

The Cup of life

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Kapitel 1: Cup of chaos

"For a land of sun it's rainy quite often", Tandrak muttered, tilted back his head and looked at the grey sky. There was just slight drizzle but a moist fur didn't feel that much better than a wet one. "What a great start..."

"Aw, don't be such a pessimist." Layton patted his back. "It's just the arrival day so we still have time. I bet as soon as we start playing there will be so much sun and hot weather that you will curse the sky another time."

"Now that also doesn't sound too optimistic to me."

It was just a short distance they had to walk to their quarters but they met a lot of other teams on their way and many dedicated fans who already wanted to see their heroes and buy their tickets early enough.

"Hey, mateys, good to see ye again."

Ol' Dash approached them. A few meters behind the rest of the Krawk Island team just seemed to have noticed that their former captain was missing and walked over to the Darigan team as well.

"Ah, grandfather Dasher", Layton said with a grin, "How's retirement going?"

"Well, let's just say I got bored and so I took over the role as trainer for this year. Ye can be sure I don't want to watch another cup of winners curse. Hope our rookie is as good as she was during training time."

Now the others were there as well and Hale dragged Tandrak into a quite rough hug.

"Glad to have ye back", he whispered into the Gelert's ear.

"Me too", was Tandrak's answer.

They couldn't hug for too long else it would have looked suspicious. Their fifth Altador Cup and their fourth year - for such a long time they had been together and still no one knew about it. No one should know. It would have been the greatest scandal in the Cup history, could even affect their careers. Together with another female player - yes, but not with another male.

"Hey, what's going on there?" Tormo suddenly said and nodded to the entry to the quarters.

The big place before their quarters always had been a good place for meeting and greeting old friends from other teams but this more and more growing crowd was just ridiculous. It looked like they all were staring at one of the walls, all at the same spot.

"Wait there, I'll take a look", Dasher said and walked over to the crowd. "'scuse me, mateys, Ol' Dash can't see a thing."

Some people made place for him and only a few seconds later he returned with a sheet of paper in his hands, looking like he had paid a visit to Davey Jones' locker.

"There were about twenty of them hanging on the wall, one beside another as if the people who put it there thought we were too stupid to read it if there was just one. I don't know what has gone wrong with the Altador Cup committee but - to say it politely - I think a clown has joined them." He looked down at the paper and started summing up what he just has found out. "The players are now only allowed to move in straight lines on the field, each turn must be made in a perfect 90 or 45 degree turn." To the confused gazes of some of the people around him he explained, "Just imagine ye're standing in a giant chess game and want to jump from one field to another. The

committee members think the game would be less confusing to watch for the audience. That sounds as if we just have idiot watching our games. But that's not the only thing new. Instead of catching the Yooyu in flight or slightly tackling your opponent so he might loose his Yooyu you are now allowed to ram him, punch him, kick him, whatever necessary to get the ball from him."

"What?" Tandrak shouted.

"This isn't a game of honour anymore if some people really do that", some Shenkuu player standing near them threw in.

"That would be a battlefield if we all do that. So much for easier to watch for the audience", Layton said.

"Also the goal is no taboo zone anymore for the rest of the players", Dasher continued with a voice as if he wished someone would jump in front of him and tell him everything was just an April fool's joke, "Players can literally walk into the goal. And if the the goalie has caught the Yooyu ye're allowed to race over to him and do whatever ye want to get the ball back and score it, even if ye've to do it over the knocked-out goalie's body."

"Can I retire as well? Immediately?" Reshar's voice was heard.

"Oh please", Hale huffed, "Who on Neopia would play like that? No team has hooligans as members."

"There might be ROOligans but no hooligans", another team member stated.

Dasher suddenly laughed but it rather sounded bitter than amused. "They really want us to take steroids. Seriously, this isn't a sport anymore. They call them power-ups and each player can freely decide if he wants them or not but they highly recommend them so that we all have the same chances."

"How great ... one year and they decide to make everything turn to the worst", Layton hissed, "Are there any other idiotic things they are doing this year."

"At least nothing concerning the teams directly", the Krawk sighed resigned, "They just want to open up the whole Altador Cup even more to the public. Fans are allowed to look behind the scenes which means they can visit everything – even the Yooyu pen or the locker rooms – but at least only when there are no games."

"Let's just hope that there won't be any hooligans among the fans. I want to return to a still okay looking locker room. And I also don't want to be the one a panicking Fire Yooyu tries to hide on."

Around them the other teams were raging about the news, the Pirates and Draconians just shared grim gazes. They all hated the new rules but what else could they do after the decisions were already made?

"They at least could have told us in advance when there was still enough time to change something", Layton finally said, "Alright, maybe we should go now. After we aren't allowed to do our old moves anymore we will have to make up a few new tactics. No matter what, we'll prove them that we're a power team that can take up any kind of challenge."

