

Scorpio: Marlowe 3.0 analysis

*Following is the Marlowe analysis of Scorpio by Marko Kloos. We've combined all the sections of the report into a single PDF **for demo purposes only** — the analysis for each manuscript is located in the Author Dashboard by Authors A.I. at <https://authors.ai/author-dashboard>. You'll find the dashboard much more useful in refining your manuscript than a static report.*

Premise

A young woman who survived eight years on a Lanky-occupied colony planet struggles to adapt to civilian life on Earth after being rescued, ultimately finding she belongs back with the military fighting the alien invaders rather than hiding from her past in a public housing complex.

Genre & story type

Military Science Fiction. The story also contains elements of the following:

- Coming-of-age fiction
- Post-apocalyptic survival
- Space opera
- Alien invasion thriller
- Character study
- Military procedural
- Hard science fiction

Overall assessment

This is a Military Science Fiction novel that focuses on character development and the psychological aftermath of survival trauma. The story should resonate strongly with readers who enjoy both military fiction and thoughtful explorations of how extreme circumstances shape identity.

The novel has compelling strengths including authentic military culture, realistic survival scenarios, and a psychologically complex protagonist whose journey from traumatized civilian to confident soldier feels earned. The relationship between Alex and her military working dog Ash provides emotional depth, while the detailed world-building of both the colony survival and Earth's militarized future creates an immersive setting. The story can become even stronger by incorporating the suggested refinements set out in this report, particularly regarding pacing and character development in the Earth sections.

Story strengths

Here are some of the most noteworthy strengths that contribute to your story's overall effectiveness and reader appeal.

1. **Authentic military culture:** The dialogue, procedures, and relationships between soldiers feel genuine and lived-in rather than stereotypical.
2. **Compelling protagonist journey:** Alex's evolution from traumatized survivor to someone finding her place shows real psychological depth and growth.
3. **Effective use of the military working dog:** Ash serves both practical and emotional functions, grounding Alex's character arc in tangible relationships.
4. **Immersive world-building:** The Vault society and Earth's PRC system are detailed enough to feel real without overwhelming exposition.
5. **Strong opening sequence:** The birthday/disaster structure immediately establishes stakes and character motivations effectively.
6. **Realistic survival scenarios:** The salvage missions and colony life details feel authentic and well-researched rather than Hollywood convenient.

Chief opportunities

Following are areas that could stand to be improved and strengthened during the rewrite process:

- **Pacing inconsistencies:** The Scorpio sections maintain excellent tension while the Earth chapters often feel static, lacking the forward momentum needed to maintain reader engagement. The story slows significantly once Alex reaches Pittsburgh, with too much time spent on mundane PRC life details.
- **Underutilized supporting characters:** Many compelling characters from the Vault disappear from the narrative or become one-dimensional once the story shifts to Earth. Friends like Dallas, Athena, and Luther feel like missed opportunities for deeper exploration.
- **Weak antagonistic forces:** Beyond the Lankies themselves, the story lacks strong human opposition or conflict that could drive tension during the Earth sequences. The mugging scene feels isolated rather than part of a larger pattern of conflict.
- **Rushed romantic subplot:** The relationship between Alex and Lopez develops quickly with limited foundation, feeling more convenient than inevitable despite their shared history.

The Dissonance section below will provide specific suggestions on how to tighten the plotting, writing, and otherwise enhance the storytelling.

Word count

Scorpio contains about **84,933** words.

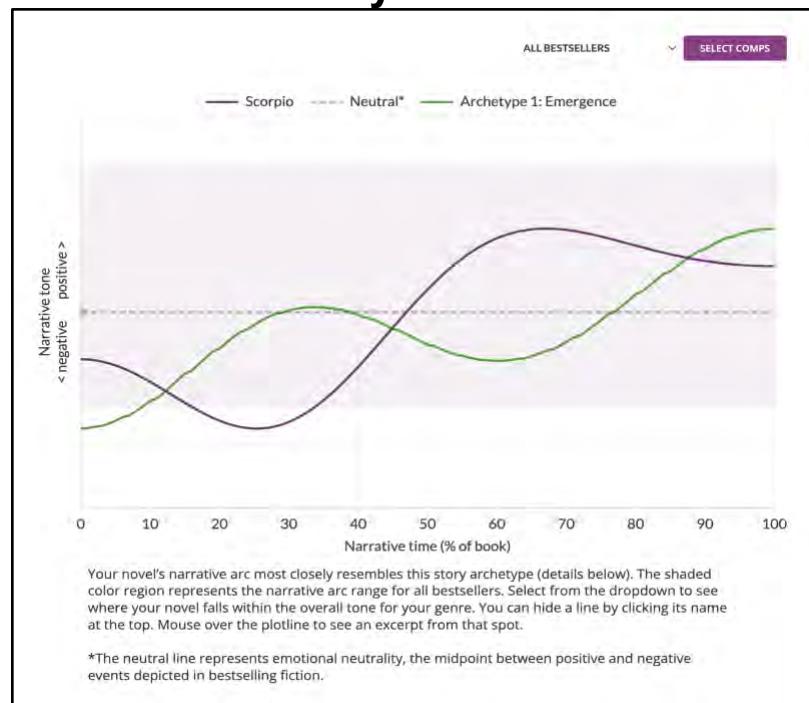
While there are no hard-and-fast rules about minimum and maximum story lengths, there are industry traditions and reader expectations. If you want to give yourself your best chance without having to fight any additional uphill battles, then writing with the word count guidelines for your genre in mind is often the wisest course. (Getting your word count right will also cut down on editing costs.)

Here's a quick reference for typical word counts by genre:

- Adult contemporary fiction: 70,000-90,000 words
- Literary fiction: 80,000-120,000 words
- Romance: 50,000-90,000 words (mostly 70,000-90,000)
- Science fiction/Fantasy: 80,000-120,000 words (longer for epic fantasy)
- Historical fiction: 80,000-120,000 words
- Mystery/Crime: 60,000-90,000 words (cozy mysteries are shorter)
- Horror: 80,000-100,000 words
- Thriller: 70,000-100,000 words
- Westerns: 50,000-80,000 words
- Young adult: 50,000-90,000 words

Are you on track with your story's word count given the genre you've chosen?

Narrative arc analysis



Marlowe has analyzed the narrative arc of *Scorpio* and produced the graphic in the Author Dashboard. The graph depicts two key elements of your book:

1. **Its major plot arc.** The curved line shows the high-level “shape” of your narrative at a glance. Marlowe also compared it to a story archetype with a similar narrative arc.
2. **Its overall tone.** The graph includes a color tint block that shows whether your story falls within the same range of emotional tone that most bestsellers do.

