

War Drums

Maggie's World

Being a city known for its food, New Orleans had an abundance of fancy restaurants. Despite that, Maggie Drake had only been to a handful of them. If not for her father's penchant for dragging her out for dinner every couple of months, she'd probably never see the inside of the greater New Orleans eateries. On this occasion, her father had chosen a new high end Italian place called Rudolpho's. It was a few blocks from the carved wood store, toward the river. The building wasn't one of the original New Orleans historic structures like those found near Jackson Square, but it was an old business that the restaurant owners had refurbished. It looked equally possible in walking into the red cinder block building that they might be going in to buy paint rather than paying a hundred dollars for a cup full of shrimp and pasta.

On the inside, though, there was no mistaking that the clientele expected to be in the business were much classier, or at least more loose with money, than an average carpenter. The lights were dimmed overhead in the small room where guests entered. To get into the main dining room, customers had to pass through a small tunnel with an overhead aquarium. Small sharks and silver dollars swam across the ceiling as if they were passing over the ocean floor. The tables inside the main room were spaced several feet apart, each with its own small lamp projecting light for the occupants. The owners were going for a romantic mood for their establishment, and Maggie could see that they'd probably succeeded.

Maggie and her father asked to be seated at one of the more unassuming booths along the far wall of the dining hall. A tuxedo clad waiter brought them water and took their drink orders, then they ordered from the limited, yet intriguing menu selections. Maggie decided on a chicken and parmesan dish, while her father went for the infinitely more cruel veal.

"How are you, Maggie?" Drake asked after the waiter left them.

Leaning her elbows on the table, Maggie felt her brow draw down in question. She found the question odd since they'd been together for an hour. "Why do you ask?"

"I worry about you. You always seem so depressed," he said.

“We live in a depressing time,” Maggie answered. She hated when her father acted like he cared about her. It made all her hateful feelings about him seem so wrong. At least until he did something to show his true nature again.

Drake nodded. “We do, and I fear our plight is only getting more complicated.”

“Why do you say that?”

The older man sighed. “I’ve decided that you are right about The Company. If we continue to be aggressive, a war will ensue. I’ve spoke with our family members who spend time on the streets, and avoiding a conflict appears inevitable.”

Leaning forward, Maggie whispered as softly as she could for her father still to hear. “Then why don’t we stop fighting with them?”

“That’s not the answer. The Company wants to completely eliminate us, whether we have five percent of the market, or fifty percent. We must annihilate them to survive,” Drake answered.

“Maybe we just need to get out of the business,” Maggie said.

Her father shook his head. “Maggie, we’ve been over this before. We stay in the business. It’s our best option. Perhaps not forever, but at least for now.”

“Fine,” Maggie said, rocking back in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest.

The waiter came and brought their drinks, then their dinners. Maggie didn’t feel like talking to her father anymore. There was no use in trying to talk sense into the man. While she knew he had his reasons for thinking the way he did, she desperately wished he would change his mind. The Drake Family and its members were different. She didn’t argue with that. Maggie was sure, though that they could survive in this world without having to break the law to support themselves. Or she was at least sure that she could.

Maggie had never tried to break free. Her father hadn’t threatened her. He’d actually said that he didn’t care one way or another. It wasn’t just him, though, that kept her tied to the Family. The others, like herself, provided a protection from the dangers she could face in the world alone. With them, she always had people to fall back on, people like her, who knew what she had to go through and would act

to protect her. Some of her clan were complete nutjobs, but the family had always stuck together.

Drake finished eating his veal before Maggie finished her food. He pulled the napkin from his lap and wiped his mouth. After a moment, he tossed the cloth in his plate and focused in on her. "So, what did you find out about this nosy cop?"

She'd hoped he would have forgotten about Reed Hackman. "Not much. He's investigating the murders, but he doesn't know anything about us."

"For the moment. Is he going to find anything?"

Maggie shrugged and finished chewing the last bite of her meal. "I can't tell that by watching him for a few hours. From what I can tell, he's not being paid by The Company, and I know he's not being paid by us."