"Now that's the right attitude", Dasher said, "Me and my mateys will have to make up new plans as well. See ye soon ... maybe at Krawk Citadel."

Tandrak and Hale shared a gaze and sighed in unison. The first day they saw each other after many months and then something like that had to happen. The Cup was still lasting for a long time; there were still so many days to be together, so many nights to share with each other. But then again it also was a long time for other things that could go wrong.

Kapitel 2: Memories

“Goaaaa! It’s now 2-0 for Krawk Island and there are only a few minutes left to play”, the voice of the stadium announcer echoed over the field.

Tandrak was returning to his starting position, panting heavily. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. The sun was burning down merciless. This couldn’t be possible. Krawk Island was an important match to keep their position; otherwise they could fall down three or four ranks if Kreludor, Tyrannia, Virtupets or Terror Mountain won their own games on the same day. The lesser three had gotten incredible good this year. But Hale proved that he really was the game’s greatest goalkeeper ever.

“Will the Draconians still get at least one point or will they have to leave with nothing at all? And the next ball iiiiiiis ... a Fire Yooyu. Hawkshanks on the ball, gets tackled by Vickles. Oh, come on, isn’t anyone of you two ever trying the new fighting possibilities?”

Slowly all of the other teams had started to take advantage of the new “hooligan rules”, even the honourable ninjas of Shenkuu and the normally oh so gentle Faeries. Only Darigan and Krawk Island decided to play fair.

“Vickles gets blocked by Collibridge. Krawk Island on the ball. Oh, that doesn’t look too good. She runs, avoids Frein’s block, shoots aaaaand... Great catch, Collifey! A pass to Frein, now to Shaye.”

Tandrak was storming over the field, just cursed that using his wings was still against the rules or else he would have flown. There was no way the power team Darigan would give up and go down without a single point. A fire was burning in his eyes and it was not just the reflection of the Yooyu. He aimed for the goal and shot as hard as he could. Hale jumped, his hands missed but the Yooyu hit his head instead jumped off and landed in the net.

“Goal! A goal in the last few seconds!”

The referee’s shrill whistle sounded over the field. Tandrak was just standing there staring at the ground. It had needed some time but now it was fully sinking in and hitting him like a bad shot Mutant Yooyu. They had lost. Lost. He was waiting for the same anger to grow inside of him like he had felt after that match against Meridell or at least a bit of sadness but there was nothing. Just this plain emptiness. Slowly he walked over to his team mates. Hale and Layton were shaking hands, complimenting for a great match. The Bori had flattened his left ear where the Yooyu had hit him. The fur there looked singed. Tandrak turned away his gaze. He now felt sorry for his heated rage earlier.

When the Gelert left the stadium Hale was standing outside waiting for him. He slightly pressed a sleeping Snow Yooyu against the left side of his head and his ear. Tandrak stared at him for a while then he asked, “Why haven’t you let the paramedics take care of that.”

“Blah, never needed damn doctors and now also won’t. Ice will do the job as well and that one was the only icy thing that didn’t melt away immediately in that heat. I hope I can borrow it for some time.”

Silently they were waking through the streets for a while. Now that the game’s adrenaline rush was over Tandrak could feel the anger and pain coming up. Why couldn’t they get just one more ball pass Hale?

"Hey, cheer up, it was just one game", the Bori said when he noticed the other's grim look.

Tandrak stopped all out of sudden. "One game? Just one game? We already have lost against Meridell and have you noticed how good the former underdogs have become this year? We will stumble down into a pre-winners curse if we don't take it serious and let our guards down now."

The Yooyu on Hale's head woke up and now gave Tandrak a dirty look.

"Heck, get down. That wasn't what I meant. But don't ye think ye're taking the whole shit too serious. Remember, it's just a game, not a battlefield."

"Oh, so that's why you led your team to doom last year, huh?" Tandrak shot out, "Can't be taken seriously if the whole thing is only a game, huh, *captain?*" The last word he nearly spitted out. "Listen, I don't need your cheer-up-shit. I don't need anything. Just leave me alone with everything."

First Hale looked at him surprised and also a bit hurt, then his gaze darkened. "Alright, if that's what ye want..." He turned tail and left. Left Tandrak who was still shaking with anger standing there alone.

For a few seconds the Gelert felt like just slamming his fist into a wall but now after Hale was gone his anger slowly faded and he realized what he just had said. Why did he let his anger get out of control that way? He wished this all was just a nightmare and he would wake up in his bed in a few minutes. But no, it was cruel reality. They had lost the game and now he also had hurt and turned down his lover, the only one who could have gotten him out of his depressions at least a bit. He hit his head against the wall. Dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit!

"Wow, first our worst enemies and now also the Krawks. Two losses within such a short time by such a power team. Now that's really a reason to slam your head against a wall."

Tandrak stopped and stared at the wall for a second. There was something familiar about this voice. He turned his head and tried to focus his a bit blurry gaze on the Darigan Lupe who was standing next to him. Then he made a few steps back in surprise.

