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SLOANE ANDREWS DOESN'T CARE (NO, REALLY)

by Rick Lane

Trilby magazine, January 24, 2020

I don't like Sloane Andrews. But I might want to sleep with her.

I meet her at her neighborhood coffee shop, one of her usual haunts — or so she says. The barista doesn't seem to recognize her as either a customer or one of the five teenagers who took down the Dark One almost a decade ago. Which, to be honest, seems remarkable, because world-famous face aside, Sloane Andrews is that wholesome, clean brand of gorgeous that makes you want to get it dirty. If she's wearing makeup, I can't see it; she's all clear skin and big blue eyes, a walking, talking cosmetics ad. She's wearing a Cubs hat when she comes in with her long brown hair pulled through the back, a gray T-shirt that's tight in all the right places, ripped jeans that show off long, shapely legs, and a pair of sneakers. They're the kind of clothes that say she doesn't give a f— about clothes or even about the long, lean body that fills them.

And that's the thing about Sloane: I believe it. I believe she doesn't give a f— about anything, least of all meeting me. She didn't even want to do the interview. She only agreed, she said, because her boyfriend, Matthew Weekes, fellow Chosen One, asked her to support the release of his new book, *Still Choosing* (out February 3).

In our preliminary exchanges about this interview, she didn't have many ideas for where I might meet her. Even though everyone in Chicago already knows where Sloane lives — in the North Side neighborhood of Uptown, just blocks from Lake Shore Drive — she flat-out refused to let me see her apartment. *I don't go anywhere*, she wrote. *I get accosted when I do. So unless you want to try to keep up with me on a run, it's Java Jam or nowhere.*

I'm not sure I could take notes and jog at the same time, so Java Jam it is.

Her coffee secured, she takes off the baseball cap, and her hair falls to her shoulders like she was just tumbling around on a mattress. But something about her face — maybe it's her slightly too-close-together eyes or the way she cocks her head sharply when she doesn't like what you just said — makes her look like a bird of prey. With a single glance, she's turned the tables, and I'm the one on guard, not her. I fumble around for my first question, and where most people might smile, try to get me to like them, Sloane just stares.

"The ten-year anniversary of your victory over the Dark One is coming up," I say. "How does it feel?"

"It feels like survival," she says. Her voice is flinty and sharp. It makes a shiver go down my spine, and I can't figure out if that's a good thing or not.

“Not triumph?” I ask, and she rolls her eyes.

“Next question,” she replies, and she takes her first sip of coffee.

That’s when I realize it: I don’t like her. This woman saved thousands — no, millions — of lives. Hell, she probably saved my life in one way or another. At thirteen, she was named by prophecy, along with four others, as someone who would defeat an all-powerful being of pure malice. She survived a handful of battles with the Dark One — including one during a brief kidnapping, the details of which she has never shared — and came out of it unscathed and beautiful, more famous than anyone in the history of being famous. And to top it off, she’s in a long-term relationship with Matthew Weekes, golden boy, the Chosen One among Chosen Ones, and quite possibly the kindest person alive. But I still don’t like her.

And she couldn’t care less.

Which is why I want to sleep with her. It’s as if, by getting her naked and in my bed, I could force her into some kind of warmth or emotion. She turns me into an alpha male, a hunter, hellbent on taking down the most elusive prey on the planet and putting its head on my living-room wall as a trophy. Maybe that’s why she gets accosted when she goes anywhere— not because people love her but because they *want* to love her, want to make her lovable.

When she sets down her mug, I see the scar on the back of her right hand. It’s wide, stretching all the way across, and jagged and knotted. She’s never told anyone what it’s from, and I’m sure she won’t tell me, but I have to ask anyway.

“Paper cut,” she says.

I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to be a joke, so I laugh. I ask her if she’s going to the dedication of the Ten Years Monument, an installation artwork erected on the site of the Dark One’s defeat, and she tells me, “It’s part of the gig,” like this is a desk job she applied for instead of a literal destiny.

“It sounds like you don’t enjoy it,” I say.

“What gave me away?” She smirks.

In the lead-up to the interview, I asked a few friends what they thought of her to get a sense of how the average Joe perceives Sloane Andrews. One of them remarked that he had never actually seen her smile, and as I sit across from her, I find myself wondering if she ever does. I even wonder it out loud — I’m curious to know how she’ll respond.

Not well, as it turns out.

“If I were a dude,” she says, “would you ask me that question?”

