

# Hold onto hope, love

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Dozens of journalists were sitting in the conference room - more than ever before. But this wasn't just an ordinary Altador Cup team member interview. First of all it was off-season and second groupie magnet number one, Tandrak Shaye, had announced he wanted to inaugurate them in a very private part of his life.

Tandrak peeked through a gap between the curtains.

"Oh man, why am I doing that? Never felt more nervous in my whole life."

"'cause ye said ye didn't want to play hide'n'seek anymore, not after all those years. But don't worry, everything's gonna be alright."

Hale smiled at him and comfortingly took his hand.

"Okay..." The Gelert took a deep breath, "then let's go."

Hand in hand they entered the podium. Immediately a storm of flashbulbs was breaking loose.

Tandrak took his place behind the microphone, waited a bit until it got calmer in the room and then started speaking.

"Over the years so many boulevard papers wrote things about my love life, tried to credit me with having love affairs with many other female players. Today I am here to deny all those stories. For all those years I only had one love and he's here with me today."

He leaned over to Hale and gave him a kiss. A murmur first, then another flurry of flashbulbs and the people started with questions.

"How long have you known each other before?"

"How long are you together now?"

"'twas during AC I that we met but we hardly took notice from each other. Then one year later we started somethin' that looked like just a little fun at first. But then we somehow couldn't get away from each other anymore", now Hale explained, "So all in all it had been ten years together."

"Why did you travel to Altador in off-season? This meeting could have taken place anywhere closer to both of you?"

"Why did you open up your love to each other after ten years and not earlier?"

"We wanted to make it public where it all began", Tandrak took the word again. "And during the first years I always was afraid that it could affect our careers. Hale wouldn't have mined too much but Yooyuball always was my life so I wanted to keep it a secret as long as possible. But after we're now close to the end of our time as active players and after ten was a special anniversary I thought the time finally had come."

While Tandrak was speaking an Ixi was squeezing through between the seats and now

stood in the middle of the aisle. It was one of those oh-so cute looking Faerie Ixis. For a second she just stared at the two on the podium then her gaze darkened and she screamed, "No way! Tandrak is mine. And if I can't have him no one will."

Before the security could reach her she had drawn a weapon. Tandrak was pushed back. Without even missing a split second Hale had jumped in front of him. A shot. The Bori stumbled back against Tandrak then broke down to the floor.

Tandrak knelt beside him and tried to stop the bleeding with his shirt but to no avail. More and more blood was coming from the wound on Hale's right shoulder. He could hear someone calling the ambulance but everything around him sounded so far away. "Please, open your eyes. Don't leave me."

The Pirate's face contorted in pain. "It ... hurts. So ... tired."

"You must stay awake." The Gelert was afraid that if Hale closed his eyes one more time he would never open them again.

"Shaye... if I don't survive this...", he paused for about two seconds, "The fuck, I don't wanna die."

"You won't, don't even think about something like that. Just hang on a little longer, help is on the way. Hale, can you still hear me? Hale!"

The Bori's eyes had closed again. Slowly his head was sinking back.

A few seconds later Hale was taken out of his arms. He heard the voices of the ambulance men as if they were coming from another world.

"Still alive but we need to get him to hospital as fast as possible."

"He stopped breathing."

"Intubate immediately."

Like in trance Tandrak followed them to the ambulance car.

Time was passing by and still Tandrak was sitting on his chair, blankly staring at the corridor wall. He had tried to make a call to Krawk Island but only managed to leave long time trainer Dasher a message. But maybe they already knew it. Media could be quite fast.

He couldn't get rid of this feeling of guilt. The bullet was meant for him not Hale. If he only had had a second more he would have pushed him out of the way. He didn't want to close his eyes anymore because when he did he always had the same visions. Blood. Hale's blood on his hands...

"Mr Shaye?"

The doctor's voice snatched him out of his thoughts.

Tandrak lifted up his head. "How did it go? Is he alright?"

"He's alive but his condition is giving cause for concern. He still hasn't started breathing on his own and he lost a lot of blood. But he is strong and I'm sure he will make it."

"When can I see him?"

"If you want I can lead you to his room now."

Aside of the constant humming of the respirator and the beeping of the ECG the room was so silent it nearly hurt in his ears. With all those cables and tubes around him and the bandages on his upper body Hale looked so vulnerable.

