



# Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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# MEMORIES IN BRONZE, FEATHERS, AND BLOOD

by Aliette de Bodard

*This is what we remember: the stillness before the battle, the Jaguar Knights crouching in the mud of the marshes, their steel rifles glinting in the sunlight. And the gunshot—and Atl, falling with his eyes wide open, as if finally awakening from a dream....*

\* \* \*

It's early in the morning, and Nezahual is sweeping the courtyard of his workshop when the dapper man comes in.

From our perches in the pine tree, we watch Nezahual. His heart is weak and small, feebly beating in his chest, and sweat wells up in the pores of his skin. Today, we guess, is a bad day for him.

The dapper man, by contrast, moves with the arrogant stride of unbroken soldiers—his gestures sure, casual—and he has a pistol hidden under his clothes, steel that shines in our wide-spectrum sight.

We tense—wondering how much of a threat he is to Nezahual. His manner is brash; but he doesn't seem aggressive.

“I’m looking for Nezahual of the Jaguar Knights.” The dapper man’s voice is contemptuous; he believes Nezahual to be a sweeper, someone of no importance in the household.

What he doesn’t know is that there’s no household, just Nezahual and us: his children, his flock of copper and bronze.

Nezahual straightens himself up, putting aside the broom with stiff hands. “I am Nezahual. What do you want?”

The dapper man shows barely any surprise; he shifts his tone almost immediately, to one of reluctant respect. “I’m Warrior Acamapixtli, from the House of Darts. We had hoped—you could give a speech on the War to our young recruits.”

Nezahual’s voice is curt, deadly. “You want me to teach them about war? I don’t do that.”

“Your experience....” Acamapixtli is flustered now—we wonder how much is at stake, for this speech to be given.

“I went to war,” Nezahual says. He’s looking upwards—not at us but at Tonatiuh the Sun-God, who must be fed His toll in blood. “Is that such a worthwhile experience?” His heartbeat has quickened.

“You don’t understand. You fought with Warrior Atl—with Chimalli—” Acamapixtli’s voice is disappointed.

Atl. Chimalli. The names that will not be spoken. We tense, high up in our tree. Beneath us, Nezahual’s face clenches—a mask to hide his agony. His knees flex—in a moment he will be

down on the ground, clutching his head and wishing he were dead. “Atl. I—”

His pain is too much; we cannot hide any longer. In a flutter of copper wings, we descend from the pine tree, settle near Nezahual: the hummingbirds on his shoulders; the parrots on the stone rim of the fountain; the lone quetzal balancing itself on the handle of the broom.

“Leave him alone,” we whisper—every mech-bird speaking in a different voice, in a brief, frightening flurry of incoherence.

Acamapixtli’s hands turn into fists, but he doesn’t look surprised. “Your makings.” His voice is quiet. “You sell them well, I hear.”

We are not for sale. The other mech-birds—the copper hummingbird who leapt from branch to branch, the steel parrot who mouthed words he couldn’t understand—they were born dead, unable to join the flock, and so Nezahual sold them away.

But we—we are alive, in a way that no other making will be. “Leave,” we whisper. “You distress him.”

Acamapixtli watches Nezahual, his face revealing nothing of what he feels. His heartbeat is slow and strong. “As you wish,” he says finally. “But I’ll be back.”

“I know,” Nezahual says, his face creased in an ironic smile.

When Acamapixtli is gone, he turns to us. “You shouldn’t show yourselves, Centzontli.”

He does not often call us by our name—and that is how we know how angry he is. “Your heartbeat was above the normal,” we say. “You were in pain.”

Nezahual’s face is unreadable once more. “Yes,” he says. “But it will happen again. That’s of no importance. That’s not what I made you for.”

Nezahual made us to remember—to hold the images that he cannot bear anymore. And for something else; but no matter how hard we ask, he will not tell us.

\* \* \*

*This is what we remember: the dirigibles are falling. Slowly, they topple forward—and then plummet towards the ground at an impossible speed, scattering pieces of metal and flesh in the roiling air.*

*We stand on the edge of the ridge, the cool touch of metal on our hips. Atl is dead. Chimalli is dead—and all the others, piled upon each other like sacrifice victims at the altar of the Sun God.*

*What have they died for? For this... chaos around us?*

*“Come,” a voice whispers.*

*Startled, we turn around.*

*A man is standing over the piled bodies—his uniform crisp and clean, as if he were just out of his training. No, we think, as the man draws closer.*

*His eyes are of emeralds, his lungs of copper, his heart of steel. “Come,” the mech-man says, holding out to us a gleaming hand. “Your place isn’t here.”*

*We remember a war we never fought; deaths we could never have prevented; but this, we know, has never happened.*

*This is a vision, not memories*

*It cannot be real.*

*“Come,” the mech-man whispers—and suddenly he towers over us, his mouth yawning wide enough to engulf us all, his voice the roar of thunder. “Come!”*

*We wake up, metal hearts hammering in our chests.*

\* \* \*

Nezahual has shut himself in his workshop. He’s making a new bird, he’s said, moments before closing the door and leaving us out in the courtyard. But his hands were shaking badly—and we cannot quell the treacherous thought that this time, the pain will be too strong, that he will reach out for the bottle of *octli* on the back of shelves, hidden behind the vials of blood-magic.

The youngest and most agile among us, the newest parrot—who brought memories of the blood-soaked rout at Izpatlan when he joined us—is perched on the window-sill, his head cocked towards the inside of the workshop.

We hear no noise. Just the swelling silence—a dreadful noise, like the battlefield after the dirigibles fell, like the hospital tent after the gods took their due of the wounded and the sick.

“Nezahual,” we call out. But there is no answer. “Nezahual.”

Footsteps echo, in the courtyard; but they do not belong to our maker. The second hummingbird takes off in a whirr of metal wings and hovers above the gate—to watch the newcomer.

It’s Acamapixtli again, now dressed in full warrior regalia—the finely wrought cloak of feathers, the steel helmet in the shape of a Jaguar’s maw. “Hello there,” he calls up to us.

We tense—all of us, wherever we perch. None of Nezahual’s visitors has ever attempted to speak to us.

“I know you can speak,” Acamapixtli says. “I’ve heard you, remember?” He lays his steel helmet on the ground, at the foot of the tree. His face is that of an untried youth. We wonder how old he really is.

