

NIGEL

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters in it are completely imaginary.

Foreword

"Nigel" is a short story and is part of a series about an ex-vampire named Zsa Zsa, who works for the Bureau as a vampire catcher. The story takes place in the future and features Zsa Zsa, the director of the Enforcement Bureau, Boo Boo, and the suicidal civil engineer, Nigel.

NIGEL

Boo Boo had a proverbially bad reputation among the Bureau's agents: he was short tempered and easily pissed. Not a day went by when he wasn't heard shouting at someone, or something, in his office (on the second floor, just up the stairs and to your left). In personal interactions, Boo Boo usually started off by recounting everything he'd eaten that day, and also the quality of his sleep the previous night.

In his early days at the Bureau, Zsa Zsa knew that he had reached a new level of intimacy when the reluctant administrator stopped calling him by only his last name, and when the first order of business for the day was an introduction to Boo Boo's plans for lunch.

This Tuesday was no exception.

Zsa Zsa was seated in the utilitarian blue plastic chair just across from him. He didn't say much, but he was secretly waiting for it to end. Boo Boo, whose real name was Mark Barney, had just finished his unofficial speech regarding Halcyon theft. This incident left him somewhat confused as to what to do with Zsa Zsa. On the one hand, his former protégé had clearly committed a crime. On the other, more ambiguous hand, he had kept a valuable agent from losing her mind after she bit. The identity of Mona's victim was revealed only to Zsa Zsa, incidentally: it was a middle aged man, unaffiliated with the Bureau, who, by the looks of things, and according to Mona herself, got a little too fresh. (Biting him was not her original intent, but it somehow got out of hand.)

Finally, after much grunting and snorting, Boo Boo drearily declared that it was the first, and last, warning Zsa Zsa was going to get. Then he cleared his throat and brought out his Magic-Glo screen: a new assignment, which looked deceptively simple, but Zsa Zsa had some idea of what it really entailed: one of the finer points, printed in obvious bold, black letters, stipulated that he was to bite somebody. Zsa Zsa shrank back in his seat.

"Is this a test?" he said.

Boo Boo shook his head.

"And what if I get loony after this? What then?"

Boo Boo's shoulders underwent a small shrug. "Then you'll get loony, and we'll incubate you all over again."

Zsa Zsa got up. "Listen, Barney, I respect you and all, but this is just nuts. Why do you want me to bite this...what's his name?"

"Nigel Kreutzer. He'll make a good agent."

"No. Send someone else."

"No can do."

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me, Zsa Zsa. I can't help."

"What makes you think he'll make a good agent?"

"Because he's ready. We've been following him for a while now. He drives across the bridge every day. Sometimes, he pulls off in the middle to look at the water."

"So? What if he's just enjoying the view?"

"On Baltimore Bridge?"

Zsa Zsa fell silent: Barney had a point.

From Zsa Zsa's memory reveal [Department of Corrections, Session D]

Chances are, you've been told a lot of things about our kind, but I have to warn you, not all of them are true. Some are kind of true, while others, not so much. The two most basic misconceptions are: 1) that vampires are dead, and 2) that we live forever. Both are dead wrong, and, if you stop to think about it for a minute, kinda contradictory.

I'm just as alive as anyone is, with one difference: I have an extra ingredient in my blood, courtesy of the one who bit me. The Bureau fights it with drugs, first with the Halcyon vaccine, and then some other meds to keep down the cravings. I remembered the hell quitting it was, and since then I haven't bit anybody, although I thought about it. Often. So when Boo Boo gave me the old runaround, you can understand why I wasn't exactly joking when I asked if this was a test of some sort.

So, I did a little research. Nigel Kreutzer was a civil engineer, working for Amyx, some big name construction company. Slightly bold, ordinary looking guy with a Glo screen installed in his wristwatchy thing and no idea that he was about to become a vampire exterminator. Information courtesy of the Enforcement Bureau. Well, here's where we split.