"Is he dangerous?" Drake asked.

"He could be, but we need to give it some time," she said. Her father wasn't one to take rash actions, but Maggie needed to be cautious about what she said about the Detective.

Drake took care of the check and she followed him to his Mercedes. The night sky held no moon, and a hint of rain hung in the air, refusing to fall. Dim orange overhead lights provided the only illumination in the small parking lot. Drake's car, which he had parked in the farthest space he could find, beeped when he unlocked it with his remote.

As they reached the car, two men sprang from nowhere, blocking Drake and Maggie's access. There was no doubt when the men came into view that they meant harm. They were both white males wearing dark colored jackets and blue jeans. They each held a handgun and looked ready to use it.

"Drake?" the one on the left asked, somehow making the word sound like a bayou.

Drake glared at the Cajun and his companion for a moment before answering. "Yes," he said, proudly.

"You can't mess with da Company, man," the Cajun said.

In the instant it took for the slow witted criminal to make the decision to pull the trigger of his gun, Drake made his move. He grabbed the Cajun's gun and hand, and twisted them behind the man in a flash. Maggie seized the opportunity to subdue the man's partner, whose mind wasn't even fast enough to register that it was time for him to react. Maggie sprang forward and planted her elbow against the thug's chin, sending him flying backward into the pickup parked next to them.

The Cajun struggled against Drake's grasp, thrashing his body and cussing an unintelligible blue streak. The man, smaller than Drake by forty pounds, pulled his hand free, leaving his weapon in Drake's hand. Not deterred by the development, the man slipped a hard punch to Drake's temple. The blow failed to stagger Drake. With cat-like grace, the older man punched the Cajun in the jaw, sending the small attacker into the abused pickup.

Apparently having convinced himself that Maggie's ability to punish him had been a fluke, Cajun's partner pulled himself off the pavement and charged Maggie again. The petite woman—five foot seven and usually about one hundred and forty pounds—stood her ground. When the man's fist came hurling toward her face, she shifted to the side, avoiding all but a glancing blow on her shoulder. His momentum carrying him past, Cajun's partner made considerable effort to stop himself. When he turned back to face his prey, Maggie put another fist into his face. The bone crunching blow sent him to the ground again; this time unconscious.

The Cajun, weaponless and already wounded, stared at them both wide-eyed. Deciding apparently that he valued his life, he skittered away through the lot full of cars. Waking up several moments later, his partner followed.

Maggie stood behind her father's Mercedes, shaking her head. "That was just completely uncalled for," she said.

"It's only going to make them want us more," her father responded.

"What do we do?" Maggie asked, fearing the answer.

Drake looked his daughter in the eye without apprehension. "We punish them until there is no one left to punish."



"We are a peaceful people," Warin Drake said, looking out over his flock. The Family members filled the meeting room at Drake Manor to

capacity. While the meeting had been called on short notice, the message summoning everyone had been clear enough that this was not a gathering that could be missed.

Drake paced slowly back and forth across his stage, measuring his breaths to project his voice throughout the hall. "Ronald Jeremiah and his Company have provoked us to take drastic action. As many of you know, there was an attack on Maggie and myself last night. If Jeremiah had his way, we would both be dead."

Murmurs of shock filtered through the crowd. Family members looked back and forth from each other and spoke in hushed tones. Firelight from the nearby torches danced off of their expressive faces.

"When Jeremiah took on the Drake Family, however, he had no idea with whom he was dealing. We shall now set him and his minions on a new path. They must understand that the Drake Family is not a target to be pushed around at their will." Drake pointed a finger over his audience with each statement. "We need not drive out any competition to our interests, but we cannot let our Family be compromised."

Maggie looked at those around her. Most of the Family members nodded as her father spoke, their faces a portrait of devotion. Concern appeared to be a prevailing emotion, mixed with the anger Drake appeared intent on arousing.