A narrative arc refers to the structured progression of a story, outlining how it unfolds from beginning to end. It typically consists of several key elements, including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. This arc maps the emotional and dramatic journey of the characters and the plot, guiding readers through the narrative's development. It doesn't capture plot turns or story beats, which are more detailed, but instead looks at the narrative's positive and negative sentiment as the plot unfolds from a high-level view.

Key components of a narrative arc

1. Exposition: Introduces characters, setting, and background information (Act 1).
2. Rising action: Builds tension through conflicts and complications (Act 2). Don't confuse rising action with the curve's rise or fall in the graph above – rising action consists of both positive and negative events and the characters' reactions to those events.
3. Climax: The turning point where the main conflict reaches its peak (Act 3). The [Story elements](#) section will likely show a positive or negative beat for your climax and it's often not depicted in the narrative arc.
4. Falling action: Events following the climax that lead toward resolution.
5. Resolution: Concludes the story, resolving conflicts and tying up loose ends.

See the [Story elements](#) section for a detailed look at where certain plot elements should fall.

Your novel's story archetype

Marlowe has determined that your story is most similar to the *Emergence* story archetype.

A *story archetype* is a universal pattern or model that serves as a framework for storytelling. These archetypes manifest through recurring themes, character types, and plot structures across various cultures and genres through the ages. They provide a foundational structure that writers can use to develop their narratives.

Using archetypes allows writers to tap into shared human experiences, making their stories resonate more deeply with audiences. By understanding these patterns, authors can craft compelling narratives that feel both familiar and fresh.

The emotional tone of your story

The graph above shows not just the story arc but also the overall emotional tone and major trends in tone within your story — the “emotional arc” of your book. The colored tint block shows the range in emotional tone, from positive to negative, that represents 90% of all bestsellers. In short, it tells you how light or dark your story is and how it fits within your genre. If you choose a genre or subgenre from the “All Bestsellers” dropdown, the tint block will adjust to show the range encompassing 90% of books in that specific genre.

Using the dropdown, notice that some genres and subgenres have a lighter or darker tone and a broader or narrower range than others. If the narrative arc of your story doesn't fit comfortably within the range for your novel's genre, consider whether your story might be improved by adjusting the tone of your story arc.

How to use the data

The narrative arc graph above provides a high-level overview of your story and the journey of your characters, along with the closest story archetype. You can use this information in two chief ways:

To understand your story type. It's valuable to identify the type of story you've told — say, whether it's a Rags to Riches tale or a Quest narrative. By exploring your specific archetype, you can read similar stories to see how other authors have approached the same structure. Refer to the examples provided below for books that fit your chosen archetype.

To refine your narrative. You may want to adjust your story to align more closely with archetypal conventions. Review the guidelines for the archetype identified below and consider how well your story follows these frameworks. For more detailed frameworks, see [Story structure](#).

What a narrative arc represents

A story shape represents the overall emotional journey that your characters embark on throughout your story, from positive vibes to negative vibes — or the opposite. The peaks and high points on the graph represent a section of your story when your characters' experiences are generally positive (even if there are moments of conflict mixed in.) The valleys or troughs represent an overall stretch of low points in the story in which your characters' experiences are negative (even if there are happier moments mixed in).

Based on these archetypes, Marlowe has drawn a visual representation of your book's plot shape alongside the most similar narrative archetype, Emergence.

Story archetypes consist of broad generalizations. While some are more often associated with a particular genre, there are examples of each archetype in all genres. Rather than getting hung up on narrative arcs, most authors instead turn to story frameworks as a way to add structure to their novels. See the [Story structure](#) section.

Because Marlowe is tracking the sentiment or mood of the language in your novel, that sentiment usually aligns with the major positive or negative events in the story — but not always. Sometimes the language might be dark in sentiment (war) but the character's experience (saving a loved one) might be positive or brighter. But the general atmosphere of the novel in that moment will still feel darker and so the graph will likely bend that way.

Emergence

An Emergence story — sometimes called Rebirth — involves a protagonist rising from difficult or oppressive circumstances to find freedom, self-actualization, or a new identity. These stories often focus on characters overcoming adversity, gaining independence, or discovering their true selves in the face of significant challenges. This kind of story tends to have a positive trajectory as the main character moves closer to success and a new sense of self or purpose. Typically, the protagonist slowly overcomes her challenges to reach a happy ending.

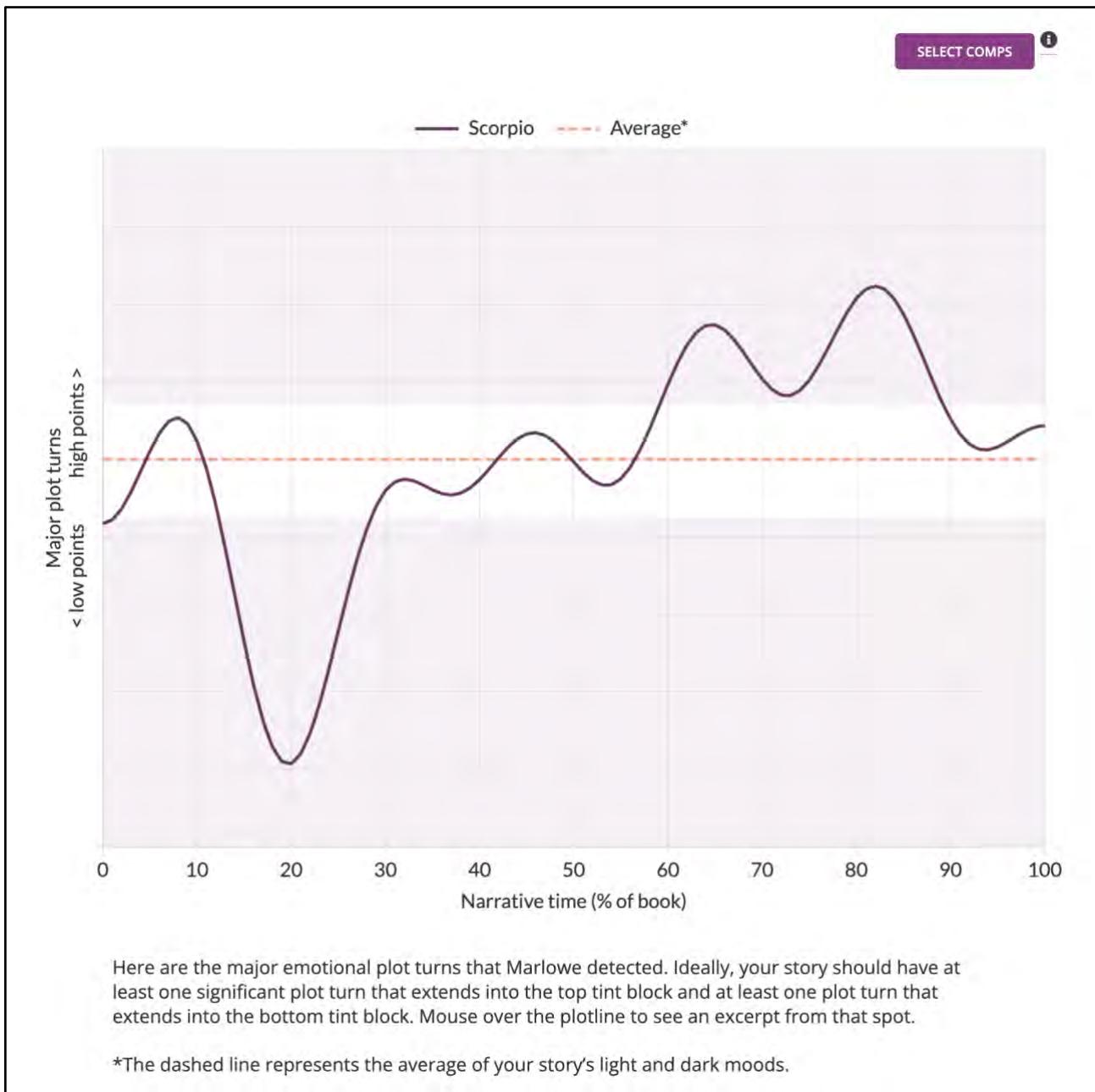
Key elements of the Emergence archetype include:

