

A place in your heart

Von Aqua111

Locke dropped his bag and with a deep nasally sigh he leaned against the door of his hostel room that he had slammed shut a few seconds ago. So often Sabre had threatened to kick Locke's ass out of Haven if that was the only way to keep him from damaging his health and from completely isolating himself but he never would have expected his father to also act on his threats.

"You might not see a problem with your life but I do - I have done for years. Working yourself to exhaustion, burying your feelings, pining for your ex-wife - I just don't want to watch you suffering and wrecking yourself any longer. I could tell you so many things I want to see changed in your life but it's time for you to figure it out yourself. It's time to start owning up and facing your problems. And if forcing you out of Haven is the only way to make you do so, then be it - as much as I hate throwing my son out" - that was what Sabre had told him and he would have wanted to ignore it as usual if not the whole Brotherhood had been on his father's side this time. Being cornered by their agreement with Sabre he had no other choice.

Somehow his father must have known he would be successful that day because he already had booked a hostel room in advance. Spartan furniture suitable enough for someone who only came here to sleep but else stayed outside for the rest of the day, no TV, no other electronics, not even food service - Sabre had wanted to make sure that Locke left his room once in a while. At first the younger Guardian had pondered to take another hotel. Admittedly, checking the money he had with him he might have found out that he had the choice of either staying where he was and then also being able to buy something or booking a room in a more expensive hotel and then starving for the few days he had to stay in the city but he often neglected his body's needs and it wasn't unusual for him to stay hungry even while he was in Haven. But the main problem was that Sabre would surely find out. He respected his son's privacy and wouldn't watch Locke but there were other ways to learn about it - asking the receptionist for example.

Locke dropped onto the bed and stared at the ceiling for a while. What was Sabre expecting him to find out within just a few days in Echidnaopolis? What was he missing that his father could see?

His stomach now already hurt with hunger. For the past few hours he had tried to ignore it but without his work to get distracted with it was hard to. With a groan he got off the bed, kicked his bag that he still hadn't bothered to put away to the side,

only took his backpack with him and left the hostel to find something eatable.

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"Oh my goodness ... aren't you one of the Guardians?! Hey, wait!"

Locke only took a quick look at the tan furred young female at the other side of the street, hectically waving with her video camera, rolled his eyes and turned away. Fans or journalists - the least he needed right now. He quickly spun around again though when he noticed what she did next out of the corner of his eye. Traffic was obviously no reason for her to stop.

"What the ... are you insane, girl?!"

Locke stormed forward to push her out of the way. The collision made both stumble and fall back onto the sidewalk, behind them brakes screeched and cars honked.

"What in Aurora's name got into you?" Locke asked, his scare now slowly turning into mild anger, ignoring the crowd of curious bystanders around them.

"Do you think I wanted to miss that chance? An interview with a Guardian would really push my career and since Knuckles is somewhere in the Acorn Kingdom exactly the same time I'm on Angel Island I already was afraid I had to come away empty-handed because you other Guardians practically never leave your holes." She picked up her now a little bit damaged looking camera. "Damn, that thing was practically new. Oh well, I'll fix it when I get back to the hotel. There's nothing Aki-Ra can't do." She stuffed it and other little things that were lying scattered on the sidewalk back into her bag.

Locke raised his eyebrows. "You want to fix that? That's pretty unusual. Normally people will rather buy a new one or let it be repaired somewhere else."

She chuckled lightly. "You learn a lot if you have brothers whose favourite childhood hobby seemed to have been destroying everything they touched." Then she quickly changed topic again, "So, what about a little interview with the one who saved my life?"

Locke only forced a smile and stood up.

"Sorry, but I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone about my life now."

"And what about later?" the girl called when he walked away but he didn't turn around anymore. "Or tomorrow? Just a little interview, a few tiny questions."

Locke went back into the hostel. He hadn't found anything to eat yet but before he went to a store he wanted to get rid of that journalist. After waiting for a few minutes he was sure the coast was clear and he could hit the road again.

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With an annoyed sigh Aki-Ra threw her bag onto her bed. It could have been the perfect chance of proving that she had got what it takes to be a star journalist and not some stupid little rookie who was allowed to announce pet beauty contests at best and then it slipped out of her fingers. Oh well, she still could roam through the city looking for interesting crimes. Aki searched the bag for her electronic notebook - until she had the time to fix the camera she would have to take the lower quality camera of that instead - and was surprised to find two of them. The Guardian must have lost it and she accidentally stuffed it into her bag as well. She turned it around in her hands and bit her lower lip. It was so tempting not to turn it on and see what he had written. Being nosey was her job but that didn't mean she could simply pry into people's

personal belongings. But on the other hand this was Locke's notebook she was holding. He wasn't really the kind of guy to write down personal things and it probably only contained the results of his last experiments or sketches of electronics. With that thought she switched it on and browsed through the pages a bit until certain entries caught her eyes every now and then.

