

The Society of the Scale

By Bernadette M. Martinez

Jezabel looked around at the people milling about the market square. People of all shapes and sizes investigated the stalls that lined the square. The gray of a woman's dress contrasted with the bright yellows of the fabric stall she stood in front of. The people of Plictisitor went about their lives, happy to be out in the sunny weather. Jezabel could not understand how they looked so bland. To her, nothing seemed as thrilling as her time in Arvadia.

Even when they smile, it doesn't reach their eyes. They're just so...defeated. By life? Jezabel continued walking through the square and past the woman in gray. Her brown hair had streaks of white through it, ageing her.

"It wasn't that expensive last week! Why is it so much more now? Don't you know I have an entire family to..."

Jezabel rolled her eyes and continued walking, leaving the woman to berate the shop keep. She sighed and turned toward the park. Her eyes kept marveling at how content these people had fooled themselves into being. She was bored every day here. Nothing exciting happened here and every day it was the same routine. Jezabel spotted Drousel Charlemagne walking through the square with her magenta beehive. *Even the Drousel's hair looks flat here. The colors of this place just aren't as bright. It's like what the silicon-agers must have thought of...oh, what was it?* Jezabel's thoughts were interrupted by the squealing children that ran past her with a cartoon projecting before them. She smiled at the children trying to catch the animated mouse before them.

Oh yea! Televisions. Their old televisions compared to their HD. I wonder what they'd think of LiveX. Jezabel watched the children a little while longer as she left the market and headed toward the park, contemplating again why she was sent out of Arvadia. She thought back to the great red dragon, Demogon, and how some of the other humans and caretakers had been surprised at their bond. Some even seemed a little jealous. One of her friends, Xavier, had even remarked that Demogon had never taken anyone flying before her. He'd made a joke about the great dragon being afraid his rider would fall to their doom.

Jezabel laid back on some rocks near the lake and chuckled to herself as she remembered Demogon telling her she was "like a wormling at bath time" when she squealed through the clouds. A sharp whistle from behind pulled Jezabel from her musings. She looked behind her to see the city guards chasing after a man that looked to be about her age from where she was, though it was hard to say from so far. She watched as he disappeared into the crowd with the guards chasing after him.

She looked to the sky with a frown on her face as she ran over the last moments in Arvadia. Two months ago, two caretakers had come into her room and said she had to leave immediately. No explanation, no time to pack, and no time for goodbyes. She was just escorted out and sent

through a portal back to Plictisitor. Her only token of her time there was the scale she'd gotten from Demogon and had in her pocket at the time. She'd worn it around her neck as a pendant since she returned. Its vibrancy gave her the strength to go on when the drabness of her surroundings became too much to bear.

Jezabel got up and began walking toward her home. She waved to the guards surveying the park. *Looks like he got away.* She smiled at the thought, though she wasn't sure why. Maybe because it was something to break up the routine. Her thoughts turned to her scale as she took the far path to avoid the market. The scale had started glowing yesterday. It was only for a short time, but she was sure it had. She had never seen Demogon or any of the others glow. Part of her hoped they were calling her back. Part of her feared it was a warning.

Maybe I'm just losing my mind and becoming like the rest of the people here.

Rachelle DeMarleàn screamed as shards of red glass exploded from the vase meeting the wall.

“What do you mean he can't be found?!”

“He's vanished. Our seers cannot locate him anywhere in Arvadia.”

Rachelle let loose another scream. “Find him! I don't care how. Just bring him to me!”

“Yes, my lady.” Gerard bowed and pulled the door closed behind him.

Rachelle turned to the window behind her and looked out over the city. Xavier Nichols was out there somewhere. She didn't know how he was cloaking himself, but he was out there somewhere. She was determined to find him.

She turned and went to the long table along the wall and studied the maps and papers yet again. Rachelle had been over them hundreds of times trying to discern where the Vallen were hiding. Her forces had been able to discern some of their strongholds and gone to flush them out, but they proved to be abandoned. The reports all said the same thing: they couldn't have been clear for more than a day before they got there. Somehow, they knew they were coming.

Rachelle picked up the report photographs again. There had to be something they missed, some clue they left behind. While her eyes sought out every corner methodically hoping to see something new, her mind drifted to Xavier again. It had to be him. She knew it in her gut. But, how did he know every time? She placed the photographs back on the table and went to his file.

Xavier Randall

Age: 26

Birthplace: Plictisitor

Parents: Deceased

Siblings: None

Last known location: The Balaur Compounds

Current location: Unknown

Rachelle's face turned into a scowl at the thought of the Balaur Compounds. They thought themselves lords of Arvadia. Especially Demogon. He was determined to undermine the Vallen at every turn. When they'd decreed flight too dangerous, he'd taken to the sky almost immediately. With that girl. Rachelle's eyes narrowed at the memory and picked up another file. This one was almost empty. Not even a photograph.

