

The Darridge Affair (Draconicon)

Chapter 1

By Draconicon

The easiest way to tell whether it was safe to use magic in a new location was to just use it and see how the public responded. So, rather than taking a train, plane, or boat to Darridge, the black dragon just opened a portal and walked into the public square in front of city hall. He paused only to put on a robe that covered him from his neck to his ankles and pull it shut, and then he was off.

Draconicon arrived with a whoosh and a swoosh, the first when the portal opened, and the second when it closed. The dark fires behind him flared outwards, creating an effect not dissimilar from a halo, and then it, too, disappeared. He crossed his arms, looking around to see just where the portal had deposited him.

A large, dome-topped building stood in front of him, and even without the words ‘City Hall’ proclaiming its function, he would have known what it was meant for instantly. A great many narrow steps led up to the front door, most of them occupied by protesters at that moment, most of them with placards, some of them with signs. None of them had their eyes turned towards him, all of them too busy shouting at the building itself.

Guess they’re in as bad a situation as they said, Draconicon thought. Never would have thought politicians could tell the truth...

Other than the dome-topped structure, there were a few other buildings around. A large courthouse occupied one end of the square to the left of City Hall, and a large, administrative-looking building occupied the side to the right. As he looked behind him, he saw -

Well, he saw a great many confused citizens, most of them staring at him with their eyes wide. Draconicon smiled, waving his hand.

“Hi.”

“...H-hi.”

“Um, hello.”

“What the fuck...”

The crowd of various species - a surprising spread of them, to be honest - continued to stare at him, each of them wide-eyed, some of them going from shock to anger, and some few still backing away. He expected that; Darridge wasn't used to magic just yet, and he had just pulled a reasonably big spell out of his ass to get here.

“Anyone care to tell me what that protest is up there?” he asked, gesturing to the steps.

Nobody answered. The crowd dispersed relatively quickly, though most of them kept their eyes on him as they walked away. The number of people that bumped into one another was almost comical as they drifted off, leaving him to figure out what was going on with the protest on his own.

Of course, he noted that there were a few that were pulling out cell phones, dialing numbers. Some were probably going to call the cops, some were probably calling family. For that matter, some might even be calling other mages that lived in the city. There were too many variables in a place like this.

Shaking his head, he flicked his wings out to full extension. Seven feet to the left, seven feet to the right. He flexed his shoulders and back, and with a single hard flap, he was airborne. It pulled at his neck and shoulder to flex again and again, but he kept flapping, taking himself higher and higher until he was well above the crowd on the steps. He floated over them, glancing down at the different signs that people were bearing for clues.

Down with the Mages!

Pray For Our Sins!

Fuck Magic!

So, that was the way that the protesters were seeing the latest developments. That was going to make things a little more complicated. The white-eyed, black-scaled dragon shook his head and continued on.

Eventually, he managed to pass over the rest of the crowd, swooping in for a landing just past the security guards that were holding back the crowd. One of them noticed him landing, a weasel that was just starting to light up a cigarette, and the guard came running.

“Hey, hey! You can't go in there, sir,” the weasel said.

“I think you'll find I can,” Draconicon said with a small smile. “This is the emergency meeting regarding the new mages, right?”

“And the Sunken Town, and - look, sir, I know that everyone's concerned, but you have to stay behind the barricade.”

“I really don’t.”

“Sir, if you don’t go back, I will have to escort you there myself,” the ferret said, finally reaching him.

The height difference between them made the ‘threat’ rather laughable, and he shook his head. The ways that he could force his way through this were downright endless, and he wouldn’t even have to use magic to do it. His own muscles would suffice, if he really wanted to push his way through. He wouldn’t even get in trouble for it, more than likely.

That said, he had been invited. He reached into his robe, snapping his fingers surreptitiously at an inside pocket, and pulled out the letter that had been left on the other side of the portal. The ferret blinked as he pulled it free.

“What’s that?”

“My invitation,” the dragon said. “I told you, I don’t have to stay behind the barricade. I’m supposed to be here.”

“Let me see that?”

He passed the letter over, glancing over his shoulder at the protesters. They were mostly disjointed, uncoordinated, but here and there, one of their shouted slogans got through. To a one, all of the intelligible ones were about getting rid of magic, hunting mages, that the city had done wrong and they needed to be cleansed of their sins. A second glance showed that most of them were swinging around holy books, too, though most of them were varied and different. Not all one religion, then.

