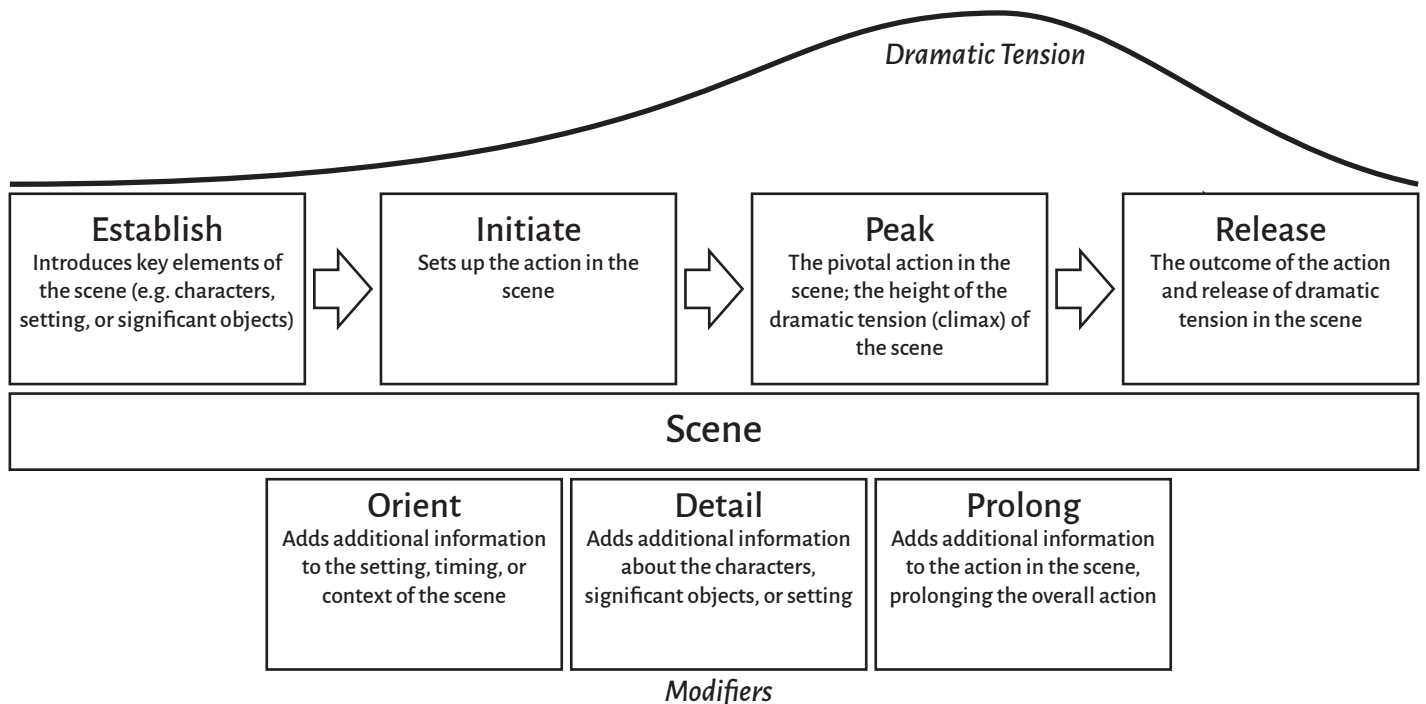


Scene Structure in Visual Storytelling

by Peter von Stackelberg



Establish – The first element in a scene introduces key aspects of the setting, characters, and significant objects in the scene. Its purpose is to introduce the reader to the scene and help them understand the who, where, and when before the action begins. In visual terms, this could be considered an establishing shot that shows the environment and characters' place in it. In text-based stories, this element is often called the set up.

Initiate – The second element is often preparatory activity that sets up action that will occur in later in the scene. It ratchets up the dramatic tension and provides readers with information needed to understand what is about to happen.

Peak – This is the climax of the scene, where dra-

matic tension is its highest. The peak is when the scene's pivotal action happens.

Release – The final element is the release, which wraps up the scene and shows the aftermath of the pivotal action. At this point, the dramatic tension is released and the scene ends.

The *peak* is the most important element in helping readers understand what is happening. *Release* is usually the second most important. The *initiate* and *establish* elements, while still providing important information, will do not have as significant impact on the readers' ability to understand the scene if eliminated from the story.

The order of these elements – *Establish* > *Initiate* > *Peak* > *Release* – is important; scrambling them reduces

the ability of readers to follow the sequence of events and understand the scene.

Most sequential art and written scenes have more than just the basics outlined with these four elements. Three secondary elements – “modifiers” – can be used to add information to a scene.

Orient – Additional information about the setting, timing, or context of the scene that helps the reader better understand the where, when, and who of the scene; it helps orient them to what is going on. This information usually follows the establish element and elaborates in some way what we have already presented to the audience.

Detail – Additional *detail* about characters, settings, or significant objects. This *detail* is usually part of an *initiate* sequence but may also be used sparingly during the *release* to provide necessary information.

Prolong – Additional actions in the scene that prolong the overall action. A *prolong* can be used to create suspense, which heightens the scene’s dramatic. They will typically be part of an initiate sequence. If you use *prolongs* in a *peak*, do so sparingly. You don’t want to drag things out for too long.

Do not use *prolongs* in a *release* sequence. Once you’ve hit the peak, the outcome should be presented without delay.

Example – Scene Structure in a Graphic Novel

Images by Peter von Stackelberg

The first sequence of images is an edited version of a scene from a graphic novel. This sequence shows just the pages with the *Establish*, *Initiate*, *Peak*, and *Release* scene elements. It provides less detail than the longer version that added information using *Orient*, *Detail*, and *Prolong*. However, the storyline in this much shorter version is still understandable to readers.

Eliminating the first two pages (*Establish* and *Initiate*), leaving only the *Peak* and *Release* pages of this sequence still gives readers a basic understanding of the storyline, showing the importance of the *Peak* and *Release* elements.

This sample scene can be condensed even more, into two panels (3rd from the end and the last panel) and still be understandable to readers.