"T-Terr? Is that really you?"

"Aw, how sweet. The ball star finally remembers about his long forgotten companion in misery", the other one said in a sarcastic tone, "Seems like fame really makes you forget about people who once were important to you."

"No, I didn't. As soon as I returned to the Citadel and it was clear I would be part of the team I was searching for you but all I heard was that no one had seen you for a long time. I thought you fled like I did or that you were dead."

"And you didn't think about the possibility that I might have grown up and found a job as well? Something that could get me off the streets? Seems more like you didn't really want to get your hands too dirty by searching for a former street kid while you could live your life in luxury."

Okay, that was too much drama for just one day. Tandrak lifted up his hands in a defiant gesture.

"Wait a second. What do you even want? If it was so important to you to meet me again after you found out I was still alive, why haven't *you* contacted me?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot that it is hard to understand that people who don't have that much money sometimes can't afford to buy a tv and that the Draconian newspapers come without pictures. I read the news about the Darigan Yooyuball team but I couldn't find a single sign of the name Zephyr in there and I was sure I didn't know any of them."

This year I have some business to do in Altador, the same time the cup takes place so I decided to look around a bit. Maybe I could finally see some of our Draconian players. And just a few minutes ago I heard some fangirls in Darigan shirts going crazy about 'that cute Tandrak Shaye' who had just passed them by but didn't notice them because he was too busy arguing with a strange pirate who had a Yooyu on his head. And guess who I found slamming his head against a wall some time later."

His voice now sounded less cynical and bitter but still enough to notice it. Tandrak couldn't help but stare at the other. He and the Terr he knew from his childhood always had been there for each other until... yeah, until... Maybe it also was partially his fault that his former friend now had become so sardonic and cold. He looked down at the ground and silently said, "Hey, I'm sorry that I have disappointed you, that I have let you down."

"And that all for a criminal life."

The Gelert's head shot up again and he nervously looked around. "Please, when I discarded my name I also wanted to leave the swamp I had sunken into behind. If we really have to talk about our past, can't we do that somewhere else?"

"Sacred about your image, huh? But alright, where would you suggest we should go to?"

Tandrak thought about it for a second then he answered, "The Krawk Citadel."

The Krawk Citadel was some kind of café, founded by a crazy DC-KI fan one year ago. A place where inhabitants, team members and fans of either Darigan or Krawk Island could hang around, share their thoughts on the games, cheer after wins or get some comfort from others after losses. Tandrak chose that place because a) it was always crowded in there and no one would care about what they were talking and b) he didn't need to stay all alone with Terr and his new dark personality. He still wasn't sure if his former friend wouldn't be up to something. But so far he did nothing else but ask Tandrak what had happened after he had been cornered by the guards at the edge of the Citadel and he jumped down into certain death.

"I know your wings always had been too weak to carry you so how did you survive?"

"They were at least strong enough to make me glide and I landed on soft ground."

"So you decided to live with our greatest enemies. The people who brought us into that misery at first place."

"Well, I just had the decision between being punished for my kleptomaniac acts on the Citadel and a new life on the hated Meridell. Believe me, I didn't like the thought of leaving my home but if I stayed I would have ended up in a cell or worse. And even if they had let me free after some time I would have been starving on the streets again and then I would have had no other choice than stealing if I wanted to survive. It would have been a never ending circle. Only starting a new life could have gotten me out of this. Meridell was no home for a Draconian as well. Even after the war had stopped long time ago they still feared my appearance. You don't know how often someone wished to see me dead. After months I finally found shelter. Some girl showed me a place near her father's farm to hide at and she brought me food. I spent my time training ball games like we two used to do during our childhood when we still had the hope to escape this all by joining a sports team of any kind. After months I heard the message that Darigan was searching players for their new found Yooyuball team. Also my wings had gotten stronger over time and so I decided to say goodbye not just to my new friend but also to my old life and fly back to the Citadel. None of the guards were after me anymore. The hunted boy Zephyr had died so no one cared

if a formerly completely unknown adult named Tandrak Shaye appeared."

"Hm, interesting", Terr said in the same cold tone as if he wasn't interested in the whole story at all. "Care if I smoke?"

Tandrak sighed. "I wouldn't even care if you were burning."

The Lupe chuckled. It was his first sign since they had met that he still possessed other feelings than the coldness. He lit his cigarette and silently spent some time blowing smoke circles into the air.

"You know, that this isn't good for your health", the Gelert finally said.

"I asked you and you said you don't care. And besides, those new 'power-ups' aren't too good for your health as well."

"We Draconians don't take them."

"You should, healthy or not. They would help you a lot to get your needed wins."

"No thanks, we rather play fair."

For another few seconds they remained silent until Terr spoke again.

"Ya know, Zephyr..."

"Tandrak."

