



## Fury Road

# STORYBOARDING MARVEL'S SECRET INVASION

BY AARON SOWD, STORYBOARD ARTIST, SENIOR ILLUSTRATOR

Ever since Samuel L. Jackson first appeared on screen as Nick Fury in *Iron Man* (2008), it was clear he had a bigger story to tell. The first was assembling *The Avengers*, but what about the man himself? Fifteen years later, we finally got to tell that story in the six-episode series *Secret Invasion* which premiered on Disney+ in 2023.

Fury's first words to Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) were, "I am Iron Man.' You think you're the only superhero in the world? Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe. You just don't know it yet." Fury too, was part of a bigger universe and he knew it. A connected Marvel universe that included gods and monsters, even aliens like the Kree, but most of all, the Skrulls.

Fury's road from there to here spanned a jaw-dropping forty-two connected movies and series

in what has become affectionately known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe or MCU for short. Even though Fury himself did not appear in every show, his presence was always felt as the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. pulling the strings behind the scenes. Like the man himself said, "I'm Nick Fury. Even when I'm out, I'm in..."

So when I got hired in May of 2021 to help resolve the unknown personal story of Nick Fury, I had no idea where the road would lead or how long the journey would take.

The initial plan was to tell the story over the course of six episodes with two directors, Ali Selim and Thomas Bezucha. The show was set to film primarily in the UK and I was here in LA, so all my weekly (and sometimes daily) meetings were done via Zoom.

Initially, I was working very closely with Thomas and his DP on his three episodes. It seemed like each director had their own team of storyboard artists, so I wasn't privy to what Ali and his team were doing during preproduction. After two or three months of working with Thomas, he left the show to work on *Fargo* for FX. So I figured that would be a wrap for me as well. I was out. I sent a short thank you note to my producer and Ali immediately responded with "Oh no, you're not going anywhere! I need you to help me finish the show!" And just like Nick Fury, I was in again. During preproduction, Thomas and I had been drawing inspiration from classic film noir like *The Third Man*, *Strangers on a Train* and *Touch of Evil*. I was storyboarding lots of dark alleyways, dramatic lighting and Dutch angles.

**Thomas Bezucha, Director**  
"One of my favorite parts of working on *Secret Invasion* was getting to collaborate with Aaron. We'd explore the beats of a sequence in conversation over Zoom and then Aaron would send these drawings that brought those moments completely to detailed life. He's a magician. And a film lover."

Ali took a different approach, incorporating aesthetics from

more modern-day spy thrillers like *The Bourne Identity*, *Bridge of Spies* and *The Conversation*. So the first thing that had to go was all those Dutch angles, since he favored film realism over theatrical staging. Ali worked quickly and efficiently due to the necessity that his workload had just doubled overnight.

He always kept his cool demeanor even under what I can only imagine was incredible pressure, the kind of pressure that forms diamonds or breaks lesser directors.



**A. & B.** NICK FURY CONFRONTS GRAVIK. STORYBOARD AND FINAL PRODUCTION FRAME.

**C. & D.** SKRULL IN THE MIRROR. STORYBOARD AND FINAL PRODUCTION FRAME.

STORYBOARDS BY AARON SOWD.

**Ali Selim, Director**

“In the past, I’ve had a love-hate relationship with storyboards. Fundamentally, my job is to create and collect a series of shots that tell a story. Working with storyboards can be invaluable for that process. Drawings remind me to get the close-up of the clock or the bullet in the chamber or the half-eaten Fig Newton slipped down between the passenger seat and the console. But whenever I get on a call with a storyboard artist and their first question is ‘so, what’s the first shot —medium or close-up?’ I know I’m in trouble.” Three days later, I’ll receive a set of technically

perfect but stagnant drawings that function as no more than a checklist. Storytelling is about more than collecting shots. It’s about energy. The energy that passes between characters. The energy that passes between story and audience.

“When I first met Aaron for Marvel’s *Secret Invasion* (on Zoom—the pandemic still had us all on lockdown), his first question was, ‘What’s the story?’ In that simple three-word question, I knew I was in the hands of a collaborator, someone who could help me create a building block of story in every drawing, leading to a sum that is far greater

than its parts; a representation of the scene that has energy and movement, meaning and emotion.

“Yes, Aaron’s drawings are clear and detailed, technical and specific. Individually, they help every department to do their job—cinematography, design, costume, props, stunts, visual effects. More importantly though, Aaron’s drawings clarify and contribute to our larger goal: story. In doing so, Aaron has given me a lasting love story with storyboards.”

