

The Darridge Affair (Alex)

Chapter 1

By Draconicon

Alex stumbled out of the subway, not just gasping for breath but nearly at the point of vomiting. The chameleon dragged himself three paces from the subway doors before he fell to his knees, one hand over his mouth and the other on the railing attached to the wall. He swallowed hard, desperately trying to keep his stomach contents down as the rest of the train emptied out around him.

Amidst mutters of ‘drunk’ and ‘foreigner’, the chameleon closed his eyes and tried to ‘look’ in rather than out. Not with his eyes, but with that extra sense that had come to him in the last year. When that failed, he focused on the floor, taking in the tiny bits of extra information that came from people passing by. Anything, anything that wasn’t that madness in the train car.

“Hey, dude, do you need me to get someone?”

Alex didn’t even have the energy to look up. For that matter, he barely had the energy to shake his head as he kept his hand over his mouth, feeling his guts heaving as his head pounded.

“You sure?”

He couldn’t even see who was talking, but he shook his head again. It would pass soon enough, as soon as the train left.

“This train is departing, mind the closing doors.”

The chameleon tensed up as the feelings in the back of his head suddenly reached a fever pitch, a cut-off cheer fading as the doors shut behind him. He saw white points of pain behind his eyes -

And then it faded, the train’s departure putting distance between him and the insanity in the train car. The chameleon’s eyes slowly stopped their frantic spinning in their sockets, opening and pointing forward again as he slowly caught his breath. When he was sure that his lunch wasn’t going to spill onto the tiled floor, he took his hand from his mouth. Swallowing one last mouthful of spit, he fumbled for the railing and pulled himself up.

“...You were faking, weren't you?” that voice asked again.

“No...not faking. Just...Never mind.”

He turned one eye. The movement brought with it the small headache that it always did - anthros weren't quite wired the same as their feral ancestors, and looking in two directions was hard for any chameleon, even now - but he finally saw who'd been offering him even some token sympathy. It was a pigeon, one that had the same sort of chubby-bellied build as the birds that flew across the city, with scaled arms running from the elbow down and a cheap, smart suit that suggested he might have an office job.

Alex shook his head, knowing that he was a rather contrasting image. T-shirt with a d20 on the front, a pair of jeans that had seen better days, sandals, and a backpack that was so big that it had almost carried him off his feet more than once. He tried to chuckle, but the pigeon just fixed him with another stare.

“You looked like you were dying. Why are you all better?”

“Uh...”

“What's wrong with you?”

“...Acting,” he lied, shaking his head. “I'm sorry for selling it so well.”

“Fucking foreigners...”

The pigeon turned on his heel, making his way back up the station walkway, turning onto the steps shortly after. Alex turned so that his eyes were both pointed in the same direction again, sighing to himself.

Well, what was I going to do? Say I had super-powers?

Not that it would be as out of place here in Darridge as it had been further south. This place seemed to be going nuts, according to the news, and the authorities had required a waiver of right of departure before allowing him through the cordon over the mountains. That hadn't gone so well for him, considering how it ate up most of his money, but it was better than walking, and better still than turning around and going home.

Hell, if he hadn't run into all those sports fans on the train, he would have been fine. The fact that they were so wound up about the latest game had meant that emotions were running high, and for someone like him, that was a problem. He rubbed the back of his head, still feeling that stabbing pain in the back of his skull. Shaking his head, he looked at the platform. Another train would be coming through soon, but he knew better than to think that it would be that much better than the last one. All those people cramped on it at the end of the day would mean that emotions of some sort or another would be running high, and the least of those would be

depressive tiredness. Considering how long he had taken to get here, he was already fighting that, and he didn't need to feed off of everyone else feeling the same thing.

So, walking it was. He shook his head, adjusting the weight of his pack on his shoulders, and made for the same exit that the pigeon had used. From what he'd read, Hero Square was about two miles from this station, almost a straight shot from there, near the border of the Sunken Town. That should be easy enough to walk.

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"...You've got to be kidding me."