See, I always have my doubts when someone - especially someone from the Bureau - asks me to do something like this. I figured I'd play along if this was some kind of set up, and not do anything, just follow this Nigel around as I was supposed to. But bite him? No thanks. First of all, he had a skinny, boring old turkey neck, although he was only 37. And, well, I just couldn't believe it, that's all. Either Boo Boo had gone nuts, bit someone himself, or this was a test, pure and simple, of my loyalty to the agent's basic principles of conduct. (Our principles are pretty simple. We sign off on a form promising to never, under any circumstances, bite anyone, even if the situation warrants it.)

And the situation definitely warranted it. I started thinking, which I don't do very often. Was this like the old Bible thing? Would someone appear all of a sudden out of thin air, flapping his wings, or, more down to earth, arms, and bellow, in Boo Boo's voice, for example, "You dumb motherfucker, this was just a test!" And would it be too late? Yeah, I signed a contract before doing it, but contracts are worth nothing around this place. The Bureau has the right to alter them at any moment, even *after* the assignment is done, just as well.

Before I went out, I stared at Boo Boo for a good full minute, trying to fish out anything suspicious. He noticed me eyeballing him from the doorway: he had just started on his morning meal, some kind of menacing looking sandwich with a lot of lettuce and cheese. Get out already, he said, and so I went. Damn that civil engineer. He'd better

make a good agent, I thought, heading out of Boo Boo's door into the hallway. On my way out, I ran into Becky, who was carrying hot coffee, and it spilled and scalded my leg. She apologized. A lot. Like I was going to make a big deal out of it or something. I said it was okay and then I pulled my coat up to my ears and went out the last door to the left. I went down the stairs and out the back, hoping not to meet anyone.

The next day was dumpy and grey, just the kind of weather I can't stand, especially around this place. The moment I stepped out the door, I remembered that I'd left my key card in my room, so I had to explain it to the clerk, and go back for it. Then I almost got run over by a pickup truck once I was out on the street. The driver yelled something, but I wasn't really paying attention. While I was busy putting my calm brains back together, I stepped into some dog shit, and that finally did it. I decided I was gonna bite that civil engineer, bite him good, once and for all, if the rest of my assignment was gonna go the same way.

But when I got to the point, later that evening in the Amyx parking lot, I just couldn't do it. I guess I'm just not a bloodthirsty sort.

I followed Nigel as he left the building. It was already kind of dark, and the rain, or fog, or whatever the crap fell out of the sky over this town, was getting pretty strong, going *drip, drip, drip, drip*. This Nigel turned out to be a heavy smoker: he went about fifty times during the day behind the building and stood there, rain or shine, glued to his cigarette next to the garbage cans.

Come end of day, he did the same, going for one last smoke before the drive home. I waited, watched as he lit up, as a thin white stream began to ooze from his head.

But I couldn't do it.

He must have felt me standing there, because he suddenly raised his head. He couldn't see me, but he shivered. Then he tossed away his cigarette and almost ran to his car. On the way, he dropped his keys, yelped, picked them up. I heard the engine starting, a low, weak noise. It stopped for a second, then started up again. A squeal, and Nigel was out of my sight.

I was trying to muster it up, but it wasn't coming easy to me. I followed Nigel's car, flying close behind its beat up rear bumper with a Florida license plate. From time to time, I saw him checking his rear view mirror. I could feel that he was afraid.

He didn't drive home, though. Halfway across the Baltimore Bridge, he suddenly pulled off to the shoulder and stopped. He killed the engine and stepped out of the car. For a few minutes, he just stood there with both hands on the railing, looking down at the water below. Below the bridge was a black river, nasty and fast and cold. I hung around while he lit up another one of his endless cigarettes. He was shivering in the night wind, the cars kept going by, and it was starting to rain. I spaced out for a second and when I turned, I saw my beloved civil engineer standing on the metal railing, ready to jump, so I thought, quick. He had already let go of the railing and was about to do it, when I grabbed him by his coat. He gave a short yelp and fell, fell off straight off the railing and onto his back on the side of the road. He lay still, looking up at me, as if frozen, and I stood still, looking down at him. I gave him my hand and he took it. His was trembling, clammy and cold.

* * *

"Who...who are you?"

