even once looking to see who it was, and asked while still staring at his assignments, "Yeah, what do you want?"

Lins smiled and her eyes seemed to glow. She snatched the papers right out of Zim's grasp with

the same hand she had the flower in, and pulled from behind her a pair of scissors with her free hand.

Zim gasped. "You! What do you think you're doing? Give those back, they're top secret!"

Lin only giggled. In the blink of an eye she cut out a chain of heart shapes out of the papers, each linked together to the next by the side of the top. She opened the folded paper to reveal it was a pattern, which consisted of the hearts running in three rows: one right-side-up, one upside-down, and the last right-side-up again.

Zim's mouth was hanging open. It was clear this "Lin" had to be destroyed.

"DO YOU REALIZE WHAT YOU'VE JUST DONE?!" screamed Zim. "DO YOU?!? HUH? HUH? HUH? HUH?!?"

Lin giggled. "I made them for you," she said dreamily, handing him the cut-up papers.

Zim looked horrified as his eyes scrolled over the hearts that used to be a message from his leaders. Never in his life had he met such a horrible creature as Lin! But before he could say one word about how much he hated her, she grabbed his arm with her left hand and started skipping along, her right arm swinging back and forth with the flower. He dropped the paper hearts, forgetting about them and concentrating more on pulling away from the horrible Lin girl.

As she dragged him with her away from the safety of his fortress, someone picked up what he had left behind, and smiled.

And so she took him with her everywhere she went. The first stop was the amusement park, which proved to be one of the most horrible experiences of his life.

Lin kept her fingers locked tightly around Zim's wrist. She happily skipped onto the first ride she saw, which was an innocent merry-go-round. She pulled him up onto a strange creature that looked most like a squirrel, keeping him in front of her while she hugged his back. He tried to escape, but her grasp was too tight. She was too strong for him.

The ride started and Zim looked panicked. He had no idea of how things like this worked. Well, sure enough, he found out. It started spinning, slowly at first, then faster, and faster, until it was spinning out of control! Then all at once it stopped, jerking everybody forward.

Zim looked rather nauseated as he climbed off with Lin still holding onto his arm, which was becoming sore.

Lin ran over to an ice-cream parlor and got two ice-cream cones, both strawberry flavored. She started licking one, and handed the other to Zim, who stared at it like it was infested with parasites. He glanced at her, and she pointed behind him excitedly. He looked over his shoulder, but didn't see anything interesting. When he looked back, she pushed his hand up, causing him to shove the ice-cream into his mouth. Lin giggled, but Zim had tears in his eyes as he screamed. He tried to run away from her, but only pulled her arm a little way with him. She felt him trying to get away, and only walked close to him and nuzzled her head close to his chest.

Spying another fun ride, Lin screeched and dropped her ice-cream in excitement. She ran over to it, with Zim right behind her. He had seen what she was looking at, and was screaming so much that he began to cry, a very degrading action for an Irken Elite Soldier. Still, it got him nowhere, as Lin dragged him into the front seat with her anyway.

An automatic buckle strapped over both of them, keeping them in place. And then the ride began. Zim was petrified with fear as the roller coaster climbed incredible heights to get to the top. He had ceased his wailing for the moment. It paused at the very top just long enough for Zim to put his arms around Lin instinctively and gulp, then lunged forward, sending Zim screaming bloody murder like he had never screamed before. Lin only had on a gigantic smile.

Loop after loop, twirl after twirl, faster and faster it went. Zim continued to scream until around the end, when he couldn't stand it any longer.

The ride slowed to a stop and everybody got up to leave. Zim wearily climbed out of the first car and Lin let go of him for a moment to look at something. He slowly walked forward, feeling incredibly dizzy. He made his way to the closest trashcan, to which he leaned over it and vomited from dizziness. He felt like his head was spinning.

Lin dashed back over to him and grabbed his Pak, purposely disconnecting it from him. She quickly gained his attention, and only giggled as he looked back at her with wide eyes. She raced around him and the trashcan, heading for the Ferris Wheel.

Zim felt energy slowly being drained from him and internally, his life clock began. Heran after her, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Lin! Wait! This isn't funny! I need my Pak to live! Without it, I'll die in ten minutes! I'm serious! Come on, stop!"

Lin was running all around with his gray and pink Pak, laughing innocently while holding it close to her heart. Back and forth, here and there they ran, Zim shouting out pleas and threats all the while.