Tandrak placed a gentle kiss on his forehead then sat down on a chair next to the bed and took the Bori's hand.

"Please be alright, Hale", he whispered, "I need you in my life."

With the silence the nightmarish fear returned so Tandrak started speaking again.

"Neither of us ever gave up especially not when it came to our relationship. Can you still remember that day in the month of celebrating? I was just fed up with being alone so I decided to leave the Citadel and stay with you over the holidays. Didn't want to attract publicity so I paid the captain of a cargo ship to take me with him. His ship was on the way from Meridell to Moltara but he agreed to take me close enough to Krawk Island that I could use my wings for the rest of the way."

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"We would now be past Maraqua and Krawk Island is close", the captain tried to drown the raging storm, "but this is crazy. Why don't you travel with us to Moltara instead and then take the next ship back to Krawk Island?"

Tandrak clasped the guard rail to not lose balance. The ship was tossed from one side to another.

"That would cost me two days", he shouted, "I'm not going to wait that much longer just because of some wind. Don't worry; my wings are strong enough to carry me."

With that he climbed up the guard rail, spread his wings and jumped. Immediately he was dragged to the side and had to fight to fly straight. The coldness was stinging and after just one minute he could barely feel his muscles anymore. *Keep on fighting. Just a few more meters.* As soon as he reached the shore of the island his wings gave up carrying him and he fell into the sand. He tried to get up again but still was too exhausted. Someone was running closer.

"What the fuck... a Darigan?" he heard the well known voice of Dinksy. "How on Neopia did ye manage to get here?"

"On ... wings", Tandrak panted, "wanted to see ... Hale..."

The Shoyru looked around and shouted, "Garven, wherever ye be, I be needin' yer mug over thar!"

"Fuck, what's wrong?" he could hear Hale's voice. A little pause and then, "Shaye?"

The Bori ran closer and knelt down beside him. Tandrak felt a warm hand on his shoulder.

"I'm fine, just tired ... and freezing."

"Okay, training's over, Dinksy. I have to take care of him first. Looks like he could need some warmth."

Tandrak was picked up and carried away from the stormy beach. He nuzzled closer to the warm chest and closed his eyes. A door was opened. The room he was brought in was filled by the dim flickering light of an open fire.

"Shoo, Bob, I don't wanna fall over ye again."

Hale carefully sat Tandrak down on a sofa close to the fire place then was searching for a blanket. The Snow Yooyu climbed up the Darigan's leg and coiled up in his lap. Absent minded Tandrak started petting it. The Pirate now returned, put a blanket over him (and Bob), sat down beside him and pulled him closer so that the Gelert's head was now resting on his shoulder. The warmth, Hale's near, it made Tandrak nearly completely forget about his aching muscles.

"What has gotten in yer mind that told ye to fly to our island? Ye know how risky that was? Ye know ye could have died?"

"I wasn't flying the whole distance", Tandrak mumbled, "Just jumped off a ship after we had passed Maraqua. And neither did I want to still wait for so many months to see you again nor get through another lonely Christmas while I could have spent it with

you."

"Ye're crazy", Hale whispered and placed a kiss on his forehead, "But I'm glad ye will be here with me. Else I guess I would have done the same sooner or later even if that had meant I would have had to learn how to fly."

Tandrak smiled, then closed his eyes. Maybe his muscles might still hurt tomorrow but everything was better than spending another Christmas alone.

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"After so many years I finally had a wonderful Christmas again. Nearly had forgotten that something like that once was existing", Tandrak sighed.

A strange beeping noise coming from one of the machines around Hale interrupted him.

"What the..."

In panic he jumped up, stormed to the door and nearly ran into the Acara nurse who just entered the room.

"Don't worry", she calmly said, "It's just the sign that he started breathing on his own again. We can take away the respirator now and will replace it with an oxygen tube."

When she was done and had left the room, Tandrak went over to the bed again.

"Never ever do that again", he jokingly said, "You scared the heck outta me. But with the stupid plastic thing over your mouth gone I can do that again."

He placed a soft kiss on Hale's lips then went back to his chair.

"I knew you wouldn't give up that easily, not after all we've been through together. Can you still remember that bad seventh year when a stupid mistake of mine nearly had ruined it all?"

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The match against Krawk Island was their last friendly match before the start of the Altador Cup. And it was the first time that Tandrak wished he was anywhere else on Neopia. Of that day where he had to meet Hale again he already had been afraid for weeks.

