

SISTER SABLE

THE MAD QUEEN

Book 1

BY T. MOUNTEBANK

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11:00 A.M.

General Berringer remembers the night he could have ended it. He remembers the way thunder shook the planks in the floor of his office and how wind had been passing shrill through a break in the lead panes of a window. He remembers his attention had been drawn away from his desk to the darkened night in anticipation of the next lightning strike.

The rain had not yet arrived, just the bluster and threats, and while the glass was still mirror sharp, he had studied himself, wondering how the troubles would define him. He would not have the wrinkles made from smiles his father had formed. He did not teach with laughter. He had been a colonel that night, as lean and muscled as he was now, but the difficulties had been with them for over a decade and his face had begun to show the strain.

He remembers he had been trying to imitate his father's amusement when the sky finally split. Lightning had jumped the clouds, and in that moment, all his concerns were obliterated with the sharp illumination of a figure crouched low and hiding in the palace gardens four floors below.

The Colonel had moved quickly to grab a rifle with night vision while killing the lights. Weapon strapped over his shoulder, he braced a hand against the frame of the window and quietly pulled it open. With the fluid ease of familiarity, he flipped the rifle to cradle in his arm, against his cheek, and then, eye to the sight, he searched for the prowler again in the green tinted night.

Years later, he could still not account for why he had remained silent, alerting no one when he found the person again by the wall, a solid silhouette against an eerie stone barrier. Instead, he watched the figure crouch once more and he waited until the sweeping survey of the eastern rooms brought their search to his window. He remembers the shock, a punch to his heart, as the distance closed and their eyes found him in the dark, looking straight through his scope to return his gaze.

He remembers the anxious pause that held them both motionless until the strange interloper stood, stretching out their arms and lifting their head to give definition to their shape. The mass of fabric caught in the storm, blowing wide, until he imagined he could hear the cloth snapping in the wind. The black robe and headdress revealed the night stalker to be a nun, but her strange actions were unknown to him; they defied the fearless, arrogant dignity of the Cloitare, so the Colonel could not bring himself to lower his gun.

Tense, perplexing moments passed before the storm sent another bolt of white light, and in that moment, the figure pulled back the headdress that had blown across her face. He remembers the dread of recognition. He feels again the mental slump. He can see as clearly as if she were before him now how she appeared bold with defiance before falling back into shadow.

The Bound Bride, he cursed the words. How she had come to be alone in the gardens, he could not imagine; her purpose for being there, he well understood. But he questioned the wisdom of allowing her to escape. She was barely fifteen. That very night she had shown them she had absolutely no experience of the world outside the convent, could not even use a phone that had been handed to her. He doubted she had the skills to find a meal, much less disappear. Here he had an opportunity, and uppermost in his mind was the excited idea: *One shot fired at an intruder and it will all be over tonight*. The King would be free, the obligation to the clergy dead. Yet still he held his hand and did not fire until finally she was forced to bring her face out of obscurity. She offered him an impatient expression, a fearless challenge, prompting him to either shoot or withdrawal.

He remembers the night. He remembers he had not lowered his sights, but he had made a gesture, a barely perceptible nod, and then he had watched as she ran away.

Now, more than seven years later, she had been found, and the General regrets the night.

1 HOUR EARLIER

She was pushing into the distance, mind free of body, feeling the ether for anything wrong, for any ripple of peril or the warning that would send her into flight. All was as it had been for years, the greatest threat nearby, but still many hours and obstacles away. It was pushing itself into the distance, searching for her, but she was just out of reach.

She dropped back into the present, the *here and now* of the moment. The young man beside her rubbed his coat sleeve against the misted window of the train, looking not upon the fields being plowed under for winter, but beyond them to the old pine forest. He would make fast money clearing the trees for new fields.

She knew she made him nervous. She knew his boastings about being a crew leader were fabricated. She wanted to tell

him he was too clean and new to carry the lie. She wanted to lift up her boot and show him the scuff marks, the mud, the stains, and the tar. The cuffs of her coat were darkened and thin. Her red hair, braided thin and piled on her head, was held with chipped enamel sticks. Her jeans were streaked at the thighs where she had wiped her hands, stained with oil and dirt. All this and she was considered well removed from the real grime of hard labor in these lands.

This, she wanted to say, is how you should appear when you have been away from the motherland long enough to brag, but by then you won't care.

For the moment though, he did care, and she made him nervous. He continued to run a whetstone over the sharpened edge of a new hatchet while he told her about topping trees, and she gazed ahead at the man who feigned sleep, as though the train had rocked him into oblivion, but she knew he was hiding lest he be drawn into conversation. They were all about the same young age, but the fake dreamer was marked as a true Alenan by his uniform. Conscripted at eighteen, he had nearly served his four year obligation. In the seat beside him, he had put his bag and old army-issued rifle, ensuring at least one less passenger that might annoy him.