“We can speak,” we say, reluctantly. The quetzal flies down from the tree, perches on the warmth of the helmet. “But we seldom wish to.”

Acamapixtli’s smile is unexpected. “Would that most people were as wise. Do you have a name?”

“Centzontli,” we tell him.

“Myriad,” Acamapixtli says. “Well-chosen.”

“Why are you here?” we ask—uncomfortable with this smalltalk.

Acamapixtli doesn’t answer. He runs a hand, slowly, on the parrot—we let him do so, more amused than angry. “Fascinating,” he says. “What powers you? Steam? Electricity?” He shakes his head. “You don’t look as you have batteries.”

We don’t. In every one of our chests is a vial of silver sealed with wax, containing twenty drops of Nezahual’s blood. It’s that blood that makes a heartbeat echo in our wires and in our plates, in our gears and in our memories. “Why are you here?” we ask, again.

Acamapixtli withdraws his hand from the parrot. “Why? For Nezahual, of course.” He shrugs—trying to appear unconcerned, but it will not work. His heartbeat has quickened. “We—got off to a wrong start, I feel.”



“Does your speech matter so much?” we ask. And, because we cannot help feeling sorry for him: “You know what he will say, even if he comes.”

“I’m not a fool, Centzontli,” Acamapixtli says. “I know what he’ll say. But I’m not here for what you think. I don’t want Nezahual to teach the recruits about courage, or about the value of laying down one’s life.”

“Then—”

Acamapixtli’s voice is low, angry. “I want him to teach them caution. They’re eager enough to die—but a dead warrior is of no use.” His eyes are distant, ageless. “We spend our youth and our blood on conquest, but we have more than enough land now, more blood-soaked earth than we can possibly harvest. It’s time for this to cease.”

*Do you truly think so?* a voice asks; and, with a shock, we recognize that of the metal man.

The sun above the courtyard is high—pulsing like a living heart. *Do you truly think so?*

What in the Fifth World is happening to us? Our nights, bleeding into our days? Our memories—Nezahual’s memories—released by our minds to stain the present?

This is not meant to be.

Acamapixtli hasn’t heard anything. He goes on, speaking of what the warriors who survive can build—of steamships and

machines that will do the work of ten men, of buildings rising higher than the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan, and of a golden age of prosperity. Gradually, his voice drowns out that of the metal man—until once more we are alone in the courtyard.

But we have not forgotten. Something is wrong.

Nezahual doesn't come out, no matter how hard we wish that he would. At length, Acamapixtli grows weary of waiting for him, and takes his leave from us.

The sun sets, and still Nezahual hasn't come out. The hummingbirds and the quetzal beat against the window panes, trying to force their way in, but the workshop is silent—and our wide-spectrum sight is blocked by the stone walls.

We perch in the pine tree, watching Metzli the Moon rise in the sky, when we feel the shift: the gradual widening of the world, so strong we have to close our eyes.

When we open them again, we have a new point of view—a hummingbird's, cradled between Nezahual's bleeding hands—carrying the memories of the fording of Mahuacan, of going side by side with Atl listening for enemy voices in the marsh.

"You're hurt," we say, and the hummingbird's voice echoes in the silence of the workshop.

Nezahual waves a hand, curtly. "It's nothing. What do you think?"

He opens his hands. Tentatively, we reach out, and the hummingbird starts flapping its wings—accelerating to a blur of copper and steel.

“Beautiful,” we say, though we are more worried than we will admit. “Acamapixtli came back.”

“I know,” Nezahual says. He walks to the entrance-curtain of the workshop, pulls it away. “Come in—all of you.”

We perch where we can: the shelves are crammed with blood-magic vials, alembics, and syringes, and the table littered with spare metal parts.

Nezahual is cleaning his hands under the water of the sink; he barely looks up. “I knew he would come back. He’s a stubborn man. But so am I.”

“It’s not what you think,” we say, and explain, as best as we can, the vision Acamapixtli has for the future. We can hear, all the while, the metal man laughing in the room—but we do not listen.

Nezahual wipes his hand with a cloth of cactus-fibers. “I see.” His voice is stiff, careful—as if he were afraid to break something. “Do you think he will come back?”

We are certain he will. Acamapixtli is a driven man. Much, in fact, like Nezahual must once have been—before war and the drive for bloodshed reduced him to, to this.

No. We must not think about it.

\* \* \*

*This is what we remember: in the silence after the battle, we wander through the mangled field of battle. We see—bullet-torn limbs, sprayed across the blood-stained mud; eyes, wide open and staring at the smoke in the sky—pain and death everywhere, and we can heal none of it.*

*Near the dirigible's carcass, we find Chimalli, his steel shield and his rifle lying by his side. We kneel, listen for the voice of his heart—but we know, deep inside, that his soul has fled, that he is with the Sun God now, fighting the endless war against the darkness.*

*And we feel it, rising in us: the burning shame of having survived when so many have given their lives.*

*"Now you know," a voice hisses.*

*We turn, slowly. The metal man is standing near us, wearing the face of a younger, eager Nezahual. It jars us, more deeply than it should—to see our maker rendered in soulless metal, his face smooth and untouched by the war. "You don't belong here."*

*"We don't understand," we say.*

*He points a clawed hand towards us—and our chests burn as if heated by fire. "Don't you?" he whispers, and sunlight, red and hungry, flickers around him. "I won't be deprived of what belongs to me."*

*“We took nothing...” we say, slowly, but we know it’s not about us. “Nezahual....”*

*Malice has invaded the metal man’s voice. “He was a coward. He didn’t die. That was his punishment—to survive when others had not. And I will not have him and that fool Acamapixtli frighten my warriors out of dying.”*

*“Who are you?” we whisper.*

*“Don’t you know?” the metal man asks. He straightens up—and his head is the clouds and the stars, and his hands encompass the whole of the battlefield, and his voice is the moans of the dying. “Don’t you know my name, Centzontli?”*

*Tonatiuh. The Sun God. He who watches over the Heavens. He who drinks the warriors’ blood.*

*This cannot be truly be him.*

*The metal man laughs. “Oh, but I am here,” he says. “Here and alive, just as you are.”*

*We are alive. Not flesh and blood, like Nezahual or Acamapixtli—sprints and wires, copper and steel—but alive enough.*

*And to this god, who is not our own, we have no blood to offer. “What do you want?” we ask.*

*The metal man extends a huge hand towards us. “Come,” he says. “Leave him.”*

*“We do not worship you.”*

*“You must. For, if you do not, I will tumble from the sky, and the world will come to its last ending,” the metal man says—and his voice is the thunder of the storm, and the vast echo of rockfall in the mountains. “Is that what you truly wish for? I cannot be denied forever.”*

*We wake up in the silence of the workshop and stare at the white eye of the moon, wondering what Tonatiuh wants of us.*

\* \* \*

Acamapixtli comes back on the following morning—still in his regal uniform. Nezahual is waiting for him in the courtyard, his face impassive, his heartbeat almost frantic.