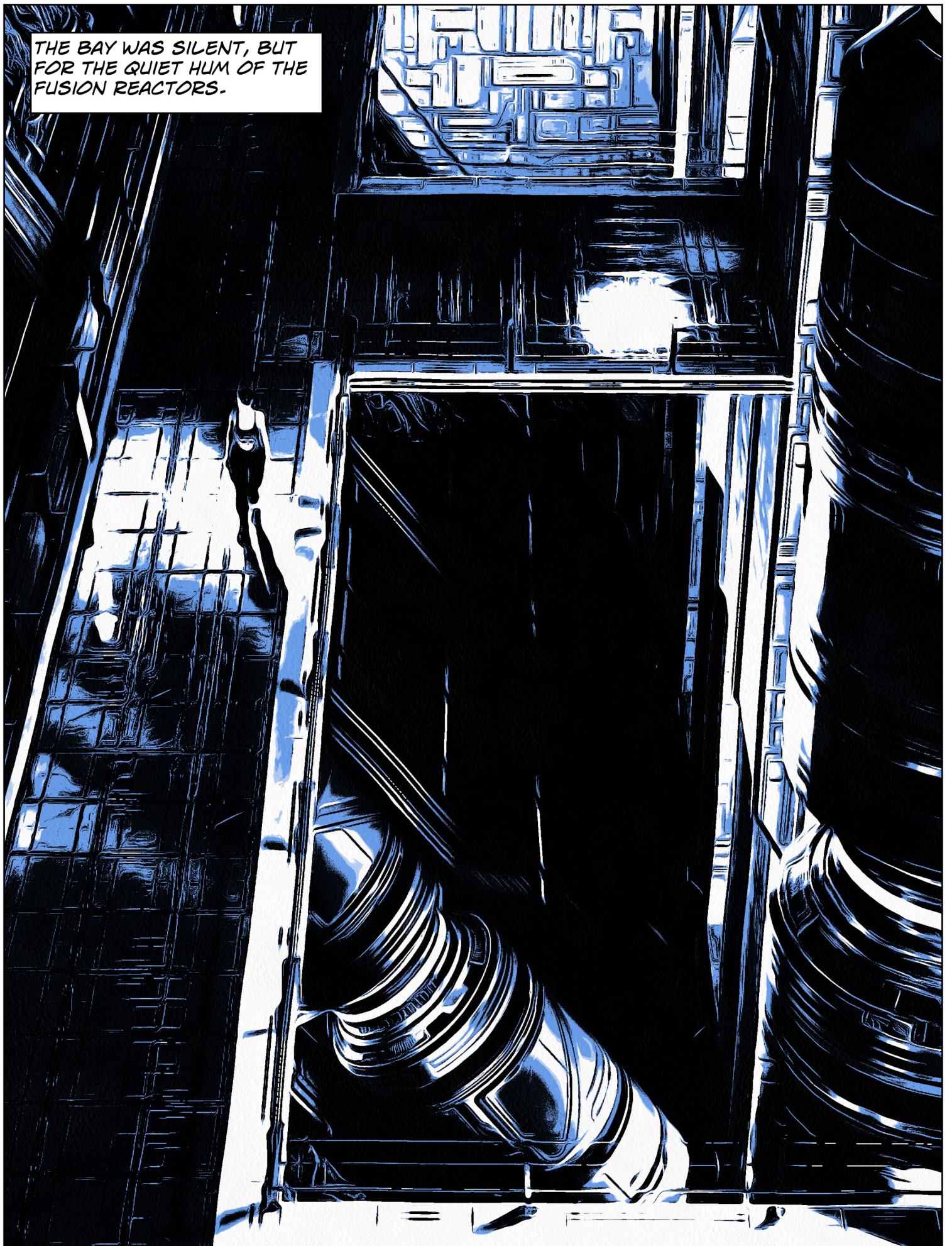
The final set of images (a total of 24 panels across 11 pages) identifies the *Establish*, *Initiate*, *Peak*, and *Release* scene elements and the *Orient*, *Detail*, and *Prolong* elements that provide additional detail to the scene.