- The starting point: The protagonist begins in a situation of confinement, oppression, or limitation.
- The awakening: The character becomes aware of her need for change or escape.
- The struggle: The protagonist often faces a dark period or crisis and faces challenges or adversaries that stand in the way of her emergence.
- The transformation: The character undergoes significant growth or change as she seeks liberation.
- The freedom: The protagonist reaches a state of newfound freedom or self-understanding, or she rejoins society or embraces a new role.

Emergence stories often explore themes of empowerment, identity, and resilience. Examples include *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, which follows the protagonist's journey to independence, and *The Shawshank Redemption*, where a man emerges from the injustice of imprisonment to find freedom. Other examples of Emergence include:

- *Room* by Emma Donoghue - The novel tells the story of a young boy named Jack, who has been held captive in a small room with his mother for his entire life. They escape, and the story follows their emergence from a confined existence into the broader, often overwhelming world.
- *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead - This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel follows Cora, a young enslaved woman, as she escapes from a Georgia plantation and journeys toward freedom.
- *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson - The novel follows Ursula Todd, a woman who repeatedly dies and is reborn, experiencing multiple alternate lives across the 20th century. Through each rebirth, Ursula gains a deeper understanding of fate, choice, and the prospect of changing her destiny.
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Plot analysis



Plot overview

Alex Archer, a 21-year-old survivor of a Lanky invasion on the colony planet Scorpio, has spent eight years hiding in an underground facility called the Vault with 150 other survivors. When she goes on a salvage mission with the remaining military garrison, they encounter multiple Lankies and lose several team members before being rescued by an Earth task force. After evacuation to Earth, Alex struggles to adapt to civilian life in a Public Residence Cluster, eventually realizing she belongs in the military rather than trying to forget her past.

Major plot turns in your story

- Alex's 21st birthday coincides with the most dangerous salvage mission yet
- The crawler gets stuck crossing a flooded gully, forcing the team into a vulnerable position
- Two Lankies attack simultaneously from different directions, overwhelming the human defenders
- The team's mule loses power during the escape, stranding them in hostile territory
- Ash alerts to approaching Lankies just as they reach the Vault, forcing an evacuation
- NAC forces arrive and rescue all surviving colonists, ending eight years of isolation
- Alex struggles with civilian life on Earth and gets mugged, triggering her decision to enlist

How to interpret the plot turns graph

Marlowe has identified the major emotional plot turns in your manuscript and has represented them in the graph at the top. Upward slopes in your line show your novel's moments of conflict resolution, where the story takes a hopeful or positive turn, signified by joy, excitement, love, relief. Downward dips illustrate where the story takes a darker turn or where there is a progressive complication presenting obstacles and challenges for your protagonists. The middle of the graph represents emotional neutrality. Higher peaks and deeper valleys increase the emotional intensity, and the more frequent the peaks and valleys, the more the story becomes an emotional rollercoaster for the characters — and for readers.

Think of the graph above as capturing the “emotional arc” of your story — a snapshot of your characters’ emotional journey throughout your book. While the narrative arc graph depicts the high-level overall tone of your book, this graph illustrates what Marlowe detected as the major emotional shifts in the story.

It’s important to think about plot turns not just in terms of *where* and *how often* they occur, but also in terms of their *intensity*. It’s fine if most of the twists and turns in your story fall within the white band, but 90% of bestsellers have at least one emotional peak that extends into the top tint block and at least one emotional valley that extends into the bottom tint block.

Note that emotional plot turns may or may not always correspond with the major plot points in your story. But chances are *that they will often align* — if something tragic happens or your characters suffer a major setback, it’s likely that the emotional temperature of the scene will follow suit.

For more information plot turns in your story, see the [Story elements](#) and [Story structure](#) sections.

Major subplots in your story

1. Alex's relationship with Ash the military working dog, which represents her connection to purpose and belonging in the military community.
2. The developing romance between Alex and Lopez, a veteran sergeant who understands her background and validates her experiences.
3. Val and Alex's evolving friendship as they both struggle to find their places in the post-rescue world, ultimately accepting they must follow different paths.
4. The gradual dissolution of the Vault survivor community as members scatter to different opportunities across Earth and the colonies.
5. Alex's search for family connections on Earth, which ultimately fails when she learns her uncle has died, reinforcing her isolation.

Foreshadowing in your story

The story effectively foreshadows several major developments, particularly through Ash's behavior patterns that consistently predict Lanky encounters. The dog's alerting at the Vault entrance foreshadows the climactic attack, while his earlier behavioral changes hint at approaching threats throughout the salvage mission. Alex's repeated difficulties with authority figures like Blake foreshadow her eventual choice of military service over civilian life.

The author also plants subtle hints about Alex's dissatisfaction with civilian life through her descriptions of the PRC environment and her inability to connect with Earth culture. Her immediate comfort with the recruiting office soldiers and her visceral negative reaction to civilian counseling sessions both point toward her eventual decision to enlist.