Two miles had taken two hours, mostly due to bad traffic, a fireball incident, and the sudden appearance of a demon at the halfway point. Some black shape had swooped out of the sky and contained it in some kind of magic, so it wasn't actually dangerous, but it had still caused a delay and scared the living shit out of him. Literally. He'd needed to hop into an alley and change his clothes, and now he was dressed in perhaps the cheapest latex bodysuit that he had ever owned.

But that was nothing compared to the mini-riot that was going on outside Hero Square. Middle-aged males and young females comprised the bulk of them, but there were representatives of all species and genders throwing eggs, tomatoes, and more at the local Super Club that stood in the middle of the square. There were even carts that were being pulled among the crowd, selling stuff to throw.

Alex crumbled on the inside. Just the thought of leaving the road that led to Hero Square felt like a bad idea now, considering the sheer vitriol that he was hearing from the crowd. Something about supers being the spawn of the devil, or that they were all criminals waiting to happen, or something like that. It was hard to make out everything, but the feeling that he got from them...

If the train had been a feeling that nauseated through its smothering power, this was something that felt like cut after cut after cut through his insides, like little prickles of pain that came from raw anger and worse. He didn't know what exactly it was, but it made him hurt from head to toe. He curled his hands into fists at the straps of his backpack, trying to keep focused but having a very hard time with that at the display in front of him.

Here I thought that they'd treat supers better up here...

Then again, this was better than the one little 'club' that had started in his hometown was treated. That place had been firebombed to hell. The only survivor was a young woman that had power over ice, and she'd suffered massive steam burns when the fire burned through and evaporated her protection. He'd never joined that club - too shy - but that had ended up saving his life. At least the folks here were only pelting the building with vegetables and eggs.

And to be fair, they built this one to take it, he thought, looking at the Super Club. Holy hell, someone had money before they changed...

The Super Club stood about as tall as a good-sized apartment building, four levels off the ground and spreading out in a giant U-shape. It was made of obvious hard stone, something that looked like it could resist fire and lightning to a good extent. It didn't quite have the look of something that was built by a super-scientist, but it had various little cameras and gadgets that hung off of mechanical arms on the rooftop and sticking through various windows. Two large turrets stood at the front door, blasting anything big that threatened the building, and they seemed to be more than good enough to keep the crowd from coming *too* close to the structure.

Still, the projectiles were leaving their marks, turning the white-gold building into something that was more like a child's fingerprint project. He shook his head, turning to leave. He'd come back when the riot had -

"Hey! It's one of them!"

And just like that, Alex felt a sudden spike of emotion directed right at him. Hate, fury, and relief: the last one probably because he was on his own, but the other two just as deadly.

The chameleon slowly turned, seeing the crowd turning to face him. Several dozen individuals had stopped with projectiles in hand, glaring at him, their eyes narrowed and fixed on his face. The latex he wore must have made him look like an obvious super, and the backpack probably didn't help. Nobody in this city seemed to have any love for someone that had come from the outside.

"We don't like outsiders, and we don't like supers," a bulldog said, stepping forward, tossing a rock up and down. "You're not thinking of settling down out here, are ya?"

"...I, uh...I was just..."

Passing through? No way would anyone here believe that particular lie. There was no way out of Darridge save for the railway that he had come in on. The waterways to the west were blocked off by the navy, keeping anyone from getting in or out without permission, and the air was locked down by the local weather. There was only one reason anyone new would be here now, and the bulldog knew it, Alex realized. They just wanted him to sign his own warrant to let them start attacking him.

He took a step back, stumbling a bit as the crowd started turning on him, some of them dropping their vegetables and produce for bits of concrete and worse from the sidewalk. What should have been a simple meet and greet was turning into a potentially deadly confrontation.

Heroes in the comics don't have to deal with this...usually...

Well, admittedly, there was the whole ‘mutant registration act’ and other things like the Sentinels when supers were particularly feared, but this was something more local, more focused on fear and -

I should be running right now.