“I apologize,” Nezahual says, stiffly. “It seems we misunderstood each other.”

Acamapixtli’s face goes as still as carved jade. “We’re both responsible.”

Nezahual’s lips stretch into a quiet smile. “Come,” he says. “Let me show you my workshop. We’ll talk afterwards.”

Nezahual shows Acamapixtli the spare parts lying on the table; the vials of blood-magic and the wires and springs that make us up. He talks about creating life—and all the while we can hear the pain he’s not voicing, the memories hovering on the edge of seizing him.

We wish we could take it all away from him, drain him as dry as a warrior sacrificed to Tonatiuh—but we cannot.

They speak of dirigibles made of steel and copper, of machines that will reap the corn from the fields—and we think of the metal man, filling his hands with the harvest of battle.

We hear his voice within us: *I will not be mocked.*

And we know that Acamapixtli's dream will have a terrible price.

\* \* \*

*This is what we remember: the silence of the infirmary, broken only by the moans of the wounded. We sit on our bed—trying to feel something, anything to assuage the pain within.*

*We are not hurt. Blood from the battlefield covers us—but it's not ours, it has never been ours.*

*Beside us, an Eagle Knight with a crushed lung is dying—his breath rattling in his chest, a horrible sound like bone teeth chattering against one another.*

*We try to rise, to help him, to silence him—we no longer know. We try to move; but our hands are limp, our fingers will not respond.*

*We watch—even our eyes cannot close—as the man's face becomes slack; and by the bed is Tonatiuh, his steel hands reaching for the dying man, enfolding him close, as a mother will hold a child.*

*He looks up—and smiles with golden, bloody teeth. “So he will make his speech, won’t he?” He shakes his head. “Does he not know what happens to those who defy me?”*

*In a single, fluid gesture, he rises from the man’s bed and reaches out towards us, his hands extending into steel claws—pricking the flesh of our metal skin.*

*We watch. We cannot move.*

\* \* \*

The morning of the speech grows bright and clear. For the first time, we wake up after Nezahual, our blood-vials beating madly against our copper chests. We still feel the steel fingers reaching for our chests—to tear out our hearts.

Nezahual is sitting in the workshop, his head between his hands, dressed in his best clothes: an embroidered cotton suit, with a quetzal-feather headdress. He is shaking; and we can’t tell if it’s from fear or from anticipation.

We hop to the table and perch by his side—the quetzal cocking its head, making a soft cooing sound.

Nezahual forces a smile. “It will be all right, Centzontli.”

We fear it won’t. But before we can speak, a tinkle of bells announces the arrival of Acamapixtli—still in full Jaguar regalia, his steel helmet tucked under one arm.

“Ready?” His smile is eager, infectious.



Nezahual runs a hand in his hair, grimacing. “As ready as I will ever be. Let’s go.”

He is walking towards the door of the workshop—halfway to the courtyard—when we feel the air turn to tar, and hear the laughter from our dreams.

No.

*Did you think I could be cheated, Nezahual?* Tonatiuh’s voice echoes in the workshop.

We rise, in a desperate whirr of wings—and in our fear, our minds scatter, becoming that of five hummingbirds, of one quetzal, of two parrots, struggling to hold themselves together.

I, I, I—

We—

We have to—

Nezahual has stopped, one hand going to his sword—his face contorted in pain. “No,” he says. “I didn’t think I could cheat you. But nevertheless—”

Tonatiuh laughs and laughs. *You are nothing*, he whispers. *Worth nothing. You will not make this speech, Nezahual. You will not make anything more.*

Behind us, the table shakes; the metal scraps rise, spinning in the air like a cloud of steel butterflies—all sharp, cutting edges, as eager to shed blood as any warrior.

Nezahual stands, mesmerized—watching them coalesce into the air, watching them as they start to spin towards him.

We watch. We cannot move—as we could not move in the vision.

Acamapixtli has dropped his helmet and is reaching for his sword; but he will be too late. Nezahual's knees are already flexing—welcoming the death he's courted for so long.

The thought is enough to make us snap together again: our minds melding together, narrowing to an arrow's point.

“Nezahual!” we scream, throwing ourselves in the path of the whirling storm.

It enfolds us. Metal strikes against metal; copper grinds against the wires that keep us together, all with a sickening noise like a dying man's scream.

*I have warned you not to interfere*, Tonatiuh whispers. The sunlight, filtered through the entrance curtain, is red and angry. *You are a fool, Centzontli*.

Something pricks our chests—the claws from the visions, probing into our flesh.

We have no flesh, we think, desperately—but the claws do not stop, they reach into our chests. They close with a crunch.

Within us, glass tinkles—and shatters into a thousand pieces. Our blood-vials. Our hearts, we think, distantly, as the world spins and spins around us....

Blood leaks out, drop by drop—and darkness engulfs us, grinning with a death's head.

\* \* \*

*This is what we remember: before the battle—before the smoke and the spattered blood, before the deaths—Atl and Chimalli sit by the campfire, playing patolli on a board old enough to have seen the War of Independence. They're arguing about the score—Atl is accusing Chimalli of cheating, and Chimalli says nothing, only laughs and laughs without being able to stop. Atl takes everything much too seriously, and Chimalli enjoys making him lose his calm.*

*They're young and carefree, so innocent it hurts us—to think of Atl, falling under the red light of the rising sun; of Chimalli, pierced by an enemy's bayonet; of the corpses aligned in the morgue like so much flesh for barter.*

*But we remember: our curse, our gift, our blessing; our only reason for existing.*

\* \* \*

Our eyes are open—staring at the ceiling of Nezahual's workshop. Our chests ache, burning like a thousand suns.

We are not dead.

Slowly, one by one, we rise—and the quetzal dislodges a pair of bleeding hands resting over its chest.