However, some major plot developments could benefit from stronger foreshadowing. The mugging incident that catalyzes Alex's final decision feels somewhat arbitrary, and the depth of her post-rescue trauma could be better established earlier in the Earth sections. The relationship between Alex and Lopez, while built on shared experience, develops quickly without sufficient emotional groundwork in their earlier interactions. Additionally, the story could more effectively foreshadow the ultimate fate of the Vault community's dispersal by showing earlier signs of the survivors' different adaptation strategies.

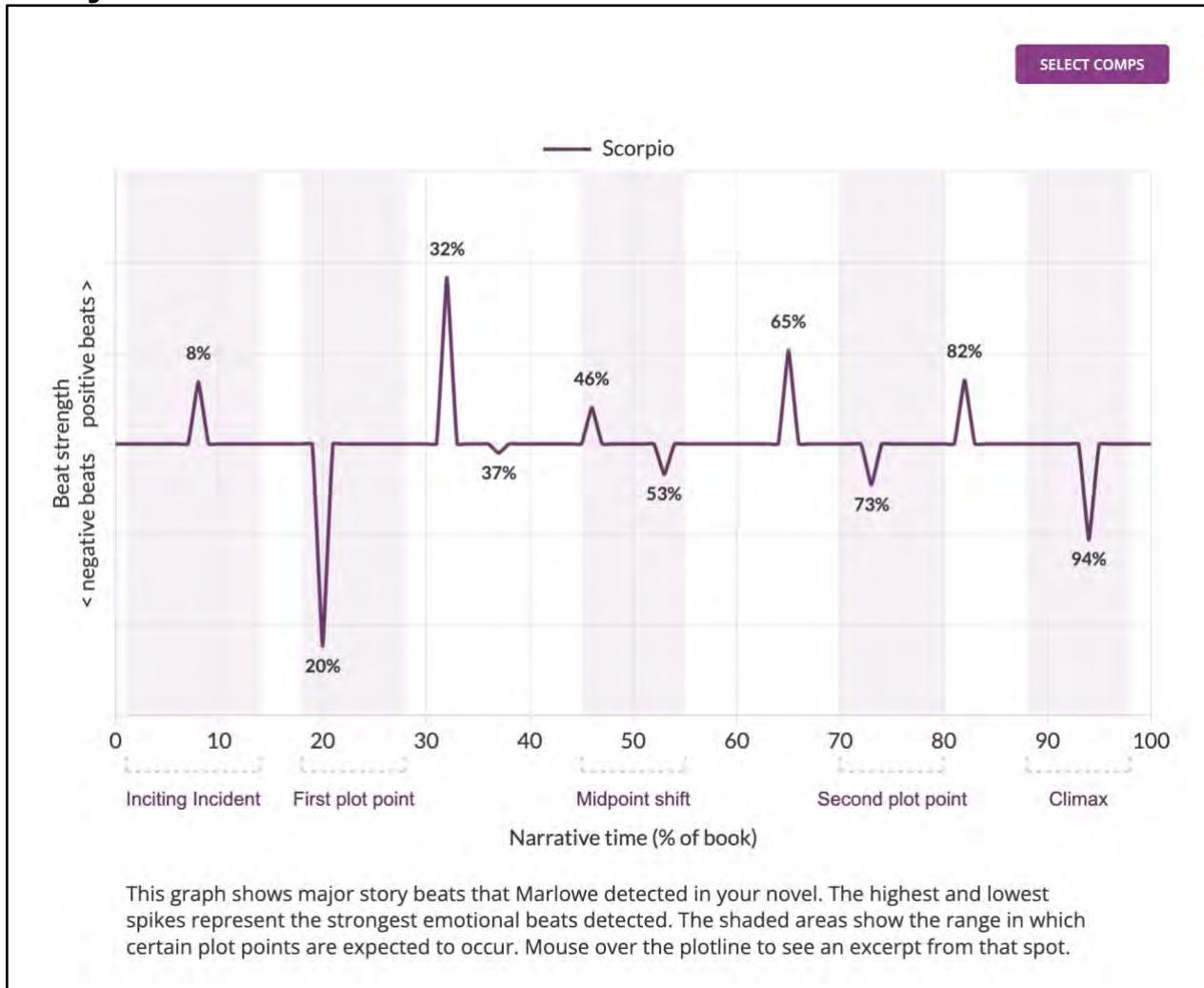
Unresolved plot threads

Unresolved plot threads are story elements or questions introduced during the narrative that remain unanswered by the end of the book. The fate of the ongoing Lanky war remains largely unresolved, though this appears intentional for a series. Alex's relationship with Lopez is left in an uncertain state after his deployment. The broader question of whether other colony survivors might be found is introduced but not resolved. Some technical details about Lanky detection methods and their ultimate origin remain mysteries. The long-term viability of the Earth PRC system is questioned but not explored to conclusion.

Revisions to consider

1. Add a stronger antagonistic human force in the Earth sections to maintain conflict tension when Lankies aren't present.
2. Develop a subplot involving other Vault survivors who chose different paths, showing multiple valid responses to trauma and displacement.
3. Create a more substantial challenge or test that forces Alex to prove her military capabilities before enlisting, rather than simply accepting her based on reputation.
4. Introduce complications in the Alex-Lopez relationship that require them to work through their different coping strategies and career choices.
5. Add a subplot where Alex must use her Lanky detection knowledge to help solve a problem on Earth, bridging her past and future roles.

Story elements



Overview

Marlowe has identified major story elements and story beats in your novel by marking the points where the tone shifts from positive to negative or vice versa. The greater the shift, indicated by peaks or valleys on the graph, the more impactful the moment in your story.

In its review of Scorpio, Marlowe examined the places in your narrative where your story shifts from a generally positive tone to a more negative tone — and vice versa. These turns or emotional shifts in tone often align with key structural beats in a novel, including plot turns in the previous section, though they may not match up perfectly.

Analysis of your story's major elements

Readers of modern fiction expect stories to hit certain notes, particularly in genre fiction, that build on perennial story elements that harken back to ancient times.

Hook: The opening scene immediately establishes Alex's 21st birthday and the dangerous salvage mission, effectively combining character milestone with action to create reader investment. This hook works well by grounding personal growth in immediate physical danger.

The opening: The first two chapters successfully establish both Alex's world and her competence as a character, moving efficiently between quiet character moments and action sequences. The opening properly begins in the middle of ongoing action rather than with extensive backstory exposition.

Relatable protagonist: Alex is immediately sympathetic as someone thrust into adult responsibilities under extraordinary circumstances, and her competence with Ash establishes her as capable rather than simply a victim of circumstances.

Inciting incident: The inciting incident is the Lanky attack that forces evacuation from the Vault, occurring at the right moment in the story structure to launch Alex into her journey of adaptation and self-discovery.

Call to adventure: Alex's reluctance to join military life initially shows in her attempts to adapt to civilian college, but she's ultimately drawn back to the military community where she feels she belongs.