"I'm not kidding," panted Zim after some five minutes, so tired from running without extra energy that he felt he would collapse soon. He had used up half of his time chasing the girl, who was now only a few feet in front of him. "Give it back, or I'll . . . I'll . . . make waffles!"

Lin giggled cutely. "Okay!" she said happily, not caring about or understanding what he had meant. She walked up to him and handed it to him.

Zim snatched it out of her hands, looked it over for scratches, then sighed of relief. He placed it on his back, and it restored the connection between his almost completely worthless body and his amazing, personality-containing energy supply. He felt life flowing back into him. This sudden rush of energy, along with giving him the strength he needed to survive, also reminded him of how much he despised Lin.

"You!" he cried while pointing at Lin, who was right in front of him. "You could have killed me! How dare you mess with anything belonging to Zim?!?"

Lin giggled again. "You're so cute!" she said. She blew him a kiss.

Zim stared for a very long time, wondering what to say. Finally, he blurted, "Stay away from me, horrid Lin-monster! Or I shall have to take more drastic measures than I already have!"

Without warning, Lin skipped a half step closer to him and hugged him tightly. He screamed.

"Cutelittle Zimmy . . ." said Lin, snuggling him.

Zim was panicking. He looked around, trying to think of something fast. Finally giving up caring about the risk of exposing what he was, two long tentacle-like wires shot out of his Pak and jammed into opposite sides of Lin's head, pulling her away from the Irken and suspending her in the air.

Lin didn't like this. She tried to pry the wires away while kicking her legs as fast as she could and grunting, but her feeble attempts at detaching Vortian-designed equipment were in vein, for she was only human and humans were weak and powerless at this age.

Zim was sweating, but was much more calm than he had been. He gritted his teeth. "Now leave me alone! I have no desire to be ANYWHERE near you!" And with that, the two wires emitted a high-voltage electrical charge into her head, causing her to scream and thrash about. When the electrocutions ceased, she was silent, half charred black and her hair a mess. She fell to the ground smoking when the wires detached from her and retracted back into Zim's Pak.

Zim paused for a moment, wondering for no less than a split second if what he had done would result in consequences, then let go of the thought and ran off, retreating to his base to plan on how to destroy the Dib.

The next day, the children had to return to school. It was extremely boring. But not so much that today was another "normal" day. No, today, things were slightly off. Just slightly. And using the word "slightly", I mean horribly different than usual.

Dib was walking to school by himself, his eyes scrolling over the papers he had found on Zim's

doorstep. Last night he had pasted them back together to make them what they once were: full-sheet pages of Irken words that he didn't understand. His computer could have translated them if they had been in computer-compatible format, but paper didn't exactly fit into any of the disc drives.

"Hmm. . ." he said to himself, thinking out loud, "I wonder what it all means." Then a funny thought crossed his mind and he snickered. "Maybe it's a letter to that girl he likes. But then, why would it be Irken? Then again, maybe it's something more valuable, like a message from his leaders or something." He turned a corner. "If I can just translate this, I can use it against him, whatever it is. Maybe it's even some sort of instructions for how to get in his base without activating the security system!"

He stopped walking and looked down at the little girl sitting on the curb staring at the ground. She was picking petals off of a flower with a dreamy expression.

Dib was about to leave, seeing there was nothing interesting about her, but he suddenly heard her say, "Zim loves me, Zim loves me not. Zim loves me, Zim loves me not . . ."

"Hey," said Dib to the little girl, "I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but are you talking about Zim, the alien?"

Lin looked up at him with big, adorable blue eyes. "The alien?" she asked. "Oh, I know no Zim the alien. But I *do* know a Zim, the sweetest boy in the entire world! Yesterday, he took me to the amusement park, and we rode rides and ate ice-cream . . ."

Dib looked slightly confused. "I only know one Zim, and he's an evil alien out to destroy the Earth! Just tell me this: is he green?"

Lin sighed and plucked off another petal, staring mindlessly at the bald flower. "Yeah," she sighed. "He's so pretty . . ."

"I KNEW IT!" cried Dib to himself. "Zim has a crush on an Earth girl!" He looked back at Lin, who snatched up another flower from the grass and started picking off its petals as well. "Unless . . . he just wants to use her for his next evil plan!" Dib's eyes widened. "But what would he want with a puny little girl . . .?" Dib continued walking to school, wondering what diabolical schemes Zim had up his sleeve.