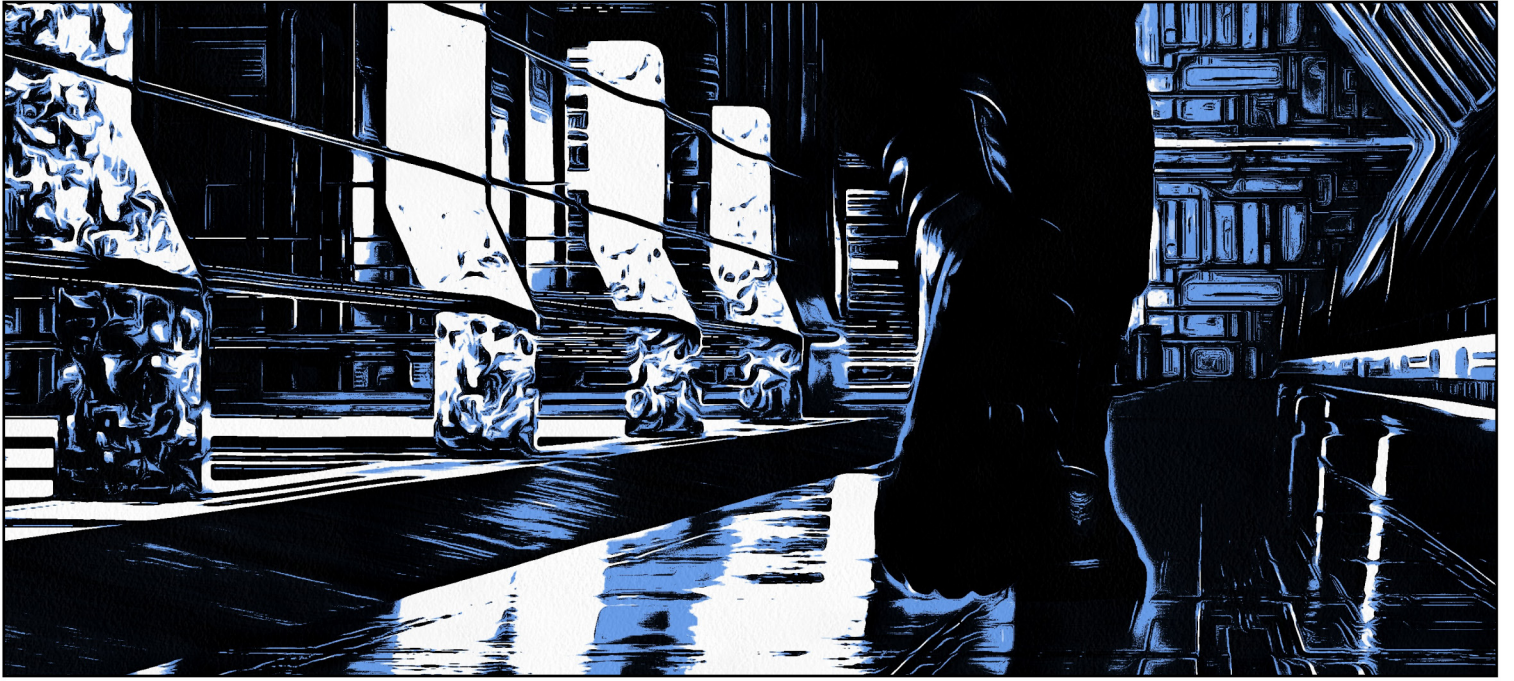
MORGANA'S WORLD



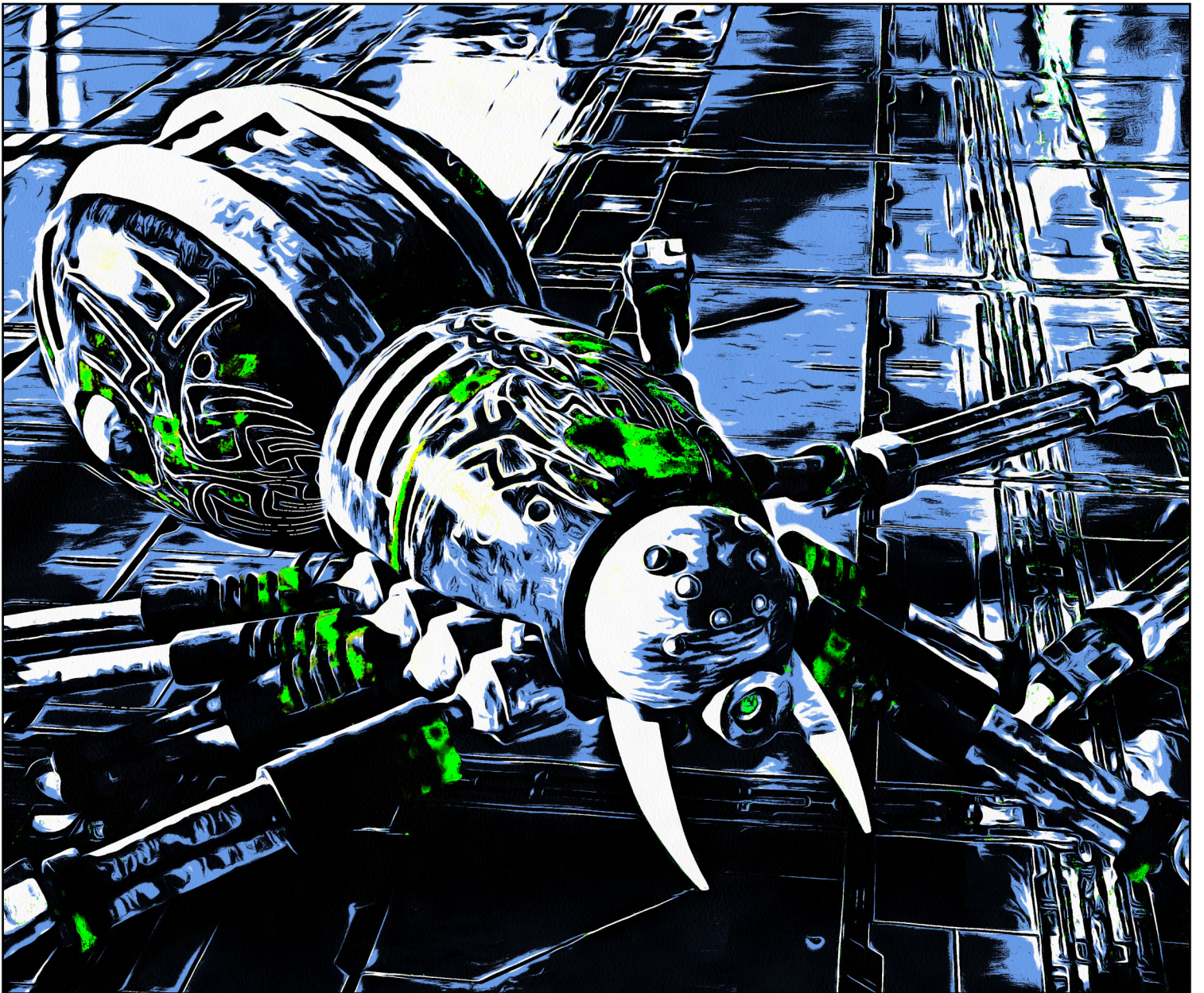
WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY
PETER VON STACKELBERG

THE BAY WAS SILENT, BUT
FOR THE QUIET HUM OF THE
FUSION REACTORS.