Guessing from the dating the first few must have been written shortly after his divorce. At first there were only little notes, not more than keywords, later full sentences were seen. Everything was short and fact-bound rather than emotional like written by someone who didn't know how to express his feelings but still Aki-Ra could read the pain between these lines - how much Locke still loved his ex-wife and how less he could let her go.

With a little sigh Aki turned off the notebook. A story of never-ending love - in a time of quickly fading feelings the people would have loved to hear about something like that. She had to think of her own relationships and break-ups. During the time Locke had been married she probably had five changing partners and her lovelornness might have lasted for a few weeks at worst. Living with such a pain for over a decade was unimaginable.

She shoved the notebook into her bag again. Tomorrow she would give it back - tomorrow she would have another chance to get that interview.

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Locke stepped out onto the street early in the morning - and only a second later he wished he had stayed in his room when he noticed the girl with the tan fur and black hair, probably the same as yesterday, she even wore the same coloured jeans and t-shirt. At least this time she was waiting impatiently at his side of the street.

"Listen, I told you I don't want any interviews", he only briefly said passing her by but instead of an answer she reached out a notebook and when he took it, a puzzled look on his face, she explained, "You lost that when we crashed and I accidentally took it with me. I swear I haven't peeked into it."

From his glare she could tell he didn't believe the last part at all.

"Okay, okay, let's be honest", she quickly said, raising her hands. "I read a part of it and it was ... how shall I say it?" She brushed a strand of black hair out of her face - more an absentminded gesture than because her hair was really in her sight. "I think it could become a really good story. People would love to hear the true story behind the seemingly cold and withdrawn Guardian."

"Then use what you already spied out from my notebook", Locke huffed.

"As I said, I only read part of it. Do you want me to invent something and make the rest sound as objective as your style of writing?"

"If you really want to write about me that desperately, then yes. Good day."

He turned around and wanted to walk away when Aki called after him, "Did you never have any dreams you wanted to realize?"

Locke froze in spot and stared down the street without focusing anything in particular. Yes, there had been dreams - once - but he had buried them under work a long time ago just like his feelings.

"For years I had been dreaming about being one of the star reporters taking live interviews with the hot shots but how shall I ever make that come true when my superiors don't think me capable of doing something harder than opening the doors for the real star reporters?" she continued a bit more quietly. "Having someone seen

as rarely as a Guardian in front of my camera - it would have given me a real chance." Locke still hadn't turned around and stared at the ground now. He rather wanted to be left alone than having to think about painful parts of his life. But on the other hand - could he really shatter the dreams of a young female?

"At 2 pm in that café at the other side of the street", he finally said. "But make it a fast interview because I don't want to be on camera for more than a few minutes."

A wide grin spread on Aki's face and she desperately tried not to jump into the air with a loud cheer.

"Thank you so much. I will be there and it will only be a few questions, promised."

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Since Aki had left him the choice Locke had taken a table in one of the corners of the café so he didn't need to sit in the centre of attention.

"We already met twice before and I still haven't told you my name. How impolite from me", she said with a light smile as soon as they had taken their seats. "The full name is Aki-Ra but please call me Aki. I never was a fan of dashes and double names."

She took out her camera-notebook and held it up like she wanted to read something in it.

"Now don't be shy – my notebook has never bitten someone before – and behave naturally."

The corners of Locke's mouth twitched upwards lightly. If he really behaved naturally then this would be the most silent interview ever.

"Before I start with some personal questions I would like to know why you decided to spend your time in Echidnaopolis", Aki began with her interview. "It doesn't happen too often that we see another Guardian than Knuckles outside of Haven."

Locke bit his lower lip. Great... Should he already tell the people from the beginning that his father thought he had some serious issues and needed to learn how to live? But since he also didn't want to tell a lie he decided for a half-truth.

"Actually it was Sabre's idea. He thought I could need a break from work."

That was only a tiny part of the whole story but at least no one could say it was a downright lie.

His answers to the other questions remained as short and vague as the first one and his gaze often trailed off nervously. He only had agreed because he didn't want to destroy a young female's dream but with someone feeling so uneasy like him and having problems talking to a stranger - especially one with a camera - her chances for a better career surely wouldn't improve. Locke felt a little bit guilty for that but what could he do? He couldn't simply change his whole attitude for one interview.