"We need not seek out anyone from The Company for punishment. However, it is clear that we will be involved with them and there will be confrontations." Drake surveyed the crowd, touching each person with his gaze. "Where before I have asked that you withhold your full capabilities, I ask that no more."

Drake's sentiment scared the hell out of Maggie. He had always cautioned his people in the past to avoid killing any enemy that confronted them except in certain circumstances. Giving them a free pass to use as much force as they wanted seemed a dangerous proposition. While Drake might tell them not to preemptively strike, Maggie wasn't sure that everyone in their little happy family would abide by that concept.

"When fatal force is necessary," Drake continued, "it should be carried out in as generic a way as possible. The deaths of these drug dealers and thugs should not be traceable back to our group. While getting rid of some of The Company will be a blessing on the city, we are in no position to take credit for the clean up."

The people listened like a congregation as Drake explained exactly what he expected to happen, and how his flock should behave. There didn't seem to be any dissenters, even when Drake forbade them from leaving warning signs to The Company, which seemed to be a popular idea.

Some of the Family would no doubt breach the rules established by her father. They always did. There was something about The Family members that seemed to keep them from following any guidelines too closely to the letter. For Drake, it seemed to make life a little more exciting. He had to manage things carefully to keep his life on track. Drake didn't mind the uncertainty. It just made Maggie crazy and a nervous wreck most of the time.

Maggie waited for the streams of people to leave the hall. This time, there were no pretty little hangers-on waiting for her father. He watched his disciples leave, his expression distant and vacant. He looked as though he were watching them leave for the last time.

Drake's dark eyes focused on her as she leaned away from her wall and walked toward him. "My beautiful daughter. Come to lecture me again?"

"I hate it when you call me a nag," Maggie said.

Drake shrugged. "Not a nag; just a worrier. You expect too much order out of life."

"Is that what this is about?" she asked.

Shaking his head, Drake began walking toward the door. "Come with me," he said. There was no question in his voice that she would follow.

Leaving the smoldering lights of the dining room, the darkness of the hallway covered them like a blanket. While not extremely large, the winding halls of the manor made it feel cavernous. Even after all the years she'd lived there, Drake Manor sometimes felt like an unordered jungle. Instead of snakes and panthers hiding in the darkness ready to pounce, though, other, more dangerous predators awaited.

When Drake went into his bedroom, Maggie paused at the door momentarily. She normally didn't question her father about any of his directions. Whether she agreed with him or not, he was the defacto boss and that left little thought involved in complying with his demands. Being led into his bedroom, however, was weird enough

to make her wonder what his intentions were. Nonetheless, she followed him.

Drake's room hid no great surprises. He had a king size bed with a beautiful carved headboard and canopy from the carved wood store. There was a matching dresser lining a near wall, and a monstrous book case on another. One chair with red silk upholstery sat in the corner like a hotel room.

Drake walked to his dresser and opened a top drawer. He turned back to Maggie with a small silver box in his hand. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"No."

He stepped closer to her and opened the box. Inside was a gold ring with a crown encrusted with diamonds and rubies. The shine had long since dimmed on the ring, but she could tell it was valuable.

"This ring is nearly four hundred years old now. It belonged to a man in the same position that I find myself. He had a family to protect and many enemies to protect it from. He did not heed the warnings given to him, and it cost him dearly," Drake said.

"How did you get the ring?" she asked, the probable answer already in her mind.

"It was passed to me along with the role of leadership that I now have. I keep it as a reminder of what can happen if I lead this flock astray." Drake pinned Maggie with his authoritative glare. "You may think that I always opt for the most violent or devious course of action, but that is not true at all. I study every problem we come across and make the decision that I believe best keeps this family strong and vital. There are risks in every course of action we take."

Maggie nodded. "I know. It just seems like we could find a different way sometimes."

Drake shut the lid on the ring box and closed his hand over it. "We do, Maggie. Don't you see that. We could be much more violent and much more criminal than we are."

Knowing what he was saying was true, Maggie bid her father goodbye and retired to another night of restless sleep.