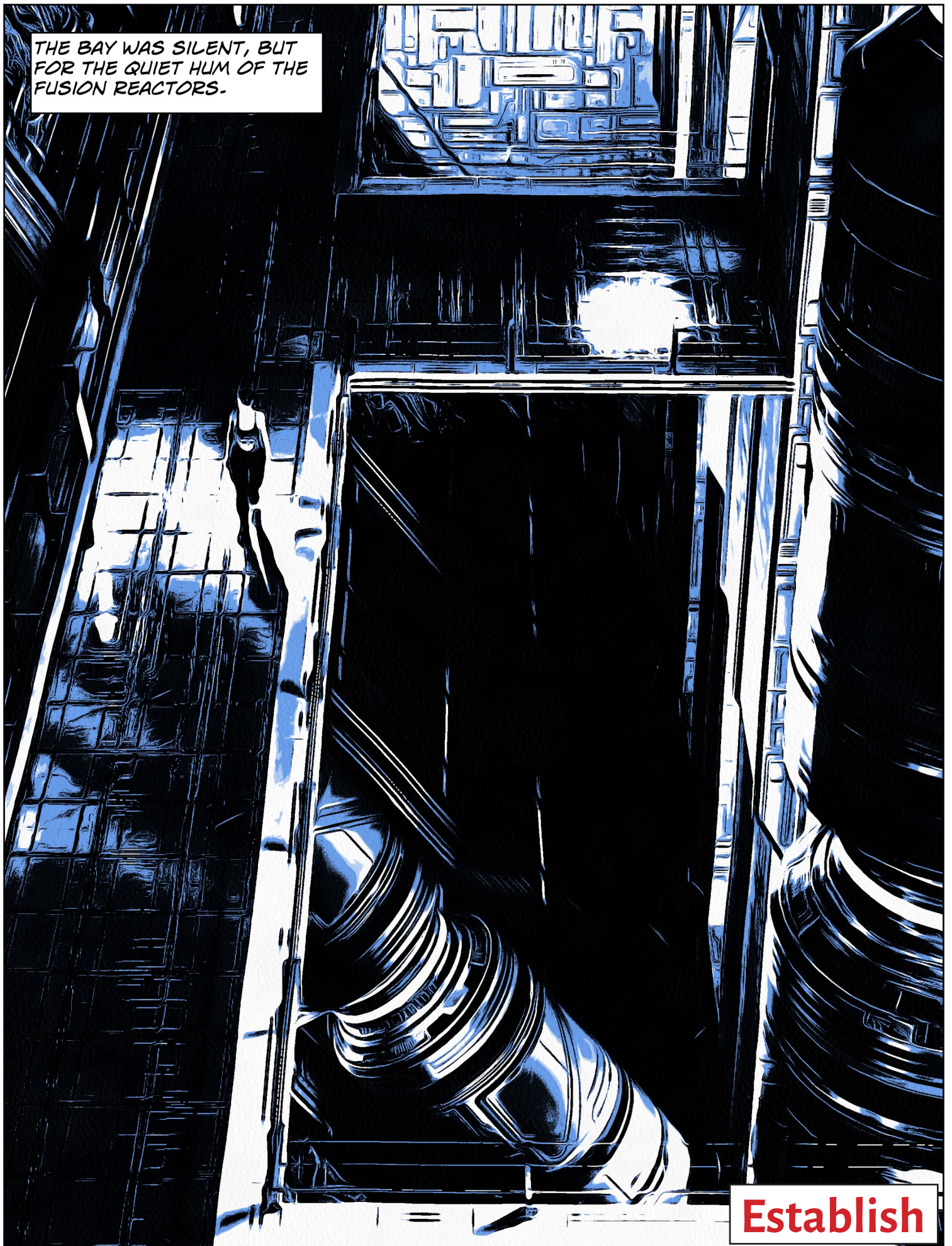


MORGANA'S WORLD

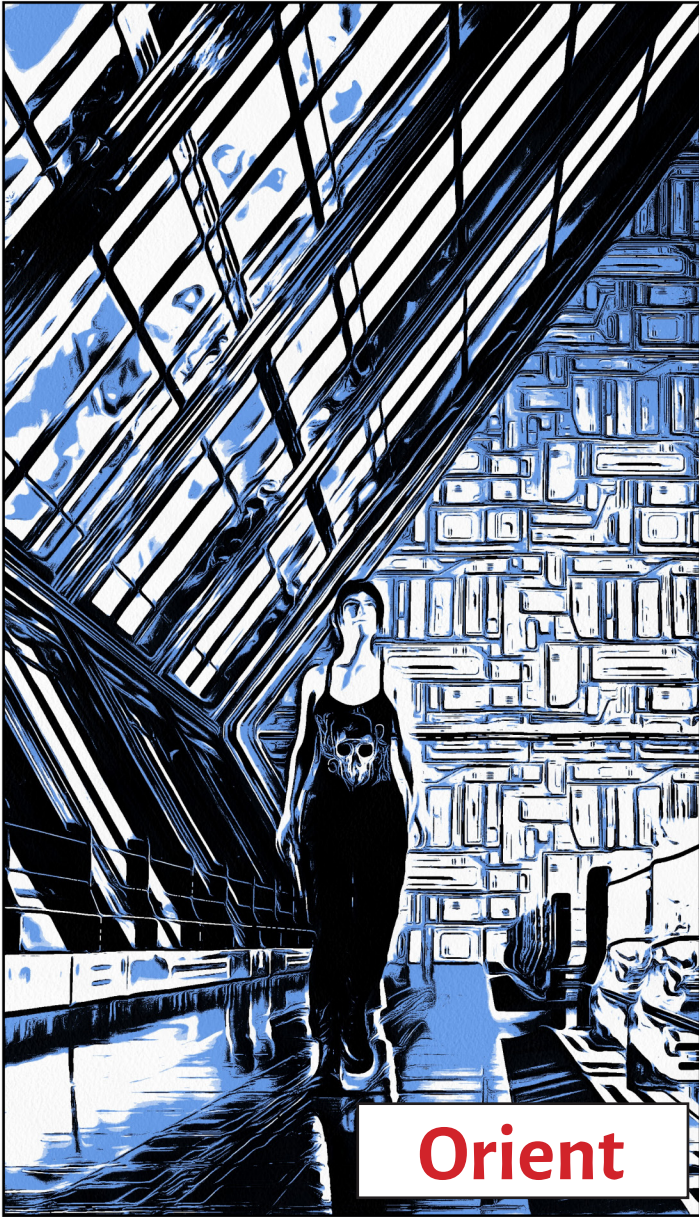