Aki also noticed his insecurity, particularly when it came to questions about his relationship with Lara-Le which should have been the main core of her reportage.

"Are you okay? Shall we make a break?" she asked putting down the notebook.

"Might be a good idea?" Locke replied now feeling a bit of his tenseness fade as soon as the camera was gone. "Though, I doubt I will be more helpful afterwards."

The light brown female gave him a weak smile.

"At least you behave naturally. Maybe you feel better when I ask more about your work as Guardian first and the personal questions later. Let's give it a try. There's one thing a lot of people already wanted to know. Why do you hardly ever use the chaos force for battling or defending?"

Yes, why? He had never really thought about it but now it seemed to him as if even that had something to do with the mess in his life. In his youth he still used it as he had been taught but then after he had started Knuckles' training - and soon after his divorce - he more and more preferred close combat. Had something inside of him rejected being a Guardian after blaming his duties for Lara-Le leaving him? Or what other reasons could there be?

"Because the Chaos force is too much of a defensive force", he heard himself answer while staring at the table. "You attack from afar - you defend yourself from afar. But why should I protect myself from death when nothing protects me from life. An enemy can kill only once but life kills a little bit day by day."

Slowly Aki put her camera down again. The Guardian had spoken in the same tone as before but he had sounded way less nervous and it was also the first time he really had talked about what bothered him instead of giving an evasive or vague answer. This question seemed to have triggered something buried deep inside of him.

His own answer surprised Locke but it sounded like it was the truth. He wasn't suicidal and seeking a fast death in battle, not at all, or else he wouldn't have perfected defending himself in close combat. But preferring this kind of tactic instead of the more effective Chaos defence was like hiding behind his work and persuading himself that this was the way he wanted to live and felt happy with instead of dealing with his problems. Letting life slowly kill him - was that what Sabre wanted to prevent him from? But how should he find a way out of it?

Aki watched Locke's inner monologue with concern. She had always known that the youngest Brotherhood member was the most reserved of them all but never would have thought about the battles that were really going on deep inside of him. Taking a deep breath she said, "Before I only saw you as shy but after this little interview and especially the last statement I rather think you seriously need help."

"And you sound like my father. Or do you want to say that I appear to be a psycho?"

"No, that's not what I meant. But I can see you have some problems and who else will be able to help you break out of the vicious circle of sadness than a true master of happiness." A wide grin spread on her face. "Everyone has the right to be happy and you're not a hopeless case either. What would you say about that? We meet daily, visit some public places or just walk around and explore the city and while I try to teach you some fun and how to be among other people you will accept my camera in return and we continue that interview once in a while - with more self-confidence. Is it a deal?"

Locke only had glanced up shortly but now returned his gaze towards the table. He knew that he couldn't deal with everything all alone but did he really want to let someone else in on his problems?

"We will start slow with less crowded places of course and I will focus on your well-being rather than on my interview", Aki persisted.

"Why do you even think that a lot of people would be interested in hearing about my life as a Guardian?" Locke asked mainly to stall his final decision. "You could also have asked Knuckles instead. I'm sitting in front of the screens a lot more but else our duties are the same."

"Actually I only asked about your everyday life whenever you started feeling too uncomfortable with questions about Lara-Le", Aki replied with an apologetic look.

"Your relationship with her and your emotions during the decade after your divorce should have been the core of my interview. I think people can learn something about love from you."

For a few seconds the Guardian blinked at her dumbfounded before he brought out, "They can learn WHAT from me? Girl, I think you got the wrong guy. I have done wrong about everything possible in my relationship so what do you expect the people should learn from me?"

"At least you still know true love. Look at me. I'm half your age and I had more lovers than you can count on your fingers. To people of my generation it's the start of a relationship if you feel like you could want to sleep more often with your one-night-stand and love is shown by having as much sex as possible. And then as soon as the smallest problems appear we break up - quickly before the partner can do it. In the worst cases this happens via text message, sending a friend to tell your partner or simply by showing up with a new pickup. Well, maybe not all people are like that but ... it happens way too often. And then there's you. You might not have done everything right in his relationship but at least Lara meant more to you than an object of sexual desire. How long did the marital crisis between you two last before the divorce? I'm sure you tried to make up quite often and not immediately went your separate ways. And even now, ten years later, you still love her and there's no place for another woman in your heart."