Nezahual. You're hurt, we think—but it's more than that.

It's not only his hands that bleed—and no matter how hard we look, we cannot see a heartbeat anywhere. His chest does not rise; his veins do not pulse in his body. Metal parts are embedded everywhere in his flesh: the remnants of the storm that he could not weather.

We are covered in blood—blood which cannot be our own. We still live—a thing which cannot be.

“Come,” whispers Tonatiuh.

He stands in the doorway of the workshop, limned by the rising sun—metal lungs and metal hands, and a pulsing metal heart. “There is nothing left. Come.” His hands are wide open—the clawed hands which broke us open, which tore our hearts from our chest.

“Why should we?”

“There is nothing left,” Tonatiuh whispers.

“Acamapixtli—” He is lying on the ground, just behind Tonatiuh, we see: his heart still beats, albeit weakly. We struggle against an onslaught of memory—against images of warriors laughing at each other, sounds of bullets shattering flesh, the strong animal smell of blood pooling into the dark earth.

“Do you truly think he will make a difference?” Tonatiuh asks. “There will always be dreamers, even among the warriors. But nothing can change. The world must go on. Come.”

There is nothing left.

But we know one thing: Nezahual died, and it was not for nothing. If Acamapixtli could not make a difference, somehow Nezahual could. Somehow....

“It wasn’t Acamapixtli,” we whisper, staring at the god’s outstretched hands. “It was never Acamapixtli—it was what Nezahual made in his workshop.”

Tonatiuh doesn’t answer. His perfect, flawless face is devoid of expression. But his heart—his heart of steel and wires—beats faster than it should.

Mech-birds. Beings of metal and copper, kept alive by heart’s blood—and, even after the blood was gone, kept alive by the remnants of the ritual that gave us birth, by the memories that crowd within us—the spirits of the dead keening in our mind like a mourning lament.

“You fear us,” we whisper, rising in the air.

“I am the sun,” Tonatiuh says, arrogantly. “Why should I fear birds that have no hearts?”

“You fear us,” we whisper, coming closer to him—stained with Nezahual’s dying blood.

His claws prick us, plunge deep into our chests.

But there is nothing there. No vial, nothing that can be grasped or broken anymore. “You are right,” we say. “We have no hearts.”

“Will you defy me?” Tonatiuh asks, gesturing with his metal hands.

Visions rise—of bodies, rotting in the heat of the marshes—of torn-out limbs and charred dirigibles—of Atl, endlessly falling into death.

But we have seen them. We have fought them, night after night.

We are not Nezahual. War does not own us; and neither does blood; neither do the gods.

We do not stop.

“I am the sun,” Tonatiuh whispers. “You cannot touch me.”

“No,” we say. “But you cannot touch us, either.”

We fly out, into the brightness of the courtyard—straight through Tonatiuh, who makes a strangled gasp before vanishing into a hundred sparkles—the sunlight, playing on the stone rim; the fountain whispering once more its endless song.

Oh, Nezahual.

We would weep—if we had hearts, if we had blood. But we have neither, and the world refuses to fold itself away from us, and grief refuses itself to us.

A shuffling sound, from behind—Acamapixtli drags himself out of the workshop on tottering legs, bleeding from a

thousand cuts—staring at us as if we held the answers. “Nezahual....”

“He’s gone,” we say, and his bloodied hands clench. We wish for tears, for anger, for anything to alleviate the growing emptiness in our chests.

Acamapixtli smiles, bitterly. “All for nothing. I should have known. You can’t cheat the gods.”

We say nothing. We stand, unmoving, in the courtyard—watching the sunlight sparkle and dissolve in the water of the fountain until everything blurs out of focus.

\* \* \*

*This is what we see: a flock of copper birds speaking to the assembled crowd—of machines, of arched bridges and trains over steel tracks, of the dream that should have been Nezahual’s.*

*This is what we see: a city where buildings rise from the bloodless earth, high enough to pierce the heavens; a city where, once a year, a procession of grave people in cotton clothes walks through the marketplaces and the plazas of bronze. We see them make their slow way to the old war cemeteries and lay offerings of grass on the graves of long-dead warriors; we see an entire nation mourning its slaughtered children under the warm light of the silenced sun.*

*This is what we wished for.*

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## THE JEWELS OF MONTFORTE, PT. II

by Adam Corbin Fusco

(Concluded from [Issue #44](#))

\* \* \*

One of LaRoche's pirates stood guard at the entrance to the ballroom. Absinthe crouched in the shadows of the entryway with Lady Montforte, weighing in his hand his rapier, which he had retrieved on their way up the stairs.

"Where are the jewels?" he asked her, whispering.

"Books in a library," she said as she leaned against the wall.

*In plain sight, then,* he thought. At the far end of the ballroom he could see LaRoche and his men covering the guests. They had already been robbed, and now the pirates awaited the abating of the storm before leaving. Doubloon still stood with his tray of cream puffs, and Absinthe knew his men would still be hidden about the room. The jewels...

He looked at the columns, the chairs of the orchestra, the chandelier—the chandelier! It glittered, the candles all lit, the perfect place to keep the jewels out of reach. But then his eyes fell on the skulls in their brackets up in the gallery, the eyes

shining from the torches behind them, some red, some green, some white—white as diamonds.

“The skulls,” he said. “Your husband’s face.”

She smiled. “Aye, Captain.”

There was a stairway going up to the gallery along the nearer wall of the ballroom. He lifted his blade. “I’ll take care of this one.”

“No need.” Still smiling, she leaned back against the wall. A line opened and a section of it gave way, resolving into a hidden door. “Servant’s entrance.”

“This mountain is full of tricks, isn’t it.”

A narrow stairway lay behind the door, lit by a single torch. He followed her up. “How did you plan to retrieve the jewels if you were still with LaRoche?”

“I would come to the ballroom with him, disguised as a pyrate, and take them as more loot, just pieces of porcelain, with him none the wiser. Then I would sneak away from him to my ship.”

“You have a ship?”

Another hidden door at the top of the stairs let out onto the gallery. They crawled low, hiding behind the railing. Absinthe looked along the line of skulls on the gallery wall. He put away his rapier and grabbed a silk tapestry, ready to tear it down for use as a sack.

Lady Montforte, smirking, stopped his hand and untied a rope that held the tapestry in place. Crouching low, they went along the line of skulls and took each from the wall, loading them into the tapestry. They finished on the other side of the room.