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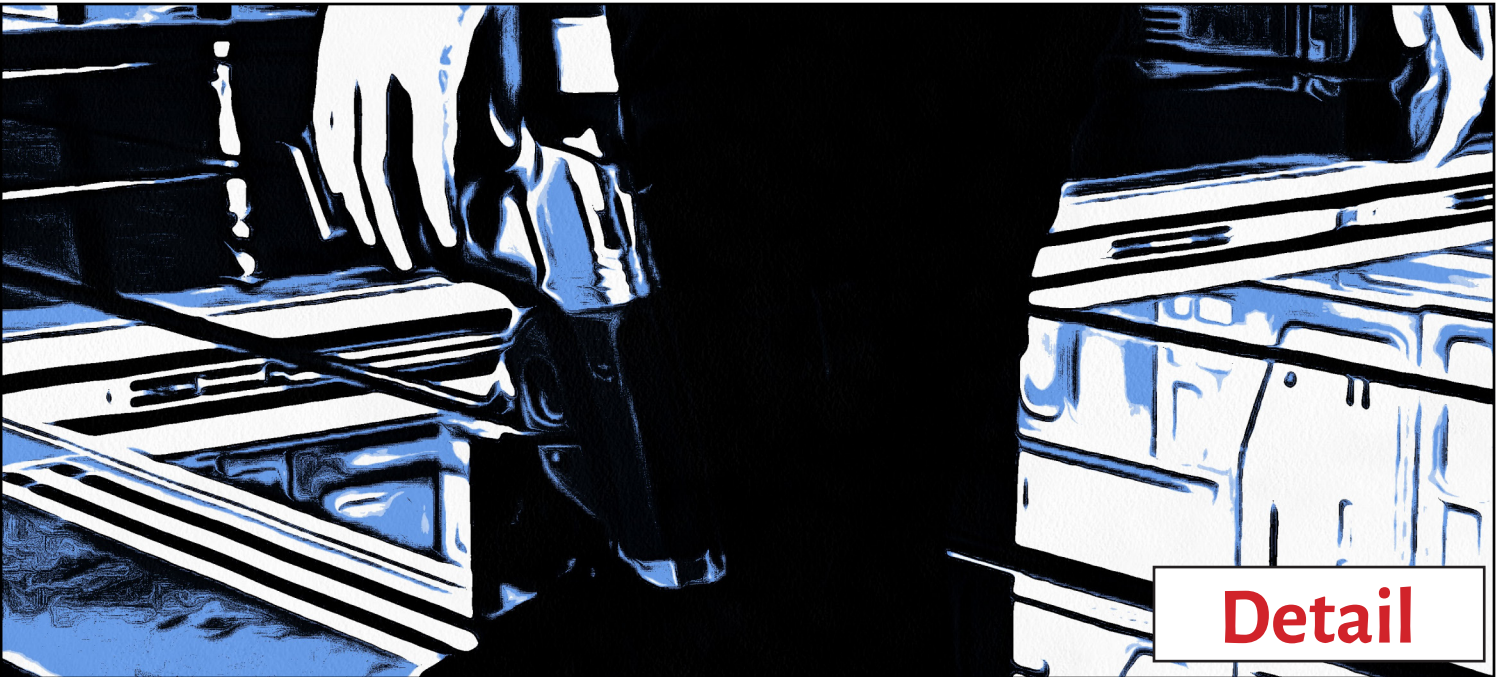
Establish



