

Alex: Zoe's letter, February 24th

Okay, first things first *chica*, you left off your punch line! I didn't look ahead, because you told me not to, but it wasn't there! I almost resorted to checking the internet so I could sleep at night!

[His voice grows serious] I know you don't want to talk about whatever happened, and I'm trying to be okay with that. I guess, I just— being helpless physically, and then being helpless when I want to... help you... I want you to be okay, and if it would help to tell someone about it, someone who is removed from the situation, someone who won't judge, no matter what it is...

[Long pause]

Well, anyways. I'm here for you.

[Pause]

You don't have to record yourself for me, honestly. I mean, the way you describe it, it sounds kind of fun to receive a... voice-mail... letter? What do we call these things? **[he quickly returns to the subject at hand]** But, honestly, I wouldn't have ever thought to do this if circumstances weren't what they are.

[Pause]

Oh Zoe, nobody likes feeling like they screwed up. We all have higher standards for ourselves than anyone else does, so if we miss-- Really we're

just letting ourselves down, but it feels like everyone else can see what you see. And-- and you're terrified that if they see it the way you do, they're going to ha- dislike you. Well, let me tell you right now, that's not going to happen. It would take a hell of a lot for you to get me to hate you right now. **[His voice lightens; he's clearly teasing]** Unless, of course, that's what you're going for, in which case, you are failing spectacularly, *chica*...

[Pause]

Take, for example, Emma. She was, I'll admit, not the greatest at being a friend for a while, while she was dating Derek... and Andrew... and Kyle... anyway, she won't say it, but I think she feels kind of terrible about it. I'm pretty sure she thinks my broken wrists are her fault, when, obviously, they're *not*. Derek is the coward who went after me, she didn't sic him on me! I mean, not that I'm not enjoying the attention, but she feels like she let me down, and now it's like she'd do anything to make up for it. It's... kind of nice, actually.

I can imagine what you're going to say - that I should talk to her, tell her I don't think she's responsible, and I will, I promise. It's just kind of awkward to bring up, because she hasn't said it yet, so I don't know if I can bring it up, or if that will just make her feel worse. You're a girl— what do you think?

[Pause]

If I weren't in need of an escort practically everywhere I go, I would try to get tickets to Merchant. Unfortunately, I think Emma has something planned. She has taken it upon herself to make sure my weekend social calendar doesn't go lacking while I'm healing, and surprisingly enough she

has yet to suggest a party. I'm kind of amazed that she is willing to forego them herself to do something with me.

[Pause, laughs]

Zoe Ballard, that is exactly what I'm trying to tell you! You see, in order to eat such spicy foods, you have to build up a tolerance. You, not liking spicy foods, probably have a very low tolerance, so you'd probably be tasting the peppers for a while. Perhaps, if we build up to it slowly, starting you on something slightly less spicy... **[Laughs again]**

But if I drown in caramel, you'll have one hell of a mess to clean up, and I won't actually be living afterward!

[Pause]

I—

[Pause]

You don't—

[Pause, starts again in a rush]

Do you really think I don't have those same fears, Zoe? Hell, I didn't even tell you my gender for, what, two or three weeks? Do you think that I'm so confident in myself that I know you'll like me and want to be friends after we meet? I'm terrified that you'll just suddenly decide you can't— you don't—

you'll just decide that you're done, and that will be it. And when big changes happen, it's just that much more likely.

[he pauses, not sure if he wants to say the next part, and is obviously nervous as he does.] Do you know that I was on the verge of vomiting from nervousness right before I recorded my first voice-letter to you? It scared the crap out of me, because what if you decided that I sounded too much like Donald Duck, or Darth Vader, and you couldn't handle it anymore? I get it, I do, but Zoe, you're not alone in being scared, okay?

[Pause]

You have every right to keep whatever secrets from me that you need to, Zoe. I'll just say that you are *not* an idiot, nor an imbecile. You couldn't be and still do all the wonderful, amazing things you do. If you were an idiot, you couldn't have researched all that history for the play, or figured out all the puzzles I left for you. And if you were an imbecile, you wouldn't always know the exact right thing to say to me, when I'm—

[Pause]

So yeah, when you decide what you need, let me know. Or whatever.

[Pause]

Glad to hear you're keeping busy. I'm... slightly surprised that you aren't excited about prom. I thought it was every girl's dream to be swept off her feet by a Prince Charming, while she's wearing a ball gown. I'm pretty sure Emma has been planning prom since the second grade. She went and got

her dress months ago, back when she was going with... was it Kyle, at that point? I'm not entirely sure what she's going to do now that the latest prospect has been dumped, and she's spending so much time taking care of me.

[Pause]

I would be happy to teach you how to climb trees, but it's not a particularly graceful exercise for anyone. Perhaps we should start with a tree-house instead.

[Pause]

Well, let's see, you said your stripe was the color of the Aurora Borealis now. How about something completely different? Like, blue so dark it looks black, that would be striking. Or, if that doesn't do it for you, maybe a... neon pink. But you don't seem to be in much of a neon pink... mood right now.

[Pause]

I guess all that's left is to answer my own questions, since you posed none of your own. Um...

1) This joke is probably in incredibly bad taste, but: I told my doctor that I broke my arm in two places. He told me to stop going to those places.

2) I would say I'm interested in minority cultures, especially Native American and Mexican. That's not really an era, but we'll make it count.

3) The compliment that's sticking with me now is when you complimented my voice. Then again, for Christmas this really great friend of mine did up a whole list of compliments, so for sheer volume, I'd say that wins.

4) I love the smell of coffee.

And 5... I like to be somewhere I can watch without being seen - if I can see everyone else around me that makes me feel safest.

Okay... I think—

[Door opens in the background]

Emma: Hey Alex, are you ready to go?

Alex: Oh. Um, almost, just wrapping this up. Can we go drop it off on the way?

Emma: *Another* letter to this girl? How often do you write her?

Alex: Uh, just when she writes me, I write her back. That's how letters work, silly.

Emma: I know, but it seems like you're *always* recording something for her.

Alex: You know she's going to hear this right? I haven't figured out how to edit yet.

Emma: Really? **[Raises her voice]** Hi Zoe!

Alex: You don't have to shout, Emma, the microphone's right there. Anyway, I was almost done.

Emma: **[whining]** Aw, come on, let me say something.

Alex: ...All right, what did you want to say?

Emma: I don't know, what do you say?

Alex: I tell her stuff about what has happened to me, ask her questions... you know, typical pen pal stuff.

Emma: Ooh, do you talk about me? Does he talk about me, Zoe? Tell him he has to pass along your answers. I'll know if he doesn't, too. I don't think he'll be feeding himself anytime soon.

Alex, admonishing and embarrassed: Emma!

Emma: Oh whatever, you know it's true. So are you ready?

Alex: Just give me five minutes to wrap this up and burn it to a CD, okay?

Emma: Okay, but I'll be counting!

Alex: Yeah, yeah.

[Door closes]

Alex, apologetically: Sorry about that. I really need to figure out how to edit these things. Well, I was pretty much done anyway. Emma is taking me to go shopping for... something, I forget what, but then she promised a trip to either the bookstore or the library.

I still need to come up with a decent sign off. Good night and good luck. That's all folks. Sayonara. Tell you what, you had me tell you what color to dye your hair, why don't you tell me what I should say to end these things?

[Long, LONG pause]

Why does your last sentence sound like you think this is goodbye?