

Brain Power

Maggie's World

Maggie walked along Canal Street behind a pack of tourists, blending in with the crowd and looking for a target. The tourists were dressed in summer clothes, most of them sweating through their shirts in the above average heat and thick humidity. She was comfortable in her normal jeans and T-shirt, having become accustomed to the intense weather long ago. She was glad it wasn't too hot for the visitors to be out and about as evening broke and gave way to another crazy New Orleans night.

Stephan was on the streets somewhere near doing the same as she. They were looking for one of Jeremiah's men with whom to discuss a proposition. So far, they'd seen plenty of Family members out cavorting and selling goods, but no easily discernable Company men. She didn't expect this mission to be easy, so she wasn't disappointed. She just hoped it was successful.

Canal Street featured a variety of different storefronts. Some were trinket shops, others hocked knock off designer ware. An occasional hotel or restaurant, which gave the road a little more class, dotted every few spaces. The most popular voodoo shops and night clubs were generally buried deeper in the French Quarter, and many considered Bourbon Street, and the avenues around it, home to the best. Other than Club 9, Maggie rarely saw the inside of those more colorful establishments and didn't care to frequent them. Just walking by and seeing drunken locals and tourists making fools of themselves let her know that she had no interest in patronizing them.

Maggie's eye caught on Stephan, who stood on the other side of the street, waving a hand at her to come over. She knew her mind was drifting, so she would not be surprised if Stephan had found a lead instead of her. The brunette walked to the next street corner, looked for cars or a street car, saw none, and walked over the crosswalk. She moved through the crowd until she was even with Stephan. They continued walking with the flow of the throng together.

"Did you find something?" Maggie asked.

Stephan shrugged. "I think I saw a likely candidate. He just headed toward the party district."

Bourbon Street was only a few blocks ahead. “Are you sure you saw someone, or are you just tired of this and want to go have some fun yourself?”

Casting her an offended glare, Stephan put a hand to his chest, wrinkling his black silk shirt. “I’m hurt. I’m all business and you know it.”

“Uh huh,” she said, and slapped him lightly on the shoulder.

A few moments later, with the number of people around them growing, Maggie and Stephan turned down New Orleans’ most famous street. Night was setting in and the spirit of the city was emerging. Tourists mingled with painted ladies, drug dealers, and drag queens, not to mention all the relatively normal locals who liked to come out for a drink and debauchery on a Saturday night. Street performers, from sax players to hip hop dancers, sat at every corner and various other spots along the way. The good ones gathered crowds who threw quarters and dollars into donation boxes. There was more than enough activity to distract an average person.

Maggie surveyed the street trying to find any Company men. She saw two Family members, one working and one playing, which they passed by without a second glance. The fact that the Drake Family was out on the streets putting out drugs that people wanted, yet surely didn’t need, couldn’t bother her tonight. If she successfully set Jeremiah up, some lives would be saved along the way. For the moment, that was the best she could hope to do.

“I’m not seeing anything,” she said to Stephan.

The dark-haired man glanced around, his standard smirk on his face. “You suck at this,” he replied. “Up ahead to the right, before Oscar’s.”

Maggie focused in on that area and immediately saw that Stephan was right. A young man, probably not old enough to drink, wearing baggie jeans that hung down to his crotch and a white muscle shirt, leaned up against the old red bricks of the bar. He didn’t have anything in his hands, but he could conceal a brick of heroin in his pants if he wanted. As people passed, he said something to each of them in a voice that didn’t carry far.

No one took the dealer’s offer before Maggie and Stephan reached him. That eased their minds, as it meant they didn’t need to wait for him to finish a transaction, or move on to another mark. The couple kept up their normal pace as if they weren’t planning on accosting the unsuspecting young man.

Maggie made eye contact with the dealer ten feet before reaching him. Despite a feeble attempt to grow a mustache and goatee, he had a baby face that betrayed his otherwise rough exterior. "You want me to hook you up?" he asked.

Smiling at him, Maggie grabbed Stephan's hand as if they were a couple and pulled him toward their new friend. "What do you have?"

"Anything you want, I can get you, Lady," he said.

"We'd have fun with a couple ounces of weed," she said. She didn't want to ask for something he didn't have on his body.

The young thug tilted his chin up signaling his agreement. With a wave, he directed them toward an alley a few paces away. Maggie and Stephan followed, hoping he would take them far enough away from the crowds to do what needed to be done.

Stephan sped up his step to shorten the distance between them. "Who do you work for?"

"I work for you, man."

Shaking his head, Stephan tried again. "Who do you really work for?"

They went deeper into the alley, past a rusted dumpster and several stacks of stained boxes that smelled like day old fish. The alley went on for as far as she could see, probably ending at the river. The lamps on both through streets bordering this section of the alley bled through enough to provide a dim orange glow throughout, but dimness hung over the area enough to provide cover.

The dealer cast a weary eye over his shoulder as he slowed to a stop. "You a cop?" he asked.

"No," Stephan said. He reached forward and took the kid's arm. His powers of persuasion worked better with skin to skin contact. They didn't understand why, as most of the Family who had special gifts didn't understand them, but they also didn't question. "You work for Jeremiah?"