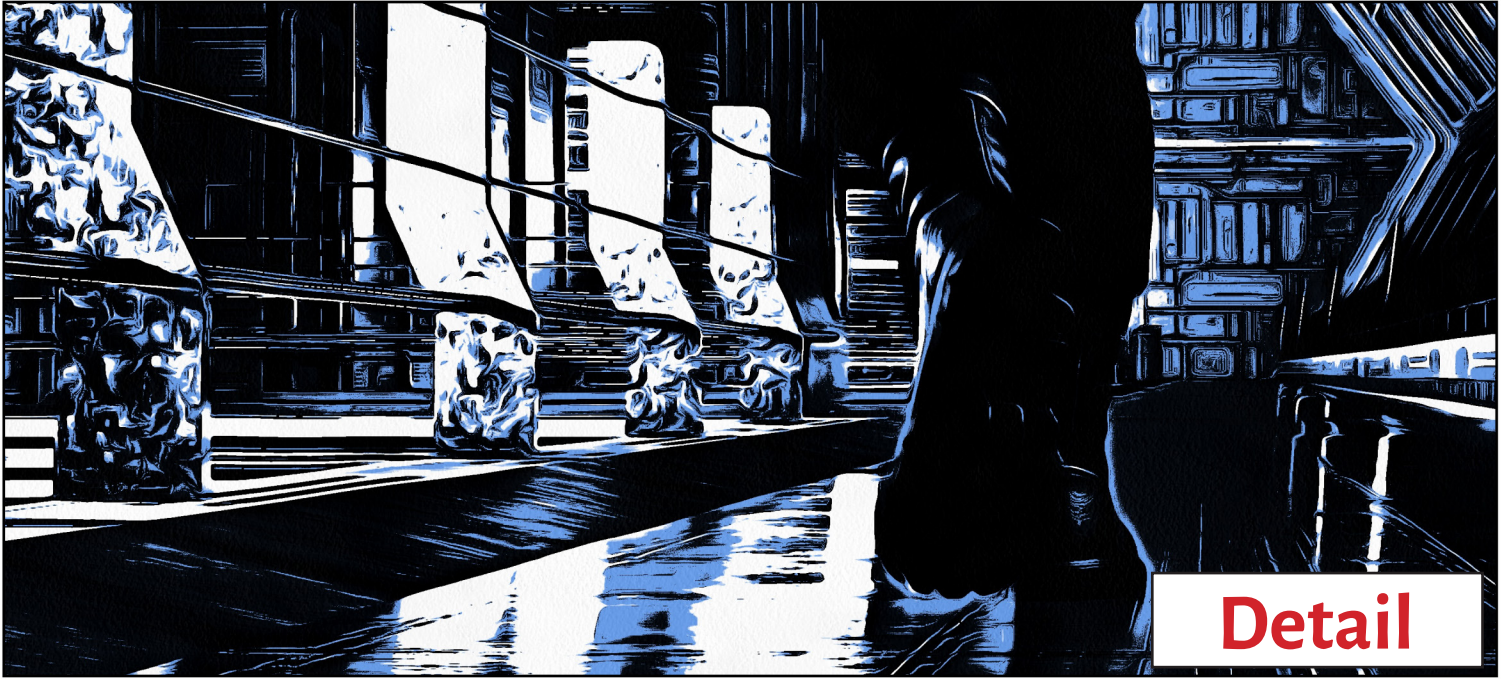
Orient



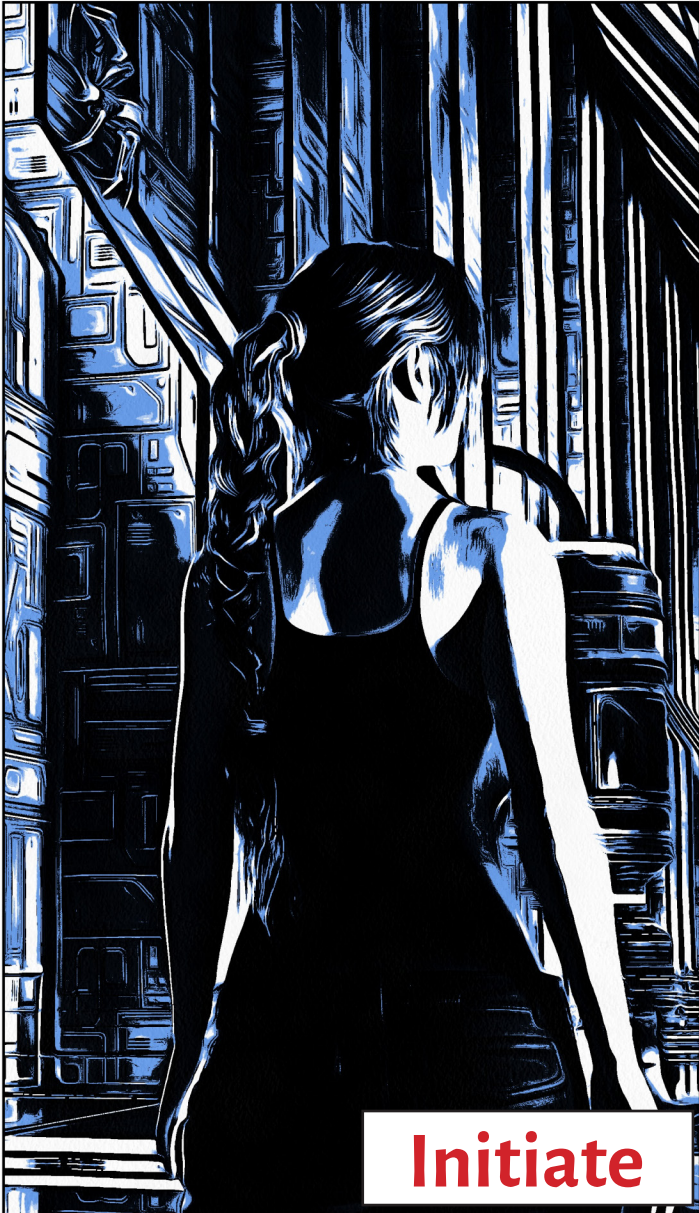
Orient



Detail



Detail



Initiate



Initiate



WHAT THE HELL?

Prolong



GAWD, I HATE
SPIDERS...

Detail



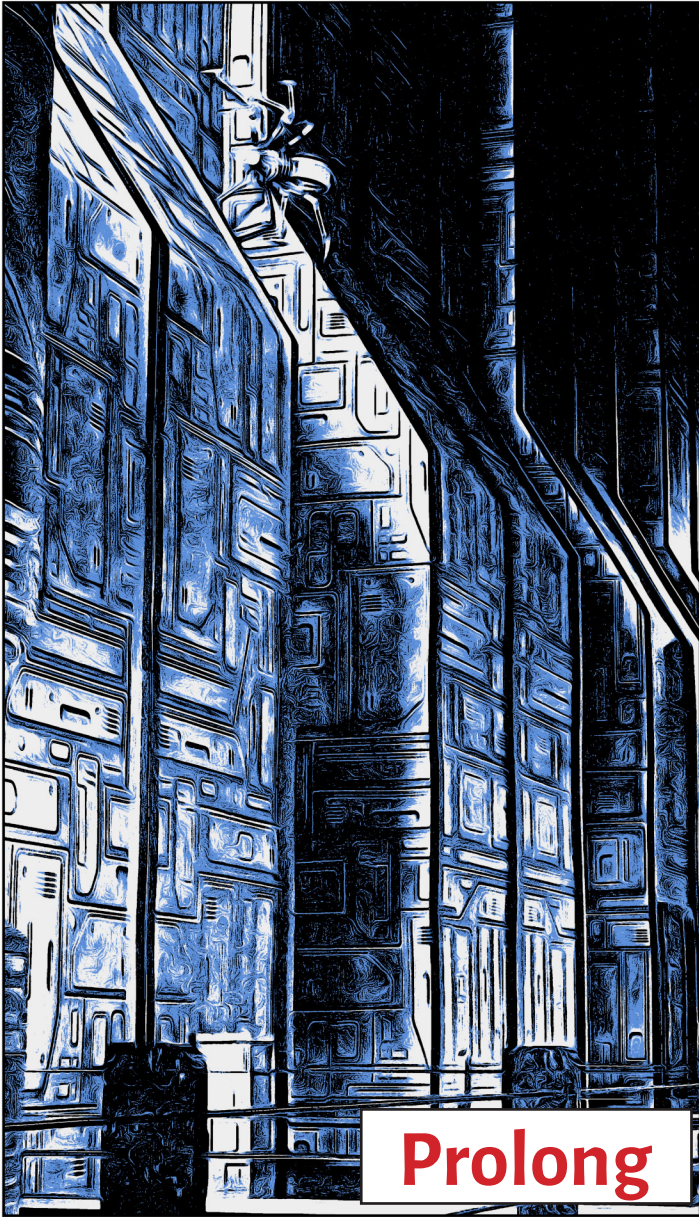
CONTROL ROOM...WE'VE GOT A PROBLEM.