I steer us away from that topic as quickly as possible. This is less a conversation and more a game of Minesweeper, with me getting more and more tense with every box I click, every one increasing the odds I’ll set off one of those mines. I click once more, inquiring about whether this time of year

brings back memories for her. “I try not to think about it,” she says. “If I did, my life would turn into a goddamn Advent calendar. For every day, there’s another Dark One chocolate in a different shape, and they all taste like shit.” I click again, asking if there are any good memories to choose from. “We were all friends, you know? We always will be. We speak almost entirely in inside jokes when we’re together.” Phew. I guess it’s safe to ask her about the other four Chosen: Esther Park, Albert Summers, Ines Mejia, and, of course, Matthew Weekes.

It’s there that we finally get into a groove. The so-called Chosen Ones bonded quickly after they met, with Matt as the natural leader. “That’s just the way he is,” she says, and it almost sounds like she’s annoyed by it. “Always taking charge, taking responsibility. Reminding us to argue about ethics. That sort of thing.” Surprisingly, it wasn’t Matt with whom she had an immediate connection, but Albie. “He was quiet,” she says, and it’s a compliment. “All of our brothers and fathers had died — that was part of the prophecy — but my brother had died the most recently. I needed the quiet. Plus, he’s from the Midwest, like me.”

Albert and Ines live together— platonically, since Ines identifies as a lesbian — in Chicago, and Esther went home to Glendale, California, to take care of her ailing mother just last year. The distance has been hard for all of them, Sloane says, but luckily they can all keep up with Esther on her active (and popular) Insta! page, where she documents the minutiae of her life.

“What do you think about the All Chosen movement that’s popped up in the last few years?” I ask. The All Chosen movement is a small but vocal group that advocates for emphasizing the role the other four Chosen Ones played in the defeat of the Dark One rather than attributing the victory primarily to Matthew Weekes.

Sloane doesn’t mince words. “I think it’s racist.”

“Some of them say that elevating Matt over the rest of you is sexist,” I point out.

“What’s sexist is ignoring what I say and claiming I just don’t know any better,” she replies. “I think Matt’s the real Chosen One. I’ve said so multiple times. Don’t pretend you’re doing me a favor by knocking him down.”

I then move the conversation from the Chosen Ones to the Dark One, and that’s when everything goes awry. I ask Sloane why the Dark One seemed to take a special interest in her. She keeps her eyes on mine as she sips the last of her coffee, and when she sets the cup down, her hand is shaking. Then she puts her Cubs hat right over that glorious just-f—ed hair and says, “We’re done here.”

And I guess if she says we’re done, we’re done, because Sloane is out of there. I throw a ten down on the table and run after her, not willing to give up that easily. Did I mention Sloane Andrews turns me into a hunter?

"I had one off-limits topic," she snaps at me. "Do you remember what it was?" She's flushed and furious and radiant, part dominatrix and part sly, spitting street cat. Why did I wait this long to really piss her off? I could have been staring at this the entire time.

The off-limits topic was, of course, anything specific about her relationship to the Dark One. Surely she didn't expect me to abide by that, I remark. It's the most interesting thing about her.

She looks at me like I'm the soggy piece of paper in an alley puddle, tells me to go f— myself, and jaywalks into traffic to get away from me. This time, I let her go.

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The drain looked the same every time, with all the people screaming as they ran away from the giant dark cloud of chaos but never running fast enough. Getting swept up, their skin pulling away from bone while they were still alive to feel it, blood bursting from them like swatted mosquitoes, *oh God*.

Sloane was up and panting. *Quiet*, she told herself. Her toes curled under; the ground was cold here, in the Dark One's house, and he had taken her boots. She had to find something heavy or something sharp — both was too much to ask for, obviously; she had never been that lucky.

She yanked open drawers, finding spoons, forks, spatulas. A handful of rubber bands. Chip clips. Why had he taken her boots? What did a mass murderer have to fear from a girl's Doc Martens?

Hello, Sloane, he whispered in her ear, and she choked on a sob. Yanked open another drawer and found a line of handles, the blades buried in a plastic knife block. She was just pulling out the butcher knife when she heard something creak behind her, the pressure of a footstep.

Sloane spun around, her feet tacky on the linoleum, and swiped with the knife.

"Holy shit!" Matt caught her by the wrist, and for a moment they just stared at each other over their arms, over the knife.

Sloane gasped as reality trickled back in. She was not in the Dark One's house, not in the past, not anywhere but in the apartment she shared with Matthew Weekes.

"Oh God." Sloane's hand went lax on the handle, and the knife clattered to the floor, bouncing between their feet. Matt put his hands on her shoulders, his grip warm.

"You there?" he said.

He had asked her that before, dozens of times. Their handler, Bert, had called her a lone wolf, and he rarely made her join the others in training or on missions. *Let her do her thing*, he had told Matt once it became clear that Matt was their leader. *You'll get better results that way*. And Matt had, checking in with her only when he had to.