She paused to wait for Locke's response but when he kept his gaze lowered, his mind occupied with an inner fight, she continued, "But as much as people can learn from you about really deep love you should also have the chance to find happiness again. I'm not telling you to forget Lara but keep the time with her a beloved memory only and open your heart for new things instead of pining for her forever."

The Guardian kept his arms crossed in front of his chest and his eyes now wandered off to the notebook.

"Your camera..." he suddenly said.

Aki quickly raised her index finger.

"Uh-uh, no more evasiveness. I want your decision now. Do you accept my help or will you keep fighting all alone?"

"Have you not been able to repair it?" Locke continued. "I can give it a try if you want to."

With a deep sigh Aki dragged the camera out of her bag.

"Fine, if you want to sleep over your decision then do it but you could have said so instead of stalling it. Here, I tried, but I don't think I have the right tools with me. At least you now have to meet me tomorrow if you want to give me my camera back. I will wait at your park."

Locke raised his eyebrows.

"I have a park?"

"Well, yes, it's named after you. You should really get out more often."

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With excitement Locke examined the opened camera. He had been away from electronics for two days but it rather felt like two decades. Only his fear of crowds had prevented him from storming the next electronic store. How did a junkie feel when getting another shot after a few days without drugs? Probably not that different.

While he was working the thoughts were spinning through his head. What should he do? He knew that he needed at least a bit of help but should he really admit it? And was there even hope for him? Could Aki-Ra achieve in something his father had unsuccessfully tried before? Sure, she was more persistent and offensive while Sabre only had hinted on Locke's problems and then left him alone until his patience finally snapped and he kicked his son's ass out of Haven but Sabre had years and she a bit more than a week.

Probably it was better to postpone his decision until tomorrow to see what plans she had in mind for him.

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Gladly Aki-Ra took the camera into her arms.

"You really could repair it? Wow, you must be some kind of genius."

Locke smiled shyly.

"Well, with the right tools about everything is repairable. So, uhm, what are you up to today?"

She chuckled.

"Oh my, you sound as if I have planned something evil with you. Have you always been like that? I doubt you would have been so reluctant if Lara-Le had asked you back then."

The Guardian quickly glanced at the camera but the way she still held it in front of her belly it was hard to tell if that thing was on or not.

"But she never asked, mainly because I hardly ever took the time for ... simply being with her. My duty always came first."

Aki tilted her head in a wondering manner.

"But why? If I loved someone that much that I couldn't forget him for years to come then I also would have spent time with him as much as possible."

"Because I was..." he began but then stopped.

'...raised that way', he had wanted to continue but was that really the truth? Sabre had loved Jenna-Lu from the bottom of his heart and also showed it to her as good as possible while having Guardian duties too. Locke on the other hand was fixated on not just doing everything by the book but also doing it better. And why? Just because of a dream about a possible future? Or because he wanted to prevent mistakes his ancestors had made - by making new and more interesting mistakes? He never would have denied that he had loved Lara but he never realized how much he actually did until she was gone.

"Mobius to Locke, are you still there or have we already lost you?"

Aki-Ra had leaned forward and brought her face only centimetres away from his. Locke winced and slowly shook his head.

"No ... I was just completely lost in my thoughts."

"Yeah, I've noticed that. Maybe I should stop bombarding you with questions and better move on to the funnier part."

She took off her backpack, knelt down to search in it and dragged out a frisbee.

"Yesterday I asked myself what we should do in the park - something that is fun, wants you to stay outside with me for a little longer than just a few minutes and that doesn't involve other people - and then I thought of this. It's probably years ago since

you played that for the last time with your son but I don't think I have to explain it." With a smile she jumped up and ran a few metres away, the disc in her hands. Had he ever played frisbee with his son at all? He couldn't remember anymore but it was very likely he never did. A frisbee bouncing off his arm quickly brought him back into reality again.

"You shall catch it, silly", Aki-Ra laughed.

Locke shoved his thoughts aside and picked up the disc. Pondering over his past was something he could also do when he was back in his room but for now he only wanted to be left alone by them.

"Hey, didn't know you also have teeth", Aki teased when she sat in the grass side by side, taking a break after hours of playing. "At least I've never seen you with such a grin on your face."

"I remember smiling a few times since we met", Locke objected.

"Yeah, forced or little shy smiles but never that grin. Care for another round to make it even wider or shall we call it a day?"

"I'm drained", Locke simply answered and leaned back into the grass. "But I'm sure you already have made up your plans what to do with me tomorrow."