Zsa Zsa contemplated what would make a good answer, but he couldn't find anything to say.

"My name's Zsa Zsa," he said simply, and pulled Nigel to his feet.

"Why'd you come after me?" Nigel inquired, pulling his coat tighter around him.

The wind was picking up, ruffling through Zsa Zsa's hair, which made him look all the stranger. Nigel crossed himself once, and Zsa Zsa laughed.

"I asked you, why did you do it?" he demanded. "I want to die, and I'll do it again."

This definitely pissed him off, Zsa Zsa thought with glee.

"Listen, I have a better idea," he said calmly. "Just listen to me for a minute. You got a minute, Nigel, don't you?"

Nigel blinked, uncomprehending, too stunned to even ask how the strange one knew his name.

"Now, I don't know why you were going to do what you were going to do, and frankly, I don't care. But I have a proposition for you. Interested?"

Nigel blew out his nose into his sleeve, in a half cough, half sneeze.

"Okay, I'll take that as a yes. Let's go inside the car for a minute, it's getting cold."

* * *

How the hell do you explain something like that to somebody, just out of the blue? This Nigel was as hard headed as they make 'em. He kept asking all these questions as we drove. Too many questions, if you ask me. Like how long does it take for the Halcyon to wear off, and what's it like to bite somebody and to get bitten and all that. I couldn't wait to shut him up, but I needed a yes or a no first. By this point I was going to do it either way, but I like things to be done cleanly. And Nigel was a suicidal chatterbox. We were standing at a red light, and a long one at that. There was some kind of traffic jam ahead because of the rain, and I could see a police hover coming at us from a distance.

He kept talking. Finally, I asked him in plain English, would he do it or not? He thought about it for a while, dragging on about ten smokes, so I told him he could still smoke after he turned into a vampire. He glanced at me. He was tense. Even though it was cold, sweat was beading up on his boring square forehead. He wiped it off with his hand and looked at me: I could see him thinking, yes, no, yes, no. Yes. Maybe.

"How are you going to do it?" he asked, looking straight ahead into the red traffic light. "Will you need to bite me?" He loosened his shirt collar.

"Hell no. There's another way. Just come with me to the Bureau in the morning."

"The Bureau? What's that?"

"Listen, you coming or not? I got no time to explain everything."

Then he thought some more.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "You can take me to the Bureau, or whatever it is you call it."

Zsa Zsa gave a sigh of relief: finally, things were going his way. *So far*, his brains quickly added.

"So how about tomorrow at ten in the evening?"

Wow, Zsa Zsa thought. *This guy even sets his own time.* He shook his head. "Ten in the morning."

Nigel gave a brief, affirmative nod. "You need a lift?" he asked, drumming on the steering wheel, although the traffic wasn't moving anywhere.

"No," Zsa Zsa replied, getting out of the car.

"See you tomorrow."

Zsa Zsa grunted something unintelligible and shut the door.

True to Boo Boo's predictions, Nigel became one of the best agents the Bureau's ever had. He genuinely loved the thrill of the chase, and especially hover-flying. You couldn't keep him down. Later, he personally thanked me for "pointing him in the right direction." Life is funny. Sometimes.

[End session]