Two hours of travel and he thought it might have been preferable to be merely annoyed. He wished he had sat somewhere else. She made him nervous as well. It was in part her faraway stare, but worse was when she returned and her attention laid on him piercingly direct. Even with his eyes closed, he felt the difference. Her hard scrutiny was off him when he peeked to see her looking down the carriage aisle, pale eyes unfocused but searching, appearing slightly dazed, and then she was back.

Only he heard her swear. "Oh, hell no."

The years of separation were over in an instant. The distance between her and the threat that sought her disappeared when the third carriage snapped the rail and the fourth derailed then started to roll. The carriage behind drove into the wreckage. The force tipped the next three cars over and piled them together while momentum dragged another five off the tracks.

10:15 A.M.

He was always pushing into the distance, always waiting for the drop in concentration, the break in silence that revealed her. In the beginning, he had let her slip forward and bolt ahead. He had known from the start she would run away and he would let her because the act would define her. The rebellion was the very thing that would allow her to do what she must.

But then, in that first year, with her sagging into despair and he just behind, just out of sight, thinking he would end the drama within days, she flashed with insight she should not have remembered and was gone. He moved his mind through the distance but did not see her. He pushed himself further and further into the place she had been but found only lingering images and vibrations of thought. He did not fret at first; she would stumble and he would grab her. He would take possession of her with such strength she would be rooted to the spot, and then he would hold her until he arrived. But that was nearly seven years ago. And now from the silence, he heard sounds, such terrible sounds, and he was filled with dread.

10:20 A.M.

Major Dominic was accustomed to feeling unsettled. He had been charged with overseeing the travel needs of this group of Cloitare for nearly three years, the longest any of the King's men had held the position. And less than a year was the longest any of the men under him had managed to endure. There was no friendship, no camaraderie, and scant laughter to be forged on mission Retrieve. Dominic found it a struggle to maintain the mental comfort he was not even aware he possessed before this assignment.

The Cloitare were oppressive enough in the stone halls of the palace, but here in this mobile unit without the massive double doors to retire behind, it felt as though they occupied every space. He felt constantly watched and exposed, as though they were in his head, judging his intellect. Everything, from a casual idea at dawn to his secret desires at night, embarrassed him for over a year. He'd become exhausted with the exertion of watching and guarding his thoughts, changing them, silencing them; but then, sometime in the second year, the exercise became routine, his mind was orderly and quiet, and the mission less exacting.

The Cloitare even seemed to view him with less disdain, though this didn't make them any more approachable. Of the

six, there was only one Major Dominic could bear to speak with. He was the sole man among the clergy of women, and he was a giant, looking more like one of the dark foreign invaders from five centuries ago than anyone seen in Erria today. For so many reasons, Master Aidan was both the most and the least disturbing of the Cloitare. With barely a glance, he could swap your pounding heart into your constricted throat, but he was so preoccupied with his own mind, he seldom acknowledged the existence of the soldiers, and to Dominic he simply gave orders of where to take them next.

The other five, maybe because they were all nuns, the Cloitare Stare was dramatically worse, especially the ones with light-colored eyes—it was all you saw. Their pupils just didn't seem to exist.

He'd been told they were always looking inward, barely breathing, with heart rates so slow they'd be cool to the touch, but who would dare confirm it? As it was, he could scarcely dash in and out of eye contact with them before those steady, direct, cold-as-hell expressions dropped his attention to his feet.

Presently, Dominic was well beyond unsettled. He did not want to be backing across the tarmac where they had most recently set up. He wanted to stand his ground and take an order, but something had changed. The Cloitare were out of their tents and descending on him with an intensity that terrified him. Staggering behind was Master Aidan, one hand to his head and bent at the waist like an aneurysm had just ripped apart his brain, demanding in staccato, "Pilots. Pilots. Medics. At once. Go," waving indiscriminately at both the helicopters and planes.

Dominic felt their singular attention like a threat. Something primal in his gut sent a siren to his head that told him to flee. It warned him he was prey. He retreated. One step back and then another, he was gaining speed to turn and run, but then, unexpectedly, he backed into a truck and came to a stop.

The Cloitare stopped when they had him within arm's reach and then parted to allow Aidan to continue his disjointed commands: "Pilots. Medics. Go."

But Dominic was not reacting. He could not look away, could not find his shoes, the ground, his radio, or divert his attention to any of the objects that let him avoid the Cloitare, that let him give orders and organize his men and mission; instead, he was round-eyed with fear, struck stupid, and near to gun-pulling hysterics by this unnatural attention locked solely on him.