“Now to my ship,” Lady Montforte whispered.

“I thought we had an alliance,” Absinthe said. “I still have men down there.”

“LaRoche will leave soon, and so can your men.”

“Not without me giving the signal. And what will your guests think when more pyrates appear?”

“That’s not my problem. The storm is waning. I need to plant this dress where it can be seen, so it looks like LaRoche killed me.”

“Why did you have such an elaborate plan? Why not just go pyrate on your own?”

“And how fast would these royals have hired privateers to hunt me down? Better to have them think me dead.”

“If LaRoche escapes, he’ll hunt you down himself.”

“Only if he knows I’m alive.”

“He might learn that from someone.”

“Who?” She looked at him hard, and then sighed. “What do you propose?”

Absinthe's gaze fell on a rope secured to the wall nearby. The rope was attached to the chandelier, holding it in place near the ceiling.

The lady's eyes grew wide. "Oh, no you don't."

Absinthe secured the sack of masks to the rope and then untied the rope from the wall. He wrapped it around his right arm and braced his feet against the floor of the gallery, now that he had the weight of the chandelier in his grip. As he eased toward the railing, the chandelier—creaking, tinkling—lowered a few feet.

He turned to Lady Montforte. "Give me the dress."

She shook her head, frightened. "It won't work."

"Come here."

"You're mad!"

"I thought you wanted to be a pyrate!" he hissed.

"I thought you said being a pyrate wasn't just about swinging from ropes!"

"Well, *some* of it is."

Furious, she approached him and slapped the dress over his arm. "I hate you, Monteroy Absinthe."

"You mean you're just starting now?"

She sidled up to him and he put his arm around her waist. She drew the pistols from the holsters at her back. "Have you done anything like this before?"

He put a foot on top of the railing. “Of course not. I’m not stupid.”

In one motion he drew himself up to the top of the railing, lifting the lady off her feet, and over the side they went.

At first he thought he had made a terrible mistake judging distances, for they plummeted straight down, the rope all slack and the floor of the ballroom rushing up to them. Then the rope grew taut, the chandelier slammed against its hook in the ceiling, and now they were sailing in an arc down and across, the air whistling in his ear—or was it Lady Montforte screaming curses?—with the room all askew in amber and honey, and guests and pirates alike gazing at them in stunned shock as Absinthe raised his feet and the tip of his rapier scratched the marble with an audible *ching*!

Up they went along the rest of the arc, halting in midair, the room silent now—or was Lady Montforte catching her breath for another scream?—and then they began to swing the other way. When they were once again a few feet above the floor, he let go of her. She landed nimbly on her feet and ran for cover.

Absinthe continued along the backswing, clutching dress and rope; but now that there was less weight on it, the chandelier plummeted down, carrying Absinthe up toward the ceiling. He passed the rattling chandelier, its tinkling lights flashing in

his face, and then it crashed against the marble floor, filling the room with a shattering cacophony. The rope carried him within an arm's length of the ceiling and then stopped. He had time for a brief sigh of relief before he looked down, saw all the guests staring back at him, and then slid down the rope all the way to the floor.

As the last of the chandelier's crystals stopped bouncing—*tink, tink, tink*—he nonchalantly approached the gaping LaRoche and threw the dress over the captain's head. He stood back and said in his loudest storm voice, "What a beautiful dress you are wearing, my lady!"

On cue, all hell broke loose.

Doubloon threw his tray into the air, drew out the two pistols hidden underneath it, and fired to either side. Two of LaRoche's men clattered to the ground at the same moment as the tray.

Wenn shot up from the urn and flung its lid across the room to knock down an enemy pyrate. He then jumped out, knife in hand.

The sword plant leaves were sliced apart as Havelyn leaped through and lay about him with his blade.

The top of the eleven-tier cake burst open to reveal Mer-rick, who felled one man with a musket shot and then ducked back in to reload.

Absinthe drew his rapier. As LaRoche struggled out of the dress, his pistol clattered from his belt. He drew a long sword and circled round the chandelier as Absinthe approached. Candles still burned in the wreckage and broken bits of crystal lay everywhere.

Absinthe gauged the feel of the marble floor with his bare feet, shuffling to knock away the crystal shards. He feinted to one side and then the other as LaRoche did the same. Then LaRoche titled back his head, his spectacles flashing, and leaped over the chandelier toward him.

Absinthe turned aside the point and riposted into the attack with his greater reach, lunging. The swords sang. But LaRoche's strikes seemed not to have much strength behind them; they were really to gauge Absinthe's technique.

Absinthe did the same, careful that LaRoche not get within his point. *Bookish*, Absinthe thought, reading all sixteen angles of attack as LaRoche went through them in order as if from a text. But LaRoche was quick—very quick.

LaRoche pressed in and now the fight began in earnest. The swords struck and slewed, flashing from candlelight, the crystals on the floor sparkling with fire. Absinthe backed away, circling behind the chandelier. He lunged, missing. LaRoche's sword *whanged* against the fixture in a failed counterstroke.

They parted and LaRoche *swooshed* his sword from side to side, feeling its weight. At one point he took a pass across one of the chandelier's candles, sending its tip jumping into the air. He laughed.

*Yes, a bookish boy, Absinthe thought. A fine swordsman deep down, innate ability, but too dependent on technique. And too confident by half.*

LaRoche took the fight to him again and metal rang. Though LaRoche was quick, Absinthe knew he had his gauge, but though his rapier darted and sang, he could not get a hit. As he sidestepped round, left then right, he realized what it was: the silent, still ground at his feet. Absinthe was out of his element with nothing but dead land under him. His feet fell flat at every step. His legs—land legs—were leaden.

LaRoche laid in with a will. His horizontal arcs tore away the plumes of Absinthe's shirt, scored hits on his arms. Absinthe chastised himself for holding his blade away too much, anticipating those angles; slow on recovery, it should be kept more in line for the lunge. And now the frills of his shirt, hanging down from the cuts, were weighing on him like a drag sail.

He circled round the chandelier, a temporary respite, and tore away the remainder of his shirt so now all that remained of the tailor's careful work were simple breeches. And was not this the way he always fought? On decks hundreds of fathoms in the



air, among clouds red and gold, in bare feet and breeches with his sword whistling in the wind?