She'd heard her laughter as they soared low over the Primul Building. Mocking the Vallen. Mocking *her*. She'd sent guards for her but by the time they were granted admission to the compound, she was gone. Vanished into thin air. No one could remember her ever being there, let alone who she was or where she'd come from. Even after the guards had searched every human room, there had been no trace of her ever being there.

She must be with Xavier. He has to be hiding her as well. She dropped the file back to the table alongside Xavier's. "We will find you both. You cannot hide forever."

Xavier Randall laughed to himself as he watched the city guards survey the park. They'd been slightly more difficult to shake than he had anticipated. He knew he was lucky they hadn't recognized him, but he wasn't surprised. It had been seven years since he left Plectisitor after all. Now he just had to find Jezabel. His eyes drifted to over the market square to the guards again and followed the path one of the guards was eyeing and raised his hand in greeting. His hand went to the red scale concealed beneath his shirt as he laid eyes on her.

Xavier watched as Jezabel followed the far path to leave the park. She was giving the guards a wide berth, which suited him just fine. His eyes followed her as she walked down a path that would take her past the market before offering an exit near lines of row-houses. He backed into the crowd and made his way there.

Jezabel had the strangest sensation she was being watched. She continued down the path at a steady pace, the gravel crunching beneath her feet as she walked. She had the sensation that she as being watched but couldn't tell where it was coming from. She didn't want to look around and attract the guards again, so she continued walking, her eyes scanning the surroundings as she went.

Maybe I'm just imagining things. She went through the park gate, daring to turn around and survey behind her. The guards were gone and the park empty. She sighed to herself. *I really am losing it.* She turned and was face to face with Xavier. One hand flew over her mouth and the other placed a single finger on his lips as he smiled and motioned for her to follow him quietly.

She nodded and he led her into one of the alleyways behind the row houses. They walked silently to the old Vanderhorn place.

The Vanderhorn place had been abandoned for five years. No one really knew why. When it first became available, people had lined up to buy it. It was in a great location and was well taken care of. No one who bought it remained there long though. Within two months it would be on the market again. "It just isn't the right place for us," was the common response, but the rumors that flew around spoke of hauntings and strange voices in the night. Some even claimed they saw glowing lights and people would appear and vanish. No one knew the truth, and no one had lived there for at least five years.

Now, Xavier was leading her to the back entrance of the Vanderhorn house, through the overgrown tangle of neglected landscaping, and into the backdoor. The yard had been so neglected over the years it was impossible to see the path they took, but Jezabel looked around for onlookers nonetheless.

"No one can see us coming here." Xavier opened the unlocked door without hesitating.

"How do you know about this place?"

"Who do you think is responsible for the hauntings?" He gave her his crooked smile as they went deeper into the house. Jezabel's head swiveled around, this being her first time in the famed home.

"What's that supposed to mean? And what are we doing here?"

"We need you back in Arvadia. Demogon sent me to find you." Xavier stopped at a back room and ran his hand over the door. "A-nak-sun a malr'dia." The door opened as if a seal had been broken and he pulled a stunned Jezabel inside.

"How did you do that? Need me for what?"

"You ask too many questions. Just come on. Where's your scale?"

"No, I—my scale? Demogon's scale?"

"Yes. We'll need it to transport both of us."

Jezabel watched as Xavier pulled a bright red scale from beneath his shirt and over his head. She followed suit with her own. "Does yours glow?"

"They only glow when we're moving between realms." Jezabel looked at him with wide eyes, not really sure what he was saying. Xavier took advantage of the silence to continue. "Do as I do. I'll explain everything when we're back in Arvadia. But we need to move now."

Jezebel nodded and raised her hand as he did. A circle appeared on the wall before them. Slowly, the ancient trinity knot appeared within the circle and on top of that, the outline of a flying dragon. Xavier placed his scale against it and motioned for Jezebel to do the same.

“Repeat after me. A-la-a-venti sac-re-turn’ied.” Xavier looked her in the eyes as he spoke, waiting for her to repeat it.

“A-la-a-venti sac-re-turn’ied.” The words felt remarkably natural on Jezebel’s tongue, though she was certain she’d never heard them before. Xavier kept chanting it, so she did the same. A light began to glow around the circle. It grew until the entire thing was filled with the pale red light.

Xavier removed his hand and grabbed Jezebel’s free hand with his.

“Let’s go.”

He pulled her into the light before she had time to form any protest. She tumbled onto the ground on the other side of the portal. Xavier helped her to her feet and she looked around at Arvadia.

“How...”

“Let’s go. Talk on the way.”

Xavier pulled up his hood and steered her toward the town center. He didn’t like going past the Primul building, but it was the fastest way back to the compound. The Vallen had already searched there so they were unlikely to return.