Shortly after their arrival he had mumbled a quick apologize so that he could get to his quarter as soon as possible and had hoped he wouldn't have to meet any of the Pirates before they all were standing on the field. But Hale caught him up on halfway.

"Hey, Shaye, what's wrong? Ye haven't been with the others so I was already worried." Tandrak stopped but he didn't look at him and stared at the floor instead. "It's ... nothing. I'm just feeling tired."

The Bori tilted his head to the side and gave him a questioning look. "But it sounds like there's more wrong than that."

Should he still lie? But what for? He already couldn't bear it any longer.

"Hale, I ... I have to tell you something." He still wasn't able to look into the other's eyes. "Inside where we have more privacy."

They entered one of the little beach huts the Darigans used as quarters for the time they stayed on the island.

Tandrak took a few deep breaths then started, "Some weeks ago we had this match against Terror Mountain and after it was over it happened that I met an old 'friend'. Or better said I once had an affair with him years ago before you and I got together.

He thought it would be a good idea if I would come with him to his guild again. They were celebrating something, I can't remember what but I joined in as well because I still had to celebrate our victory over the Terror Mountain team."

Hale stood there arms crossed in front of his chest and with one raised eyebrow.

"Stop beatin' around the bush and cut to the chase."

"Alcohol flowed like water and ... well ... I ... I couldn't even remember what exactly ..."

Tandrak closed his eyes and wished himself far, far away. "I woke up beside Kanrik but I knew there had been something going on during the night because parts of it were still stuck in my head."

He opened his eyes again. The anger outbreak he had awaited - or nearly hoped for - didn't come. Hale just stared at him heartbroken for a few seconds then turned around and left the hut. Tandrak ran after him.

"Hale, please ... I didn't mean to ... I am ..."

"Cut it!"

The sharp tone made him freeze at the spot.

"I only wanna be alone", the Pirate now said a bit quieter, "I need time to think about it."

The Darigan remained where he was standing and watched Hale disappear between the buildings. He felt like the last crap now. If he just hadn't told ... no, it wouldn't have made it better because he knew he wouldn't have been able to live with a lie. Only one night but it had been enough to ruin his life and Hale's as well. It felt as if something big was stuck in his throat. He tried to swallow but it wasn't making it better. He was so sorry and only wished he could turn back time. If Hale only had given him the chance to apologize. Or maybe it was better if he gave him the time to think everything over and calm down a bit and not talk about it further even if it were apologies. Every further word just would have cut the wound more open. Tandrak went back to his hut and sank down to the bed.

How long was he already lying there? Just some minutes or already a few hours? He didn't care. Some time ago Layton had knocked at his door to ask if he felt alright after he had hidden in there for such a long time. Tandrak shoved his awful feeling on the bad weather but immediately noticed that he just had given the lamest excuse ever when he looked out of the window and saw Layton giving the bright sunny sky a confused look before he left. After a few more minutes he stood up and left the hut. He couldn't wait any longer.

When he knocked at the door to Hale's house he didn't get any response but entered anyways. The Pirate was standing in front of the window in his living room, staring outside, cuddling Bob in his arms. Tandrak wasn't sure if he really hadn't heard him or just pretended he hadn't but after the little Yooyu gave out a happy call at his sight Hale couldn't ignore him any longer. He put down Bob and turned around. His eyes still held sadness but at least he didn't look as heartbroken as before. For some seconds they just stared at each other. Even Bob seemed to feel the tension between them because he was hanging around the wall and tried to look as invisible as possible. Tandrak slowly came closer until he stood right in front of him.

"Is it okay if we talk now?"

The Bori only nodded.

"Listen, I don't even know if it was my idea or if I just was drunk enough to let everything happen. If I could turn back time I would do it to make everything undone. I still love you from the bottom of my heart and don't want to lose you just because of

one idiotic mistake."

"I ... also don't wanna lose ye..."

Were those really tears glinting in Hale's eyes? Tandrak looked at him aghast. In all those years the Pirate had shown so much strength no matter what problems they had to fight with. The Gelert now bridged the last steps of distance between them and pulled the other into embrace. He was relieved and glad when his hug was returned.

"I'm sorry, so sorry", he whispered, "I love you and never want to hurt you again."