"Oh yes", she said, voice playfully changed as if she wanted to let him in on her plans of world domination. "This time you will be among people, likely a lot of them, but they won't see you and you also won't pay much attention to them, not just because it's too dark but rather because you all are distracted by the more important things in front of you. I'll take you to the cinema."

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"Do you often watch movies?" Locke asked when they left the building.

"Oh, sometimes when they sound good enough. The ones I really like I'm going to see more often as long as they are still shown at the cinema and this one can definitely be one of them. How did you like it?"

"It sure was interesting", he answered. There had been way too much action - what else to expect from a movie of the action-comedy genre - and he also didn't get all of the jokes but he couldn't deny it had been fun to watch. A bunch of superheroes rescuing the world from an insane god and a lot of aliens - somehow it reminded him of the past of this island, only with Guardians instead of superheroes and with Dark Legionnaires or other enemies instead of aliens. And Enerjak as the insane god. It was possible that the producers really had taken Guardians as their example. If someone had asked him about a favourite character in this movie, he definitely would have chosen the doctor - the shy silent genius with a monster living inside that only showed up under certain circumstances.

"Are you hungry too?" Aki asked after they had been walking through the quiet side-streets for a while. "Popcorn doesn't fill the stomach for too long."

"Uh ... yes, kind of."

She had chosen the same café they had their first interview in. The camera had been casually put on the table where it also remained the whole time. Once in a while Locke shot it a glance. That thing had only been likeable when he had to repair it. But if it was on or not, Aki didn't really lead an interview. They made some small talk only, she told him a bit about her life in Albion and her job, he told a bit more about his past in

return.

He nearly felt a bit sad when they said goodbye to each other later that evening in front of his hostel and he watched her disappear into the crowd. Talking to someone who wasn't a member of the family, Constable Remington or an ambassador of one of the towns on Mobius Prime was something he hadn't done anymore in decades. And it was better than playing something or watching a movie.

But now she was gone and before he could see her again he was left alone with the thoughts about his past life that always returned when he couldn't drown them in work. Maybe the receptionist had an old telephone for him that he could take apart and ... build a washing machine out of it. At that thought Locke had to chuckle a bit. But seriously, if he wanted to keep his mind busy and there was nothing to work on for him then something to read might be okay as well.

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Why she had chosen one of the main streets to take a walk with him was no mystery to him. Him moving around in larger crowds - it was all part of her little 'therapy'. Still he would have preferred to stay on the side-streets. She had offered him to take her hand or at least her arm in case he wouldn't be able to move on anymore but he had declined it. At this time of the day the street wasn't too busy yet so his nervousness stayed at bay. Besides, if he needed her aid now already then how would he be able to deal with places where more people were? He wanted to get his fears under control as soon as possible. If anything then the distraction by talking with her was enough.

Now he finally learned to know the metropolis of Echidnas. So often he had been gliding over it or seen the streets via surveillance screens but in his whole life he hadn't walked so many streets as he had done within this week. It was a shame that one of the Guardians knew less places in Echidnaopolis than a girl from Albion who probably only had been in the city during her holidays.

After what seemed to be many hours on the main streets Aki decided to turn to a small side street again - or rather a back street between the large residential houses with nothing more than trash bins in it and fire escape stairs on the outer walls of the buildings.

"I think you had enough stress for one day", Aki said climbing over the barrier at one of the stairs. "Now you will get the chance to see something beautiful as well."

"Are we even allowed to get up there?" Locke asked.

"Why not? I had been doing that quite often whenever I had been in the city and no one ever stopped me."

The Guardian doubted that things were simply added to the allowed-list just because no one ever noticed it when you had been doing them but he followed her anyways up to the rooftop.

From up there they had a great view over the city. It was nothing that Locke hadn't seen already but again rather from gliding over it, passing it by in one of the jets or on the screens and never by just standing side by side with someone on the top of a building.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Aki asked and laughed when the wind ruffled up her hair.

Locke had taken a look over Echidnaopolis and down the building then turned and

watched Aki-Ra bending over the balustrade the fingers of one hand tightly wrapped around the straps of the camera tangling off her shoulder.

'To her even the wind in her hair is fun.'

A slight smile went over Locke's face. He still wasn't sure what Sabre had expected him to find out in the city but he was happy with the little things he had achieved within these few days - going outside and doing things he would have avoided but which turned out to be not that bad after all, even if he needed some kind of personal trainer for it. And he also had found someone to call a friend. Her bubbly personality had been annoying at times but he had learned to deal with it and now nearly liked it. The tenseness as soon as she asked him if he felt able to answer a few more questions about his life with Lara-Le returned but even that was weaker than in the beginning.