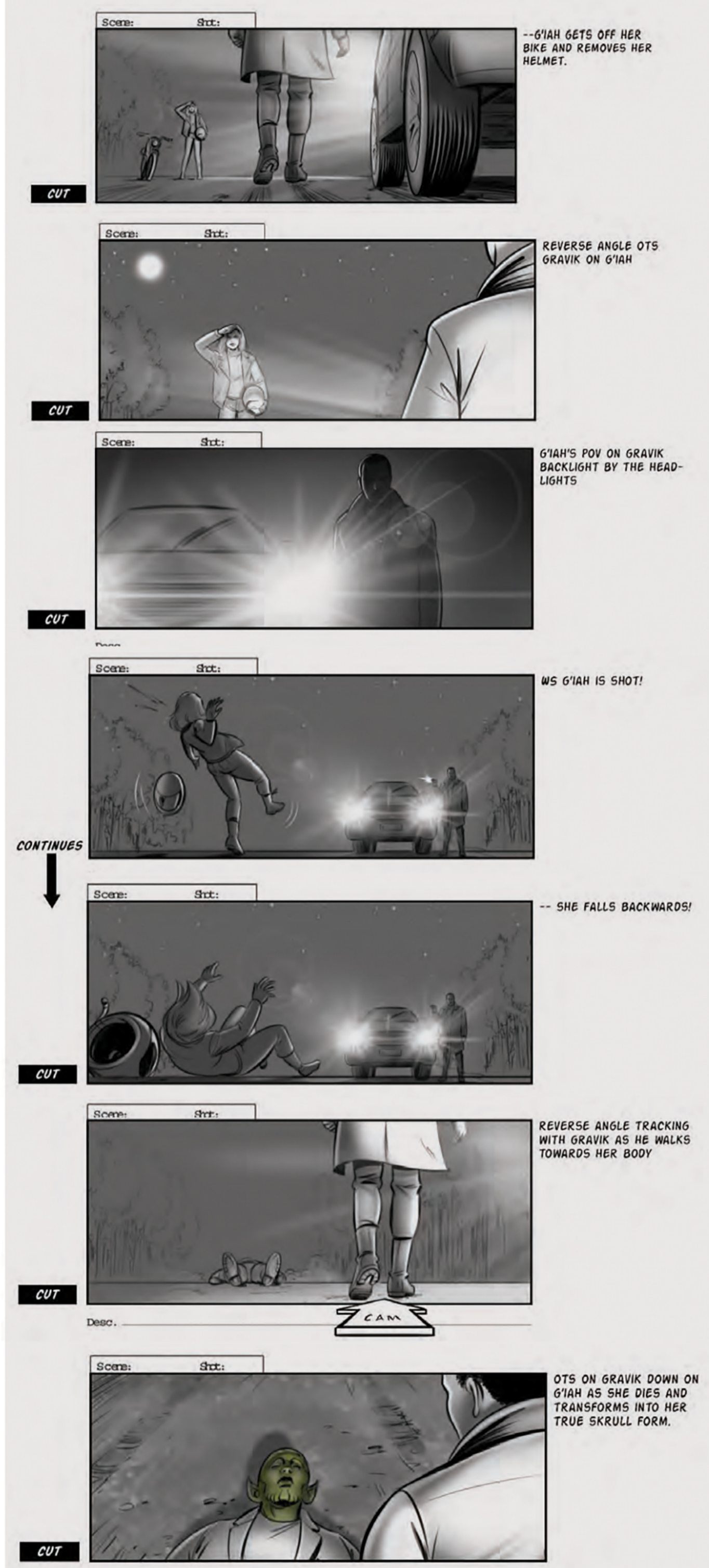
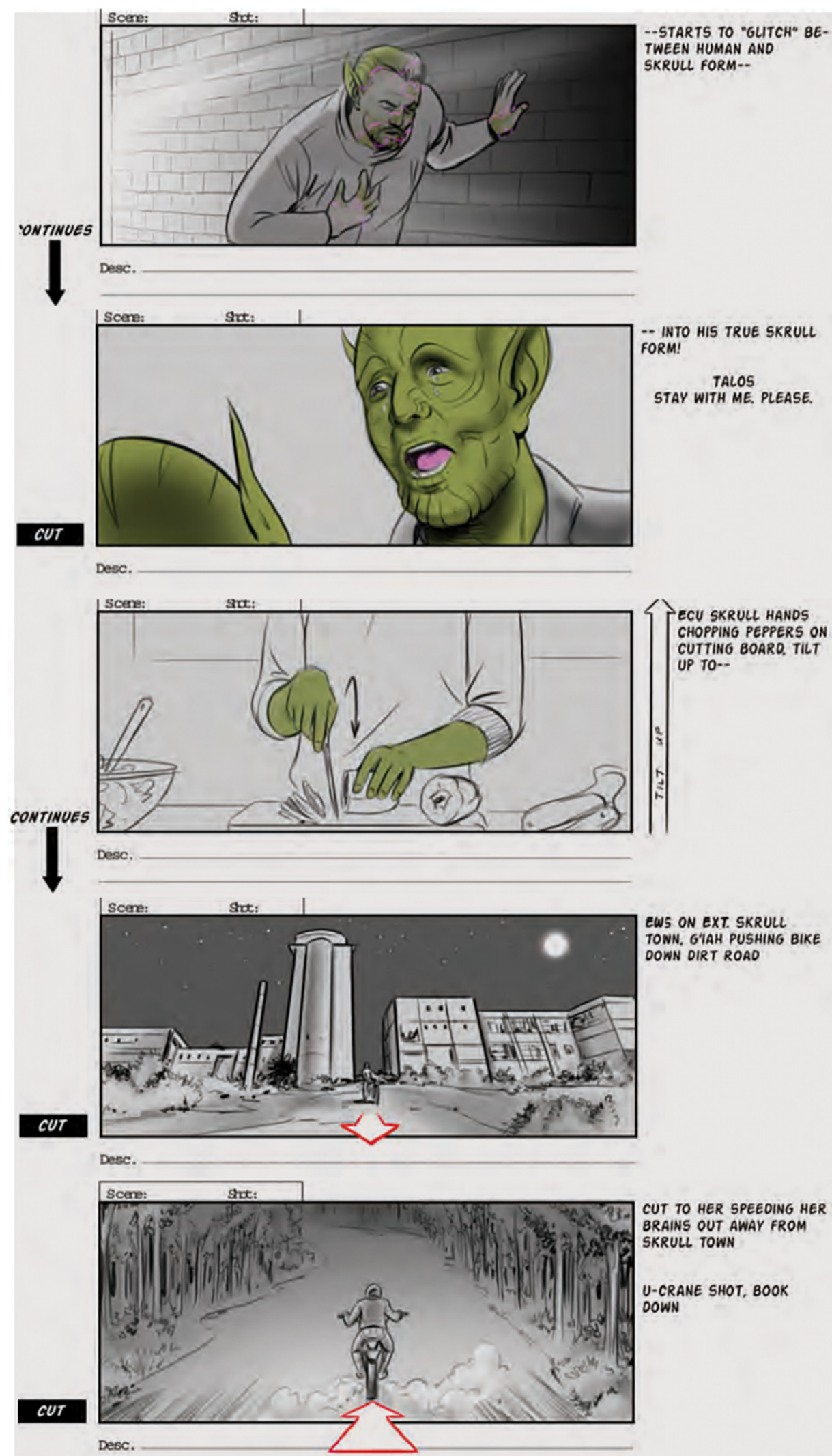
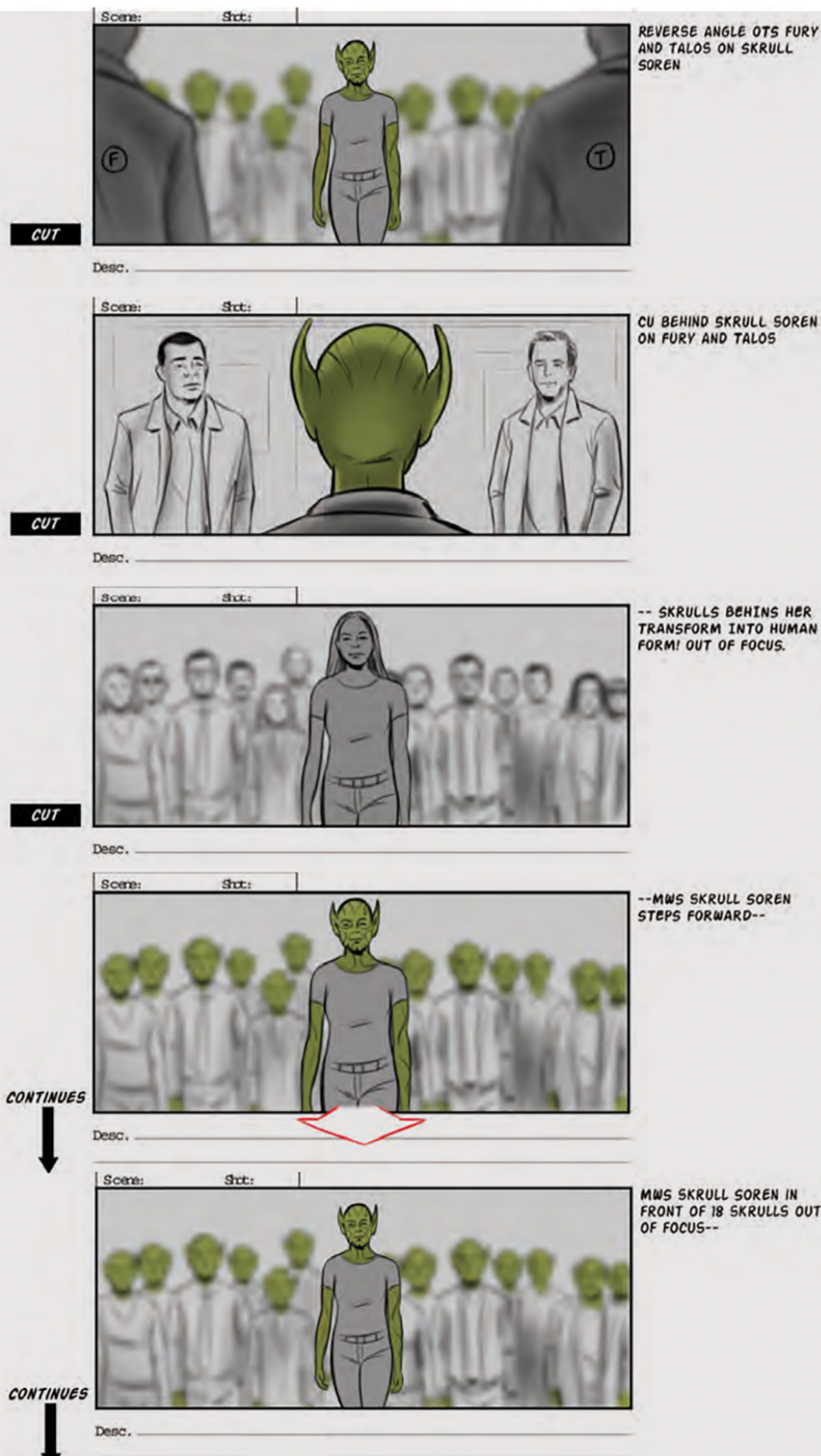
Ali and I quickly became fast friends, and I was impressed with not only his approach, but his openness to collaborate and incorporate my ideas into his sequences where needed. Sometimes the ideas I pitched him were simply too expensive, like the transformation of the shape-shifting Skrulls. In 2019’s *Captain Marvel*, the shape-shifting is an expensive blend of practical and digital makeup augmented by CGI and VFX. Ali wanted to make it more spontaneous and organic, so we would come up with clever practical transitions, like a character wiping condensation off of a bathroom mirror or a foreground image wiping the frame. Some sequences took months to refine into their final form, while others were done quickly, sometimes the week or day before they would be filmed.

