

## Z #1

Rotterdam,  
Wednesday morning,  
sometime in the '20s.

### *Acid Green*

“Hey, Z . . . your lips are a bit purple.”

Z looks at her with surprise and reflexively touches his lips as if trying to cover them.

“I’m just a bit cold,” he remarks.

“Are you sure? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this pale.”

“I’m fine, really. I just didn’t get enough sleep last night,” he forces a comforting smile and takes a long sip of freshly made coffee.

“If you say so,” she sighs. “Have you read the news already? How many are there today?”

Z starts sketching on a small, neon green piece of paper lying on the table. “No, I haven’t, but I’m guessing around six hundred.”

“Oh,” she raises her eyebrows in naïve surprise, “that’s not such a big number.”

“No, it’s not,” Z says indifferently, spinning a pen between his fingers and observing the sharp, straight lines on the paper forming an outline of a sketchy skull, “but we’ll probably have another six hundred by tomorrow, and then another seven or eight hundred already by the weekend.”

The spinning distracts her for a moment, after which she starts reluctantly. “So, after everything that has happened in the past weeks, are you starting to see how dangerous it is?”

He thinks for a second. “There’ve been worse things.”

“Worse things, like what?” she asks, watching his fingers as they shade a miniature skull wearing an N95 mask on the neon green paper.

“I mean, it’s not the plague,” Z remarks, keeping his face utterly placid, “it’s just a flu that’s a little bit more contagious,” and continues to sketch.

“It’s not the plague?” her voice becomes irritated. “How can you say that after you also—”

“It’s not killing anyone, is it?” he says abruptly, in a tone quite unusual for him, and meets her eyes with an intense glare, momentarily diverting his attention from the drawing, “unless they’re already dying.”

“Well no, but—”

“Then I don’t see why it would be dangerous,” he returns his attention to the skull.

She fell silent for a couple of long minutes, and a light sadness briefly clouds her face.

“Have you seen this week’s reports?” her voice tentatively breaks the silence.

“No, I stopped paying attention to the reports.”

“Well. . . some patients started showing unusual symptoms. Foaming at the mouth, hypothermia, purplish discoloration of the skin,” she says to Z, carefully inspecting his unhealthily pale complexion. “Their condition has been worsening,” she takes a breath, “and the symptoms are also appearing in everyone they’ve been in close physical contact with after a few days.”

Z suddenly stops sketching and rests his eyes upon her face for a brief moment, letting his brain digest the information. “What happened to these patients?”

“Nothing. Except that all of them recovered from the virus a week ago. At least the medical experts thought they did,” she pauses in slight confusion. “It just, it doesn’t make sense. The medical staff was convinced that the virus was completely gone from their bodies.”

“How do the reports explain it?”

“They don’t say anything concrete. The medical experts think that it’s the immune system’s delayed response to the viral toxin, or that the virus has evolved to a new pathogenic state, but they’re just speculating.”

Z doesn’t respond.

“Z, I’m a bit worried,” she starts slowly, her voice softening, “last week you were also discharged from the—”

“Maybe they’re decaying,” Z cuts in.

“Decaying?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you mean?”

“Their bodies are rotting, from the virus,” an uncanny edge creeps into Z’s voice.

“Their tissue and muscles are slowly decomposing. . . their flesh will eventually liquify. . .” He takes another long sip of coffee, and swiftly puts the cup back on the table. A few coffee drops fell onto the neon green paper, fusing with the black color of ink and

deforming Z's miniature drawing. "Just like mine will, won't it?" He gives her another intense glare. "I also tested negative last week, after the treatment was finally successful. Well," a fragile, distorted smile flickers across his face, "that's what they thought at least."

"I don't—"

He doesn't let her finish. "What if I'm like one of those patients with the new symptoms?" Z asks anxiously.

"I—"

"What if I'm one of them?" he continues, his voice slightly trembling, "what if my body is rotting away, contagious, and sickening? What if you also—"

"I don't care if you're sick," she vomits the words in the middle of his sentence.

"What?"

"I don't care if you're contagious."

Z looks at her silently.

"I would rot with you."

### *Carmine*

Author's note: The sentences "I don't care if you're sick" and "I don't care if you're contagious" are lyrics from the song *I Don't Care if You're Contagious* by Pierce the Veil.