Lin giggled as she plucked off the last flower petal. "Zim loves me!" she cooed.

Gir was staring at a toy pig. He was just laying on the sofa upside-down, staring at it in front of him. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason as to why.

Zim was down in his lab, working on adjustments to his Pak to make sure only he could remove it. He had been at it since yesterday, but wasn't the least bit tired because he was wearing a micro-pak, rather a miniature temporary energy supply "Personal Aid Kandrona". It was the size of any computer chip, and was simply plugged into one of the slots revealed only when his actual Pak is removed. It could keep him running without the true Pak for almost forty-eight hours, so he was fine to continue working.

The doorbells suddenly rang, interrupting Gir's empty thoughts. "Aw, man!" said Gir to the toy pig. "I got to answer the door now, Pig." Gir got up and zipped on his costume, then hopped to the door and opened it, revealing who it was.

Lin stood at the door with a huge smile on her face. She was holding the same flower from yesterday. She blinked.

Gir squealed with joy. He wasn't sure why the girl was here, but he was excited because it had to be something important.

"Hello!" said Lin sweetly. "Are you Zim's cute little puppy?"

"Suuuuream!" answered Gir. "I like waffles!"

Lin giggled. "Can I come in, talking dog? I wanna give something to Zim. He forgot it yesterday."

Gir stared for a little while, thinking. It was hard for him to think. It always hurt what little bit of a mechanical brain he had. "Uhh . . . yes!"

"Thanks!" said Lin, and walked into the living room with Gir. They both sat on the sofa waiting for

Zim to come in. Lin was very excited. She just knew Zim would be happy to see her. After all, flower petals do not lie.

Down below in his lab, Zim had just completed the final adjustments on his Pak. He sighed. "Finally! It's done! Now I'd like to see that Lin creature try to pry it off my back!" He reached behind him and pulled out the temporary energy disc, then set it on the table. He smiled. Picking up his Pak, he said, "I sure am amazing." He laughed slightly at himself. He put it where the disc had been and it reattached itself to him mechanically with little cords that connected with the plugs on him.

Feeling no need to get on his disguise because it was likely nobody was going to be spying on him for a while, Zim hopped in the "elevator". It took him up.

Lin was still smiling. Gir was watching television. They were both sitting on the couch.

"Gir," said Zim, getting both Lin's and his robot's attention. The circle on the floor stopped moving upwards and he stepped off. "The upgrades on my Pak are complete. I feel we will no longer have to worry about-" Suddenly he saw her. The girl he hated more than anybody can hate a person.

"Hi, Zim!" said Lin cheerfully, her eyes closed. She got up off the sofa and ran over to him. "You forgot your flower!" After hugging him, she took a step back and showed him the giant flower she had kept for him.

Zim pushed her back, causing her almost to lose her balance. It was a direct insult.

"What's wrong?" asked Lin, staring into his big, red eyes. "You're allergic to flowers?"

Zim growled. "How DARE you come into MY house, sit on MY sofa, and even get NEAR ME?!" He took a step towards her and pushed her again, making her peep. "Go away! I don't care if you know my secret, just go away!"

Lin's eyes lit up. "You have a secret?" she asked, curious.

There was a pause. Zim realized that she was blind to the fact that he was Irken, though he was standing right in front of her with bright pinkish-red eyes and a pair of antennae. But now he had done it. He said something about it, automatically thinking she noticed.

"Uh, no," he lied. "Never mind. Just go away!" He pointed to the door.

Lin tilted her head and smiled. "But I'll be good," she insisted. "I'll sit on the sofa with your talking, green dog and I'll be quiet. You won't even know I'm there!"

Zim thought about this. Perhaps he was being a little harsh on the deluded Earth girl. "Well . . . I suppose it couldn't hurt. As long as you STAY OUT OF MY WAY!"

Lin giggled. "I sure will!"

Gir squealed. "Dancin' monkeys!"

It was a little later in the day. Zim was still down in his lab working on a new microchip experiment. He pushed a few buttons on his computer console, then picked up some strange electricity tool thing and shocked the little microchip. He sat it back down. He typed some more at his computer, then was ready to reach for the electricity tool thing again, but instead found Lin in its place, staring at him with her hands behind her back.