**Ali Selim, from his July 28, 2023, interview by Brian Davids for *The Hollywood Reporter***

It starts with Kevin Feige saying, “Any and all superpowers are fair game. Have fun,” and then we storyboarded it.

Credit to the great stunt and second unit people, led by Rob Inch and the great VFX department, led by Aharon Bourland. Even the storyboard artists that we worked with, Ian McCaffrey in Dublin and Aaron Sowd in L.A. We all had our fingers in applying what this sequence would be and when we were storyboarding Aaron, has deep MCU knowledge and leans on comic books. But Ian is not so much an MCU guy, he’s more of a choreographer. And so we put those two ideas together: What would be from the MCU and what looks lyrical and works?

**STORYBOARDS BY AARON SOWD.**



113

FULL FIGURE 2 SHOT



FURY IS DEVASTATED, SURROUNDED BY CHAOS.

STORYBOARDS BY TIM BURGARD.

15 FURY MONITORING



FURY MONITORING

16

FURY POV



JOE HANSEN ON CAMERA ENTERING RED SQUARE.

NOTE: FURY'S POSITION AS PER OUR MEETING IS TOO FAR AWAY FOR HIM TO SEE HANSEN WITH HIS NAKED EYE.

17



REACTION FURY

EXT. RED SQUARE - DAY

18A



FURY PUSHING THRU CROWD TOW. CAM

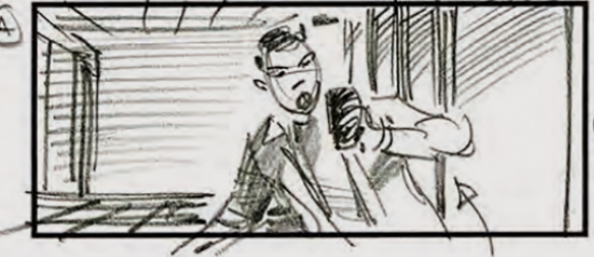
18B



18C



19A



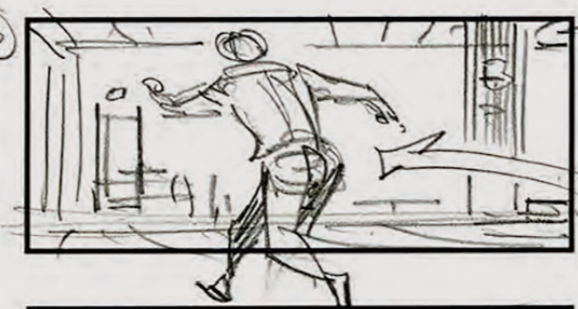
TALOS LEAPING UP - (INTO RADIO) "ON MY WAY!"