Well, most of the big ones do condemn witchcraft. Looks like Mayor Dirkson has his hands full...

“Wait, wait...you...” The weasel’s confusion pulled his head back around, watching as the guard looked up. “You’re a mage?”

“That’s one of many titles, but yes.”

“And...and they invited you here?”

“That’s also a yes.”

“...I need to call this in.”

“Go ahead. And can I just say that you’re doing a better job than most?”

“...”

“I’ll wait here, shall I?”

“Yes...wait here...”

Draconicon nodded, leaning his head back against the wall and closing his eyes. For all that this caused another delay, it was better than forcing his way in. Security was only doing their job, and he’d prefer that they actually *did* that job rather than let someone else push inside. After all, if he was going to be working with the city council, then he’d prefer to know that they were protected while they were talking.

He couldn’t do everything himself, after all.

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Ten minutes and a pat-down that embarrassed the security guard doing it more than it did him, Draconicon was allowed through the door into City Hall. He had two guards walking alongside him - both beagles, surprisingly enough - and they hustled him through the surprisingly silent building. He kept waiting to hear someone talking about the day’s work, or to hear the hum of a copy machine, or any number of a hundred different things that one expected from an active office building, but there was nothing to be heard.

“Short-staffed today?” he asked.

The beagles didn’t answer. As a matter of fact, they didn’t even look at him. They looked at the floors, the walls, the ceilings, the empty doors to empty offices, but never at him. It was almost like they feared that he’d do something to them if they made eye contact.

Nobody really knows how magic works here yet, he thought, shaking his head. It’s not like I’ll steal your soul with a look.

Not that he couldn’t, of course. He could. It was one of the harder, more evil spells that he knew, but it was entirely possible to steal a soul with a picture or a glance. It just was more trouble than it was worth, not really even that good a party trick when you got right down to it. He generally left it to the liches.

Eventually, the beagles led him to a large, windowless door. One pointed at him to stay where he was, while the other walked up to the door and knocked. It opened a slit, and the beagle whispered something. The dragon just barely caught the word ‘consultant’, and he bit off a chuckle.

Is that how they’re referring to it, then?

Well, he’d been called worse. He could live with that.

The beagle stepped back from the door, and it opened the rest of the way to reveal a skunk. Definitely in his mid-forties, the skunk wore a tan suit that curled unfortunately close to his stomach, showing off a gut that could stand to lose a few pounds, and a chest that was just starting to sag a bit. He had the sort of lightly-grayed muzzle edges that made it look like the skunk should have been holding a pipe or something, and the expression of a man that was used to telling stories.

He smiled, offering his hand to the skunk.

“Mayor Dirkson, I presume?”

“Yes, indeed, indeed. So sorry for the wait. And you are...Draconicon, yes?”

“That’s correct.”

“Out of Maiyone?”

“Well, out of somewhere. Probably too old to be out of whatever you call yours, though.”

“I meant the city, of course. How...forward of you to say, though.”

“I know. But yes, I’m the one that you’re looking for.”

“Thank heavens.” The skunk sagged in on himself as he breathed a sigh of relief. “Come in, come in.”

Led through the doorway into the council chamber, he glanced at the others at the table. Seven different councilors, each of a different species. King cobra, elephant, donkey, orca, lioness, polar bear, and gray wolf: each one stared at the center of the table, rather determinedly not looking at him, and avoiding looking at each other. He wondered if that had been going on since the start of the meeting, or if that was just because he’d walked into the room.

The mayor left him at one side of the room, walking back to the one empty seat at the council table. Clearing his throat, the mayor looked up at him, but even the skunk seemed to struggle to meet his eyes.

“Ahem. Welcome to Darridge, Draconicon,” he said. “As I said, I’m Daniel Dirkson, the mayor of the city.”

“And bucking for governor,” the lioness muttered. “Not exactly the time for it, mayor.”

“A matter for another time, Ms. Moore.” Daniel shook his head. “Ahem. I apologize for the interruption.”

“No, no, please. I like to know what I’m dealing with. It makes handling the overall situation easier. Mind if I find myself a chair, though?”

The skunk gestured for him to go ahead, then froze as if realizing his mistake. Before he could take it back, Draconicon seized on it and cast another spell.