"... whatever, I actually just was mad about you for not showing up for such a long time. The whole criminal thing doesn't bother me. It did when I still was a stupid kid and thought only the legal way is the right way. But now I nearly have to thank you. Just taking things instead of begging for them really makes everything easier and as soon as I had my money I could start my own independent life. And your mistakes showed me what to do better. I never strutted around calling myself the greatest thief of the Citadel so the guards just saw an ordinary hobo stealing for food in me. As soon as I had enough to at least survive for a few days I left the Citadel. Not because I had to, rather because I wanted to look for some new ways of business." He looked amused at Tandrak who was staring at him with wide opened eyes and slightly opened mouth and blew a little cloud of smoke into his face.

"So you're sliding down the same swamp I have once been in", Tandrak said and tried to wave the smoke away.

"No, I'm already out of it. My business is legal now. Or let's just say half legal." He searched for something in his pockets and put it on the table. "You know that?"

"Yeah, it looks like one of those speed power-ups."

"It is but with a slightly changed mixture. The effect will last twice or three times as long. But no one would be able to prove if you have taken the official powerups or the extra kick because they only will find the allowed amount of speed in your blood. It's just the mixture that makes it stronger."

Tandrak opened his mouth but before he could say something Terr added, "I can freely tell you about my business because I trust in you as an old friend. You won't say anything that could harm me."

"As old friend, huh? Not because you else could reveal some delicate information about my past?"

"No, not at all. I now watched and listened to you long enough to know you are a fair player. You might not trust me at all but the same time you remember that we have been friends once and it wouldn't be nice to feed an old friend to the Meepits."

Why didn't he just stand up and go? He wasn't sure how much he still wanted to hear – it already was more than enough. But something was holding him back. Was it the fact that he still saw some kind of friend in the Lupe or was it just morbid fascination for someone who willingly laid his criminal life open?

"I bet a life as Yooyuball player is fun", Terr changed the topic all out of sudden.

"Money, luxury, a lot of pretty girls to sleep with... I bet a sexy player like you can choose from tons of fangirls each day."

Tandrak nearly choked on his coffee. When his coughing fit finally was over he brought out, "First of all why on Neopia are you calling me sexy and second I'm not the kind of guy who wants to take advantage of his fans. Why does everyone in the whole wide world want to see a playboy in me?"

"To your first question: because I have eyes. To your second question: every celebrity loves to have some fun with groupies once in a while. I don't think you are just there for playing your heart out and worrying about your team's standings. But then again... as much as I heard from your fangirls what you were fighting about with that Pirate guy and your head-slamming action I saw later ... Yes, you really could need some more fun in your life."

It was like a déjà-vu at the moment. In his thoughts Tandrak found himself hiding in a storage room together with Hale. But this situation now got kind of creepy. He stood up. "I think I gotta go now."

Terr stood up too, tightly grabbed the other's wrist and dragged him back. "Just wait one more sec, sexy."

And then he felt those rough lips on his own. This wasn't a déjà-vu anymore, this was for real. But this time they weren't in a quiet little storage room but in a crowded café and this time he didn't return the kiss and just pushed the Lupe away as hard as he could.

"Fuck, Terr! What was that good for?"

"Just wanted to show you some fun if you already decided to stay without a partner forever", the other one shrugged.

"I know fun and I'm already taken."

"Oh, I see... So why didn't you go to your loved one after your lost match instead of torturing an innocent wall. I bet she or he would have taken your pain easier away."

"Because..." he started. '...I kicked him away', his brain finished.

But Terr didn't seem to need an explanation and just continued, "Hm, I wonder if they really love you or just your fame. You know what? An unknown and unexpected past life would be the best proof. I wonder what they would say if they knew about the criminal part in your life."

"Nothing 'cause he's a pirate", it was out of Tandrak's mouth before he could choke it back. Shit!

The Lupe just grinned. "Ah, jackpot... Well, alright, if you already have a boyfriend then there's not much I could do. You wanted to leave as far as I can remember. It was nice to talk to you again after such a long time and we can repeat that whenever you want to. Good night and greet your pirate boyfriend from me." He gave him another mysterious smile.

Tandrak just nodded turned around and already was a few steps away when Terr yelled after him, "And tell him your groupies said a Yooyu on his head just looks ridiculous."

The Gelert winced. How had he found out? Or was it just a shot in the dark and he wanted to see his reaction? In that case his wince was proof enough. He didn't look back anymore, just stumbled forward until he was standing outside again and could breathe in the cool night air. His thoughts were spinning around. Why did everything have to happen within just one day? Well, at least now the loss against Krawk Island just seemed to be a bad but nearly forgotten dream. There were too many other things he had in his mind now. Hale, his past life, Hale, Terr's strange behaviour and –

especially – Hale. What time was it? Why on Neopia had he been stuck in the Krawk Citadel with someone who really gave him the creeps for so long while he already could have apologized to Hale so many times? He started running, back to the quarters.