Now a cold anger overcame him. How could this *boy* deign to come between him and his treasure, tittering his way across the Archipelago? How could this upstart churl think he could take it all? How could he himself think that frills and creamy silks could deliver into his hands what he desired? Elaborate capers were all well and good at whiles, but most times the only solution to a problem was a swift, sure, well-delivered blade.

Absinthe feinted to one side and leaped to the other, right hand on hilt and left on pommel to strike with greater force. Now it was LaRoche's turn to back and parry, his face sheening with sweat. A weak titter escaped his throat. Absinthe did not need to see past the spectacles opaque with candle flame to know there was fear in LaRoche's eyes.

They parted, breathing hard. Absinthe took his own swipe against a candle with the tip of his blade. It remained intact.

LaRoche tilted back his head and laughed. "You missed!"

Absinthe crouched down, picked up a crystal from the floor and threw it. It shattered one lens of LaRoche's spectacles and a shard of glass embedded itself in his eye. As the candle slowly toppled in half from his invisible cut, Absinthe leaped and drove his blade through LaRoche's chest, the bloody tip erupting from his back.

LaRoche stumbled backward as he withdrew it, collapsing on the floor. Absinthe started to dart forward for the final dispatch, but LaRoche's hand snatched up his fallen pistol. He raised his head, bringing the pistol to bear and aiming with his good eye.

Absinthe froze.

LaRoche's finger pulled back on the trigger.

A dagger flew from somewhere on the right, end over end, and drove itself into LaRoche's wrist. His shot went wide.

Absinthe jumped the intervening distance and plunged his blade into LaRoche's heart. The light glinting in the remaining lens went out.

Lady Montforte stood to the right, hands on hips. "Was that as good as Red Betty?"

Absinthe took a deep breath. "Not if you were aiming for his neck." He pulled out the dagger and handed it back to her, smiling. "But it was good enough for me."

Absinthe saw that his men had dispatched the last of LaRoche's pyrates. A commotion at one of the windows drew their attention: the jolly boat from the *Crimson Moon* had arrived, bobbing on its bags of argent dyoro. Absinthe gathered up the sack of masks as Lady Montforte grabbed her dress, and they made their way to the window.

The storm had subsided. Doubloon, Wenn, Havelyn, Merrick, and all the rest were climbing into the boat. The twins Brace and Brack, who had sailed the boat in, stood to leave the vessel.

“We’ll stay behind, sar,” said one.

“Storm drove a moonfish into one of the bags, sar, what pierced it,” said the other.

“Won’t float with two more aboard.”

“Of all the—” Absinthe began, but bit down on his words. There was no point in cursing the bad luck of a storm. “No. You stay and get everyone back to the *Moon*. Lady Montforte and I will take her ship and rendezvous.”

“Aye, aye, sar,” Brace and Brack said together. They raised the little sail and the boat pulled away.

Lady Montforte was glaring at him. “What?” he said, and then turned around.

All the guests were staring at them.

Baron Sabato snapped open his fan and gazed through its eyeholes. “Lady Montforte?”

The Electress Serpentine frowned extravagantly. “A ship?”

Earl Reticella pouted. “My lady, why are you dressed as... as a *pyrate*?”

Absinthe had forgotten to address her as the Autumn Rose. Now he looked at her and back to the angry guests. Al-

ready a slab of cake whizzed through the air toward them and Absinthe ducked. This was followed by talia fruit, three petit fours, and a coconut.

They were behind one of the food tables, the one with the huge punch bowl. Without exchanging a word, he and the lady braced their hands under its rim and heaved. Up went the bowl. The concoction of bubbling yellow disgorged onto the floor, splashing the guests in a slippery flood. Amid the shouts and curses, dress swords were unsheathed, while a small group of people shuffled toward the carving table where several cleavers glinted.

“Come on,” said the lady, grasping his hand and leading him to the entrance as the guests slipped and slid.

They flew down the steps that led to the hallway where lay the water cells. Lady Montforte splashed into the water, which came up to her waist, and took the torch that remained in the cell.

Absinthe stopped, gazing into the black depths.

“This way,” she said. “The docks are down here.” She waded ahead of him.

Absinthe plunged into the water and for a moment he could not breathe. The shock of the cold—the shock of fear—threatened to suffocate him. He stood in the black water as the

lady moved forward, her torch growing smaller, dimmer. Its orange flame receded, turning a sickly green.

The water churning around his waist went silent. As he gazed after that far-off light, the inky darkness welled up from below. The air turned a prickly chill, and he became aware of the yawning gulf of space behind him. He dared not turn around.

The water came through in waves to splash against the wall behind; it echoed against the stones like the beating of a drum. It felt as if some mass were gathering itself there, or a space were opening, vast and pitch black. He could not move. He became aware of the oppressive weight of stone above his head even as he sensed that something rose, or opened, behind him.

*This is what it is like in Harrowdeep*, he thought, *in the domain of Leviathan. This is the fate of the world.* He imagined the shape of the thing behind, and what came to mind were tales told to him when young of the inky bloaters. Everyone knew what they looked like, stooped and dripping black sludge from the voidful depths.

An amber glow to the left caught his eye. He heard voices, calling “They went this way!” and “Down here!” It was the guests, making their way down the stairway. The light brightened as their torches approached. He darted a glance behind to

see the shadows fly away, but not before glimpsing one that shimmied straight down into the water.

He found his legs. He splashed rapidly toward the lady's distant torch, which had resumed its normal color, and presently the voices of the pursuing guests broke out clear behind him.

"What took you so long?" Lady Montforte glared at him as he entered the large chamber where she stood on a platform above the water. The place was one of the grottoes, its walls glowing blue from scuttling crabs. One of the hapless creatures was skewered by a carving knife thrown from behind him.

"I ran into your friends," he said, his head rapidly clearing.

Suspended by ropes next to the platform and above the water was a two-man launch. Its bags of argent dyoro were full; presumably its ballast barrels were too. The tops of incoming waves kissed its keel. It was small.

"You said you had a ship," he said.

"I do."

"That's a boat!"

She pointed at their pursuers, fuming. "Why don't you lecture them about the difference?"

Muttering, he climbed up the thin gangway and secured the sack of masks. She followed with the dress. As an incoming wave passed underneath, he unshipped the ropes and they

dropped into the water. The wave hit the back of the cavern and rolled forward, carrying them with it just as the guests splashed into the chamber.