Tim Burgard, Storyboard Artist, Senior Illustrator

I storyboarded the end of the pilot episode. It took place in an open plaza in England passing for Red Square. A metro stop there had a part to play. I drew an encounter between the bomber and a little girl in traditional Russian costume. All the camera angles were tied to the location, except for the closer crowd shots at the end leading to the death of an established MCU character (spoilers alert!). "Oh, and a cool Nick Fury interrogation scene. It looks like they lost the location, and everything had to be dropped except for the scene I drew of Agent Hill getting murdered (definitely a spoiler, sorry!).

19B

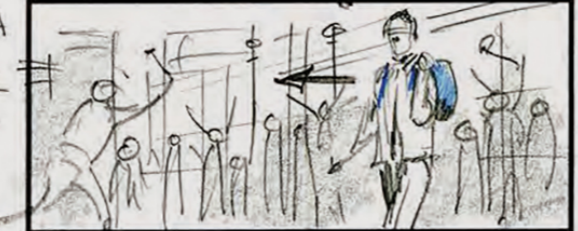
PAN



TALOS RUSHES OFF

20A

TRACK



EXT. RED SQUARE-DAY

22B

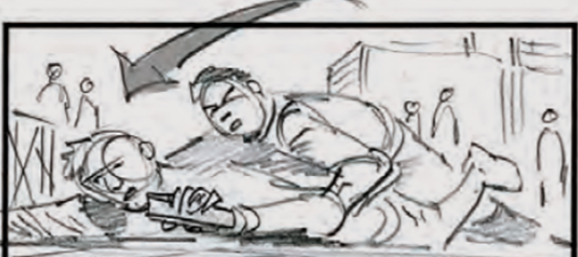
Slight Pan



IN SC - TALOS TACKLES HANSEN

23A

Low angle



TALOS TAKES HANSEN FLAT ON THE GROUND - (HE IS STILL HOLDING HIS CELL PHONE)

23B

Dolly Back



PULL BACK TO REVEAL FURY STANDING NEXT TO THEM.

24

Hansen semi POV up angle



FURY STANDING ABOVE HANSEN (DIRTY IN FRAME) POINTING A GUN AT HIM

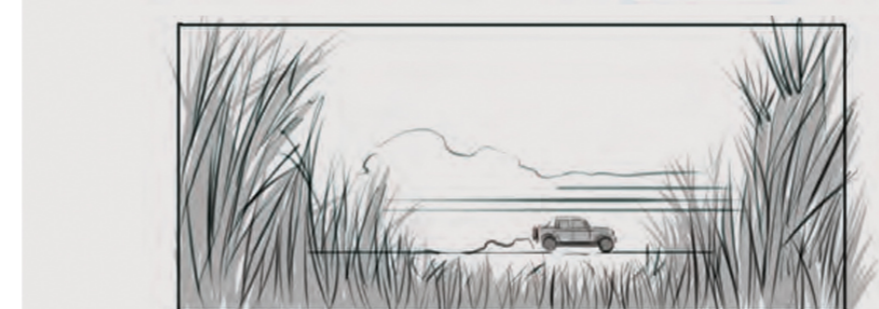
Ed Laroche, Storyboard Artist, Senior Illustrator

Getting the call for Secret Invasion was one of the highlights of my live-action storyboarding career. Not only was I working in the big leagues with Fargo director Thomas Bezucha, but it was also a story and concept I was very familiar with. I was picking up those books when it was originally being published.

A lot of what I was tasked in doing was setting up the mystery and the intrigue, asking questions that would be answered later in the series, so I approached most of my scenes in a '70s noir style.



STORYBOARDS BY ED LAROCHE.



It's not often you get to work with directors as talented and gracious as Ali and Thomas. Some directors don't want to even admit privately that they use storyboard artists, let alone publicly. But film is a collaborative media. Nothing gets done in a vacuum. And the fact that my friends Tim and Ed were along for the ride was even better. It ended up being a long and sometimes difficult road, but those nine months were some of the most intense and rewarding film experiences of my storyboarding career to date. A lot can happen in nine months. Babies can be born, reshoots can be filmed and six episodes of *Secret Invasion* can be made!

Like my man Stan said, "Excelsior!" Onward and upward! **ADG**

STORYBOARDS BY  
AARON SOWD.



--LEANS DOWN TO LOOK AT FURY.



CUT TO WS AS GRAVIK BACKHANDS FURY ACROSS THE MACHINE!