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"It needed some time but our love also could overcome this. Even now, three years later, I still want to thank you for giving me a second chance. And I never disappointed you."

Outside it was still dark but slowly the first rays of sun were appearing. Tandrak now had spent half a day and a whole night beside Hale's bed. His eyes were burning but he didn't want to go to sleep, not until he was completely sure that his love was alright. If Hale's condition didn't get better it was all his fault. He was the one who had the idea to make everything public.

"But I also didn't want to stay hidden forever anymore."

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He was still in some kind of wonderful half sleep. He loved this kind of waking up on his own before the alarm clock could forcefully rip him out of his dreams. If it was for him he could stay in this moment forever, lying in Hale's arms not fully awake but also not sleeping anymore. But he also knew he had to get up soon. Was the Pirate still asleep or had he already woken up as well? The alarm clock shrilled. Okay, now he was awake for sure.

"Morning, Shaye." The Bori never had sounded that drowsy before.

Tandrak turned around.

"Hey, no offense, but you look awful. You look as if you have just slept for a few minutes. What have you done all night?"

"Watched ye sleeping", Hale said with a weak smile.

"You've been looking like that quite often in the past few days. This isn't too good for your health. And neither is it for your game performance."

"Ye know, after we don't get to see each other too often and always have to keep it a big secret I don't wanna miss any of these moments together."

The Gelert sighed. "Maybe we soon will get the chance to spend more time together. I have thought about it for a long time. Now it's our tenth year together so it's some kind of special year. I always was afraid of affecting our careers with our relationship but I have spent eleven wonderful years in this team and it's only a matter of time when I will think about my retirement. So that's the first thing why you would be able to have more of me in the future. The second thing is that it doesn't really matter anymore who I am together with. Our love shouldn't remain a secret anymore, we should show it."

Hale stared at him. "Ye really sure? I mean it's great and I couldn't feel any happier if ye really did but the Cup always was yer life."

"And you have become my life as well. Besides one day I will be too old for such a hard

game anyways. Eleven was a good number to reach after I thought I wouldn't even be part of the second Cup with all those injuries during my beginning time. It's all set. When this Cup is over I will make it public."

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If Tandrak had known what was about to happen he would have let it stay a secret forever. Nearly a whole day had passed since Hale had been shot and the Darigan hadn't moved from his side for a second.

"Back then you said it would be the greatest moment for you when we finally can show the world how we feel for each other. Please, you must get alright again."

Still the Bori hadn't shown any sign that his condition had improved any further, still he was lying in his bed lifeless. And Tandrak felt a sudden hit of desperation, felt tears welling up. He tried to choke them back but the first few were already running over his cheeks.

"Please, Hale ... don't leave me here all alone. I love you and I need you." The last sentence he was nearly shouting, "Please, open your eyes."

Suddenly there was a soft moan. Hale's eyes twitched a bit even though he didn't open them.

"S-Shaye..." Just a mere whisper.

"It's alright, I'm here", Tandrak hastily answered and tried to wipe away his tears. His heart made a little jump of joy. "You're at a hospital but you will be alright."

"Good...", the Pirate mumbled before he lost consciousness again.

It felt like hours although it were just a few minutes until Hale woke up again and could open his eyes.

"How do you feel now?" Tandrak carefully asked.

"It still hurts so much..."

"I'll go and find a doctor. He shall give you something to get rid of that pain." He stood up but he didn't leave before he had given his love another little kiss on the cheek.

Tandrak was waiting on the corridor while the doctor was examining Hale. He was leaning against a wall and for the first time after 24 hours he closed his eyes. Relief and happiness was flooding through him. Hale had woken up, he had spoken to him. Everything was going to be alright.

The doctor came out of the room again. "He's fine but still very weak. But I can assure you now that he will be able to fully recover. You can go to him again."

Hale was sitting in his bed when the Darigan came back and sat down beside him again.

"You can't believe how much I feared for your life."

The Pirate gently stroke over his cheek.

"But now I'm feeling okay again and ye don't need to worry about me too much anymore. Ye look awfully tired. Better get some rest now. And I can watch ye while ye're sleeping. Haven't done that in a while anyways."

He was right. Now that the stress was over Tandrak felt more and more tired with every second. He smiled and gave the Bori one more kiss then he went over to the second bed in that room.

"And you do me a favour and recover even faster", he still could mumble before his

eyes fell shut.