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The two Echidnas stood at the entrance of the big shopping centre. It was Saturday which meant a lot of people had a lot of time to go shopping. Locke winced whenever someone squeezed pass him to get in or out of the building.

"I know, this really is a crash course for you", Aki said. "But I promise there will be a reward at the end and after that we will visit a bit less crowded places again. Somewhere on the last floor there's an electronic shop and if you manage to get there I will buy you a gift. Since I also never have been in here I won't be able to lead you anywhere so we both have to find our way together first. But I also don't force you to go anywhere. If you think it's too much for you just say so and I will get you out."

"A gift from an electronic store?" Locke asked. "Sabre wouldn't be too happy if he found out that I improved within the last few days only to have a relapse today because I got something to keep myself busy with."

Aki waved a hand.

"Ah, Sabre shall go cleaning the roof gutter. I'll continue to make sure you will have other things to do during the day and can only work on your stuff in the evening and if you really backslide then I can tell him it's all my fault."

Locke chuckled. "Sabre shall go what?"

"Hey, I made you laugh and that in the middle of the crush. Now if that's not some major improvement."

With a little smile still on his face Locke turned around, took a few deep breaths and started walking. His breath went faster than it should have but he also was eager to reach the store on the last floor and not to look like a scaredy-cat.

"Do you want to take my hand?"

Aki touched his arm.

"Just so we don't lose each other in the crowd", she quickly added.

"Yes, so we don't lose each other", he mumbled and gladly took it. Feeling her hand in his gave him a bit more courage, enough to make it to the store.

Eyes wide opened Locke wandered around between the shelves. This was heaven, only much better. He nearly had forgotten about the other people in the shop though he still didn't want to let go of Aki's hand.

He took a few radios off the shelf and examined them. They were pretty cheap which was good since he didn't want Aki to pay a fortune just because he had made it through a shopping centre. Besides he could also work with scrap - the receptionist

had really found an old telephone and Locke had managed to make it run away and hide somewhere in the lobby within an hour - so he didn't really need the most expensive stuff.

"We can now find a place where we can eat or just wander around", Aki suggested after they had successfully made it out of the shopping centre again. "You have mastered your crash course and I don't want to push you to anything else today."

"And what plans do you have for me tomorrow?" Locke asked hoping it was nothing too straining again.

"Oh yes, of course", Aki said with excitement. "Try not to do too much with your radio that evening or else you will have to walk around alone outside to find something else to keep you busy because we won't meet before the evening. I wanted to go to the Le Freak with you. It's some kind of dance club but since it's not the newest anymore and a bit further outside of Echidnaopolis less people visit it so you don't have to be afraid that you are stuck on the dance floor."

Locke raised his brows. "A dance club? That's something for the younger people. Look at me. Do you really think they will even let in someone as old as me?"

"Yes, I'm looking at you", Aki said. "But all I can say is, if I hadn't known it better I would have said you are Knuckles' older brother. Most of you Guardians look young and you are no exception."

"And even if I look young - I can't dance at all."

The young female laughed.

"You rather would have stood out if you could. Just trust me. Or have I ever done something you didn't like in the end?"

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When Locke left the hostel in the evening he nearly wouldn't have recognised Aki-Ra waiting for him outside. The tan fur and black hair had stayed the same but now she wore a summer dress. Not even the usual camera was with her. Being used to see her in jeans and t-shirt only Locke had nearly forgotten that somewhere inside the little tomboy there was still a young woman.

"I know that I look strange", she answered his stare with a wide grin, "but I thought now was the time for something fancier. When else will I get the chance to wear that? Come, we need to take the subway train to get there."

Despite its age and location the Le Freak was still visited pretty well, though not enough to make Locke feel too uncomfortable - especially not after several hours in the shopping centre.

He barely had the time to look around when Aki already dragged him to the dance floor because a song she loved had started. Soon he had found out that dancing in a club wasn't in fact dancing to most people but rather moving to the rhythm any way they liked. At first his own moves were still pretty stiff but the fun Aki had while dancing was contagious. No one was watching them or even cared what they were doing so why bother?

Once in a while they also returned to the bar to get something to drink. Locke never had been a fan of alcoholic drinks but also Aki preferred soda over cocktails.

"I want to enjoy this evening, not forget about it or drown it in alcohol", was her explanation.

And then she repeatedly dragged him away from the bar and to the dance floor again.

When they walked to the subway station hours later Locke completely had lost track on time. It was dark outside but he couldn't tell if it was closer to midnight or to the morning.

