

Alex: Zoe's letter, April 14th

Sorry, this one's late again. I've been . . . I've been spending some more time with Emma, to see . . . well. Anyway, I've been busy.

[Pause]

It's so great to hear about your mom and Joe! Tell them congratulations from me, if that wouldn't be too weird. I mean, it's not like I've met them, but you've said they know about me, so, yeah.

I'm glad you talked to your mom. I think . . . I think that . . . that dealing with the situation with Thom will be good for you. And hey, you get two amazing trips out of it!

Of course my summer is cleared out, Zoe. I mean, it's not like I had that much to do anyway, so if you want me there, I *will* be there. But let's get something straight - you're not paying for *me* to go. I'll go with you, but I can pay my own way, okay?

[Pause]

[brisk and bright, covering up some nerves] Sunday afternoon it is then! Since it's coming up pretty soon here and I might not get your letter beforehand, I'll text you for details, okay? I need to know where and when I'm showing up, after all!

[Pause]

Oh good! You *do* still want to do questions. These are great!

So, one. Do banana peppers count as a condiment? If not, then I'll go with spicy mustard.

Two. *Everything*? Like, even chocolate cake and ice cream? There's nothing that I'd want to eat with *everything*. If I could have one condiment for savory and one for sweet, then I'd be golden - savory would be the spicy mustard, and sweet would be real maple syrup - not that ridiculous fake stuff like Mrs. Butterworth, that's FAR too sweet.

Three. I guess my favorite thing about San Diego is the number of parks close by? That's kind of specific to my neighborhood, but . . .

Four. Oh goodness, this is hard. Maybe I'd live in Battlestar Galactica? That doesn't seem too bad as long as you're not one of the main characters.

Five. I think I'd be a Slytherin. But not, like, a *Malfoy* Slytherin. A nice Slytherin. Like . . . Oh, I can't think of one right now, but I'm sure they exist.

Six. I think . . . well, it's not exactly advice, but I would suggest to my younger self that instead of stewing over it, he should reach out to Mom and find out what the *real* story is. Instead of just . . . you know, wallowing in . . . whatever it was."

Seven. *Demons* by Imagine Dragons is pretty relevant to my life right now, though I wouldn't say it's stuck in my head. I don't get songs stuck in my head - no musical talent, you see. I tend to get words stuck in my head more often, and there are a few phrases from *Demons* that have been chasing each other around, though, so I guess that counts. Right?

Eight. Mom and Joe should go with whatever colors *they* want, because it's *her* wedding. That said, it'd be nice if you got to wear that dress Gabe made you more than once, wouldn't it?

Nine. Pie, just because you can have more variety!

Ten. I wouldn't necessarily say you're "torturing" me, as such, because I don't de-- expect a birthday present from you, but . . . I'm not that great with secrets. I like surprises, but if I know they're coming I have trouble not ferreting out every detail before it happens.

[Pause]

It's okay that you skipped a while with the questions, Zoe, I just... I missed them! Mine tend to be more difficult, make you think, and it's nice to have some silly ones in there for a little while."

I'm sorry that . . . that you're so exhausted. I hope it gets better. I mean, I thought it would after Michelle passed, so . . . **[abrupt switch to cheerfulness]** well, I hope whatever it is, you'll feel able to share someday. Future counselor over here needs the practice!

[Pause]

I . . . it's not a bad thing that I was overwhelmed by your support, it's just . . . oh, I don't know. But thanks. If I didn't make that clear enough in the last letter, you've . . . you've been fantastic this past year, and I haven't said it enough. So . . . thank you for . . . for just all of it, okay?

[Pause]

Maybe it's a good thing I sound like Allie, since I'm looking into the same career! And I hear what you're saying - immersion is touted as a great way to learn a language. A lot of universities have language societies that have meetings where you only speak the language. I . . . I actually started going to one to help my Spanish so I could use it with Mom more. Something like that would give you a chance to be thrown in at the deep end, as you say, for little bits at a time in an environment where you *can* use English if you get really stuck. Maybe that would be better than

getting lost in the middle of the French countryside where *nobody* speaks English, you know?

[Pause]

Of course I notice when you're upset, Zoe. You *let* me notice. So, I'm here for you, okay?

[he sounds both nervous and really excited] You know what? This time I can say it - *See you soon chica*. I can't wait.