Jezebel peppered him with questions as they walked. Why was she needed? What was happening? Why was she sent away in the first place? Who are the Vallen? Why are they looking for her? Xavier answered as best he could, though his answers were brief and distracted. He kept looking around as if they were going to be taken right off the street.

“If she’s are so dangerous, why are we going right past their base?”

“The great ‘Lady Rachele’ never leaves her stolen tower, so there’s no chance we’re going to run into her.” The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable.

Jezebel opened her mouth to ask another question as they went around a large group of people gathered in front of the Primul building. Before she was able to, alert fountains on every other corner began projecting a woman’s image.

“People of Arvadia, we are in need of your help!”

Xavier stopped in his tracks and turned toward the steps of the building to their left. Rachele’s voice rang out above the chatter, commanding attention. The projections mirrored her words throughout the square, and likely the city. Xavier’s hand went to Jezebel’s arm.

“Stand here and stay quiet,” he hissed, never looking directly up at the woman on the steps.

Jezebel didn't understand why they'd had to stop if time was so pressing. The woman continued.

“We are looking for a group of individuals who would bring harm to our land. We believe them to be led by this man.” Jezebel gasped as an image of Xavier was projected behind the woman. “Xavier Randall. He is extremely dangerous and not one of us. He is a runaway from Plectisitor and, until recently, was hiding in the Balaur Compound. It is of the utmost importance that you reach out to the Vallen Protectorate if you see him or any of his associates. There is a reward for any information that leads to his capture. Thank you.”

Xavier scoffed when she said “Vallen Protectorate,” but dared not lift his head. As soon as she was done speaking and the crowd around him began to move, he tugged Jezebel forward again. She resisted a bit but kept pace next to him.

“What is she talking about?” Jezebel looked around them and for the first time noticed the large number of uniformed people in the area.

“That is Rachelle DeMarleàn, the woman who is trying to drive out the dragons and take over Arvadia.” Xavier dared to look at Jezebel. “She can't be trusted and is completely ruthless, despite her niceties in her speeches.” He could see the hesitation in Jezebel's eyes. “If you don't trust me, then hear it from Demogon.” Jezebel's eyes widened.

“Are we going to—”

“Yes,” Xavier cut her off before anyone could hear her say the words. “But we must hurry.” Jezebel nodded and Xavier turned quickly to continue walking...right into one of the Vallen.

Jezebel grabbed him and began chastising him. “Really Jacob! You must be more careful!” She looked at the uniformed man with apologetic eyes. “I'm so sorry. My brother hasn't been feeling well and we were just on our way home so he can rest. I hope he didn't dirty your uniform.” Her heart was pounding, and she gripped Xavier's shoulder tightly, willing him to keep his head down.

“It's fine, just watch where you're going young man.” Jezebel smiled at him. “Thank you so much. Come along Jacob.”

“I don't believe I've seen you here before.” Rachelle's voice was clear behind Jezebel as she came up behind them. “And I know everyone in my city.”

Xavier tensed up and Jezebel froze. More uniformed Vallen appeared in front of them and when Jezebel looked to her left, she saw even more approaching.

“Xavier,” Rachelle almost cooed, “Why not introduce me to your friend?”

Xavier stood straight and turned to Rachelle.

“We really must be on our way. Perhaps another time.”

“Take them.” Rachelle waved her hand with a smile and watched as her Vallen guards closed in on them.

Xavier grabbed Jezabel’s arm and looked around them for an escape path between the guards. He pulled her with him as he turned and ran.

“A-le-ki ka-zurl!” A force seemed to push apart the Vallen Xavier was running toward. The guards flew to either side and gave them the opportunity to escape.

“AFTER THEM! Don’t let them get away!” Rachelle’s shrill voice carried to their ears as they ran. Jezabel chanced a glance back and saw uniformed men and women coming after them quickly. Xavier took a sharp left down an alley and she yelped at the tug on her arm. He stopped about a third of the way in and pulled Jezabel behind a pile of boxes and debris stacked up.

“Reznien-tar-coug-é,” his voice quieter now, rushing but not wanting to give away their location. They could hear the footsteps of the guards at the mouth of the alley. Jezabel felt her heart pounding in her chest as she watched a rectangular glow appear on the red brick before them. The space opened inward to what looked like an underground tunnel. Xavier pulled Jezabel through as he entered. When they were both clear, he turned back to the opening.

“Restul.”

The brick vanished along with the sounds of the approaching guards. Xavier leaned against the tunnel wall, almost doubled over, breathing heavily.

“What the hell was all that?” Jezabel couldn’t stop herself from shouting at him.

Xavier smiled through his heavy breathing. “Demogon will explain it all. Let’s go.” He stood and started walking down the tunnel.

Jezabel looked at him and shook her head. *What have you gotten us into now?* She sighed and followed him into the darkness.