Aidan was silenced. His face shed the image of pain. It became in a moment a placid refuge from where he said gently, "Dominic, look away." And when Dominic broke their gaze and rediscovered his shoes, Aidan continued, "Major, you are safe and in control. You will ready everyone. We are going north."

10:30 A.M.

At first, Aidan saw sparks. They appeared like a welding arc but longer and stronger. He did not have to push into the distance to find her; she had reached out to him in a moment of blind panic. He heard metal screaming against metal.

It was a sound that could not be mistaken with anything except disaster, and Aidan found her in the middle of it. Like he knew he would when given another chance, he grabbed hold of her, and then, held in one place, he went to her. He saw just seconds of it: the old pines out the window, the brown fields, the boy flying forward with a hatchet and dying. He felt the impact. The pain. The momentum that held her. The release and spin that dropped her back. And he was still with her when she was no longer aware.

Dominic had them in the air in less than ten minutes. The tents and supplies were left standing. The old forests were in the north, running the uppermost borders of Erentrude, Alena, and Sierra. They would fly toward the pines until they learned the location of the rail crash.

10:35 A.M.

Lieutenant Fallon wished he were in the cargo plane. The cargo plane was dark and smelled of grease, rubber, and electronics. It had a wall of ports and docks for all his electronics, and a desk designed to hold them in place. But more than anything else, it rarely carried the Cloitare who were staring a hole through his head.

Before the jet was even off the ground, he was thumbing in the search on his phone: train crash wreck. He set the results to show from the last half hour forward. With the jet angled steeply into the sky, he typed out the same search on a tablet and

tucked it beside him, and then did the same on the laptop that was being pushed against his waist by the steep ascent. Under his right boot, he held down another tablet with northern maps already loaded.

Loud blips designed to be heard in the cargo plane sounded in succession from each device.

“OMG just in train wreck.”

“FUCK TRAINS,” and attached was a picture of a carriage strewn with overhead luggage.

“Dude like our train must have hit a cow.”

“TRAAAIN CRAAASH!!!”

The laptop automatically replied to each post the same questions: *Where are you? What train? What’s your location?*

“Was I just in a train crash?”

“Seriously hurt here.” The picture showed bone piercing the flesh of a man’s finger. “My train crashed into a field.”

“Train wrecked. Going to find body pics.”

Lieutenant Fallon forgot about the Cloitare. He was scrolling through the messages, hunting for the one among many that would give pertinent information.

The laptop beeped out a returned message: *Who the fuck is this?*

And another answered: *dude we in a field.*

Then finally from WickedPie: *Eudokia. We need help.*

Fallon called out to Major Dominic, “Eudokia.” He typed back: *Tell me from what city the train left and where it was going.*

WickedPie: *Left Eudokia for Balina.*

Fallon: *How long ago? Do you know your current location?*

WickedPie: *Two hours ago. Are you coming to help? Who are you?*

The lieutenant grabbed the tablet from under his foot and highlighted an area between Eudokia and Balina, then passed it to the waiting major. “There. For now, go there.”

11 A.M.

Major Dominic was speaking directly with General Berringer, “We’re eight hours from the location. I need clearance to enter Alena’s airspace within three and then permission to land at Balina Airport or Eudokia Field. The cargo plane is following, but this time it’s too slow to be of use, so we’ll need vehicles on the ground when we arrive. We’ll keep up with where they’re taking survivors from here, but you’re in a better position to get someone on the ground to find her.”

“She was definitely on the train? Hurt? But alive?”

“Master Aidan says so.”

“Ok, Major, we’re on it.” General Berringer felt Dominic’s adrenaline fueled focus to capture and return the nun—it had been his task in mission Retrieve for three years after all—but Berringer was in no rush to assist.

To the men in the communication center waiting to receive orders, Berringer held up his phone and said, “I’ll keep the major on this line. I’m going to find Laudin to get clearance.”

Berringer walked with speed and purpose out of the room, but once in the hall, he slowed to give himself time to think. The political secretary, Laudin, he could reach by phone, but the person he really needed to see was two floors below on the second level of the palace.

He shook his head and cursed himself. He had all but forgotten the girl. After a year, the constant fear she would be found had subsided, then the years seemed to prove she was really gone. He had relaxed. His King would not be forced to marry a nun. The obligation to the Cloitare would die and buried beside it would be the insane fabricated Revelations of the Prophets. He found himself remembering the night he could have ended it. He should have killed her. To have made certain, he should have killed her when he had the chance. He set his jaw forward. It was too late for should-haves; he needed to make certain she died now.