He and the lady ducked as the boat was pelted with dishes, cutlery, and angry shouts. A cleaver *chunked* into one of the barrels while another *whanged* off the gunwale to spin away above their heads. Then they were shooting down the channel, past the opening of the grotto and into the sea beyond. Absinthe immediately threw open the ballast levers and into the sky they flew.

The night was dreary dark, but the clouds in Cumulo had cleared enough to show the great blue stone of Sussurus nearly full in the northeast. Absinthe put up the little sail, but it caught only a fitful breeze: they were on the lee side of the mountain. As they gained altitude they came level with the mansion on top of Montforte. Swinging round, they rose above its twinkling lights and the sail snapped full.

In the southwest sky he saw his ship the *Crimson Moon*, lying to about three hundred fathoms above Ocean under close-reefed topsails on all three foremasts. She was just swaying up her topgallantmasts, having taken them down for the storm. The skull-and-crown banner snapped at her stern. Her proud lines, her forecastle towers, and her beautiful figurehead cupping in delicate hands a crimson orb all stirred his heart. *I*

*do have a home, he thought, one that flies through clouds and sun under billowing russet sails.*

Something struck the boat. And another. Looking down, he saw on the mansion's roof more of the ball's guests. Puffs of smoke appeared, followed by hollow reports peppering the air.

"Muskets!"

"They've broken into the guards' locker," the lady said.

Another shot hit the boat. "Get down," Absinthe called. A soft *plumpf* sounded on their starboard beam, and they rapidly dropped two fathoms.

"They hit one of the bags," he said, levering away the rest of the ballast. "Are all your guests sharpshooters?"

"The Electress Serpentine is," Lady Montforte said flatly.

Absinthe peered over the gunwale. Earl Reticella was preparing the cannon, a twelve-pounder, assisted by Baron Sabato.

"And gunners too." He let go of the ballast barrels themselves, then cast about for anything else to throw overboard. His gaze fell on her.

"Well don't look at *me!*" she cried.

"I was looking at your dress. Those lead hoops—"

"You're not taking this dress."

"It's either that or the jewels."

"Or you!"



A crackling of musket fire sounded from the mansion, and a hit sent a shower of splinters into the boat. As he sought a way to unship the seats, he heard a rumbling *boom*, followed by something striking the inside of the boat with a clank. Had Reticella fired the cannon? He then noticed a puff of smoke drifting from the rail of the *Crimson Moon*.

Lady Montforte saw it as well. “They’re going to hit us if they fire on the mansion!”

“They’re not aiming for the mansion,” Absinthe said. What had landed inside the boat was a grappling hook. The rope attached to it led all the way back to the railing of the *Crimson Moon*, a hundred-fathom line.

Lady Montforte’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, no you don’t.”

Absinthe tied the bag of masks to the grappling hook and wrapped the rope around his arm. “Give me the dress,” he said.

“We’re hundreds of feet in the air!”

“Hundreds of fathoms.”

“Swinging from a chandelier is one thing—”

“And escaping certain death is another. Come here.”

She rolled her eyes. “I suppose I should be used to this by now.”

He draped the dress over his arm, which he then hooked around her waist. More musket fire clattered against the boat,

and a final glimpse revealed Earl Reticella reaching toward the cannon's touchhole with a smoldering match.

Absinthe leaped into empty air. A thundering crash sounded behind him as the cannonball struck home, shattering the boat into kindling.

Then they were flying, falling, until the rope grew taut. The air whistled in their ears as Ocean churned far below and stars wheeled above. Down, across and up they went, swinging free, surrounded by the black gulf of night with the titanic mass of the *Crimson Moon* high overhead.

Absinthe realized that his throat was raw; he had been yelling with joy. "Now that's skylarking!"

The rope gradually came to rest. The *Crimson Moon* unreefed her topsails, let fall her forecourses, and bore away east, already out of range of the mansion. Presently he felt the rope being drawn up. The ship dropped ballast, a cascade of water, to rise higher, heeling to starboard so its charges would not scrape against the hull.

Absinthe felt the lady's nails digging into his chest. She was shivering, her head against his collarbone. "Don't look down," he said. "Look up. And clap your legs around me."

She did so, tense with fear. She relaxed a little. Her body was warm. A smile grew on her face as she wriggled against him. "It's bigger than I thought."

“Madam?”

“Your ship. Bigger.”

“Oh. Aye.” He wished he had his cuffs back to wipe the sweat from his brow.

They came in line with the ship’s keel and continued to rise. The planks of the hull slid past, barely a fathom away. Hatches popped open to reveal curious faces from the ship’s population. Men leered; women whispered and smiled behind their hands. Gossip always flew through the ship faster than any nor-east gale.

Absinthe refused to be embarrassed by any members of the population, especially those who lived so close to the Bot-toms. Nevertheless, as he held Lady Montforte, feeling the easy grace of her body under his hand, he distracted himself by voicing a thought that troubled him. “*Did* you kill your husband?”

Her head naturally fell against his chest. Her voice murmured against him. “No. He never beat me or abused me. That was a lie. He was very kind, actually. I did love him. He died of a consumption of the lungs after swimming in one of the grot-toes one cold night. I wept for months. Those balls celebrating inheritance are a morbid tradition in the Archipelago. I had to hold them.”

“And the tale about your uncle?”

“That was true. He trained me to protect myself in case of pyrate attack. Pistols mostly. Some of the old battle dancing. He trained me, until they killed him.”

“Who killed him?”

She looked up at him. “Pirates.”

He held her a little tighter. *Becoming one of them won't assuage the pain*, he thought but did not say. *We are of the same age, but you have more to learn—at least on that score.*

Presently they reached the maindeck and were hauled aboard. They stood at the rail with the crew—Doubloon, Wenn, and all the rest—gathering around them and the bag of jewels at their feet.

Absinthe turned to announce her to the crew. As he did so, she drew the pistols from the holsters at her back and aimed both barrels at his head. “Now, Captain Monteroy Absinthe, you will give me the jewels. And a boat.”

Before she even breathed the word “now,” precisely twenty-seven cutlasses, fifteen pistols, four hand axes, nine muskets from the tops, eight marline spikes, two belaying pins, and a rusty penknife from the boatswain, Patches, were aimed directly at her.

“Steady, lads; calm yourselves,” Absinthe said. He kept himself perfectly still, knowing that at a flick of his eyes they

would cut her down. “The lady only wants to leave.” He addressed her. “Hardly the thanks I expected for saving your life.”