Prolong

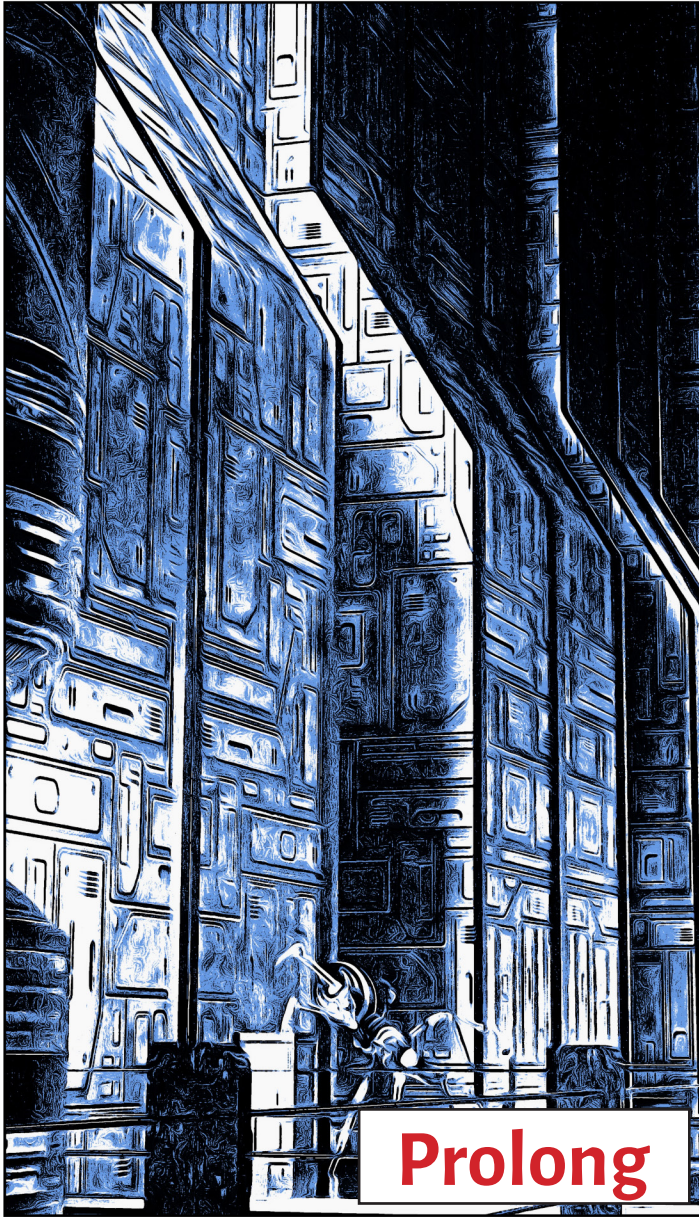


THERE'S A MECH IN BAY 3, SECTION 6... IT'S ON THE MOVE.

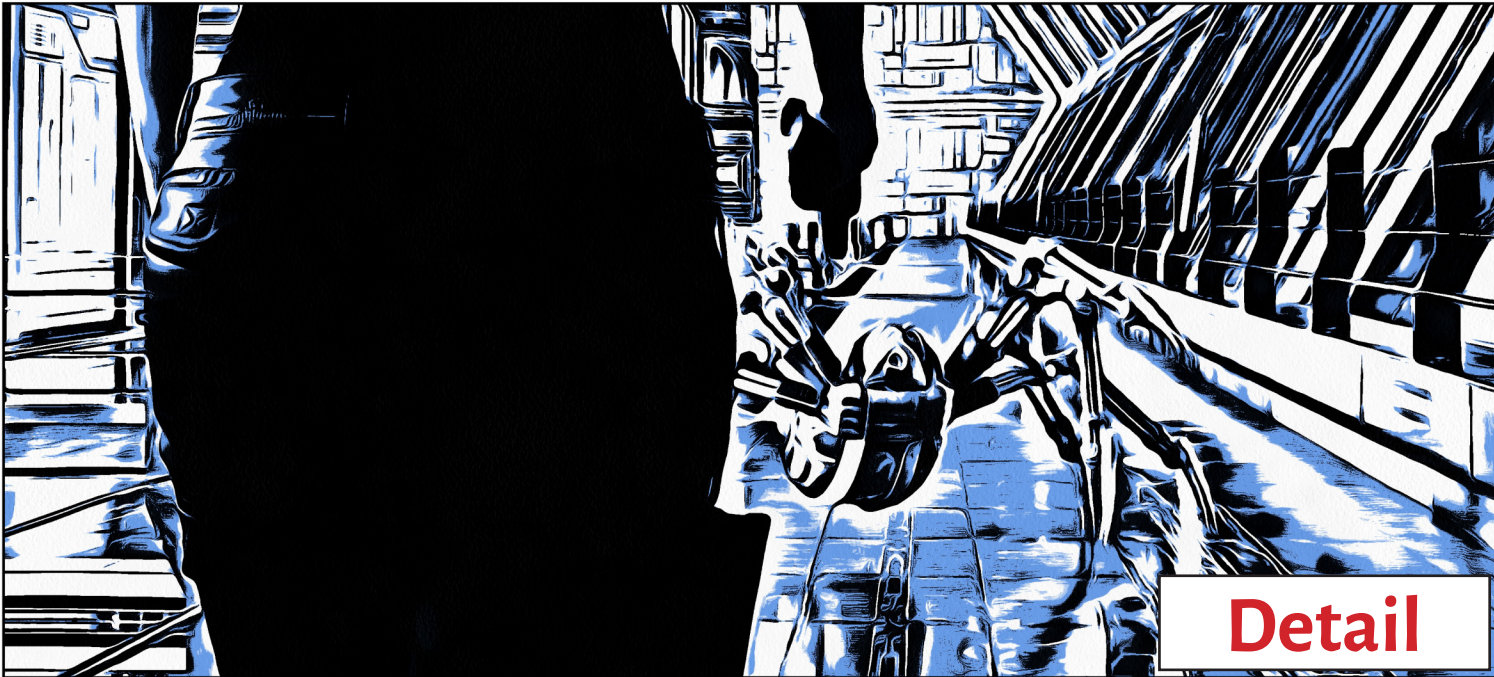
Detail



Prolong



Prolong



Detail



CONTROL ROOM...SEND BACKUP...FAST!