The chameleon knew that was true. He knew that running would also likely get him killed. The minute that he turned his back, they’d start throwing. The minute that he answered them, they’d start throwing their rocks and stuff, too. If he stayed here, they’d come after him and knock him down and then start hitting him, just for daring to come to *their* city as a super. It didn’t even matter what he could do. All that mattered was that, to them, he didn’t belong here, and they needed to ‘fix’ that.

He was utterly frozen in fear, and in that moment, he was sure he was going to wake up in the hospital.

Then, the front door to the Super Club opened up. A blur darted out the door, followed by flared wings reflecting the sunlight. Alex had a split second to realize that something new had hopped onto his radar before something grabbed him around the waist and -

Whoosh!

Half-deaf from the sudden roaring winds in his ears, he blinked to find that he was on the front-step of the Super Club. He stared straight ahead for a moment, then his eyes all but flipped over, rotating to look behind him.

The crowd had split, several groups running away while one was stuck spinning in place, trying to find where he’d gone. Overhead, the glimmering feather shape had split from one to four, then to sixteen. It was an entire flock of feathered anthros, all of them bearing in hand a stun baton and wielding it with great efficiency as they swooped down and then ascended again. In short order, the crowd was completely dispersed.

Alex was still trying to sort out what had happened when he brought his eyes forward again, this time hit with the surprise that someone was standing right in front of him. The chameleon leaped back, then windmilled his arms desperately as he hit the back of the front step for the club. He nearly fell over before the big guy in front of him grabbed him by the front of his ‘uniform,’ holding him by the neck.

“Hey, hey, relax. You’re with friends now,” the big guy said. “You okay?”

“J-j-just didn’t expect to b-be greeted by a g-giant...”

“Bumblebee?”

“Y-yeah.”

Of all the species that he had expected to see in a Super Club, a bumblebee had not been one of them. While the giant insect didn't have the mandibles of his feral cousins, he *did* have the large wings that poked out from behind his back, and he had the large abdomen (though in his case, it was more like a giant rump) that stuck out behind him. He was a fluffy, fuzzy guy, too, someone that seemed to radiate warmth, and his arm, while rather stiff and chitinous, had surprisingly flexible fingers.

He wore something like a wrap, probably because normal clothes would not have fit him in the slightest. The bumblebee nodded, smiling.

“Well, come on in. Shadowfax there saved you from the crowd, and Flock up there's making sure that they don't come too close. You're safe here. Safer than you'd be just about anywhere else, for that matter.”

“Okay...okay. Thanks - wait. Shadowfax?”

Alex whipped his head to the side, expecting a white-haired stallion to be standing by the door. Instead, he found a black-furred donkey. His wide-eyed stare must have been a little more insulting than he thought, because the equine stomped a hoof in irritation and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Hey, it's not *that* kind of reference, alright? ‘Shadow’ for the fur, fast as a fax...” The donkey shook his head. “Didn't even know it was a fucking reference until after I put that down as my official fucking name.”

Alex would have had a hard time believing that if it wasn't for the fact that he was picking up all kinds of embarrassment and annoyance from the donkey at the same time. The chameleon immediately looked away before that could develop into a headache, looking back at the bumblebee. The big bug's eyes were mostly humanoid in shape, but they still had the faceted, fractal look of a bee's eyes, leaving them all the same color and vaguely gem-like.

Like I have room to talk with my eyes...

Flock finally joined them, the red-tailed hawk landing with a thump just inside the door. Shadowfax pulled the door shut, and they were finally behind closed doors and safe again. The bumblebee sighed.

“Finally. Anyway, welcome. I didn't expect someone to be brave enough to come in with a costume already, particularly with something like that riot going on. What's your name, young man?”

“Uh...Alex.”

“And using your real name?”

“I don’t have a super-name yet. I wanted to pick a good one,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “Plus, uh, I haven’t been doing this very long just yet.”

“Heh, well, we can’t all have that much experience.” The bumblebee nodded, gesturing to himself. “My official name is Hearthhome, but some of the younger heroes call me Bumble-Dad.”