The dealer's eyes concentrated on Stephan's grip on his arm. "Yeah, what's it to you."

"You like working for him?"

“Yeah, he’s great. Lots of perks.” The kid looked back up, his face more relaxed.

“What’s your name?” Stephan asked.

The kid frowned again. “Royce.”

Stephan’s face held a stern look. “You want to work for the Drake Family.”

The dealer paused, his expression uncertain. “I do?” Emotions churned almost visibly below his surface.

“Yes. Everyone who works for Drake lives forever. You want that more than anything Jeremiah can give you.”

His eyebrows shooting up in surprise, the kid nodded. “I want to live forever.”

Stephan smiled a sinister smile. “You need to work for Drake.”

“Okay.” The kid’s eyes shot back and forth for a moment while he thought. “How do I do that?”

“You need to take as much product from Jeremiah as you can and give it to Drake,” Stephan instructed.

The dealer nodded. “Okay.”

“Go do it,” Stephan commanded, and let go of the young man’s arm.

Without sparing Stephan and Maggie another glance, the kid ran from the alley and turned down Bourbon Street as if his baggy pants had passed over a flame and caught fire.

Maggie shook her head as he disappeared around the corner. “Does that really work?” she asked Stephan as they headed back toward the street.

“How do you think I’ve got you to keep me around all these years?”



Maggie sat behind the steering wheel of her green Toyota SUV watching the door of Commander’s Palace. Night had fallen on New Orleans long ago, and now only the moon and street lamps illuminated

the otherwise darkened sky. Stephan had fallen asleep beside her. He was usually a good friend, but not necessarily a reliable work partner.

Still not convinced that Stephan's mind control would work on their young drug dealer friend, Maggie supposed that what they were doing couldn't hurt. If it did, Reed might have another viable suspect in the murders. If not, it would make Jeremiah paranoid, and generally annoyed, and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing either. The harder life was for him and his operation, the easier it would be for the Drake Family. No matter how much she detested their primary business, it was what kept things running.

"You're thinking again," Stephan said, his voice groggy.

Maggie looked over to him with a small grin. "What else am I supposed to do? You're certainly not keeping me occupied."

"A boy needs his beauty rest," Stephan replied. "Besides, this is as boring as hell."

"Most real work is, but you wouldn't know about that."

Stephan straightened in his seat, but he did not feign offense. "I thank the universe for that."

"Is this going to work on Jeremiah?" Maggie asked.

Her dark-haired friend shrugged. "Hopefully. It doesn't always work on strong-minded people, though. But it doesn't even really have to. If we plant the seed of suspicion in his head, he'll probably take care of the rest on his own."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. It would ease my mind if we knew it would work, though," Maggie said.

"You worry too much."

Maggie laughed, mostly at herself. "You're telling me."

The side door of the restaurant opened and two figures emerged. Jeremiah, shorter than his companion by a foot, wore a light tan jacket and matching pants. His hair was as slicked back as usual, and Maggie was sure she could change out her oil with all the goop stored on his head. The other man was a typical goon, likely interchangeable with one of twenty others on Jeremiah's payroll.

Stephan sighed and looked to Maggie. "I was hoping he'd be alone," he said.

"And I worry too much, you say. Talk to me about it after you get beat by that guy," she said.

Stephan scowled at her, but opened the door and left the car. His trajectory put him meeting Jeremiah and his thug at a black Cadillac. Maggie couldn't help if their plan was going to work since Jeremiah knew her. That left almost the entirety of the mission up to Stephan. He'd been on a run of good luck lately, and Maggie hoped that would continue.

Jeremiah and the goon spotted Stephan before they were within ten feet, so his prey was ready. Despite their distance from the Toyota, Maggie's sensitive hearing could pick up most of their words.

"We don't got nothing for you, mister," the goon said, putting his body in between Stephan and his master.

"Calm down, man," Stephan said, not stopping. "I'm not going to cause any trouble. I just want to talk to Mr. Jeremiah."

The big man grabbed Stephan by both arms when he got close enough. Stephan, no small man on his own, looked like a rag doll in the grip of the thug. Given the nature of his job, the man likely spent as many hours in the gym as Stephan spent partying.

"Let me down, man," Stephan said, his voice distressed.

Instead of following the direction, the big man released with one hand and used it to slap a hand across Stephan's face. The skin on skin contact sent a reverberating smack through the parking lot.

"Hey, man. Stop it," Stephan barked. Maggie could tell by the tone of his voice that her fun loving, but childish friend would whine about the incident for hours afterward.

The thug released Stephan completely, a confused look on his face. "Step back."

Stephan turned his attention to Jeremiah, who stood beside his car, watching the altercation with some amusement. "I want to talk to you about a rat in your house," Stephan said.

"Do I know you?"

“No, but maybe you should. You don’t know your own people well enough,” Stephan said, starting his appeal to the kingpin’s pride.

Jeremiah didn’t look impressed so far. “What do you want?”

Stephan took another step closer, unaccosted by the thug.