

Sentient

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Feedback Notes

The pilot is classic alien sci-fi with strong story elements including an alien invading force that presents an ambiguous threat and a classic motley crew of survivors composed of tough, skilled Navy Dive Officer Dowd and his equally tough ex-wife Freisler who outranks him, a medic on her first day on the job, a loyal young petty officer, a scientist who knows more than he says, and three civilians one of whom has an energetic connection to the aliens. Dowd and Freisler are classic antagonists in love and war. Both want the same thing, to eliminate the threat, but their methods put them at odds.

Dowd is a strong main character and the set up unfolds from his perspective through well written action. It establishes his heroic character (fiercely advocating for a sickly teen while wearing Naval dress whites, struggling to save Symsie, rescuing Amiri), while varying the pace to build suspense (discovering disturbing clues while creeping through the base, a daring rescue in the storm outside in which a truck explodes). The visuals are striking and atmospheric and add a horror element in the way they evoke images of heaven and hell, good and evil. Examples include the pervasive red mist, a color that signals both danger and evil, the blue humanoid that seems to be made of stars and from the heavens, the ominous supercell darkening the skies, the dissipating shadow burned into a wall, the empty wet suits hanging like bodies, the people floating wide-eyed in the pool as though they're in suspended animation, and Dowd's blood-reddened eyes, among others.

The ambiguous clues and Dowd's Koori heritage set up themes about the cost of judging based on appearance but Dowd is all action hero and, at the end, takes aim without hesitation and without ever connecting them to the bias and discrimination he's experienced. The theme of discrimination based on stereotypes is set up during his arrest when Eid tells him, "Come on, you're not the first boong to go to lock up." Consider revising to set up a hesitation in Dowd to shoot first because his military and personal experiences have taught him that things aren't always as they appear. When he first encounters the starry humanoid on page 10, he is captivated and curious but is easily persuaded by Teicher to believe it poses a threat. The alien is an unwelcome "other" like he is in some parts of society which makes him the perfect man for the job because his personal history with discrimination has sharpened his military threat assessment skills.

The script would benefit from omitting Hunt's exposition on Dowd and Freisler's marriage to let their sexual tension and past hurts fuel and complicate their relationship and loyalties in future episodes. Freisler is set up to know more than she says but also as a tough commanding officer who expects to hide behind her authority to issue unquestioned orders. She makes stopping Dowd a priority, with lethal force if necessary, as though he's somehow impeding the progress of her real mission. Her actions go beyond marital animosity. Any subtext in her page 28 line, "Your life is over, Michael," is lost in context. All of their lives could be over because they are trying to find shelter from the deadly supercell overhead.

The pilot would benefit from bookending the script with another flashback (or flashforward) to commit to a nonlinear narrative that weaves together past, present, and aftermath. It sets up a nonlinear narrative told through the opening scene in the hospital in which it appears Toby has been found, cuts to another time period in which the main action of the alien invasion develops, and includes a flashback within a flashback to an earlier time just before Dowd is put into the recompression room. To anchor the story in the time of the opening sequence, consider revising the end note on page 49 with another cut after Dowd takes aim on the beach to his visit to the hospital.