“Or just daddy,” Flock muttered, shaking his head. “Speaking of which, do you have room tonight, ‘daddy’?”

Alex’s cheeks just about burned off his face, and for a split second, he lost control. His blush spread through all three heroes around him, and their cheeks were suddenly as fiery as his, with nobody able to look at one another. The chameleon grimaced, pulling that back in, shaking his head.

“Sorry. Sorry. That...that was an accident.”

“...Are you an empath?” Hearthhome asked.

“Um...yeah. Receiving and transmitting.”

“Holy shit,” Flock muttered.

“Well, at least my role’s safe,” Shadowfax said.

“Quiet, please,” the bumblebee said, hushing the other heroes before turning to him properly again. “Why don’t we go get you settled in, hmm? We need to fill out the records for you to officially join, and...”

“And?”

“You might want a different suit. That one is...clingy.”

“Sorry, it’s the cheapest one they had.”

“I must say, it doesn’t make you look cheap.”

“Wha - oh. Oh. Oh, god...”

One could have lit the corridors with just how red everyone’s faces were after that particular realization.

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Thankfully, Hearthhome was particularly good at comforting and calming people down. It turned out that he had a limited empathic ability himself, one that dealt with bringing comfort

and calm to those around him. It turned out that it wasn't as effective on another empath, but it was more than sufficient to keep Alex from burning up in embarrassment every time that someone saw him during their brief walk through the Super Club. Every time that someone turned to look at him and saw him, not to mention everything that his cheap latex suit showed off, he had to hold tight to that heart-warming feeling that the bumblebee put off.

Eventually, he and Hearthhome reached the big man's office on the fourth floor. Steel doors on hydraulics opened to let them in, and the whole place was coated with metal. The bumblebee shook his head, opening the buttons of his shirt and shrugging it down to his waist. It hung off his hips, since it was tucked into his pants, but it meant that he was naked from the waist up.

"It's going to get a little warm in here. Sorry about that," he said.

"It's okay. I'm just...figuring this out, still."

"So, how long have you had powers, Alex?"

"Six months. Something like that."

"That's a reasonably long time. Any trips to the emergency room?"

"None for me. I...knew how to keep people from finding out. Most of the time."

"But for others?" Hearthhome asked, his head cocked to the side, his wings flicking slightly.

"...One or twice. First time was more of them, second time was..." Alex sighed. "Is this part...required?"

"I'm afraid it is, young man. I need to know who we're taking in, just in case something bad happens. It's the best option I have for protecting everyone here, and everyone that wants to join. I know it's not comfortable to think about, but let's get through it quickly, hmm? Like pulling off a bandaid."

Alex took a deep breath, rubbing both hands against his face. He wanted this new beginning, but at the same time...

"Sit down, Alex. It'll be easier if you don't have to focus on standing up and trying to sort yourself out."

"Mmmph..."

He nodded, letting himself be guided to the one chair in the room besides Hearthhome's. The metal frame wasn't very comfortable, but it was better than nothing. He leaned forward, resting his hands on the metal desk. As the bumblebee sat down, the room warmed a bit, and he

wasn't sure if it was from the big guy's body temperature or if it was from his power. Either way, it helped a little bit.

"I...accidentally put two people in the hospital when my powers came out. Heart attacks. It was an accident, but one of them almost died, and the other...they said that he'd be on heart medication for the rest of his life."

"That's a horrible thing to carry."

"They were going to mug me, and...and I was just scared. So scared." Alex shook his head, covering his face with one hand. "I found out later that...that if I got too emotional, too excited, or anything like that, I could make other people feel things without meaning to. That's what happened in the hall - sorry. Sorry about that. Again."

"It's alright. Nothing wrong with a little embarrassment." Hearthhome nodded. "That was the first time. What happened the second time?"

"That one...that one was a little bit more...on-purpose."

"What happened?"

"I..." He blushed, looking down. "I did something stupid."