No one was seen anymore on the corridors and he also barely heard any sounds. Could it be possible that Hale was already sleeping? And if he wasn't how would he react if he saw Tandrak again after so many hours? He nearly was afraid to knock at the door to Hale's room but he did it anyways. The door was opened so quickly as if Hale had already waited for him to finally show up.

"Shaye, where the fuck have ye been? I already started to worry 'bout ye."

Well, that was least expected.

"I ... just was walking through the streets for some time and tried to get my head clear." An out-and-out lie. His head felt more stuffed than ever but at least he didn't think about lost games anymore. "Sorry about what I said to you earlier."

The Bori just shrugged it off. "Blah, maybe I was overreactin' a bit as well. I mean, after four years I should be kinda used to yer touchiness after ye've lost important games. Why are we even talkin' on the corridor? Come in if ye wanna."

Tandrak looked up and down the corridor a last time then slipped into the room. The Snow Yooyu was lying coiled up in a corner and slept again.

"How does your ear feel now?"

"Still a bit burning but better than before. Don't bother 'bout it too much. It's not like I'm not used to injuries."

He let out a rough laugh.

"And 'bout that thing", he nodded over to the Yooyu, "I think I'll return it tomorrow. Or just keep it. Wouldn't be a pirate if I wouldn't steal something from time to time. Hey, just kidding", he quickly added when he noticed Tandrak's gaze.

"What? Oh, sorry, it wasn't about the Yooyu. I was just reminded ... well, never mind."

He didn't want his thoughts to bother him anymore, not yet, not now. Being with Hale was all that mattered at the moment. Carefully he touched the singed hair on Hale's ear. At least it wasn't swollen anymore.

And suddenly this feeling was burning hot inside of him. Others might have needed drugs to forget their pain or compete at their physical best. His only drug that made his powers run to the max was called passion. He gave Hale a demanding kiss, literally pushed him back where the bed was located. Hale tried to keep from stumbling over his own feet but couldn't help but fall on the bed as Tandrak practically climbed up onto his body. His hands were running free through bluish-grey hair, over those muscular arms and chest.

"Wow, didn't know ye had such a storm in you", Hale said with a smirk after their lips finally parted – for getting some air and to easier get rid of disturbing shirts.

"Well, the savageness of youth", was Tandrak's answer before he continued kissing the other hungrily. He started to move his hips in a pelvic thrust manner, ripping a low moan from the Bori's lips.

"Fuck, Shaye, stop being such a tease", Hale groaned and grabbed the other's pants to slide them down, set up a bit to get rid of his own remaining clothes. He let his lips slightly wander over the other's cheek, down to his neck, began to kiss and suck the flesh underneath the fur and tried to gently push the Gelert back onto the bed but Tandrak turned around and ended up on top again. It was an unfamiliar experience. Normally Hale was the more active part but he seemed to be alright with this place as well. For a few seconds they just stared at each other. Their positions felt wrong but

oh-so right the same time. Then Tandrak moved down again for another kiss. He pressed his hard-on against Hale's causing them both to groan. The Bori's hands went down. He held both erections for a moment then with one last stroke let go and let his hands wander up again over Tandrak's belly and chest.

"Don't start something you don't intend to finish", the Draconian warned him breathlessly, half laughing and half groaning at the touch on his over-sensitized flesh. Hale grinned and let his hands wander over the other's spine, dragged him even closer, pushed their hard-ons together once more. Then instinct took over and they started to move against each other. They both felt like they were on fire, reveled in the sensation, kissing and licking at whatever bits of each other they could reach. The Bori let one hand wander down again, let his fingers run over their lengths, the other was still sliding over Tandrak's spine. Then he suddenly dug his fingers deep into the fur of the other's back and let out a cry of passion. Only a few seconds later, with a wail muffled in Hale's shoulder, Tandrak shot over the edge as well. He collapsed on top of the pirate who grunted softly but wrapped warm, comforting arms around him. Whatever had happened to him before, whatever he was reminded of before, it had gone out of Tandrak's mind, at least for now. The world outside could be dark, cold and cruel – they now were wrapped up in their own private cocoon of warmth and wonder, laughter and love.

They held onto each other as they listened to their unison heartbeats and stayed like this until they drifted down from their high and slowly into sleep.

When Tandrak finally awoke Hale already had been up for some time. Right now he was kneeling on the floor playing with the Snow Yooyu by holding a brandy praline over its head which the little Petpet desperately tried to reach.

The Gelert rubbed over his eyes and set up a little. "You are feeding it with alcohol filled chocolate?"

"Oh, morning, love. Yeah, tried several different things but the only he really liked to eat was that."

"This Yooyu is an alcoholic."

"He's a true pirate", the Bori answered with a proud grin. "I think I'll call him Bob."

Tandrak just chuckled and slowly shook his head then his gaze fell on the alarm clock at the side of the bed. "Dammit, just two more hours until we have to face Terror Mountain. I better should be prepared."