11:10 A.M.

The intelligence chief was signing papers. It was a monotonous job others disliked but Catherine Girard quite enjoyed as it allowed her to think. And wait. She was supposed to be having lunch with her deputy chief, but that was cancelled when the Guard Dog made contact from Alena. He was in the neighboring country trailing an Erentrude scientist that planned to pass off secret soil reports to his Alenan handler.

Catherine was not so much waiting to hear that the reports had been wiped from the scientist's portable drive and replaced with another version, as to read the Guard Dog's confirmation that the traitor would not be returning home to the motherland.

It was the sort of task the Guard Dog excelled at. He was her own special agent, one whose existence was known only to herself, the King, Berringer, and Laudin.

The soil report was done by the King of Erentrude's own Ministry of Science and showed that Alena's border contained several rare elements in rich deposits of monazite ore. Neither the King nor Laudin wanted the Alenans to know the extent of the metals. Alena was torn between those wanting to rejoin the mother country for its wealth and opportunities and those who would toil away their lives mired in all the misery poverty could serve merely to call themselves free. Girard hated them both. But, by the King's will, the breakaway nation would be reunited with its motherland, and that would be easier without the Alenans knowing the promise of wealth that lay in their boundaries.

The scientist was a defector from Erentrude's Ministry of Science, but far from an idealist, Catherine knew he was instead a disastrous combination of bored, disenchanted, and broke.

And the Guard Dog, she mused, was going to rip his throat out.

Catherine stopped signing papers and opened a document on the widescreen that dominated her desk. She shouldn't have kept the message, but she had, and she read it again: *One day, kitty, I am going to leave you on the floor calling my name. My real name.*

She had a whole folder of them. He was the secret she carried.

Opening another, she had just pulled the band from her blond hair to let it settle over her shoulders when her secretary's voice announced an unexpected visitor. "General Berringer is here. Shall I show him in?"

"Of course."

He had closed the door himself before Girard could exit the provocative folder.

"The Cloitare have found the Bound Bride. She's in a train wreck in Alena, someplace called Eudokia. I'm told she is presently alive but injured."

Girard took the news with the delighted half smile of a proper psychopath. "And I assume you have all your soldiers racing there with great haste?"

"I have a jet with eight soldiers and six Cloitare seeking clearance to enter Alena's airspace and land."

Girard was correct in guessing the General hoped she knew a way to have this request denied.

"Alena?" Catherine nodded. "So, essentially a gesture of courtesy. I assume you have already cleared this with their military and merely require Laudin to call for official handshakes?"

Berringer's focus left Catherine's blue eyes to stray across the carved desk, over the glass doors of the bookcase behind her, and then up to the gold molding near the decorative plastered ceiling. It was a hell of a lot different to his office. "I thought perhaps I would get your advice first."

The smile on Catherine's face widened.

Berringer pointed to the coffee service on the low table in the sitting space before Catherine's desk. "May I?"

Gesturing with an open hand, she exuded glee, "*Please.*" The likes of Berringer did not come to Girard for advice—the King did, Laudin did, but staunch self-reliant generals did not. This unusual request had her keenly interested. Girard had so many questions, but to ask would imply direction, such as *Does the King know?* Catherine suspected he did not.

The General couldn't sit. Delicate cup in hand, he stood between the chairs. "This northern territory she's in is quite poor but being developed. It has a larger influx of people than work, which would leave most willing to do anything for money. A very threatening place it would be," Berringer declared.

Girard smiled and inclined her head with agreement.

“If everything goes smoothly, it will be at least eight hours before my team gets the Cloitare on the ground.” Before drinking, he looked over the rim of the cup at the King’s intelligence chief. “That’s a lot of time for something to go wrong.”

“Wrong?” Girard’s amusement had settled across her face to a manageable level. “You are expecting trouble of some particular description?”

Berringer found no enjoyment in the exchange. His words were measured and careful. “It’s a dangerous place. Some of the most unfortunate have been killed for less than food. I thought with your people, *as they are*,” he could barely endure her people, “you might have someone on the ground that could find her. To ensure security, as it were.”

Girard sat forward and ceased to smile, “Yes.” Then pulling back, she was more circumspect, “Perhaps. I will see what precautions I can arrange before your soldiers arrive.”

11:30 A.M.