OTS GRAVIK AS HE PICKS UP FURY BY HIS COAT--



(FURY'S FOOT) CU DOWN ON GRAVIK ABOUT TO HIT HIM--



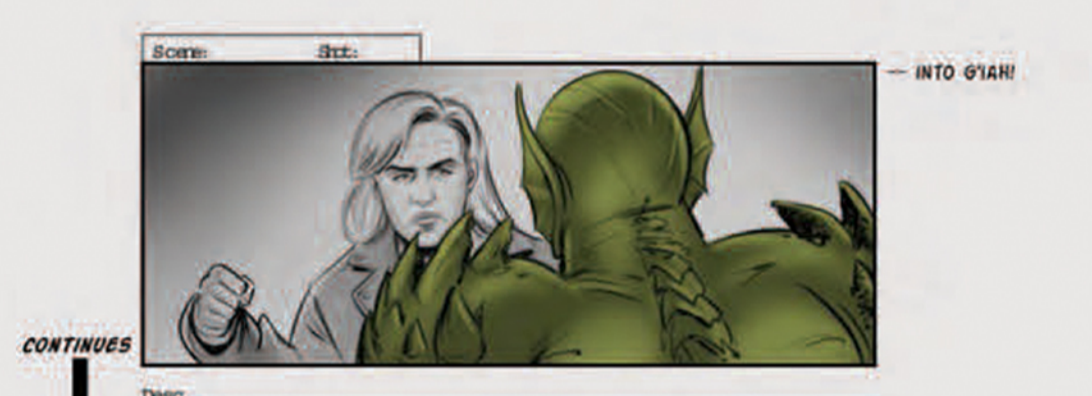
--PUNCHES STRAIGHT TOWARDS CAM!



CU/INSERT SHOT TRACKING WITH GRAVIK'S FIST AS FURY CATCHES IT!  
ROTATE CAM 90 DEGREES TO REVEAL--



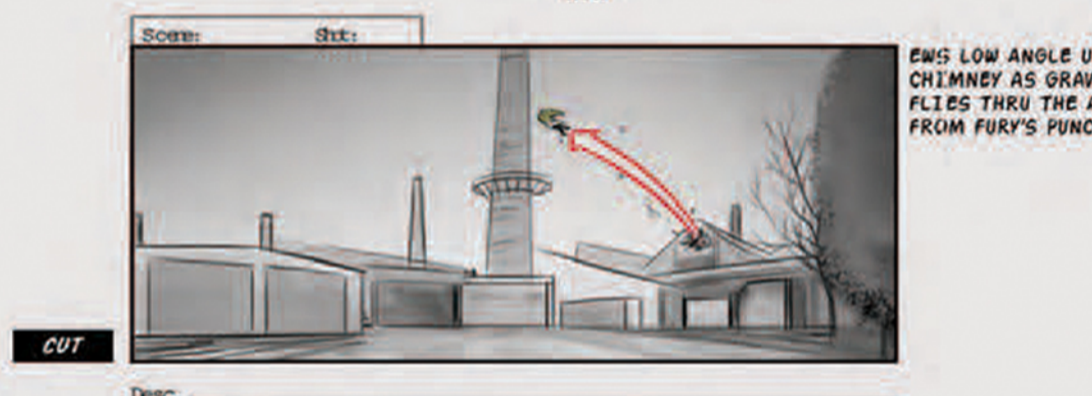
-- ROTATE CAM 90 DEGREES TO SHOW GRAVIK'S SHOCKED REACTION!



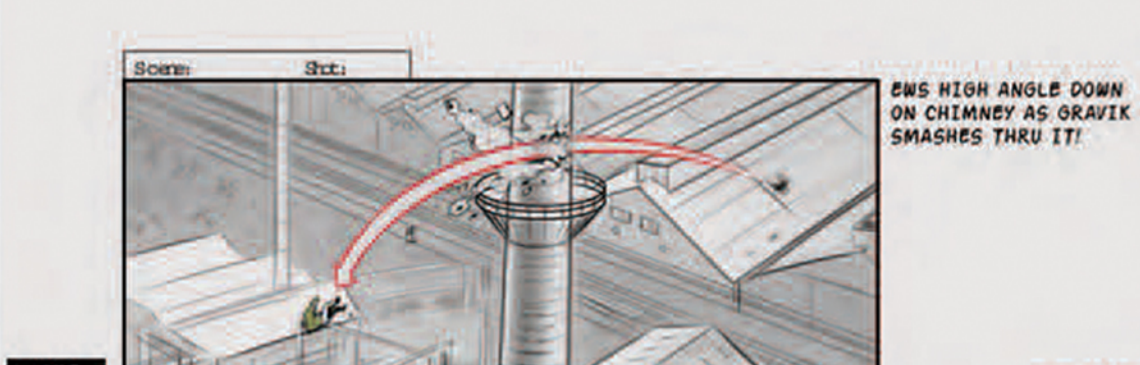
INTO G'IAH!



-- G'IAH PUNCHES GRAVIK OUT OF FRAME!