It was a simple one, really. Most of the ones that he planned on casting in the city - at least for now - were of the simpler variety. He flexed his fingers, calling the magic from his core and down his arm. The heat of it flowed through his veins as it always did, and then took form as black flames at the ends of his fingers. Usually, he silenced the crackle that they made, but this time, he let it through at full force. The sound rippled through the room, and every councilor looked up whether they meant to or not.

Of the seven councilors and Mayor Dirkson, only three of them looked at all okay with the magic that they saw. Ms. Moore, the lioness, looked at it with eyes slightly wide but with her face focused and intent, like she was trying to unravel what he was doing like some student at a magic show trying to learn the craft. The elephant at the table, another female, looked at him with curiosity that was a bit fearful and a bit fascinated, like she was afraid but knew that it was necessary, and was trying to focus on the best.

The third, the donkey at the table, looked at his magic with a different sort of study. That one seemed like he was trying to figure out where to place it, almost like what he'd seen some people do at an arena. They sized up the fighters and tried to figure out where they were going to place their bets based on their guesses. That was the sort of look he was getting from the donkey.

Now, isn't that interesting?

He decided to make the spell slightly more theatrical, releasing it without even a gesture. The fire leaped from his hand, spinning around its middle point and forming six different limbs. Four pointed down, solidifying into metal legs, while the remaining two spun upwards, coming together to form the pointed back of a chair.

He sat down as it was still half-solid, letting it finish taking shape under him, his tail pointing out the back.

"Much more comfortable," he said. "Do continue."

The entire council stared at him, and he chuckled.

"You knew I had magic. That's why you asked me to come here, wasn't it? To use mine to help the city get a handle on the new 'magic problem'?"

"Well, yes, but...but..." Mayor Dirkson stared at the chair, obviously struggling to find his words.

Eventually, the lioness sighed. Rubbing her forehead, she gestured at him without looking at him directly.

“What he means is that we didn’t think you could just *do* that without even trying.”

“Ah. You’re dealing with *that* kind of magic, then?” the dragon asked.

“And what do you mean by ‘that kind’, dragon?” the donkey asked.

“...I mean the sort that is done quietly, that is often done in secret, because it happens so *slowly*. The kind that builds up and then explodes because everyone else ignored what was happening. The sort that, quite obviously, happened here, and now you can’t pretend that it isn’t there, and you have no idea of how to handle it.”

“...I’ll have you know that we could,” the donkey said, shaking his head. “And without you -”

“Oh, pish-posh,” the elephant said, shaking her head. “Douglas, just get your head out of your ass. I understand the fumes get you high, but most of us find it very unappealing. Mr. Draconicon, was it?”

“Yes. And you are...”

“Nicole. Nicole Jones. It’s good to meet you,” the elephant said, holding out her hand. He reached across the table and took it. It was only when he got a close look that he realized that she was wrinkled with more than just her species, and wondered how long she had been on the council. “And it’s good to have someone here that actually knows how this all works, I think we can all agree.”

There were multiple murmurs of agreement across the table, though some came more reluctantly than the others. He shook his head, sighing.

“Is this how it’s going to be, then?” he asked.

“What did you expect? A parade greeting?” Douglas asked.

“No, but I expected that those governing a city so at a loss with what to do would be a little more on the ball with things. How long ago was the Sunken Town incident? A year now?”

“...”

“And how much have you done to start working with the mages in your city? For that matter, have you even started using a different term?”

“Why would we do that?” the king cobra asked.

“Because ‘mage’ isn’t going to cut it before long. Do you know what magic actually is? Any of you?”

The council looked at each other, and he could see that they were already disliking him. Most of them were probably used to running the city the way that they liked. Considering just where Darridge was, that was no surprise. The geography encouraged the region to be relatively self-reliant, and that meant that they would be getting little other than taxation notices from the rest of the over-region past the mountains to the east. They'd be able to do more or less as they liked.

Unfortunately, this was not the time for that. The dragon crossed his arms, waiting for a response, and when none was forthcoming, he pushed forward.

“Where you are right now, ‘magic’ is the influence of will upon the world. Or more specifically, the process of a specific, new energy field upon one’s belief, which is then expressed upon the world. At this moment, your city is drowning in something you don’t understand, something that isn’t just giving people powers, but is creating a brand new reality. A reality that you need to get a hold of, now, before it gets any worse.