First plot point: The first major plot point is the rescue from Scorpio, which launches Alex into the unfamiliar world of Earth and forces her to confront who she is outside the survival context.

Midpoint shift: The midpoint occurs around the mugging incident, which shifts Alex from passively accepting her civilian placement to actively choosing her own path back to the military.

Second plot point: The second plot point is Alex's visit to the recruiting office, where she finally commits to returning to the life she understands rather than continuing to struggle with civilian adaptation.

Climax: The climax is Alex's decision to enlist, representing her choice to embrace her identity as a soldier rather than trying to escape her past experiences.

Resolution: The story resolves with Alex preparing to begin military training, having found her place in the world through accepting rather than rejecting her traumatic experiences.

These story elements work together to create a cohesive character journey that follows classic story structure while addressing contemporary themes of trauma, identity, and belonging.

Character analysis

Overview

Our AI has analyzed the characters in Scorpio based on their agency — what they seem to be doing in your story rather than based on their descriptions or backstory. Regardless of which type of novel you're writing, the characters you create will play a crucial role in engaging the reader. Broadly speaking, there are two types of stories:

- Plot driven, in which the story is driven mainly by action — the characters serve to advance the plot. E.g., *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien.
- Character driven, in which the story focuses more on character than plot — the plot is a mechanism through which to develop character. Examples: *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Truman Capote, *Normal People* by Sally Rooney.

After you're finished with your draft, see what Marlowe says about the major characters and see if they need to be tweaked or some of their actions need to be reconsidered.

Analysis of your story's characters

Strong character development requires three-dimensional personalities that feel real through their actions and avoid falling into predictable archetypes, showing growth and change throughout the narrative.

Protagonist analysis

Alexandra "Alex" Archer serves as an effective protagonist whose journey from survival-focused colonist to self-aware military recruit drives the narrative. Her key traits include resilience, loyalty, and competence, shown through her dedication to Ash and her team members. She demonstrates practical intelligence in dangerous situations but struggles with emotional processing of trauma. Her growth arc involves learning to accept her identity rather than trying to escape it, moving from reactive survival to proactive choice-making.

Antagonist analysis

The **Lankies** function as the primary antagonistic force, representing existential threat rather than personal malice. They're effectively portrayed as implacable natural disasters rather than evil entities, which makes them more terrifying. The true antagonist might be considered the trauma and displacement Alex experiences, which she must overcome to find her place in the world.

Supporting characters analysis

Lopez is a veteran sergeant who represents Alex's connection to military life and shared experience. His combination of competence and emotional understanding makes him an effective romantic interest and mentor figure.

Val Velasco serves as Alex's closest friend and represents the civilian path Alex might have taken, showing a different but equally valid response to their shared trauma.

Ash the military working dog functions almost as a co-protagonist, representing Alex's competence and belonging in the military community while providing emotional grounding for her character.

Administrator Blake embodies the burden of leadership under impossible circumstances, showing both the necessity of authority and its human cost.

Gina Velasco represents practical adaptation and forward-thinking leadership, serving as a positive authority figure who contrasts with Alex's struggles with civilian bureaucracy.

Character dynamics & character arcs

Character dynamics: The relationships between characters effectively drive emotional engagement, particularly the bond between Alex and Ash, which serves as a through-line for her military identity. The friendship between Alex and Val shows genuine affection while acknowledging that shared trauma doesn't necessarily mean shared solutions. Their conversations feel natural and lived-in, avoiding exposition-heavy dialogue. The romantic tension between Alex and Lopez could benefit from more development, as their shared military experience provides good foundation but their emotional connection needs more specific grounding in personality compatibility rather than just mutual understanding of combat stress.

Character arcs: Alex's character arc is well-constructed, moving from reactive survivor to proactive chooser of her own destiny. Her journey involves accepting rather than rejecting her military identity, which is a more sophisticated arc than simple escape or revenge. Lopez shows growth from enlisted man to NCO, taking on leadership responsibilities that reflect his maturation. Val's arc involves choosing to follow her mother rather than clinging to childhood friendships, showing her own growth toward independence. The character arcs would benefit from more explicit moments where characters confront their assumptions about themselves and make conscious choices to change.

Character development ideas

1. **Develop Alex's specific military skills beyond dog handling:** Show her demonstrating tactical knowledge, weapons proficiency, or leadership capabilities that she developed during the Vault years, making her military aptitude more concrete and believable.
2. **Give Lopez a personal flaw or conflict that complicates his relationship with Alex:** Perhaps difficulty with emotional intimacy due to military culture, or conflicting career ambitions that create tension between personal and professional goals.
3. **Create more specific details about Val's adaptation strategy:** Show her developing particular civilian skills or interests that contrast with Alex's path, making their different choices feel more distinct and meaningful.
4. **Add backstory about Blake's pre-invasion leadership style:** Brief flashbacks or references that show how the crisis changed him, adding depth to his character and making his death more impactful.
5. **Develop Ash's personality beyond work mode:** Show more of his individual quirks and preferences when he's not on duty, making him feel more like a complete character rather than just a tool.

POV analysis

Point of view in Scorpio is handled consistently and effectively. The story employs a close third-person limited perspective that remains exclusively with Alex throughout the narrative. This choice serves the story well, allowing readers to experience events through Alex's perspective while maintaining enough narrative distance to provide context and description that might be awkward in first person.

The manuscript successfully avoids common POV pitfalls like head-hopping, maintaining Alex's perspective without slipping into other characters' thoughts. The narrative voice effectively conveys Alex's internal reactions while maintaining a clear distinction between her thoughts and the narrator's observations. This balance allows readers to understand her emotional journey without excessive internal monologue.

One strength of the POV handling is how it naturally incorporates worldbuilding without information dumps. Because Alex has lived on Scorpio most of her life, she doesn't need to explicitly explain many aspects of her world—they're simply part of her experience. When she does reflect on her circumstances, it feels organic to her character rather than forced exposition.