You there? Over the phone, in a whisper, in the dead of night, or right to her face when she spaced out on something. Sloane had been annoyed by the question at first. *Of course I'm here, where the f— else would I be?* But now it meant he understood something about her that they'd never acknowledged: she couldn't always say yes.

"Yeah," she said.

"Okay. Stay here, all right? I'll get your medicine."

Sloane braced herself on the marble counter. The knife lay at her feet, but she didn't dare touch it again. She just waited, and breathed, and stared at the swirl of gray that reminded her of an old man in profile.

Matt came back with a little yellow pill in one hand and the water glass from her bedside table in the other. She took them both with shaking hands and swallowed the pill eagerly. Bring on the coasting calm of the benzodiazepine. She and Ines had drunkenly composed an ode to the pills once, hailing them for their pretty colors and their quick effects and the way they did what nothing else could.

She set the water glass down and slid to the floor. She could feel the cold through her pajama pants— the ones that had cats with laser eyes all over them — but it was grounding this time. Matt sat down next to the refrigerator in his boxers.

"Listen," she started.

"You don't have to say it."

"Sure, I just almost stabbed you, but no apologies necessary." His eyes were soft. Worried. "I just want you to be okay."

What had that awful article called him? "Quite possibly the kindest person alive"? She hadn't disagreed with Rick Lane, *Creepmaster 2000*, on that point at least. Matt had eyebrows that squeezed together in the middle in a look of perpetual sympathy and the heart to match. He reached for the butcher knife that lay on the floor near her ankle. It was big, almost as long as his forearm.

Her eyes burned. She closed them. "I'm really sorry."

"I know you don't want to talk to me about it," Matt said. "But what about someone else?"

"Like who?"

"Dr. Novak, maybe? She works with the VA, remember? We did that talk together at the juvenile detention center."

"I'm not a soldier," Sloane said.

"Yeah, but she knows about PTSD."

She had never needed an official diagnosis — PTSD was definitely what she had. But it was strange to hear Matt say it so comfortably, like it was the flu.

“All right.” She shrugged. “I’ll call her in the morning.”

“Anyone would need therapy, you know,” he said. “After what we’ve all been through. I mean, Ines went.”

“Ines went, and she’s still booby-trapping her apartment like she’s living out a *Home Alone* fantasy,” Sloane said.

“Okay, so she’s a bad example.” The floodlight on the back stairs glowed through the windows, all orange-yellow against Matt’s dark skin.

“You’ve never needed it,” Sloane said.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Where do you think I kept disappearing to the year after the Dark One died?”

“You told us you were going to doctor’s appointments.”

“What kind of doctor needs to see someone weekly for *months*?” “I don’t know! I figured something was wrong with . . .”

Sloane gestured vaguely to her crotch. “You know. The boys or something.” “Let me get this straight.” He was grinning. “You thought I had some kind of embarrassing medical condition that necessitated at least six months of regular doctor visits . . . and you never asked me about it?”

She suppressed a smile of her own. “You almost sound disappointed in me.”

“No, no. I’m just impressed.”

He had been thirteen and lanky when she met him, a body of sharp edges with no sense of where it began or ended, but he had always had that smile.

She had fallen in love with him half a dozen times before she knew she had — when he was screaming orders over the deafening wind of a Drain, keeping them all alive; when he stayed awake with her on long night drives through the country even after everyone else had fallen asleep; when he called his grandmother and his voice went soft. He never left anyone behind.

She curled her toes into the tile. “I’ve been before, you know. To therapy,” she said. “I went for a few months when we were sixteen.”

“You did?” He frowned a little. “You never told me that.”

There were a lot of things she hadn’t told him, hadn’t told anyone. “I didn’t want to worry anybody,” she said. “And I still don’t, so . . . just don’t mention this to the others, okay? I don’t want to see it in f—ing *Esquire* with the headline ‘Rick Lane Told You So.’”

“Of course.” Matt took her hand and twisted their fingers together. “We should go to bed. We have to get up in four hours for the monument dedication.”

Sloane nodded, but they still sat on the kitchen floor until the medicine kicked in and she stopped shaking. Then Matt put the knife away, helped her up, and they both went back to bed.

**

TOP SECRET

AGENCY FOR THE RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATION OF THE SUPRANORMAL

October 4, 2019

Ms. Sloane Andrews

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Reference: H-20XX-74545 Dear Ms. Andrews:

On 13 September 2019, the office of the Information and Privacy Coordinator received your 12 September 2019 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for information or records on Project Ringer.

Many of the requested records remain classified. However, due to your years of service to the United States government, we have granted you access to all but those requiring the highest level of security clearance. We searched our database of previously released records and located the enclosed documents, totaling 120 pages, which we believe to be responsive to your request. There is no charge for these documents.

Sincerely,

Mara Sanchez

Information and Privacy Coordinator

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