Aki-Ra had to take another train than Locke to get back to her hotel but he at least wanted to wait for her train together with her.

"Dear Aurora, I can't remember ever having that much fun", Locke laughed while wandering down the station. He felt exhausted and so full of energy the same time.

"Never thought I would ask this but when can we do that again?"

"As soon as possible, I hope", Aki-Ra answered with a weak smile while leaning against the wall.

Locke noticed the sudden change in her mood.

"What's wrong? Didn't you like it?"

"This night was perfect and I really loved it but..." she hesitated for a moment, "I think I have a serious problem." When Locke stared at her wonderingly she continued, "I have a huge crush on you."

The Guardian's mouth opened but he had no idea what to reply. Beside them a train arrived at the station but no one took too much notice of it. Slowly Aki-Ra had come closer until she stood about an arm length away from Locke.

"If I kissed you now what would you do? Would you back away? Or just stand there and let everything happen?"

"I don't know", Locke silently mumbled, not able to take his eyes off her.

She waited for a few more seconds then she closed the gap between them, put her hands on his shoulders and gave him a kiss. At first Locke really stood like frozen and simply let it happen but then he closed his eyes, shyly put his hands on her hips and leaned into the kiss.

When they broke it a while later the usual smile had returned on her face.

"You didn't run away, I see."

"Maybe because I..." he started but then only shook his head, "I don't know." He nodded at the next arriving train. "Don't miss your ride."

Instead of taking a train Locke had decided to walk back. He needed the time and the fresh air to clear up his mind. He liked Aki, more than he ever would have admitted, but there also was this nagging little feeling inside of him that he was betraying Lara-Le. It was stupid - Lara was happily remarried and if she found out that Locke was in love with another female she would rather be glad that he wasn't pining for her anymore - but loving someone else still felt so wrong.

'Besides she's way too young for you', he tried to tell himself. It was true that he was much older but in fact no one would care as long as he didn't look too old for her.

Maybe he should stay away from her for the rest of the time they were in Echidnaopolis. It was best for both of them.

'Oh yes, of course, run away from your feelings just like you always have', a sarcastic little voice said inside of his head. 'Love would have finally found you again and you want to drown it out before it gets the slightest chance to grow.'

"It's not love, it's just ... a little bit of affection..." Locke said weakly.

'But it can grow.'

"And then? She only stays here for a few more days and then returns to Albion. Why should I open my heart if I know exactly that I will be alone again soon?"

A small group of passing by revellers gave him strange looks when he started talking to himself but he barely noticed them.

'Albion is not in another world. There are enough means of communication and neither of you is a prisoner of their hometown. She will surely find enough reasons to return to Echidnaopolis. And Sabre will go dancing on the streets if he heard you want to do your job outside of Haven, maybe even away from Angel Island sometimes.'

Locke only slowly shook his head. He didn't know what to do or even what he felt for her. But still one thing was for sure - he couldn't get rid of that feeling that he wanted to be close to her again.

Half of the next day Locke spent lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. Aki-Ra was probably still asleep and would come around later in the afternoon. There was no way she would stay away from him on purpose. He on the other hand had barely found sleep.

He knew where her hotel was located. Should he be the one to pick her up for a change? Not as long as he still was afraid of his feelings and of how he would react when he saw her again...

Not even an hour later the receptionist called him because a young lady was waiting for him in the lobby.

His fears about his reaction were washed away when she ran over to him as soon as he appeared in the lobby and pulled him into a stormy hug which he lightly returned.

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For the next few days not too much changed. They still visited a lot of different places throughout and around the city but now it felt less like a therapy, rather like they both wanted to spend as much time as possible with each other. The camera was barely seen anymore. Aki claimed she already had enough video material to make a nice documentation of it but Locke rather presumed she wanted to allow them a bit more privacy. There happened not much more than hugs and occasional little kisses but only being close to her was all that mattered to Locke. Thoughts of Lara-Le still bothered him but as much as he had tried to hide his new feelings before he now tried to push the old ones behind.

Too soon it was there - the last day of Aki-Ra's time in Echidnaopolis. Their evening and part of their night they had spent at the Le Freak again. When they walked back to the train station it had started to rain.

"Ugh, my station is half an eternity away from the hostel and I don't have an umbrella", Locke said. "I definitely won't need a shower today since I will look as if I swam home anyways."