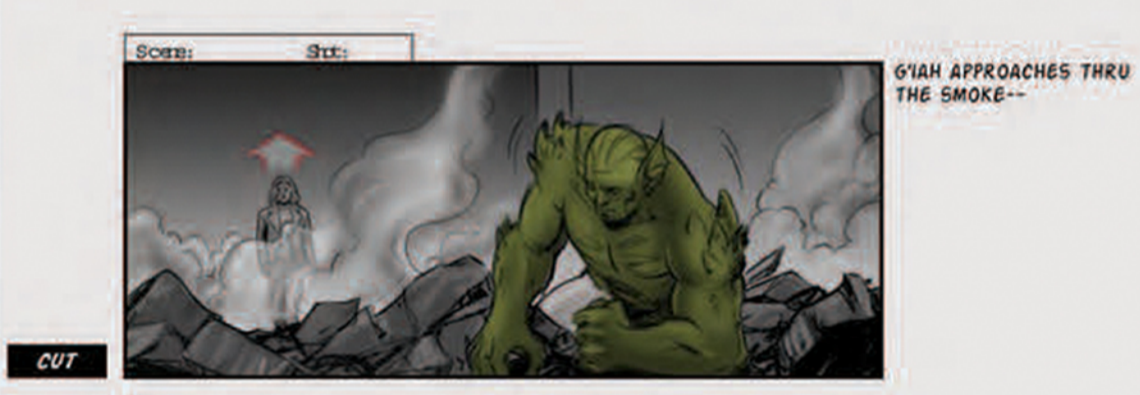
EMS LOW ANGLE UP ON CHIMNEY AS GRAVIK FLIES THRU THE AIR FROM FURY'S PUNCH!



EMS HIGH ANGLE DOWN ON CHIMNEY AS GRAVIK SMASHES THRU IT!