“Right now, you’re seeing magic. Why? Because people want to believe in magic. Because there are lots of little people out there that have read a hundred stories, played a hundred games, where one fantasy hero has come out and won because they have the power of magic on their side. They’ve read stories of Cthulhu and the dread cults that get power from worshipping him. There are thousands of ways for the idea of magic to get into someone’s head, and right now, that belief in magic, that wish for it to be real, is all that it needs to become. The *only* thing keeping you from being in an even worse position is the fact that everyone believes that it has to be more complicated than it is. If anyone understood how simple it was, you’d be sitting in the charred ruins of this building right now.”

Draconicon looked around, meeting the eyes of every councilor and the mayor. He could see the gears turning, could see how they were puzzling it out. What they were dealing with wasn’t magic in the strictest sense of the word. It was an energy that was translating itself *as* magic, and through that, empowering those that were affected by it. That meant that it wasn’t just limited to throwing fireballs and summoning demons.

“Are you saying...we could be dealing with people with superpowers, too?” Ms. Moore asked.

“Very possibly,” he said. “Superpowers, the Force, mutants...anything that someone believes in strongly enough, wishes to happen, could come to be in the next year or so. It takes at least two years for the released energy in an area to start calming down, to stop being so violent and mutable. After that, that particular energy field is no longer accepting new applications, as it were, and will just operate under the rules established from the first two years. If - and I stress that, if - you can last that long, you have a chance. But considering you didn’t even know that much, I’m amazed that you’ve already lasted a year.”

Douglas sputtered, but the donkey was silenced by almost every other member of the council. Almost; the king cobra looked at him with a cautioning glance, but no more than that. Silence reigned for a few more seconds, only for Mayor Dirkson to speak up again.

“And...what do you propose we do?” he asked.

“The first thing you’ll want is to make sure that all current practitioners of this power have a place to go and be educated in how it works. A safe place, away from mobs like the one on the steps. By the way, really a bad idea to let that keep going.”

“Everyone is allowed freedom of expression,” the polar bear said. “It is in the rule of law; they may assemble and speak their mind.”

“You ever had a school shooting out here?”

“I fail to see how that -”

“Imagine how that would work out if the shooter could lob fireballs, or lightning, or other natural disasters at the people that they’re angry at. Except in this case, replace ‘angry with’ with ‘scared of.’ You literally have people protesting the existence of magic out there, and considering how tied to magic you become once you start using it, that’s the same as protesting someone’s right to breathe.”

The way that they looked at him, it was clear that a portion of the council didn’t entirely believe him. The orca, the gray wolf, the donkey: none of them were entirely sold on the idea, clearly, but at least the others were thinking about it. He was starting to make some headway, at least, and that was something.

The mayor sighed, leaning forward and pinching the bridge of his muzzle. After a few deep breaths, he looked across the table again.

“Again, what do you propose we do, Mr. Draconicon?”

“As I said, gather up those that are practicing this. Give them all a chance to go somewhere safe, a place that *I’m* in charge of.”

“Out of the question,” Douglas said.

“Much as I am...disinclined to agree with my colleague, I’m not entirely sure I like the idea either,” the gray wolf said. “The idea of putting that many dangerous individuals under the authority of one person feels like a recipe for disaster, particularly without any way of having accountability to the council. Or anyone else, for that matter.”

“If you want accountability, there’s ways to give you that,” Draconicon said.

“You are too powerful for that,” the mayor said. “I’m sorry, but that’s the biggest stumbling block there. We have no way to stop you if you decide to go further than we decide to allow. I know we invited you, but...”

“But what?”

“We were hoping for a solution, not greater expenses.”

The lioness whipped her head around, glaring at the mayor. Before she could open her mouth, though, the dragon spoke up.

“Do you really think that this problem is going to be ‘handled’, Mayor Dirkson?” he asked.

“We are looking for a way to do that. There are other invitations out for aid. Perhaps someone else can see something that you didn’t.”

“Really? And what solution is that? To cart them all off? To get rid of them? Oh, or perhaps establish a regular shipment of super-powered individuals to those that will use them in a different way? Perhaps even against you?”

“That’s not - we’re not that cruel.”

“No? You have an interesting way of showing it.” Draconicon crossed one leg over the other. “The truth is, Mayor Dirkson, you want this to go away. Most of you probably do. But that’s not going to happen. This is not something that you can just put back in a box and pretend it never happened. Once ‘magic’, for lack of a better term, comes back, you can either leave, or you can deal with it. Now, I’m offering you the chance of getting a handle on this, of keeping all your people safe, educating them in how this works so that we don’t have another Sunken Town incident.