Zim looked confused. Lin only smiled and handed him the electricity tool thing. He scowled at her, and she giggled and ran off somewhere.

A little later, Zim was taking a break and sitting at the kitchen table looking over some other papers, these about his experiment. He was concentrating on them very hard trying to figure out something. Just as he thought he had the solution, Lin snatched the papers out of his hands and folded them into a giant heart. She smiled and gave them back to him. Then she giggled and ran off somewhere.

Zim growled. He unfolded the papers and continued studying them, trying to remember the answer he had come up with.

Even later still, close to when school was about to let out, Zim was in his lab again testing his new

microchips out on a chicken, when Lin came up to him and tugged at his shirt.

Zim turned around, curious.

Lin pointed to the far side of the lab, and Zim gasped. Half of this lab room was wrecked! Test tubes, wires, computer screens . . . all jumbled together in a crazy way that made a picture of a heart with an arrow going through it. Gir was on top of it laughing insanely.

Zim growled even louder. He reached for a weapon to fire at the pest, but she jumped to a computer console and typed a few codes she stole from him, then onscreen appeared all of Zim's history. Pictures, documents, genetic codes, all displayed for her to see. She pushed the arrow onscreen and scrolled down, revealing an embarrassing picture of Zim as a smeeet, sitting on the floor of an alien place, naked, playing with the circuitry of a little robot bee.

Gir screamed excitedly at the top of his lungs at the sight! "Baby Zim! Lookit! how cute you were!"

Zim's mouth dropped open. The weapon he had grabbed fell from his hand. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and he looked almost frightened. He suddenly screamed in terror.

Things were quiet for a while, about until nighttime. Zim was sitting on the sofa watching television with Gir, trying to cool off some of his anger towards the Lin girl. He knew not what she was up to now, but she was leaving him alone for the moment, and that was what mattered.

Gir was sucking on a Suck Monkey while watching TV with his master. It was normal, boring. But at least there was no Lin to spoil Zim's slowly returning happy mood, which he was always in when he was planning on how to destroy Mankind. Yes, perhaps she had learned to leave him alone and stay away from his things.

Suddenly there was a snicker from the kitchen. Zim heard it, but ignored it, figuring Lin was only daydreaming about him again. She giggled when she dreamed about him, so he had learned from his experiences today.

Another giggle, this one louder, shattered Zim's thoughts. He clenched his left fist around the arm of the couch. His right, he grabbed the cushion with. He gritted his teeth. Then he paused everything and took a deep breath, telling himself to let it go. It was no big deal, whatever it was.

Lin giggled louder still, more of a laugh now. Zim growled and got up, ready to find out what was so funny. He walked into the kitchen, spied Lin, and almost fell over backwards at the sight of what she had in her hands. It was a certain familiar spiral notebook with a black cover that had the Irken watermark on the front, and right underneath that in blue letters read "Zim".

Another laugh escaped Lin's voice as she turned a page. She looked up, feeling Zim's presence, and smiled. She looked like she had a dirty secret.

"MY LOG BOOK!" screamed Zim. He ran over to Lin and grabbed it right out of her hands. He was even more panicked now than ever before. "How could you? This is my personal property!" He looked at what page she was on. Page thirty-seven. The sight of the page number struck fear into him. "No . . . NO! NOOOOOO!!!"

Lin giggled.

Zim was hyperventilating. "All of my thoughts, my secrets, my *life* . . . EXPOSED!! The mission, my plans . . . my habits, my weaknesses . . . all read by a disgusting female Earthenoid smeeet!" He suddenly turned on Lin. "You! You horrible, sick creature! GET OUT OF MY BASE THIS INSTANT!"

Lin's smile faded. "But-"

"GET OUT!! NOW!!!"

"But-"

"NOW!"

Lin smiled again and giggled. She got up from the chair and skipped over to the door. "Okay, see ya tomorrow, Zimmy!" She blew him a kiss, and left. Zim looked out the window and could see her singing all the way down the street until she was out of sight.

"GIR!" he cried. Gir hopped in front of him, saluting, his head covered in chocolate bubblegum. "Yes, sir!"

Zim gulped. "Gir, we have to leave for a few minutes. Now. The Dib should know what to do."

Dib's doorbell rang. He jumped up from watching *Mysterious Mysteries* and ran to it. "The FBI! The president!" Dib pleaded aloud. "*Somebody* who's actually here to listen to me!"