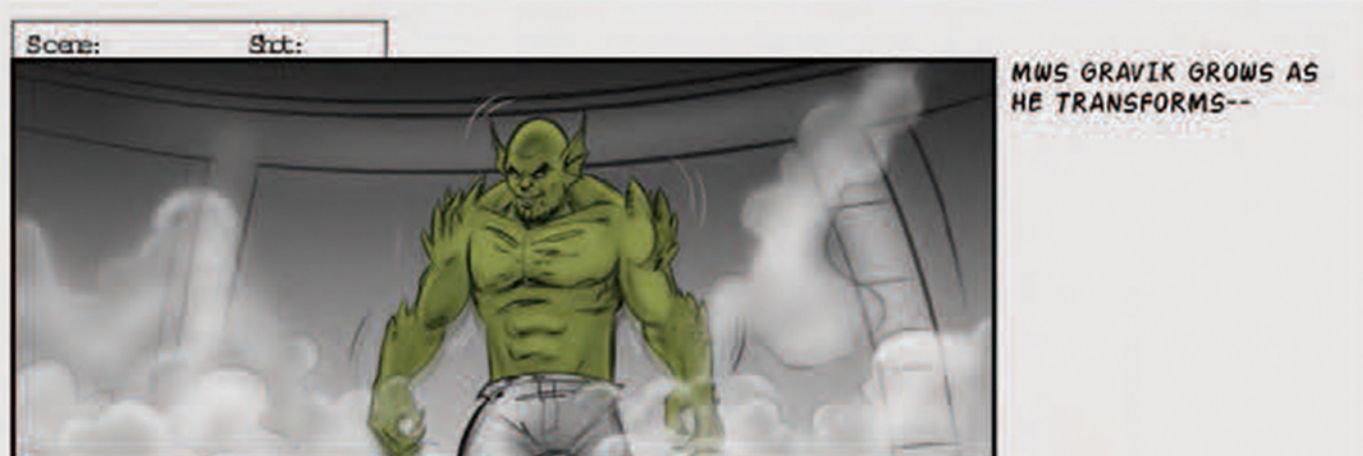
EXT. NUCLEAR REACTOR  
GRAVIK RECOVERING IN A PILE OF RUBBLE AND SMOKE--



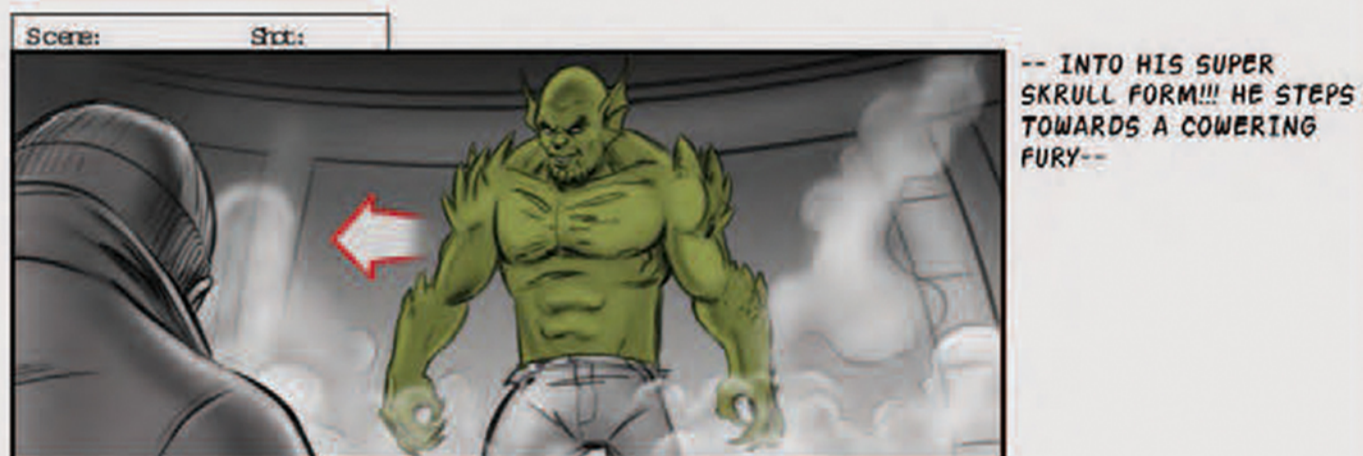
G'IAH APPROACHES THRU THE SMOKE--



PUNCH IN ON G'IAH WALKING IN SLOW MOTION LIKE SAM SHEPARD IN THE RIGHT STUFF.



MWS GRAVIK GROWS AS HE TRANSFORMS--



-- INTO HIS SUPER SKRULL FORM!!! HE STEPS TOWARDS A COWERING FURY--



--FURY HAS CAUGHT GRAVIK'S FIST!



# PERSPECTIVE

THE JOURNAL OF THE ART DIRECTORS GUILD



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## CONTRIBUTORS



**CHRIS SEAGERS** is a Production Designer best known for his work on *Alien: Covenant* and *Raised by Wolves*.

With family roots in Norfolk and Suffolk and with a flair for creativity from a young age, Chris began his career working on light entertainment at

the BBC. After serving as Art Director on Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, he became acquainted with

Tony Scott, the late acclaimed director and brother of Ridley Scott, with whom Chris worked closely for several years. Having made the step up to Production Designer, Chris went on to design a total of five films with Tony—*Man on Fire*, *Domino*, *Déjà vu*, *The Taking of Pelham 123* and *Unstoppable*. 2017's *Alien: Covenant* marked Chris' first collaboration with director Ridley Scott and, in 2020, Chris was hired to design Steven Spielberg and Tom Hank's third installment of the *Band of Brothers* franchise, *Masters of the Air*.



**CAT SMITH** is a television and film Production Designer. She was born in Los Angeles, CA. She has worked in the film industry for 20-plus years. Her credits include *The Drop Out*, *Transparent*, *I Love Dick*, *Shut Eye* and *The Society*,

as well as creating the pilots for *Better Things* and *Yellowjackets*. Cat has been nominated for an Emmy 10 times, and has won the Production Design Emmy for the second season of *Transparent*.



**AARON SOWD** is a renowned illustrator, storyboard artist and Art Director based in Los Angeles. He has worked in the entertainment industry for over 20 years, bringing his versatility and expertise to feature films, TV, animation, video games, advertising and online media.

A firm believer in sharing his craft and giving back to the creative community, Aaron has taught his storyboarding for filmmakers class at the prestigious Art Center College of Design, Pixar Animation Studios and Otis College of Art and Design, as well as being a featured guest speaker and panelist at Lightbox Expo, WonderCon, SIGGRAPH and Comic-Con International. He currently teaches online storyboard workshops through Schoolism. He has worked with directors such as Steven Spielberg, Sam Raimi, Akiva Goldsman, Michel Gondry, Doug Liman, Michael Bay, John Watts and Kat Coiro among others. His work on *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* with director Joachim Rønning and acclaimed Production Designer Patrick

Tatopoulos earned a nomination for an ADG Award for Excellence in Production Design for a Fantasy Feature Film.

Some recent credits include *Echo*, *Secret Invasion*, *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, *Godzilla vs. Kong*, *Ms. Marvel*, *Star Trek: Picard*, *Fear the Walking Dead* and *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*. Aaron recently storyboarded the pilot episode of *The Sex Lives of College Girls* which received a GLAAD Media Awards nomination. Aaron was the award-winning Art Director of Stan Lee Media, designing and supervising the look of many of Stan Lee's Flash-animated webisodes and working closely with Stan himself. Film clients include Bad Robot, Disney, DreamWorks, Fox, Legendary, Marvel Studios, Overbrook Entertainment, Sony, Universal and Warner Bros. Commercial clients include Apple, Coca-Cola, Lexus, McDonald's, Netflix, Nike, Ogilvy, Deutsch, TBWA\Chiat\Day, Wieden + Kennedy and Toyota. Theme park clients include Disneyland, Ferrari World Abu Dhabi and Universal Studios in Hollywood, Japan and Singapore.

Aaron currently lives by the beach in Marina del Rey and resents the fact that he has no free time with which to enjoy it. [www.aaronsowd.com](http://www.aaronsowd.com)