“Funny, I thought I saved yours.”

“And I never learned your name.”

“Rosaria, of course. Are all pyrates so thick?”

He sighed. This was certainly turning into a bad day. “I’ll give you a boat to get off my ship. Nothing more.”

The lady clearly had not anticipated the response of the crew and took in the situation with eyes wide, though she did not lower her weapons. “Very well.”

A jolly boat was hoisted to the rail. She slowly backed into it, pistols leveled. “At least give me back my dress,” she said. “Unless you want to wear it for your next ball.”

He had hardly noticed that he still held it. “Too bad it’s not my size.” He threw it into the boat.

She put down one of her pistols and reached behind her to raise the little sail. The boat slowly pulled away. She made way east and then northeast, skimming athwart the *Moon*’s bows.

Absinthe and his crew went to the larboard bow to follow her. Patches stood beside him, still clutching fiercely to his penknife. As they all watched, Lady Montforte slipped into the dress. She then turned away from them, bent forward, and rudely presented her posterior.

As she did so, the inner hoops of the dress glinted. Lined along them, sewn against the fabric, were jewels, hundreds of them. Diamonds, emeralds and rubies—though perhaps not as big as albatross eggs as the rumors said—were arrayed neatly inside the dress in prodigious quantity.

“Ooooh,” the crew had said as the lady bent forward, but now crowed a disappointed “Ahhhh” as the jewels were revealed. A few tittering laughs were quenched by Absinthe’s angry glare. He dismissed the crew back to their duties. Patches remained behind.

“She *did* say the dress was worth a fortune,” Absinthe muttered. He bent to the bag of masks and scratched a crystal eye with his thumbnail. It broke apart and crumbled into powder. “Paste.” He threw the mask down and it shattered.

“I’m sorry for it, Cap’n, sar,” Patches said, scrunching his hat down low on his head. “That’s a right bung-up, that is.”

“She *did* say that her best seamster worked on the dress,” he mused. “Not *seamstress*. She knew who I was from the beginning, because he told her everything before the ball. No wonder he pricked me with a pin when I presumed she would be ugly.” He turned to Patches. “Remind me later to keelhaul the tailor.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“Stem to stern.”

“Of course, Cap’n.”

“She had the jewels all along. When she had us go back to the ballroom it wasn’t to get them. It was so that I would dispatch LaRoche, who would have gone after her when he realized he had been betrayed.”

As the lady’s boat drew farther away, a shape rounded from the shoulder of Montforte. It was a ship, trim and pretty, a three-masted twenty-four gun, sailing up and east, soon to cross the gaze of Sussurus.

“She *did* say she had a ship,” Absinthe murmured. “It was probably waiting in the north, hidden by the glare of the moon.” Now he fully felt the wind spill from his sails. “Well then, Patches, what should I do? Go after her and get the jewels? Destroy her ship? Or should I just let her go?”

“Oh, no, sar, don’t let her go!”

“Why not?”

Patches’ eyes grew wide. “Well, sar, a woman like that, bootiful and purdy besides, and clever enough to hand you your arse, you don’t let a woman like that go, no, sar!”

“Hand me my what?”

Patches doffed his hat. “Pardons, Cap’n, sar. What I mean-ter say is—if ‘twere me, sar—why, I’d marry her.”

“*Marry* her?”

Patches fairly danced a jig. “Oh, aye, sar—I’d marry her in a pinch!”

They could not see the jolly boat anymore. It had presumably tied up to the ship, which was now cutting across Sussurus, the taut crescent shapes of her sails reflecting the blue.

Patches clutched his hat. “She cut a right caper, didn’t she, Cap’n? And nuthin’ for yer trouble, no, sar.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that.” Absinthe drew from his pocket a square-cut green gem more than half as big as his palm.

Patches gazed at it in wonder, his eyes wider than ever. “By the Thirteen, Cap’n, what that be?”

“I believe it’s called the Searock—or Seawrack.” He held it up to the light of Sussurus. A cloudy form of a darker green lay within it, toward the bottom. He turned the gem upside-down. The darker portion, now at the top, slid slowly down one inner side, collecting at the bottom and rolling along it to splash against the other. It curled over itself like an ocean wave, collapsing and gently coming to rest.

“How did you nip that, sar?”

“I just groped around under her dress until I found something big to clap on to.”

Patches’ shoulders climbed up to his missing ears while his face turned bright red. “Oh that’s larks, Cap’n! That’s larks! Your hand up her dress? Oh! Ooooh!”



Absinthe did not bother to tell him it was while the lady was not wearing it, while they were being drawn up the rope to the *Moon*. He had suspected the dress when she was reluctant to let it go, and when he threw it to her on her escape he had already been convinced by her belief that such things were soon to become worthless. Besides, the best place to spend such treasure would be the Archipelago, where the value would be honored, but its people knew all about him now. Best to give her what she was after; there was always tomorrow.

Of course, he was not above taking a souvenir. The legend said that the Seawrack had power over Ocean. A thought now struck him. Power *over* Ocean. It commanded powers *above* it. The storm. She had controlled the storm with the gem, summoned it even. She had controlled the situation the entire time, every bit of it, with the storm delaying all so that her plan could fully unfold.

He shook his head. Well, now he had the best of the jewels of Montforte; but as he gazed out toward the lady's ship and thought about her eyes, which seemed now to swim before him, and remembered the feeling of holding her in his arms, he wondered if he had let go the better treasure.

"Aye, Patches," Absinthe said. "She is a beauty. A fine lady indeed."

“Pffft!” guffawed the boatswain. “Oh, no, sar, no—she weren’t no lady.” He leaned back and threw his hat into the air. “She were a *pyrate*!”

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*Adam Corbin Fusco’s fiction has appeared in The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror, Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales, Science Fiction Age, The Best of Cemetery Dance, and other publications. His web site can be found at <http://adamcorbinfusco.com>.*

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## COVER ART

“The Canyon,” by Christophe Vacher



Christophe Vacher has provided artwork for the movie and animation industries since 1989, including the Disney films “Hercules,” “Tarzan,” and “Treasure Planet.” He served as Art Director for animated movies including the feature film “9,” for which he received an Annie Awards nomination for Best Production Design. Visit his galleries at [www.vacher.com](http://www.vacher.com).

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