He opened the door, revealing Zim. Before Dib could say anything, Zim darted inside and slammed the door shut. He looked scared.

Dib gasped. "Zim! What are you—"

"There's scarcely any time, Dib thing. You have to help me before she comes back! SHE'LL DESTROY MY LIFE!!"

Dib cocked an eyebrow. It took him a few moments to grasp what Zim was yelling about. Then, he realized it. "You're talking about that girl, aren't you? Well, I'm onto you. What do you plan to do with her?"

Zim was breathing hard still. He had his back to the side of Dib's sofa. "Lin! She won't leave me alone! She follows me *everywhere* I go! I can't get away from her! She's like a Cathgorian Worm Parasite, that evil creature! You have to make her go away!" Zim fell to his knees, tears in his eyes. "I'm begging you! You don't know how serious this is!"

Dib had his arms crossed. "Why should I help you? You're evil! You're trying to annihilate the Earth, and you expect me to drop everything to help you lose a little girl that likes you?"

Zim took a deep breath. He squinted his eyes. "She knows more secrets about my life than *you* do, filthy Dib monster." Dib's eyes flashed. "I can't stop her! She has gotten past security, infiltrated my base, hacked into my computers, and worst of all read *MY* Log Book!"

Dib thought about this while Zim sniffled and stared at him with big, watery eyes.

Zim rubbed the tears out of his eyes and stood up, trying to act somewhat more like a soldier. "So will you help me destroy her? Please?"

"Hmm, lemme think about it," said Dib. There was a pause. "No."

Zim's mouth hung open slightly. "But . . ."

Dib crossed his arms. "I don't have time to help you with girl problems. So figure it out yourself."

Zim gulped. There were a few seconds when nobody said anything, then he answered Dib, "Fine!" He opened the door cautiously and peeked outside, making sure Lin wasn't there waiting for him. When all he saw was Gir running around in circles, he marched out the door. He turned back to Dib for a moment before he left.

"Dib, you will regret this. I'll make sure of it."

Dib closed the door, bored to death.

Tuesday brought new fate for all three of our characters. Zim, Dib, and Lin were going to put an end to this thing tonight. Of course, the answer to how was slightly more complicated than most of you would expect. But before you find out, the new list of events began in school, which is what will lead up to the end.

Zim was sitting at his desk, still shook up about yesterday's horrible experience with Lin and his Log Book. He was slightly jumpy, but not so much that he forgot about getting his revenge on Dib. Still, before Dib's entrance to class, most of Zim's thoughts were focused on one thing: how to rid himself of the annoying brat Lin, so she would no longer follow him around.

Mrs. Bitters sat at her desk, ready to begin class. She despised teaching, but still did it every single weekday with little complaint. "Okay, students. Today's lesson is about love, and how it could eventually lead to the horrible end of the doomed universe!"

Zim wasn't listening today. Not that he ever did, anyway. But today he was even more zoned out of class than usual, what with thinking about the events over the past three days. His thoughts were very distracted from her words. Perhaps he could simply kill her, but then that would be such a waste. He should find away to use her to his advantage.

The classroom door opened, interrupting Zim's pondering. Dib walked in with a large stack of notebook papers, which were falling all over the place. They came upright past his eyes, so he was having trouble seeing where he was walking.

Zim snickered at the funny sight. Feeling this was the perfect time to get his revenge, he stuck his foot out just as Dib walked by, tripping him. Dib stumbled over Zim's foot with a yelp, and fell to the ground, his papers flying everywhere. But he didn't care that Zim had tripped him. He was concentrating on other, more important things.

Mrs. Bitters growled. "Dib! You're late again! What's your excuse?"

Dib sat up and started gathering his papers once more without giving Zim's "revenge" a single thought. "I was trying to decode some alien writing I found on Zim's doorstep. I was up all night, so I accidentally overslept."

His words sparked Zim's curiosity. He remembered something about papers that he had had the day that Lin took him to the amusement park, but the vision was a little bit blurry. So he asked, half in a lie, "Papers? What papers? I had no papers on my doorstep!"

Dib smiled evilly at Zim, seeing that he didn't realize what had happened that day. "Oh, no? Then what are *these*, Zim?" He waved around the message from the Almighty Tallest in front of Zim's face.