"I'll leave with ye", Hale said and stood up with Bob in his hands, "Need a bit of training in goalkeeping. Those pesky Maraquans really were able to score a last time and draw with us just because I'm still lacking a bit practice."

The Darigan player couldn't quite hide a brief smile. The only reason Maraqua had been able to shoot their last goal was because Hale mistook their Kiko for the ball and kicked him away instead.

Kapitel 3: Rain day

Some more days had passed now and after more than a week of cloudless sky and hot weather it had started raining again. Not the drizzle they had on their arrival day in Altador – now it was a real cloudburst. The temperatures didn't drop very much though and it was still pretty warm outside.

A few teams still had been able to play in the early morning the other matches had been delayed until the late afternoon or evening – which also included Darigan and their opponent Haunted Woods. Tandrak didn't bother about them too much. Although the Zombies had improved over the last years they still were known to draw or lose against old and ongoing powerhouses. They wouldn't be too much of a problem.

Right now he used his uncommon spare time to wander through the streets of Altador a bit. His fur was soaking wet after just a few seconds but he didn't care about it. This was one of the rare chances to see a bit more of the city without being chased over the hills by a hoard of raging fangirls. No one else was outside. Or at least he believed so at first.

"The ballstar doesn't even have enough money for an umbrella?"

The Gelert stopped so sudden as if he had run against an invisible wall. Not again... This cold voice was giving him the creeps. The only thing he wanted to do was just turn tail and run. But then again it might have been pretty impolite... Maybe Terr really was just seeking for a friend and didn't mean any harm. He was a creep anyways...

"Care for another visit at the Darigan Island or whatever it was called?" the Lupe asked and came closer. Too close.

"Krawk Citadel", Tandrak said and instinctively backed away a bit, "No, thanks, I was just on my way back."

"Oh, then ... wait a sec, I'll get us a coffee-to-go from that Krawk Citadel and then I'll accompany you for a while, what about that?"

The Gelert sighed resigned and just nodded as there was no way he could get rid of the other too soon.

Just a few minutes later Terr returned and handed him his cup. At least it had a lid – watered coffee wouldn't have tasted too great. For a second their eyes met and Tandrak felt a shiver running down his spine. His cold gaze and the grin that now set his features – this mix made him look as if he had laid an eye on some kind of prey. And still the Gelert didn't just leave and walked beside him through the empty streets instead. They talked a bit about the games although it seemed as if Terr was just asking questions about them to have something to talk about, not because he was really interested. He also asked him if he still felt happy with his pirate guy and repeatedly mentioned that there were a lot of Darigans around he could take instead. "Listen", Tandrak said and took another sip from his coffee, "I neither want you nor any other. I'm happy with my pirate since the second Cup and it also will stay like that for a long time."

"We'll see", the Lupe just stated, "Opinions can change quite fast you know."

Suddenly Tandrak felt a slow growing sickness – but not because of Terr. Maybe the stress of the past few days, heat, humidity, a heavy fur coat and coffee was too much

for him at the moment. He had to lean against a wall.

"T-Terr ... I ... " The last thing he brought out before a dark cloud filled his head.

His mind was slowly returning. He was lying in a bed, staring at the wall. His bed, he was back in his room. He never had been completely passed out and the memories that were now flooding through his brain made him want to throw up. He still had been able to feel, hear, see, move around but it was like he was walking through thick fog with earmuffs on his head and a strange feeling of callousness. They had been walking into the building and up to his room. No strangers were allowed in there but after Terr had been with a player who didn't seem to bother about him too much the security had let him pass. They had walked into his room and then... He was shivering when he realized that he still was naked and that someone now was crawling over him, back into the bed.

Terr roughly hugged him from behind – at least he now was wearing some clothes again – placed a kiss at his neck and whispered into his ears, "See, I told ya. I knew we'll belong together one day."

Tandrak would have really vomited but he didn't even have the strength to turn his head, not even to open his eyes more than just half. His whole body was hurting and he still felt so weak, so tired ... and so grossed out...

"I know it still will be hard to keep you, but it was a first step after all. Next would be to make that pesky pirate leave."

There was a knock at the door. "Shaye? Are ye back again?"

"Heck, not that early", he pushed Tandrak in the back, "Tell him, he should piss off."

The Gelert opened his mouth, not that he wanted to really do what Terr said but he at least wanted Hale to know he was there, to know what was going on. But it was just a mere whisper that was coming from his lips, drowned by a door pushed open – Terr didn't even take his time to lock it – and a pirate Bori coming in. He stopped and stared at them, bewilderment in his gaze. "Shaye? What the fuck...?"

Terr sighed and climbed out of bed another time. "So you were the one, weren't you? Well yes, it is exactly what it looks like. I think he even was happy to cheat on you with me."

Hale turned his head to look at Tandrak. There might have been a little glint of anger in his eyes, but they mostly were filled with pain.