Girard pulled her multi-SIM phone into her lap and looked for contact from the Guard Dog. He was silent. Their communication was secured by an encryption program they shared, but even so, Catherine felt at extreme risk. She paused with a sense of trepidation before typing: *Contact me immediately with news of your success. I need you at the train wreck in Eudokia. You will find an injured woman, her picture is attached. There has never been a greater threat. Do this and I promise you anything you can name. Even me, if you still desire.*

1 HOUR EARLIER

There were seven of them piled into the four-seat compartment. She had dropped with the liar and the conscript across the aisle when the carriage tipped to its side. Near the bottom, under baggage and debris, someone was wheezing, someone else was moaning. A broken arm kinked across her chest, and across her waist, the soldier was struggling back to consciousness.

She lay in the heap aware but not moving. She acknowledged the threat within her, *Master Aidan, deepest respects*, and then recognized the presence of the mothers with a mental bow.

As she had done nearly seven years before, she flashed brilliant obliterating silence, a silence of the mind designed to sever the ties that bind.

But one remained: Master Aidan.

In the silence that should have been void, she was held by one tether. Breath stilled, heart slowed, in the skip between beats, she flashed annihilating silence once again.

When she returned, he remained.

She snapped back to the *here and now* with anger, both annoyed to be impaired and vexed to be found, but more than ever, she was intent on remaining free. Above her, balancing his weight on the sides of two seats, the soldier met her eyes apologetically. She followed his attention to her hip and the skinning knife buried in the flesh and bone.

“Mine,” he admitted.

The half curl of her lips spoke forgiveness for the unintended. “Take it,” she said.

“Maybe ...”

“Take it,” she said with flat force.

She had seen it repeatedly in the kinder more emotive people of the world, when forced to confront something awful, they would go to a place that was hard and remote, very near to the place that made them nervous of the Cloitare. The soldier was steadfast resolved when he yanked out the blade, but then he broke. His hands shook as he pulled off his shirt to press it to her hip.

To console him, she said, “It didn’t hurt.”

“You’re in shock.” Then from below, they heard another moan. “Hang on buddy,” the soldier encouraged.

Thinking she looked frail and delicate, he gently pulled her small body up to the side of the seats, but beneath her heavy jacket, he felt dense muscles in his grip.

Slumping in a tilt that threatened to pitch her back into the pit, he stopped her fall and then laid her flat while she whispered, “I’ll just take a moment here.”

He reached into the hollow of the seats to haul the boy with the mortal hatchet wound off the pile, then tossing two duffel bags aside, he shifted the dead woman with the broken arm.

While he dug to the bottom, she took her phone from a pocket and sent a message to the name tagged Enzo: *I’m in the train wreck in Alena. Too hurt to help myself and I’m in serious trouble. About to lose my freedom. Please come rescue my ass.*

Spinning weak from the effort, she scrolled through her contacts hoping someone else capable was near, but they were all farther than Enzo. She tried to concentrate on a plan of escape, but Master Aidan’s steady presence unnerved her. He was calling to her, a soft thrum in her thoughts that held her attention, frustrating every attempt to think clear. She needed to lose him and then put vast space between her and Alena. She would go to Sierra, hide and recover with someone she trusted, but as she focused her mind to act, there was an unexpected mental embrace, an affectionate hug across the distance, and with it came the memory of Aidan’s protection.

The years on her own no longer felt free but like one long exhausting trial that seemed too grueling to continue. Aidan was offering deep, placid comfort, showing her a place to sink with ease, to go under into warmth. She was fighting not to yield to it, wanting to collapse with gratitude and rest within the depths. His singular devotion pulled at her. She told herself, *Just for a moment. Just to remember what it was like to be held in safety.* Slipping into careless security, she exhaled, letting the breath tremble through her throat as an appreciative moan.

A firm hand squeezed her arm. “You with me?”

Shock and alarm brought her back. *Mad, stupid, ridiculous*, she rebuked herself. He was the Master of Travel and he was in her mind, influencing her will. She needed to burn him off, to pull up such energy it would explode like a star. She could see the action she wanted to take. She believed she could do it. But her body was slowing. Her arm was tired, shaking to hold the phone; it had become incredibly heavy. She opened three new messages thinking the fates that had always protected her would offer some last reprieve, but there was nothing. Nothing she read gave her the slightest hope. All the while, Aidan was softly beckoning, whispering *Come*, gently tugging with the promise of dark, serene quiet, something close to sleep but deeper, someplace she remembered as home. She thought she would lay her mind softly on the edge near him, but only for a moment, not long at all, just near enough to borrow his strength while she considered what to do.

Enzo replied: *On my way. Are you Ok?*

But she did not answer.

(This concludes the preview of Sister Sable. The ebook is available at Amazon, Barnes & Nobles, Kobo, Smashwords, and a number of other retail sites on October 30, 2015. Paperbacks are available at Amazon, Barnes & Nobles, and independent booksellers.)