Zim gasped, suddenly remembering, and grabbed it out of his hand. He looked it over, seeing the familiar words printed on the paper in Irken. He was outraged. "You dare take something off of my property?!? This is top secret, stupid human! I've been looking all over for this!"

Dib shrugged. He could care less about Zim's statement. And he said to his enemy smugly, "You can keep it. I have hundreds of copies."

Zim growled and clenched his fists with rage.

"SILENCE!" screeched Mrs. Bitters. "As I was saying, love will most likely lead to the end of the universe."

As she continued on about the subject, Zim set the message aside and pulled out a new piece of paper. He began writing down his plans, which he had been thinking through all morning before coming to school. He originally had intended on killing her . . .

Dib watched from his desk with papers on top of it as Zim wrote his thoughts. It appeared as if he were actually paying attention and taking notes, but he figured that wasn't possible, because Zim never took any notes about anything that had to do with school.

At lunch, Zim was still writing. He smiled as he finalized his amazing thoughts of how to get rid of the Lin girl. He was still working out a few kinks, but overall, he had finished the main part of the plan. He was very proud of his work. Holding it up and looking it over once more, he exclaimed, "YES! Done at last! The perfect plan! I shall never have to worry about the horrible Lin again!"

Dib was sitting at the table opposite of Zim. He cocked an eyebrow at hearing this. He got up and walked over to Zim, sitting next to him and looking at the papers. They were all written in Irken, which made no sense to him. Zim noticed he was there and snatched the papers out of his view.

"What was that?" asked Dib curiously. He knew asking Zim would result in another stupid argument, but still, asked he did.

Zim smiled evilly to himself as he thought over what he had just spent half of the day working on. "Just the perfect way I plan to get rid of the annoying Lin creature!" he answered. "She will never bother me again after tonight!"

"Why? What happens tonight?" asked Dib, getting that feeling that told him something wasn't right here.

"Well, I'm going to- WAIT! Why should I tell you what my ingenious plans are?" Zim slammed his hands down on the table and stood up. "You would just steal them! This is between Lin and me, so mind your own business, paranoid human!"

Dib stood up to face Zim. "What do you have against her?" he demanded. "She never did anything to you!"

Zim shook his fist in Dib's face. "Yes, she did! She tormented me by forcing me to ride 'rides' at an amusement park! She twisted my beautiful laboratory equipment into a horrible worthless blob! She read my inner thoughts in my LogBook! She deserves much worse than I intend to do to her!"

"And what do you intend to do to her?" asked Dib.

"Something she will thank me for later!" Zim answered. "This will satisfy both of our wishes! She will stay with me until the Earth is devastated, and I will no longer have her around to bug me when I am working on . . . important . . . stuff!"

Dib gave him an odd look. "Wait. Did you just say you were going to keep her with you, but she wouldn't be around to interfere with your work? How is that possible?"

"It is too complicated for your puny human brain to comprehend. You should stick to analyzing your pathetic human cafeteria food, which even then is something you most likely couldn't handle. Of course, I don't have time to do that today. I am still adding the finishing touches onto my brilliant plan."

Dib looked at him with a smug expression. He reached down and picked up a glob of mashed potatoes from Zim's lunch tray, then without warning tossed them straight at Zim's head, hitting him square in the eye.

Zim screamed. He ran in the first direction he saw that was away from Dib, holding his pain-stricken eye. "THE PAIN!! THE PAIN!! IT BURNS!!" He fell over and rolled onto his side, quivering with pain.

Dib chuckled. "Now who can't handle analyzing the cafeteria food, Zim?" He laughed.

Zim took a few staggered breaths, sat up, and quickly wiped off the disgusting food from his eye. It was red and irritated. Feeling as if he were pushed to a breaking point, he felt like crying, like sobbing because of the fact that Dib would do such a horrible thing. But no. He simply got up and walked back over to his table, sat down, and continued writing his plans, keeping his feelings to himself. He had had all he could take over the past few days, and was tired of yelling at people to get back at them. He only wanted to be left alone. What's more, he wanted nothing more to do with Dib for the moment.

Dib, however, was still curious about Zim's plans. He wondered what Zim had meant about "keeping her but getting rid of her". He suspected the worst. And he was not going to allow an innocent little girl to be harmed because of Zim's evil schemes.

Zim sniffled and wiped the tears out of his scratchy eye, interrupting Dib's thoughts.