The Draconian now was at least able to lift his head a bit. "Hale... please..."

And the pirate's eyes widened in realisation. He had perceived despair, pain and fear in those two nearly whispered words, seen it in the other's eyes. Something was completely wrong here. His eyes narrowed when he looked back at Terr. Suddenly he rushed over to the Lupe, grabbed the collar of his shirt lifted him up a bit and slammed him against the wall. "Little bastard. What the fuck have ye done to him?"

Terr tried another smirk but it more looked like a grimace. "Just tried to show him some real fun and pleasure. You pirates may be rough but not enough for us Draconians. He just still stayed with you because he had a lack of comparison and after he was unwilling at first I had to drug him. The effect will subside soon but believe me, now that he has tasted blood he wouldn't want to have you back. And now let me go. You can't do anything against me. Wouldn't be too good for any image if a ballstar beat up an innocent fan."

"Innocent?" Hale scoffed, "I bet they would forgive me beatin' ye up after Shaye..."

Terr's real smirk returned. "Forget it. Our sexy one wouldn't say anything for a certain reason."

Hale snarled and let go of him but just to push the alarm all of the players had in their rooms. "Then let's just let the security take care of ye, scumbag."

Just a few seconds later two security members approached.

"We have an intruder here", Hale exclaimed, still having a hard time to repress his rage, "He... might have attacked Shaye but don't worry he's alright. Would be enough if I stay here with him for a while. Just take care of that creep."

After Terr had been dragged out and they were all alone again, Hale sank down to his knees beside the bed, carefully took Tandrak in his arms. The tiredness was still there but at least the Gelert's strength was slowly returning. He wrapped his arms around the other, buried his face the Bori's shoulder. At first he had been shivering but now he felt Hale's soothing warmth around him again. He didn't say a word, just was there letting his hands gently run through the fur on Tandrak's back giving him as much comfort as possible. He held him tight until the Gelert finally gave in to his exhaustion and slowly drifted into sleep.

When Tandrak opened his eyes again the room was bathed in the light of dusk. The rain was now completely gone. Hale still was sitting beside his bed and let his fingers run over the other's cheek. Tandrak set up slightly. His strength had fully returned his body was hurting just a bit anymore.

The pirate looked at him. "So ... ye're feeling better?"

"Yeah ... a bit I guess ..."

"Ye knew this guy? At least he seemed to do so quite well."

"He was ... I made acquaintance with him years ago on the Citadel", Tandrak said, staring down at the blanket. Seeing a former friend in him made the pain inside stronger again. "He once was a street kid like me." It came out before he could hold it back but then again why should he still keep silent about it. Hale was his love after all and furthermore the pirate in him would make him understand better than anyone else. "But this isn't the only secret he knows about me. I once was a thief, a criminal, a hunted one on the Citadel. Let's just say I faked my death to escape and start a new life. When I returned as a grown up no one recognised me anymore, except for him. I haven't told anyone about my past before and I'm afraid of what could be if he came out with everything."

Hale carefully took his hand. "Hey, look at me. I'm a goddamn pirate and I'm sure ye know what we mostly do. But do people hate the Krawk Island team because of that? No. Besides this was yer past life. It's long time behind ye. I would also feel sure enough to say that most of yer fans would be like 'Aw, poor Tandrak, what a rough childhood he had' than be mad 'bout ye."

Tandrak weakly smiled. Yeah, the fans wouldn't ditch him that fast but what about his own teammates? Before he could think any further it was knocking on the door again.

"Tandrak? After the rain is gone now they decided to set our match in half an hour", they heard Layton's voice.

"Okay, I'll be there soon", Tandrak answered.

"Ye sure?" Hale asked after Layton was gone again.

"Yes, this is business and has nothing to do with my private problems. Besides this is just Haunted Woods. I could need an easy game now."

There were still puddles on the streets but they already started to dry. The sun was half gone when Tandrak came to the coliseum. Nights in Altador weren't that much cooler than days but at least there was no sun burning down.

When he was changing clothes in the dresser room he repeatedly could feel Layton's gaze on him. Finally their team captain came over to him. "Are you sure, you can play today? You don't look as if you're feeling too well."

"It's nothing. Just usual nervousness." This was more than ordinary stage fright. He felt sick and weak again but he tried to repress it. There was no time for unwanted feelings and memories during a game. Layton didn't look too concert but at least he didn't want to go any deeper. Besides it was already time to leave. The game was about to begin.

"The game is half over and Darigan is still in lead with a good 3-1. The Zombies would need some good shots or a miracle to catch up", the commentator's voice echoed over the field again. "Vitor on the ball, Shaye behind him but he seems to have problems catching up."

It was true. The longer this game was lasting the harder it got to run. Not just the muscles in his legs were feeling numb he also ran out of air faster than usual and he had to stop and stand around just panting heavily more often. It was a very hot night but he alternated in sweating and freezing badly.