"Well, thank goodness my hotel is right in front of a station", Aki said. "Hey, why don't you stay with me for that last night?" She laughed when she saw the expression on his face. It was invisible thanks to his red fur but she was sure his cheeks had turned bright red by now. "Don't worry. There's a sofa in it so you won't have to sleep in the same bed. All I want is to have you with me for a little longer until we are separated again."

'You are betraying her.' The unwished thought burned his way through Locke's mind and this time it unfortunately wasn't the sarcastic little voice from a few days ago. Though he felt guilty he tried to ban the thoughts on Lara and nodded in agreement.

It was a nice little room, rather made for living in there than Locke's hostel shelter. "Sorry for that chaos", Aki apologised when she dimmed the lights to create a more comfortable atmosphere and sat down on the sofa beside him. "I wanted to pack but now that can also wait until tomorrow morning."

The Guardian didn't reply. Just thinking about the next morning made his guts twist. For a little while they only listened to the silent rain outside then Aki leaned in closer, hesitated for a moment - a short time she wanted to give him to make up his mind - and then kissed him.

Though Locke returned the kiss and moved his hands behind her back to drag her even closer, inside of him his feelings fought a war. Her fingers had trailed down his shoulders lightly opening his coat in the progress and were now on his chest. He wanted more of her and the same time couldn't allow himself to go further.

"I don't want to go too far and do anything you might regret later on", he said breathlessly when they broke their kiss for a moment.

"I doubt I will", she only answered before their lips locked again.

Locke's hands already wandered on their own, through her black hair, over her back. By now it was too late to draw back and he also wasn't too sure if he wanted anymore.

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Placing a gentle kiss on sleeping Locke's cheek Aki-Ra carefully stood up and wandered around in the room. He really had kept his word and hadn't gone to the furthest. What they did could have better been described as making out followed by a long time of just lying in each others arms until they had dozed off. But while Locke had slept in deeply Aki couldn't stay asleep for too long.

What had she awaited? That she could really get him to fall in love with her that easily? It was hard to tell what Locke felt for her. Maybe he really liked her more than he wanted to admit but all this time she knew he was suppressing the still strong feelings for his ex-wife. He had tried his best to hide them but even now she had noticed his little hesitations and his inner fight. With someone like Lara there was no place in his heart for anyone else.

Aki felt a sob in her throat and vigorously wiped over her eyes. She hadn't cried anymore since she had been a little child so why should she start with it now just because of some guy? She had had so many flirts and changing partners so why did it bother her so much that she couldn't have one of them instead of moving on like usual?

A bit of fresh air might have been good right now. Leaving a note for Locke behind so he wouldn't be worried if he woke up while she still was gone she left the room.

The rain drenched her fur and clothes while she walked up and down the empty street. She didn't know how long she actually had been outside but after a while she heard someone coming closer. Turning around she saw it was Locke, about as wet as she.

"You will catch a cold if you wander around in the rain", he silently said and took a closer look at her. "Why are you looking so sad? Please don't be. I love you better with that smile and it's enough if one of us had been in a permanent gloomy mood most of his life."

Aki tried to smile but the corners of her mouth only twitched a little bit.

"I can't."

"There's nothing Aki-Ra can't do - these were your words, remember? You were able to get me to do so many things I never would have tried otherwise within just a few days so what is bothering you so much that you can't even smile anymore? "

"There's one thing I couldn't do", she said saddened. "I couldn't get you to fall in love with me."

For a moment they both remained silent then Locke said, "For ten years I have regretted bygone times and it is hard to get out of it within not even two weeks. But if you have achieved something aside of showing me how to be happy again then it is getting a place in my heart."

When his lips gently touched her forehead Aki looked up and this time she could read it in his eyes how serious he was about what he had said. A little smile wandered back onto her face.

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In the late morning Locke and Aki-Ra stood at the airport for their last goodbye.

"You have thanked me quite often for not stopping to be annoying at the beginning and wanting to change your life", Aki said with a silent chuckle. "But I also need to thank you for teaching me that love can mean more than just making out, having a lot of sex and going straight for another one as soon as you ditched your last partner."

"I taught someone something about love?" Locke asked. "I can't remember anyone ever had said that to me before."

"Yes, in your own silent way you did."

"What do you think when we will be able to see each other again?"

"Oh, don't worry, Echidnaopolis is such a big city where so many exciting stuff can happen, it would be a big surprise if Albion doesn't want its own reporters there once in a while. In two or three weeks I'm sure I will be back."

Locke gave her a last kiss on the forehead and watched her disappear into the crowd. It might still need some time until he got over Lara-Le completely but the feeling of guilt already had grown weaker. Maybe he was finally ready to start into a new life.