Lin skipped along to her sweetheart's house, holding her newest gift for him: a box of chocolates shaped like a heart. She was singing, her heart filled to bursting with happiness. She would let no one get in her way today.

"Lala la la . . ." Suddenly she stopped, seeing she was there. She giggled, walked up the walkway to the front door and rang the doorbell, holding the chocolates behind her back. At first, nothing happened, as if nobody was even home. But Lin stayed there, her eyes fixed on the doorknob to make sure she would know the second that it moved.

Inside, Zim slowly turned the doorknob, causing Lin's eyes to sparkle with joy. The door opened, revealing a very evil Zim, who was standing before the girl without fear. He moved aside for a moment to let her in.

"Oh, Zimmy!" said Lin. "I was beginning to think you weren't home!" She skipped inside and turned around to face him. It was dark inside, much darker than it was outside. Tuesday afternoon bore a bright, hot sun to fill the red sky with light that streamed into Zim's dark base like a candle in a cave.

Zim smiled evilly, silently. He closed the door, creating a darkness that was almost pitch black, but was just light enough that he could still make out her colors.

"Wow!" exclaimed Lin cutely. "It sure is dark!" Then, her attention diverted, she said, "Here, I brought you these!" Lin held out to him the heart-shaped box of chocolates with a large smile. She stood there as Zim walked up to her and took them gently. He put them down on a table sitting next to the couch.

"Thank you, Lin," he said to her coolly. He walked up to her. "Now, I have something for you."

Lin gasped excitedly. "You got me something?" she asked, her eyes sparkling. "Oh, Zim, you're so sweet! How can I ever thank you?"

"You won't have to," Zim answered. He pulled from behind his back a small, gray and purple Irken Utility Pak. It had a tiny card attached to a string that was taped to the front.

Lin appeared to be mesmerized. "You got that . . . for *me*? Thank you so much, Zim! I love you!" She took the Pak and looked it over. Finding the card, she opened it and read it aloud.

"To Lin, from Zim. Place it on your back. How cute! Just like yours, Zim!" Lin giggled as she turned the Pak over and looked at it some more. The bottom had two holes centered in it.

"Would you like me to help you?" Zim asked.

Lin sighed dreamily as she looked at him. "Of course!" she answered. "I would want nothing more!"

Zim squinted his eyes and his smile grew. He carefully took the Pak from her hands and moved behind her. He then pressed it against her back, about the upper middle where Irken Utility Paks always went. It attached itself to her by puncturing her skin and running wires through her body painlessly.

"Perfect. . ." Zim backed away a few feet. Before Lin could turn around and thank him, a tube-like tentacle shot out of Zim's own Pak and connected with Lin's. Electric pulses began streaming into it.

Lin screamed for a moment, then her eyes went blank as information flowed into her. She said nothing, she did nothing. She was but a mindless zombie while the information transfer was taking place.

As the transfer began, her Pak let out its own tentacles and equipment, which wrapped around her in symmetrical ways that, after complete, gave her the appearance of a true Irken warrior.

Zim began to laugh. He laughed evilly, watching as the horrible Lin girl that had caused him so much torment was becoming one of his own.

"Yes! Yes, filthy Lin monster! You shall never bother me or read my secrets again! IT'S OVER!"

Suddenly, the door and some of the wall surrounding it were blown away by an explosion, which knocked Zim off his feet and disconnected the cord that attached his and Lin's Paks together. But she still stood, blank, mindless because the information was incomplete.

Dib's silhouette became visible through the smoke. He was holding a laser weapon he had gotten from his dad's lab. "No it isn't, Zim! Not while I'm around!"

Zim growled and lifted his head up, now covered in scratches. His Pak was damaged, sparks shooting from the broken part. "Dib!! What are you doing here? I need no help with the Lin girl!"

Dib walked into the now well-lit room. "I'm not letting you destroy her, Zim! She's an innocent, confused child! It's just not right!"

Zim stood up painfully and limped over to him. He pushed him, causing him to fall and drop his weapon. "I do not intend to destroy her, idiotic Earthenoid! I intend to turn her into one of my people! She will become something greater than any human with *my* help!"

Dib jumped to his feet. "That's crazy, Zim! You can't possibly give her what she needs! Do you really think this will solve your problems?"

"Ofcourse it will!"