"Vitor shoots and ... wait, what's that? Do we have our first breakdown this Cup?"

The Yooyu went straight into the net but Reshar didn't even seem to notice it. Not even Vitor payed attention anymore if he had scored or not. The centre of attention now rather was the Darigan right forward who had broken down to his knees. For a second he tried to get up again then his arms gave in and he remained lying on his stomach.

When Tandrak's eyes snapped open again he saw a white ceiling over him. He quickly tried to set up.

"Hey, not so fast, pal. It's not good for you."

Layton gently pushed him back into the bed.

"What has happened? What about the match?"

"Is that the only thing you are worried about? Well, you have passed out and we had one player less. Even the Zombies wanted to cancel the game and repeat it on the next day but the committee decided to go on with it. With one forward less we were going down. As long as you still aren't feeling too good I wouldn't suggest you to take a look at our standings now."

Tandrak closed his eyes and groaned.

"I couldn't care less about it because I was worried about you and still I am. The paramedics thought it was because of the heat and the stress but still suggested we should let a doctor examine you. Right now I'm just glad that we didn't let an official Cup doctor close to you because you would be in a lot of trouble now. One of Tormo's old friends who's a doctor has his practice in this town. When he analysed your blood sample he found a mix of the speedo power-up, date rape drug and Rapture, a common party drug. He said it must have been mixed by a pro because one microgram more or less of one of the ingredients would have been a deadly cocktail. I know you had never done drugs and I don't think you ever would but the committee would have thought else. So what on Neopia has happened?"

"Yeah, he really is an expert", Tandrak slowly said staring at the ceiling, "Date rape to make me compliant, Rapture to keep me from passing out and to give me enough energy to move on my own and the speedo maybe for camouflage so that he could carry it around before he gave it to me. Maybe also to give me some kick so that I

wouldn't just lie around later on."

He noticed Layton's confused and now even more worried gaze and shut his eyes. Slowly, haltingly he uncovered memories he wished he could just forget a second time that day.

After he had ended Layton looked at him silently for a little while then he said, "I'll stand by you, no matter what and I think I can speak for the rest of the team as well. Past is past and I think we all are no angels after we all had been through a few rough years including a war. Don't believe we would ditch you just because some idiot reveals never told information about you. We might not be able to take memories away from you but we can bring that bastard into even more trouble than he is now. But it's all your decision because it's highly possible that every detail will go public. Think about it."

Tandrak just silently nodded. Layton gave him a warm smile and said, "Now rest, we want to have you back. I think I can now finally tell Hale you're alright."

The Gelert's heart made a little jump. Why just Hale? Could it be possible that Layton knew something? Hadn't he already revealed enough of his private life on one day?

"Hale?" he asked as innocent as possible.

"Yeah, a lot of people came to me that night to ask about your well being but Hale definitely took the cake. No, wait, he rather took the whole bakery because he was literally storming me every five minutes. I wonder what got into that guy. Well, I think he will be happy to hear that you feel okay again."

After Layton was gone Tandrak let out a sigh of relief.

For one day it remained pretty calm. The news mentioned his breakdown but after he was alright and able to play again it wasn't a too big deal. And then on day two the headlines exploded. Seemed like Terr didn't want to wait much longer to slip a few humiliating details about Tandrak's past life and how he raped him. Strangely there was nothing to read about a relationship with a certain pirate. Only one of the papers mentioned that the Lupe seemingly wanted to humiliate Tandrak even more by framing him for having a relationship with another male player – complete nonsense of course. In their opinion the Darigan player still was the womanizer all people saw in him and his only sexual interaction with another male was during the rape and the other papers obviously silently agreed to that.

On one single morning the Gelert got more attention than ever before. It wasn't easy being reminded of what had happened two days ago with every step he took but he had the support of his friends and Hale. And it also was better that everything was out, much better than choking on it forever.

"The desert mummies might be out of shape a bit lately but that's no reason to take them lightly. They were our hardest opponents last year and still can take us as stepping stone up to the top again if we let our guard down. But if we do our best just like we always do we can win. I believe in you. So let's fight for our DC pride."

Tandrak listened to Layton's motivation speech while still getting dressed and couldn't help but smile. Even if their opponent was called Moltara he held speeches as if they had to face Kreludor. Sometimes Tandrak wished he also had such an undying optimism.

Before they all went out Layton held him back to ask, "You're feeling fit enough even with all this ... hullabaloo now going on? I know we can't cancel the match now nor do we have any substitutes. Just wanted to know if I should take the main part today or if

we can rely on two forwards like usual.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I can do it. This Cup is my life. It might not always be too good but I will go through no matter what.”

The Hissi patted his shoulder. “Alright, then let’s go out there and sweep them.”

The crowd went wild when they entered the game field and took their positions. Win or loss – somehow that didn’t matter at the moment. The most important thing was that he felt alive again. Another game, another chance – and Tandrak Shaye was alive.