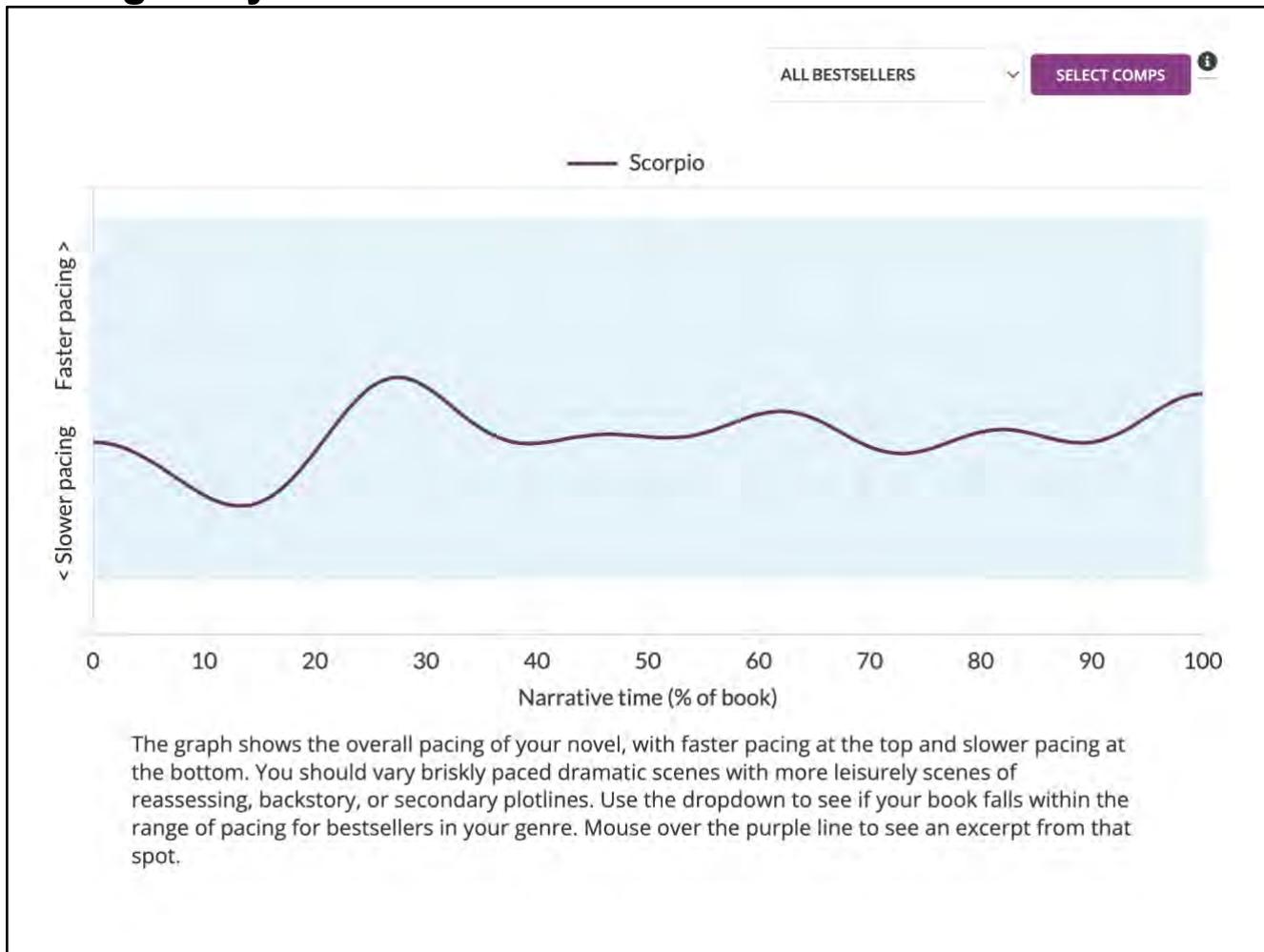
The limited perspective also contributes to the tension during action sequences, particularly during Lanky encounters, as readers only know what Alex knows. This restriction heightens suspense and creates genuine moments of surprise when events unfold unexpectedly.

Revisions to consider

While the POV handling is generally strong, there are a few areas where it could be refined:

1. Alex's internal voice could be more distinctive in places, particularly in the Earth sections. Adding more of her specific observations about Earth customs or technologies would reinforce her outsider perspective and strengthen reader connection to her experience.
2. Some scenes would benefit from deeper sensory immersion through Alex's perspective. While visual and auditory descriptions are strong, incorporating more touch, smell, and taste would create a more vivid sensory experience, particularly during high-stress moments like the Lanky attacks.
3. Consider more explicit transitions between external observations and internal thoughts to clarify when Alex is analyzing versus simply experiencing. This would help readers track her developing understanding of her circumstances, particularly during her adjustment to Earth.
4. The narrative could more explicitly acknowledge the limitations of Alex's perspective at key moments. When she makes assumptions about others' motivations or misinterprets situations due to her limited context, highlighting these misunderstandings would add complexity to her character and create opportunities for growth.
5. In the Earth sections, Alex's POV could more actively compare and contrast her new experiences with her life on Scorpio, reinforcing the psychological journey she's undergoing and making her eventual decision to enlist feel more integrated with her past.

Pacing analysis



Overview

In the graph above, Marlowe has charted the high-level pacing of *Scorpio*. This pacing model simulates the experience readers have as they move through your narrative. While it doesn't show every fast-paced and slow-paced passage, the graph gives a snapshot of the parts of your story where your readers will be turning pages most quickly (peaks) as well as the slower moments (valleys) of foregrounding, scene setting, and the "sequels" that occur between action scenes. (See the [Story elements](#) section for more on sequels.)

Marlowe determines pacing by considering language used, sentence length, paragraph length, and scene length. Key changes in pace are marked by dotted vertical lines and a percentage showing where in your story the change takes place. The graph is interactive so you should be able to click on any point to see a text excerpt.

A graph that depicts narrative speed

If you see several valleys, that's not a bad thing. Readers need a break between major action scenes to assess and prepare for the next peak. A warning flag should go up if your graph shows relatively flat pacing – most bestsellers offer a joy ride of highs and lows throughout a story. However, keep in mind that while the plot turns graph shows the emotional rollercoaster ride your story takes readers on, the pacing graph above doesn't measure emotion, mood, or tone at all — it depicts the speed at which the story is moving. Note that different authors handle different scenes with their own style and voice, so you could write a slow-paced gun battle or a fast-paced romantic scene. Marlowe determines pacing by looking at the complexity of your sentences from scene to scene.

You'll notice a blue tint block. This represents the full range in pacing (from fastest to slowest) in 90% of bestsellers — and when you choose a genre from the ALL BESTSELLERS dropdown filter, it shows the range for that genre or subgenre. Whereas the narrative arc and plot turns graphs show a lavender tint block to indicate the range of tone and mood, this tint block shows how quickly readers are likely turning the pages based on what's happening in the story.

It's important to point out what Marlowe is *not* looking at: time frames. A romance, mystery, or science fiction novel might unfold over a number of weeks, months, even years. But some genres, such as thrillers, often demand a compressed time frame (you know, the ticking clock thing). Marlowe is thinking about your pacing not based on the calendar but rather on your writing. Faster-paced scenes usually contain shorter sentences, more action verbs, crisper dialogue. Slower scenes contain more description, texture, background. A mix of both is good.