"Noit won't!" Dib argued. "She may be under your control, but inside,somewhere, is still the little girl she used to be. And you don't have theright to take that away from her! Look at her. Does she really look like shecould become an elite soldier?"

Zimthought about this for a moment as he stared at Lin, then suddenly his metalspider legs shot out of his Pak and hoisted him up into the air above Dib. Theyran Zim past him and over to his forgotten weapon.

Zim bentdown and tried to pick it up as he ran by, but Dib grabbed one of the metalspider legs and pulled at it, causing Zim to lose his balance. The spider legstripped over themselves, the one Dib was holding onto snapped, and Zim screamedas he skidded across the floor on his back, stopping close to where the doorhad once been. Where he had slid there was a scattered trail of circuitry andthin, delicate little wires. Half of his metal spider legs had broken off ofhim.

Dib sawthis as the perfect opportunity to save the girl. He ran over to her, droppingthe half of Zim's spider leg he had been holding. He grabbed hold of her Pakand pulled at it, snapping it from her body. The tentacles and equipment cameoff with it and sucked back into its main part automatically.

Lin'seyes flashed brightly, and her pupils became visible again. She stood there fora moment, wondering what happened. Then she turned around and saw Dib.

Zimmoaned and sat upright, holding his throbbing head with one of his hands. Hesaw Lin back to normal, and Dib holding her Pak.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!"cried Zim. He jumped to his feet and ran over to Dib. "What have you done?She was so close to becoming one of my own! So close to being Irken! You ruinedeverything!"

Dibsmiled. "No, I *saved* her from *you*. She deserves to be free,like the rest of us."

Zim tooka step forward to grab the Pak away from his enemy, but tripped and fell on hisface. He slowly lifted his head with tears in his eyes to see that Lin and Dibwere leaving without the slightest concern for him.

"Wait!"cried Zim to Lin. "Come back! You still have a chance!"

Linturned around for a second, looking Zim in the eyes, and said, "Sorry,Zim. I don't like you anymore. Maybe I'll see you again later, but I stilldon't like you."

Zim wasspeechless. Lin turned and left without even looking back. She silently grabbedDib's hand and held it tight.

"But. . ." said Zim to himself as he watched them leave, "you . . ."Then suddenly it dawned on him. He stood up and looked himself over, seeingwhat a mess he was. He was covered in scratches and scrapes from head to foot,his shirt ripped to shreds, his Pak damaged almost beyond repair, his disguiseonly half in place.

He pickedup his fallen eye lens that rested at his feet and held it, looking down at itand seeing his reflection in the imitation iris. He noticed that, from hisreflection, one of his antennae had the top of it completely broken off. As forhis wig, he had no idea.

Tears were in his eyes at the pain that covered him. But as he saw Dib and Lin's tinyoutlines disappear into the dimming horizon, he smiled. And his smile stretchedall the way across his face.

"SHE'SGONE!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. He danced around with the eyelens. "Finally! I'm free! No more Lin! No more torment!" He paused."GIR!"

Gir'srobotic head popped out from inside the broken television set, which had thescreen shattered from the explosion. "Yes?"

Zim ranover to him and grabbed his head. "Gir, she's gone! SHE'S FINALLY GONE!!Let's make waffles!"

Girsquealed loudly with approval. He darted into the kitchen, followed by theslightly delirious Zim. Cooking noises could be heard from the damaged livingroom.

Lin sat with Dibs on his doorstep, looking at the stars. She was holding his hand. Her eyes were sparkling with delight.

"Isn't it amazing?" asked Dibs. "Outer space . . . there's just so much we don't know about everything that goes on up there."

Linsighed. "Yeah. All those stars, and the planets, and moons . . . it's so romantic."

Dibs looked at her, not quite understanding what she was getting at.

"So," she said to him, both of them looking at each other, "I never introduced myself. My name's Lin."

"And my name's Dibs," said Dibs.

Lins began to giggle. She laughed and laughed, somewhat evilly, as Dibs stared. He was becoming frightened. Suddenly, the laughter stopped. Lins looked happy.

"You're funny," she said. "Wanna see my collection of mood rings?"

Dibs stared at her, thinking about this. "Well . . . I guess I don't have anything else to do. What could it hurt?"

Lins smile grew bigger and bigger. She reached behind her without looking and plucked a flower from the ground. "I have something for you. . . . Wanna go to the amusement park tomorrow?"