



*A Distant Magic is Mary Jo Putney's third Guardian novel. Nikolai Gregorio feels that he was betrayed into slavery by Macrae of Dunrath, father of Jean Macrae. Though many years have passed, he burns for vengeance almost as much as he despises slavery. Jean Macrae is visiting in Marseilles when their paths cross.*

After the sisters left with their bulging baskets, Jean had the showroom to herself. She filled one basket, set it by the door into the offices, and began to fill another basket. She was examining the area that displayed African beadwork when a man entered the showroom from the warehouse side.

Forgetting her manners, she stared in frank appreciation at one of the handsomest men she'd ever seen. The newcomer was dressed with expensive European elegance, but his strong features and dark coloring surely came from some more exotic land. Lean and a little above average height, he moved like man who walked in dangerous places. And wherever he walked, women would notice.

The newcomer was so compelling that it took Jean several moments to realize that he was followed by a servant, or perhaps a slave, a black African who carried a basket for his master. The elegant gentleman examined several lengths of fabric before placing two

in the basket, then moving to the next area.

Since he was coming toward her, Jean returned her attention to the bead necklaces she had been examining. They were so lovely and varied that she wanted to buy them all. Not all women would enjoy jewelry of such barbaric splendor, but Meg, the Countess of Falconer, would love this broad collar of brilliant red beads and tiny shells, while this delicate necklace of silver links and sparkling gemstones would be perfect for Duncan's small daughter.

She became so engrossed in her selections that she forgot the handsome stranger until she turned to leave the beadwork area and bumped into him when she stepped into the passage. She was knocked backward, but he caught her arm quickly. "My apologies, mademoiselle," he said in flawless French as he released her.

Intensely aware of where he'd touched her arm, she said, "The fault is mine, monsieur. I am so dazzled by the Fontaine treasures that I didn't take proper care."

It was all she could do not to stammer since the man was even more compelling this close. The wavy black hair pulled into a queue was his own, not a wig, and his dark eyes had mysteries in their depths. She tried to read his energy, but it was tightly closed.

Switching to English with only the faintest trace of accent, he said, "Forgive my forwardness, but you are English, I think?"

So much for the quality of her French. "Scottish, actually, but close enough."

"Scottish?" Hot, indefinable emotion flickered in those dark eyes. "I knew a gentleman of Scotland once. Macrae of Dunrath."

"My father or brother," Jean exclaimed, pleased to have a reason to continue the conversation.

“Your father, I think,” he said, his gaze intense. “It has been many years since we met in Malta. You would have been hardly more than a babe. He said that he had a son, Duncan, and a bonnie wee daughter, but I don’t remember the name. Would that be you, or an older sister?”

“I have no sisters and only one brother.” She smiled at him. “I’m Jean Macrae.”

“I am called Nicholas Gregorio.” His eyes narrowed. “Does your father yet live?”

“He died ten years ago.”

“So James Macrae is dead,” Gregorio said softly. “A pity. I had dreamed of meeting him again. I trust your brother is well?”

“Yes, and with two bonnie bairns of his own.”

“So the Macrae line continues.” Gregorio’s gaze became abstracted, as if seeing the past, before his focus sharpened on her again. “May I shake the hand of James Macrae’s only daughter?”

His intensity was beginning to unnerve her, but he still fascinated. “Of course.” She extended her right hand, thinking it might have been better if she’d not removed her glove. His hand was also bare, and the touch of skin to skin seemed dangerously intimate. But he had known her father, so he was not really a stranger.

He clasped her hand with a powerful grip and energy blazed through her. Darkness, fury—

and the world shattered.

Nikolai’s hand still held the girl’s, which slowed her collapse enough for him to

catch her before she folded onto the floor. Dear God, but she was light, scarcely heavier than a child! He stared down into the small, pale face. She must be in her middle twenties, but she looked much younger, a prim sheltered child of the British aristocracy.

He felt an uneasy qualm. This girl was not the one who had betrayed him into slavery. But the sins of the father were visited on their sons, and on their daughters. For too many years, during burning days and bleeding nights, he had planned the revenge he would take against Macrae. He had reveled in it, and sometimes that lust for vengeance was all that had kept him alive.

Though he was bitterly disappointed to know that his enemy was dead, he was not really surprised, not after so many years. But until now the time hadn't been right for Nikolai to seek justice. He had needed to obtain freedom and power before he was in a position to pursue Macrae and his family.

Ironically, he was in the Fontaine warehouse to purchase goods for his first voyage to London. He had planned this journey for years, for he was finally prepared to seek out his enemy. Now that enemy's daughter had fallen into his hands. Perhaps the force of his obsession had drawn her to him.

With Macrae gone, vengeance must be wreaked on the son who was now Macrae of Dunrath. And this pallid girl, who had become his by the merest chance, would be his weapon. He studied her with avid curiosity, thinking that her slight body had never known adversity or hard labor. Her light green dress brought out her delicate coloring. Her hair was powdered heavily enough to disguise the color. He hadn't really noticed her eyes. They might have been a light hazel.

But she was a pretty thing, in a fragile, high-bred fashion. He had a sudden

violent vision of himself assaulting her, ripping off that expensive gown and hammering into her soft, pampered body.

The fierce desire that accompanied his vision left him trembling. He took a deep breath and laid her on the floor. He would not rape, not even Macrae's daughter.

Tano returned and halted to stare at the girl. "Captain?"

"She is the daughter of my enemy." Nikolai's resolve hardened. Fate had brought this Macrae to him, and he would not waste the gift. Later he could decide the best way to use her. For now, he must get her to his ship without being noticed. "She's small enough to fit into one of the merchandise hampers. Bring one from the warehouse and don't let yourself be seen."

Tano frowned at the girl before turning to obey. Nikolai studied her again, wondering how long she would be unconscious. He'd used a huge amount of power on her—thinking of Macrae had made him burn with a red rage. It was fortunate he hadn't killed her by mistake. In fact, he probably would have if she hadn't been shielded. She was a Guardian, after all. His own power was undeveloped and rigidly suppressed—except for occasions like this.

He wondered how great her power was—the shield had been quite competent. But perhaps she'd had help with it. When Macrae talked of his children, he had shown pride in his son's great talent, but had not mentioned the daughter. Likely Jean Macrae had no unusual magical ability, but he mustn't take that for granted. A captive Guardian mage would be dangerous.

Tano returned with one of the large wicker hampers used for packing fragile valuables. Nikolai removed the lid, then lifted Jean Macrae and folded her into the

basket. She barely fit, her knees drawn up and her arms crossed on her chest like a child. Once more he felt a twinge of discomfort at what he was doing. She'd looked so sweet and innocent when she had smiled up at him, pleased to find a man who knew her father.

But all who lived were the product of their ancestors. She should have chosen hers more carefully.

*Nikolai Gregorio thinks Jean Macrae is a fragile lady. He is in for a rude shock!*

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