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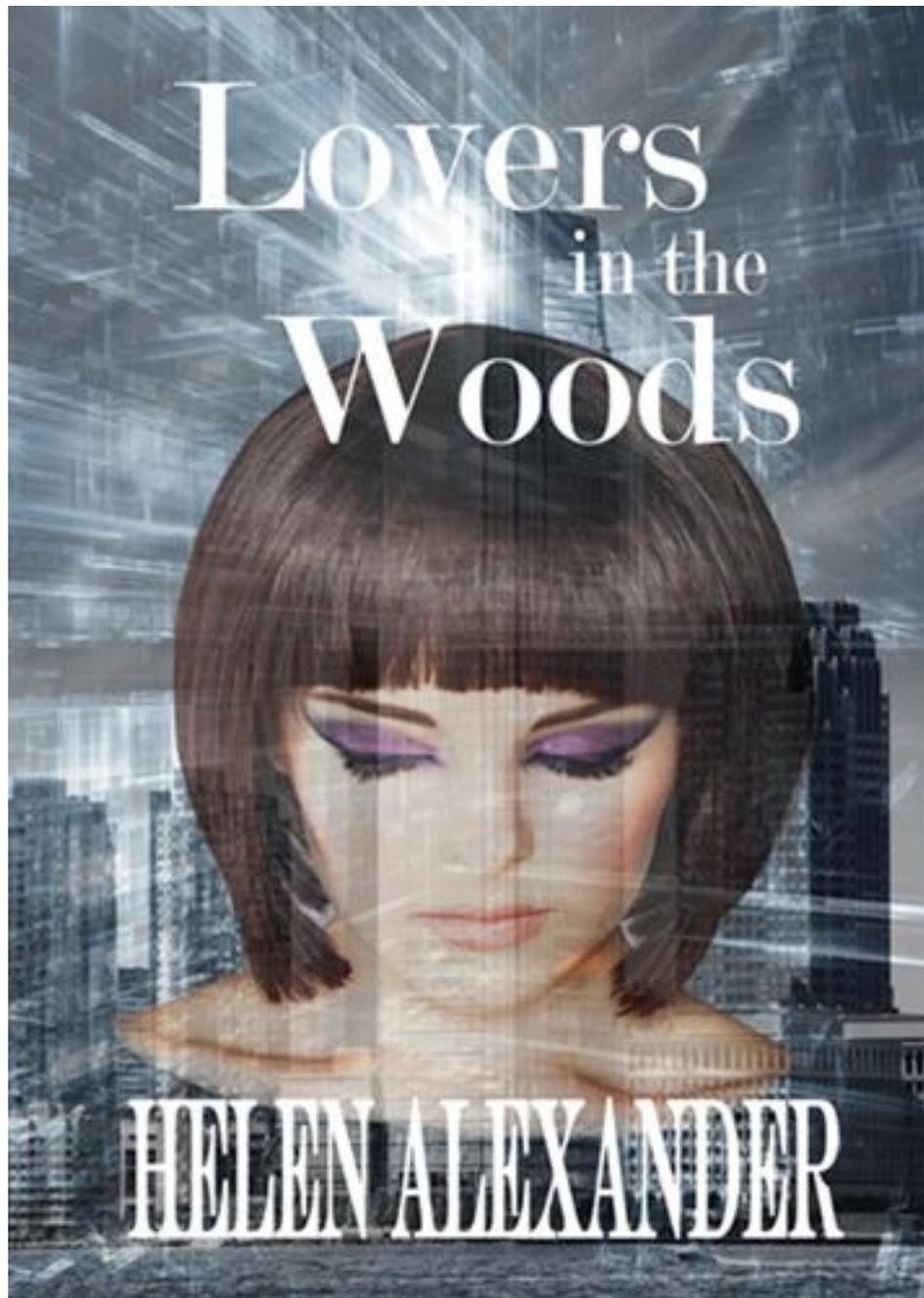
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Reviews of *Lovers In The Woods*:

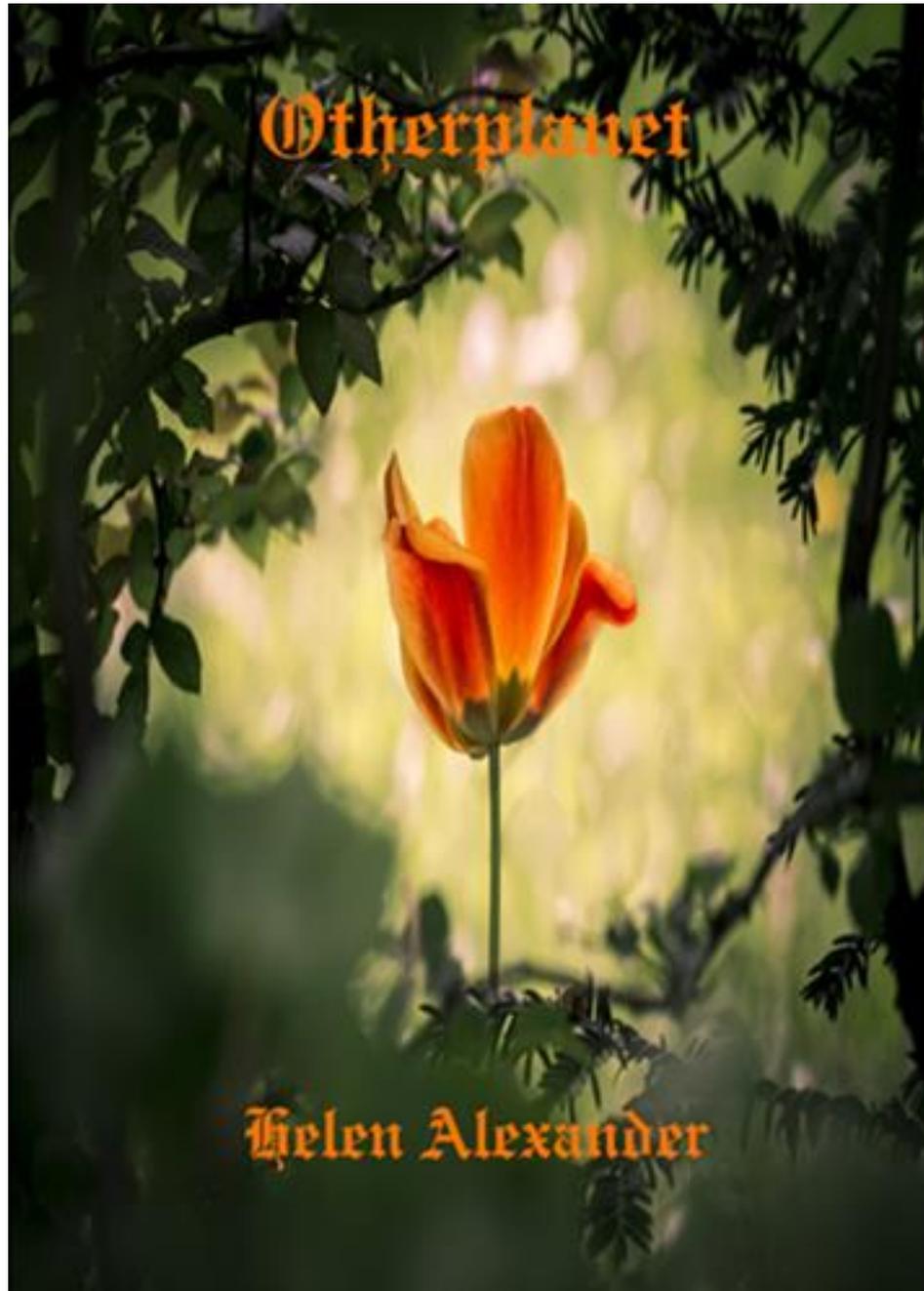
"...a mind-trip of the best kind. If you like unpredictable fiction with a twist, you will love this book."

---Amazon reviewer

"Helen Alexander's Lovers in the Woods, is an inventive and imaginative science fiction novel, set in the futuristic landscape of Metrodom. Many of its inhabitants are drones, Dolls, or other creatures having odd appearances with tentacles and wings. In spite of

their unique features, they act and socialize like humans. [...] The themes of the book raise questions about identity, humanity, life, and responsibility. Although many of the characters are not human beings in our current understanding, they have the same motivations and goals that we do."