"Normal people do stupid things when they're your age, Alex. You have all the things that they have to deal with, and powers. You'll make mistakes. The important thing is that you know it wasn't a good idea. But what happened?"

"I got..." He squirmed in the chair, shaking his head. "I got...horny. And I thought...maybe...maybe see what I could do with that. Maybe if I made someone else horny, they'd want to do something, too."

Essentially, it was no better than date-rape. He'd felt that after the post-nut clarity hit that day, and he still realized that now. It was one thing to just have fun, it was another thing to put someone else in the mood when they might not want to be. Heroes didn't do that sort of thing. If he wanted to be a hero -

"What happened to your partner?" Hearthhome asked.

"Partners."

"Pardon?"

"It was...partners." He covered his face with both hands as all the embarrassment and shame came racing back. "I-I went to one of the frat-houses on campus, lots of jocks, lots of big guys, and I - I swear, I didn't mean...I always liked the big guys and...and I just..." He had to stop and breathe for a few seconds to calm down enough to keep going, even with Hearthhome's

help. “I thought, just a little lust. Just a bit of, you know, horny. Make people feel in the mood, to want someone...someone that they wouldn’t usually...wouldn’t look at.

“It blew up. I was...I was desperate, and stupid, and it blew up. It turned into an orgy, but then it didn’t stop. All the hormones and everything ramped up to overtime, and...”

“Just tell me what happened to them, Alex. I’m not here to judge. I just need to know what happened, so we can move forward from this.”

“I know, I know, I just...It’s...” The chameleon bit it off. He needed to talk. Not excuse, just talk. If he wanted to be here, they deserved to know. “Some of the guys...they were basically castrated afterward. Everything was running so hot and high that they...they burnt themselves out all at once. They’d never have kids. Some wouldn’t even get it up again. Others...others were so in the grip of it that they did stupid things, got expelled. One person got three different girls pregnant in one night.

“And it was all my fault. All my fault. And I didn’t tell anyone. Not then. I mean...I couldn’t. They’d...they’d have...”

“They would have put you in prison, at least. Possibly worse, if someone else had gotten their hands on you,” the bumblebee said.

“I should have said something. It’s not right. It’s not *right*. Heroes are supposed...we’re supposed to take...”

Alex couldn’t continue. He gripped his head, on the verge of punching his own temples in as he pressed his knuckles harder and harder against the side of his head. *Stop, stop, stop*, he told himself, feeling like he was on the verge of an explosion right then. *Stop it before you make everyone feel this. Stop. Stop!*

Hearthhome reached across the desk, laying a hand on his arm. If he’d been standing or leaning forward, he would have lurched away, but he was forced to take it because he was in the chair. Huffing and puffing, he managed to keep from hitting himself, and he held tight to that connection.

“You did what you could. That’s all anyone can do, Alex. And maybe one day, you’ll go back and apologize, make it good. But if you did that then, you would have been locked up, or dead. You did what you had to do to survive, to stay alive, and for someone in your situation, that’s a miracle.

“But for right now, you’re here. Somewhere safe. Somewhere with other people like you.”

“What if I do it again, though?” he whispered. “What if I...what if I hurt someone like that again?”

“Then we’ll figure it out. We’re all figuring it out. Most of us haven’t had powers for longer than you have; I’ve barely had mine for ten months. But we can, and will, figure it out.”

Hearthhome squeezed his wrist, and Alex slowly took the other man’s hand. He squeezed back, taking a deep breath, then another, and another. Gradually, he was able to calm down, no longer at risk of letting out that burst of emotion again. The bumblebee smiled, his eyes glittering.

“Now, let’s finish filling out the paperwork, and then we can get you a proper costume designed, huh? I bet you’d like something better than that thing.”

“...It’s not that bad, is it?”

“Alex, I’m sorry to tell you, but that costume is so clingy that it makes you look like a little lost ‘escort.’ I wouldn’t put someone I hated in that thing.”

“...It was all I could afford.”

“I know. But you’re in the Super Club now. Let’s get you something proper. Right after we finish filling this out...”

The End