“Now, you can take my offer, or I can open a portal right now, go back to the main square, and leave. And you can count yourself lucky that I don’t broadcast your eagerness to abandon your magical citizens in the process, because at the moment, I’m more than tempted to do just that.”

Again, silence fell. He could tell that they were negotiating with each other as they glanced around the table again, their expressions changing on a dime as they looked to each other. It was clear that they had worked with each other quite often, that they understood one another in a way that an outsider could never quite grasp. He leaned back, looking away and giving them the privacy to have that little non-verbal chat.

He looked at the ceiling while he waited, wondering if they would come to the right decision. He’d been as blunt as he could about the dangers that they faced if they did nothing. All he could hope was that they listened.

“Mr. Draconicon?”

Looking down at the orca who’d spoken, he arched an eyeridge.

“What will your help cost?” she asked.

“That’s your issue?”

“I’m aware we need help. The question is, can we afford it? What will your help cost us?”

“Not as much as you think. And not as much as you’ll pay if you don’t take it.”

“I want numbers.”

“...I don’t need a paycheck. However...I will want something else.”

“...If it’s what I think it is from that tone of voice, we will have conditions, as well.”

“Then let’s hash that out, shall we?”

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By the time that the negotiations were done, the protesters had gone home, the sun had gone down, and the deal was done. He groaned as he walked out of the council chambers, gripping the bracelet that he had made for himself as a result of their negotiations. It had already left him dizzy, and he shook his head as he felt more than two-thirds of his power being drained away by it.

This is going to get very annoying, he thought, looking at it. But if it keeps their trust for now, worth it.

The sticking point of being too powerful for them to handle had kept interfering with every bargaining point that he tried to make, and rather than keeping it around as a tool for them to keep throwing in his face, he offered to negate most of it right then and there. They hadn’t believed it possible, but he had made it clear that it had happened.

One-third of his total power was less than what he was working with, but it was better than nothing, and it would be more than what anyone else in the city had, at least for the moment. When others started moving in, this deal would have to be renegotiated - there were powerful mages in other parts of the world, after all - but for now, this would be fine enough.

What he’d offered - and they’d happily accepted - was his experience as a magical teacher, his aid in finding and recruiting anyone that the city police had missed in their sweeps of the city, and a position as advisor on the city council as someone experienced in how a newly empowered population needed to be managed. They were so eager for someone that knew what they were doing that most of them accepted that on the spot, with only Douglas and the orca - Erin Taylor - being the hold-outs. The rest had been eager to have something other than cops chasing after mages, and they were happy to hand that job over to him once he’d depowered himself.

What he'd gotten, on the other hand, were two things, one easier and one harder given. The latter was how much authority he had over his students, and it had taken a *lot* of arguing to get that. In all matters regarding his 'students', he had ultimate authority. Punishment, education, and general treatment were all down to him. He'd fought both Ms. Moore and Douglas for that, neither of them wanting to cede that level of power to him, but eventually they'd been forced to. He was, after all, the educator that they needed.

The former, easier matter, was his payment. He smiled as the beagles were called to the door, given their orders. They blinked, whispered back, obviously sure they misheard, before they ran off.

One doesn't really need money...but company is nice.

He'd known that Darridge had a bit of a sex trade. Every big city did. He'd made it his 'payment' that every night, he could go down to wherever the officers were picking up and holding the sex workers of the city, and he could pick one that was willing to spend the night with him and release the others. Part of that was for his pleasure, part of that was to throw the wrenches into the work for those that still wanted to prosecute the sex workers for doing what they did.

"Mr. Draconicon."

He looked over his shoulder. Nicole Jones, the elephant, had just left the room. He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

"Regardless of everything, thank you for coming. Things have been going downhill ever since the incident, and...well, this is the first time that I've seen it turning around in over a year. I might just light a candle to the Angel of Hope tonight."

"The Angel of Hope? What's that?"

"Oh, just my angel for the week. One of many." She smiled, her eyes slightly red.
"Anyway, do make sure that you take care. Don't want to get caught out alone after dark."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

"See you tomorrow, dearie."

She walked off, wobbling slightly, and he shook his head. An old granny elephant that still found time to get high. At least the council had character.

Now, where am I going to stay tonight...

The End