Even a veteran author who has published multiple titles can benefit from a deep dive into pacing. Just keep in mind there is no ideal shape of a pacing graph, though you may want to compare yours to titles by bestselling authors you admire.

Pacing analysis of your story

Pacing is crucial to maintaining reader engagement throughout a story. Effective pacing creates rhythm and momentum, balances action with reflection, and ensures that the narrative doesn't drag or rush at inappropriate moments. When well-executed, pacing becomes almost invisible to readers; they feel naturally pulled through the story without noticing the structural techniques creating that propulsion.

Scorpio demonstrates strong pacing in many sections, particularly during the salvage mission where tension builds gradually through a series of escalating complications. The Lanky encounters are especially well-paced, with moments of high tension balanced by necessary quieter intervals that allow both characters and readers to process events and prepare for the next challenge.

However, the manuscript's overall pacing structure is somewhat unbalanced. The Scorpio sections unfold at a measured pace that effectively builds world, character, and tension. In contrast, the Earth sections compress several months into a few chapters, creating a sense of rushing through Alex's adjustment period and decision to enlist. This imbalance diminishes the impact of her journey and makes her ultimate decision feel less earned than it could be.

Additionally, some reflective passages during the salvage mission could be tightened to maintain momentum. While character development and worldbuilding are essential, there are moments where internal reflection slows the narrative without adding sufficient new insight.

Conversely, the Earth sections would benefit from expanding key moments rather than summarizing them. Alex's struggles with civilian life and her growing disillusionment would have greater emotional impact if dramatized more fully through specific scenes rather than compressed summary.

The transition between Scorpio and Earth represents the most significant pacing challenge. The abrupt shift creates narrative whiplash rather than a smooth progression. Developing this transition more fully would help readers adjust to the new setting and stakes along with Alex.

Suggestions for faster pacing

- The college orientation and daily routine sections could be compressed into summary rather than scene-by-scene development
- Alex's apartment setup and early PRC adaptation could be streamlined to focus on the most significant adjustment challenges
- Some of the exposition about Earth society could be delivered through action rather than explanation

Suggestions for slower pacing

- The relationship development between Alex and Lopez needs more gradual buildup rather than jumping quickly to physical intimacy
- Alex's internal struggle with civilian life could be explored more thoroughly through specific conflict scenes
- The decision to enlist could be drawn out over multiple scenes to show her wrestling with the choice

Conflict analysis

Overview

Conflict — both external and internal — is central to effective storytelling. Used properly, conflict (when combined with character and other key elements) can propel a novel onto the bestseller list. But you can't just pile on the conflict with no let-up, even if you're writing a high-stakes thriller.

As James Scott Bell notes in *Conflict & Suspense*, our goal as authors is to keep readers engaged through tension and resolution. Bestselling plots alternate between intense conflict and quieter moments where characters regroup and move closer to their goals.

In his seminal book *Scene and Sequel*, Dwight Swain laid out the general rule that action-packed scenes should be followed by reflective moments that allow characters to process events and plan their next steps. These "sequels" could be as short as a couple of paragraphs or as long as a scene. It's a way to let the story breathe.

Fiction University founder Janice Hardy emphasizes this structure: Each scene should follow a pattern of Goal > Conflict > Result, followed by Reaction > Reflection > Decision. Have you done so in your story?

Our AI has analyzed the main sources of conflict in Scorpio and has identified the main sources of conflict in the storyline and the major shifts in emotional polarity. We end with a short "brainstorming" session focusing on opportunities to enhance the narrative drive.

Conflict in your story

Conflict in storytelling drives plot forward and reveals character through pressure, requiring both external challenges and internal struggles to maintain reader engagement.

1. **Survival against Lankies:** The primary external conflict provides immediate physical danger and establishes the stakes for all other conflicts in the story.
2. **Alex's identity crisis:** Her internal struggle between military and civilian life creates the central character conflict that drives her personal journey.
3. **Adaptation to Earth society:** The clash between Alex's survival-honed instincts and civilian expectations generates ongoing tension throughout the Earth sections.
4. **Resource scarcity in the Vault:** The constant pressure of limited supplies creates background tension that affects every decision the survivors make.
5. **Authority vs. independence:** Alex's conflicts with various authority figures reflect her struggle to find her place in hierarchical structures.

The story successfully employs multiple layers of conflict, though the external conflicts are generally stronger than the internal ones. The Lanky threat provides clear, high-stakes external

conflict, while the resource limitations create ongoing pressure. Alex's identity crisis represents the main internal conflict, though it could be more explicitly developed through specific scenes where she must choose between competing values or desires. The conflict escalates naturally from immediate survival to broader questions of belonging and purpose, maintaining tension even when physical danger is absent.

Narrative drive

Narrative drive is crucial for maintaining reader engagement by parceling out information strategically while keeping character motivation urgent and emotionally compelling. In his masterclass, James Patterson says that narrative drive is about parceling out information in such a way as to keep the reader asking questions and engaging emotionally with the protagonist. This is precisely why long passages of exposition (also known as information dumps) do not work. They reveal too much information and they do it in a way that distances readers rather than intriguing us. Character motivation must remain urgent and emotionally gripping, so that every action and decision feels inevitable yet unpredictable. Finally, questions should constantly be raised—whether through mystery, conflict, or suspense—ensuring that readers are always curious about what happens next.

The story demonstrates strong narrative drive during the Scorpio sections, where immediate survival needs create urgent motivation and each scene raises new questions about whether the characters will survive. The salvage mission sequence effectively balances action with character development, maintaining forward momentum while deepening relationships.

However, the narrative drive weakens considerably during the Earth sections, where Alex's motivation becomes more passive and the stakes feel lower. The story raises interesting questions about adaptation and belonging but doesn't maintain the same urgency as the survival sequences. The pace slows as Alex settles into routine civilian life, and while this reflects her character state, it also reduces reader engagement.

The romance subplot with Lopez provides some emotional drive but develops too quickly to sustain long-term tension. The mugging incident attempts to restore urgency but feels somewhat artificial compared to the organic conflicts of the Scorpio sections.

Ideas to intensify the conflict

1. **Create a bureaucratic antagonist on Earth who represents everything Alex rejects about civilian life:** Someone who actively tries to prevent her from enlisting or who embodies the worst aspects of PRC culture, giving her something concrete to struggle against.
2. **Develop competing military options that force Alex to choose between different paths:** Perhaps the Canine Corps wants her for training while SI wants her for combat, creating internal conflict about her role.

3. **Add tension around other Vault survivors adapting differently:** Show some thriving in civilian life while others struggle, creating social pressure on Alex to conform to civilian expectations.
4. **Introduce a deadline for Alex's decision:** Perhaps her survivor benefits expire or Lopez's deployment timeline forces her to choose quickly, adding temporal pressure to her internal conflict.