Detail



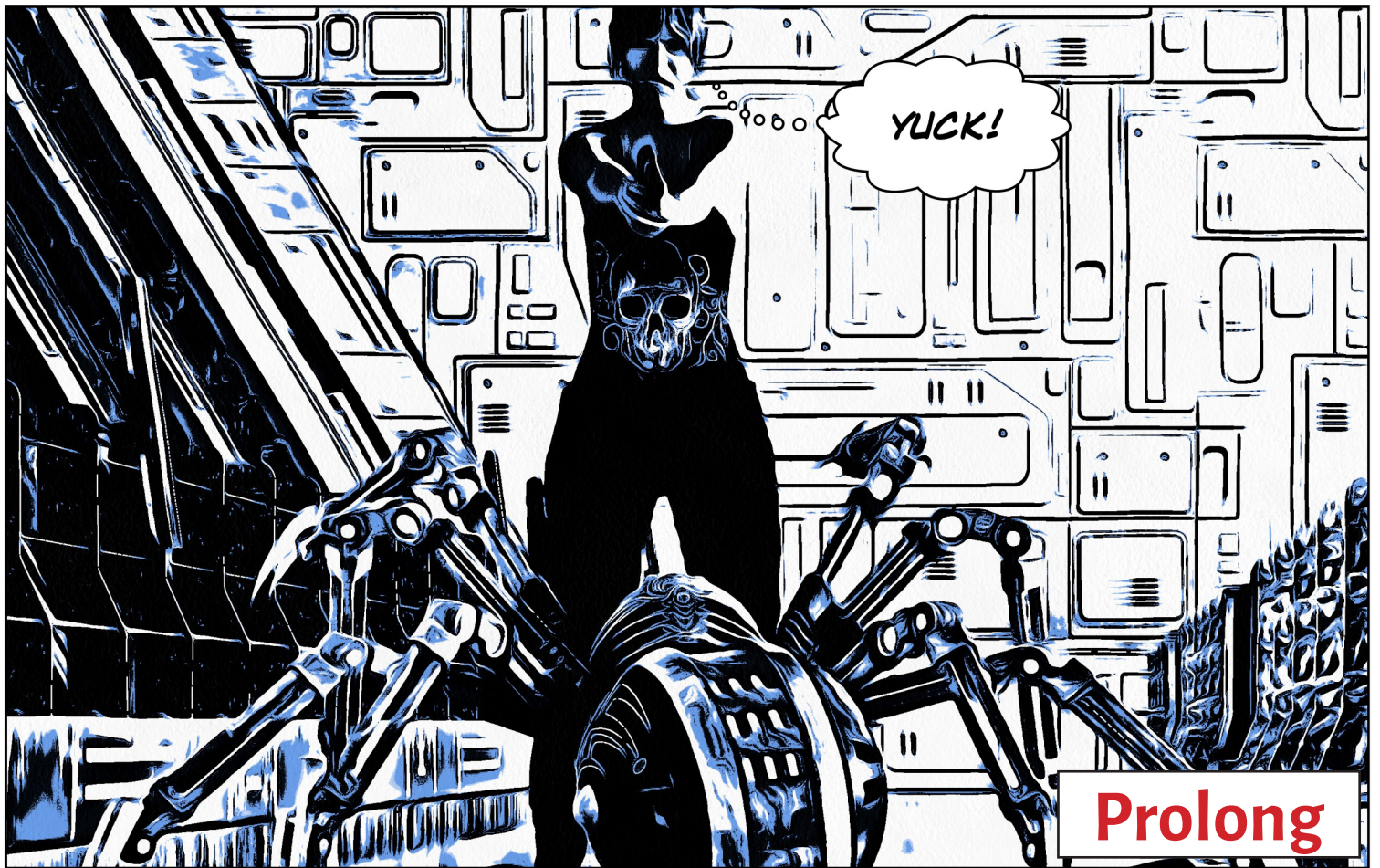
CONTROL ROOM...WHERE'S MY BACKUP?

Detail

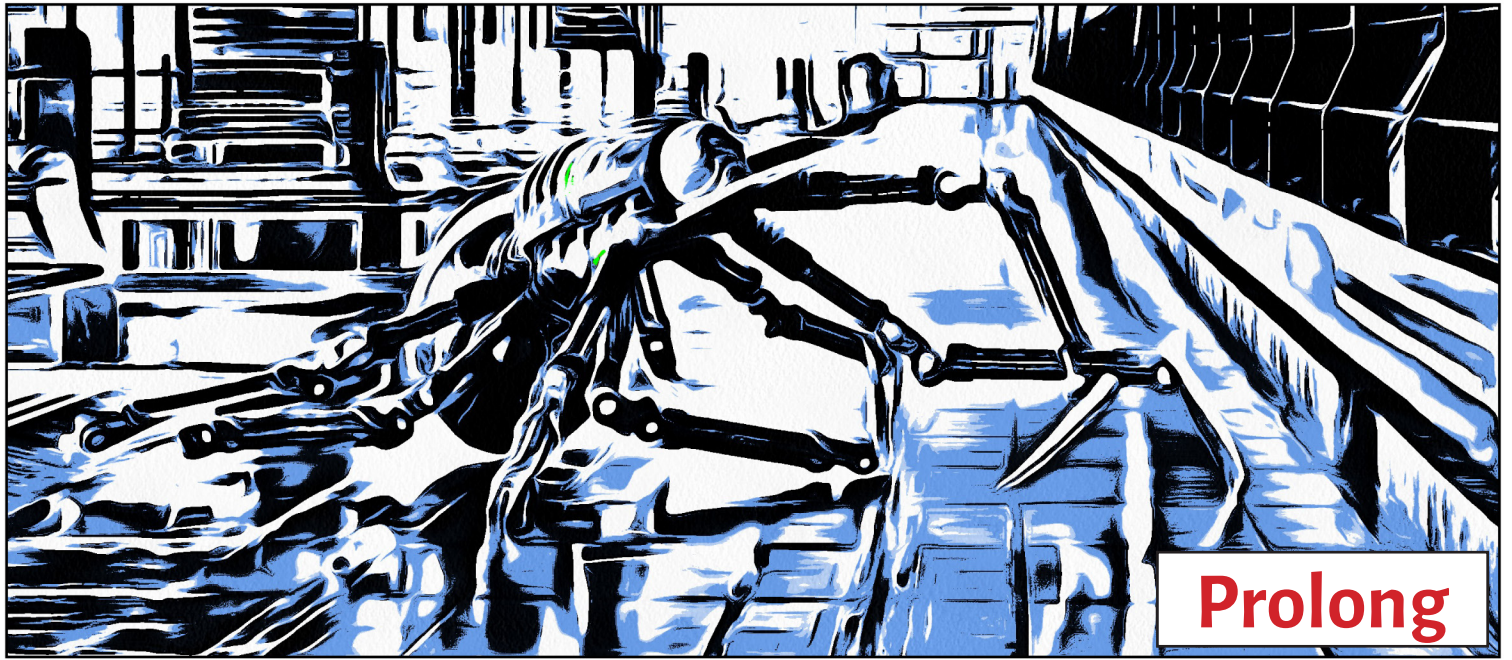


I NEED THEM... NOW!

Detail







Prolong



Release