---Fantascize.com



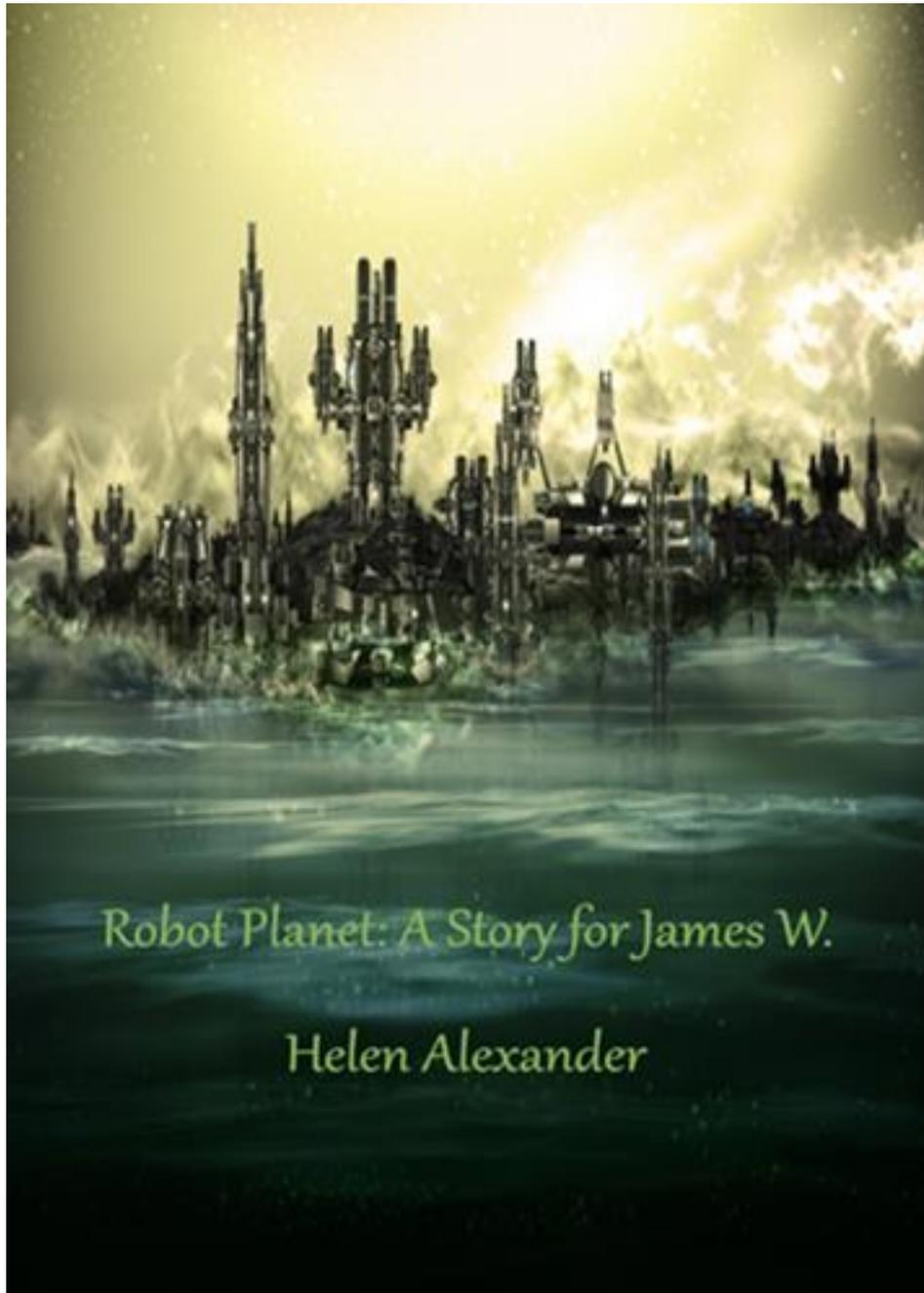
Reviews of *Otherplanet*:

"...an intriguing story which left me wanting more. [...] Clever and imaginative..."

---Amazon reviewer

"This story moves at a brisk pace, but it keeps your attention quite well. It is complex, yet easy to follow. I certainly will not spoil anything for you, but the end has an interesting twist."

---Amazon reviewer



Reviews of *Robot Planet: A Story for James W.*

"It reminded me of some of the great Isaac Asimov's stories, where things are sort of backwards, if that isn't too much of a spoiler! [...] a nice introduction to the genre for the younger reader, avoiding cliché-ridden myth and magic and presenting a story from an unusual angle. [...] A definite five stars."

---Goodreads reviewer

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(a web comic based on the Sci Fi novel

Lovers In The Woods)