The importance of narrative tension

Emotional valence shifts are crucial for maintaining dynamic storytelling, as scenes should develop narrative tension rather than simply describe a series of events. In *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, James Frey writes, 'Many books have scenes that don't shift valences. They never turn. When a scene doesn't turn, it's not a scene.' Every scene should advance either plot or emotional engagement, avoiding static filler content.

The story generally maintains good emotional variety, moving effectively between tension and relief, hope and despair. The Scorpio sections demonstrate particularly strong emotional shifts, moving from quiet birthday celebration to life-threatening action to grief and loss. The contrast between the claustrophobic Vault and the overwhelming openness of Earth creates effective emotional dissonance.

Notable shifts in tone or emotion

1. **Birthday to disaster:** Alex's 21st birthday celebration immediately shifts to life-threatening salvage mission, creating jarring contrast that establishes the story's central tension.
2. **Rescue euphoria to adjustment depression:** The joy of being saved quickly transforms into the challenge of adapting to an alien Earth culture.
3. **Military competence to civilian helplessness:** Alex's confidence in dangerous situations contrasts sharply with her struggles in mundane Earth life.
4. **Intimate connection to separation anxiety:** The brief romance with Lopez creates temporary stability before his deployment reintroduces uncertainty.
5. **Passive acceptance to active choice:** The recruiting office scene shifts Alex from victim of circumstances to agent of her own destiny.

Suggestions for increased emotional polarity

1. Add more pronounced emotional shifts in the Earth sections by creating moments where Alex's military instincts clash dramatically with civilian expectations, generating both humor and tension.
2. Develop the romantic subplot with Lopez to include more emotional volatility, showing both the comfort of shared understanding and the fear of renewed loss.

3. Create sharper contrast between Alex's confidence with Ash and her uncertainty in human social situations, emphasizing her displacement.
4. Introduce more dramatic shifts between claustrophobic PRC life and moments of openness or freedom, perhaps through outdoor scenes or travel.
5. Add emotional complexity to the friendship with Val by showing moments of jealousy or resentment alongside the love and support, making their relationship more realistic.

Theme analysis

Primary and secondary themes

Primary theme: The story explores the concept of belonging and identity, specifically how extreme circumstances shape who we become and where we fit in the world. Alex's journey demonstrates that trying to escape one's formative experiences often leads to alienation, while embracing them can lead to purpose and community.

Secondary themes:

1. **Military vs. civilian values:** The contrast between practical military efficiency and bureaucratic civilian complexity
2. **Trauma and adaptation:** How people respond differently to shared traumatic experiences
3. **Community and isolation:** The importance of finding your tribe versus trying to fit into mainstream society

Theme development

The primary theme develops through Alex's attempts to adapt to civilian life and her growing realization that her military identity isn't something to escape but something to embrace. The story shows this through her comfort with military personnel versus her struggles with civilian bureaucracy, her immediate connection with Ash versus her difficulty forming civilian relationships, and her competence in dangerous situations versus her helplessness in routine social encounters.

The secondary themes support the primary theme by showing different responses to the same circumstances. Val chooses to follow her mother into colonial administration, representing another valid path for dealing with their shared experience. The military characters who choose to reenlist show that Alex's desire to return to dangerous service isn't pathological but practical. These themes interact to create a nuanced exploration of how identity forms through experience rather than choice.

Revisions to consider

How to strengthen the theme

1. Add scenes where Alex must choose between military and civilian approaches to the same problem, showing the practical differences between these value systems.
2. Develop more explicit contrast between Alex's military efficiency and civilian bureaucratic inefficiency, perhaps through a scene where she solves a problem the civilian system can't handle.
3. Create moments where other Vault survivors judge Alex's military choice, forcing her to articulate why this path is right for her specifically.
4. Add scenes showing Alex teaching civilian friends military skills or perspectives, demonstrating the value of her experience.
5. Include a scene where Alex's military training saves someone in a civilian context, showing that her skills have value beyond warfare.

Author voice

The story demonstrates a strong, consistent authorial voice that effectively balances military authenticity with emotional accessibility. The writing style suits the protagonist's practical, observation-focused perspective while maintaining enough literary quality to engage readers beyond pure action. The author shows genuine understanding of military culture without falling into clichés or stereotypes, creating dialogue and situations that feel lived-in rather than researched.

The narrative voice successfully captures Alex's internal experience without becoming overly introspective or self-indulgent. The balance between external action and internal reflection serves the story well, allowing readers to understand Alex's motivations while maintaining forward momentum. The author demonstrates particular skill in describing technical military procedures and survival situations with clarity and authenticity.

Prose style

The prose style effectively serves the story's military science fiction genre while maintaining readability and emotional engagement. The writing is clear and direct, matching Alex's practical worldview without becoming simplistic. Technical details are integrated naturally rather than feeling like exposition dumps, and military terminology is used appropriately without excluding civilian readers.

The author demonstrates strong control of pace through sentence structure, using shorter sentences during action sequences and longer, more complex structures during reflective moments. The sensory details are well-chosen and specific, particularly in describing the contrast between Scorpio's hostile environment and Earth's overwhelming civilization.

Some passages could benefit from tighter editing to eliminate redundant phrases and streamline description. The writing occasionally relies too heavily on character thoughts to convey information that could be shown through action or dialogue. Sentence variety could be improved in some sections, particularly during the Earth sequences where the rhythm becomes somewhat repetitive.

The dialogue is generally strong and character-appropriate, though some civilian characters speak in ways that feel more functional than natural. The military personnel speak with authentic authority and camaraderie that demonstrates the author's understanding of military culture.

The descriptions of both Scorpio and Earth are vivid and atmospheric, though the alien planet descriptions are generally stronger than the Earth settings. The author effectively uses environmental details to reflect character emotions and story themes.

Other sections

In addition to the sections above, the Author Dashboard also contains Marlowe's analysis in these sections:

- Dialogue vs. narrative (including dialogue tags)
- Readability score and complexity score
- Setting analysis
- Novelty and variations in chapter openings & closings
- Active vs. passive voice examples & suggested alternatives
- Cliches finder and Select Comps option
- Explicit language and content and Select Comps option
- Repetitive phrases finder and Select Comps option
- Repetitive adverbs
- Repetitive adjectives
- Misspellings finder
- Dissonance: Revisions to consider, inconsistent plot threads, unlikely character actions, etc.
- Story structure: Frameworks, templates, and tropes by genre
- Final review checklist

Head to <https://authors.ai/author-dashboard> for Marlowe's full analysis of your work.