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Opening extract from

Alien Timebomb

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Na Noitativni ot Wen Kroy

'This is the news at nine o'clock,' said the voice from the clock-radio, jolting Walter from his dream, the same dream he'd been having for almost a year, ever since his grandad died: he dreamt he was floating helplessly in space while the earth drifted away from him into the blackness. Walter took a deep breath and opened his eyes. The telescope given to him by his granduncle, Bob, sat on a table by the bed and, above his head, Neil Armstrong's lunar boots dangled from a hook. He breathed out – he was not floating in space; he was at home in Nittiburg on the first day of the school holidays.

'Scientists are alarmed by the discovery of a large asteroid on a path towards earth,' said the newsreader. 'If this asteroid, which has been named Hellvega, collides with our planet,

humankind as we know it –'

Walter hit the 'off' button with his elbow. He had heard about these so-called 'killer' asteroids before; asteroids on a journey to annihilate the earth . . . but in ten or twenty thousand years! It was all a big yawn. He rubbed his eyes, threw back the duvet, removed the lunar boots from their hook, placed them on the floor and stepped into them. One giant step at a time, he walked towards a small table on which sat a framed photograph of Grandad Speazlebud. How Walter missed him – his crazy humour and his wild, adventurous spirit, his kindness and his big warm heart. And little things too, like how he liked to stick a flower in his lapel when he was going out, preferably a rose he had grown himself.

Beside the photograph lay a small leather-bound book inscribed, Noitanigami by Arnold Speazlebud, and beside that was a small hand-carved wooden box. Walter took the box in his hands and opened it to reveal a gleaming ruby gemstone – the Giftstone, given to Walter by his

grandad after he had successfully completed his first journey back in time using the power of ***Noitanigami***. He tightened his palm around the box, and with his other hand, opened *The Book of Noitanigami* and read his grandad's introduction:

This gift so rare
Given to you
Can make a million dreams come true
Can stop the arrow-head of time
And send it back, for you and yours
To do the things you might have done
To win the battles you might have won
To right a wrong, or simply be
A witness to Man's history.
When spoken with the power of truth
That nestles in the heart of youth
This gift will cast a blinding light . . .
Then every man will surely see
The power of ***Noitanigami***.

Walter felt a gentle heat emanate from the

Giftstone, enter his hands, travel through his entire body and warm his spirit. Just then, as it did most mornings, a Red Admiral butterfly flew in through the open window and fluttered around Walter's head. He fixed his gaze on the butterfly and repeated the word '***Ylfrettub***' three times. The Giftstone glowed as the butterfly instantly reversed its flight path and disappeared out through the window.

'Bye bye, butterfly,' said Walter with a smile.

He enjoyed using his power of ***Noitanigami*** – sending things backwards by saying their name backwards three times – but he had another power too: the power to travel back in time. Since Grandad had made him Keeper of the Giftstone, Walter could, in theory, time travel on his own, but the mere thought of going back in time without his grandad to guide him had caused him to put time travelling out of his mind.

Walter placed the Giftstone back in its box, returned it and *The Book of Noitanigami* to the table, then clunk-clunked his way across the room

to the mirror on the wall. Was he really Walter Speazlebud, the first person on the moon? The answer was yes, of course, but ever since Grandad had gone on his heavenly journey, Walter felt that a part of himself – the adventurous part – had gone for a walk too, and never really come home.

Walter glanced at his 'back-to-front' watch. It said 'm.a. 02.01' (10.20 a.m. to you or me). His kung-fu class started in twenty minutes, and his teacher didn't like it when he was late. He removed Neil Armstrong's boots, hung them back up on the hook above the bed and got dressed.

Downstairs, Walter poured himself a glass of milk and filled a saucer for Maharaja, the green-eyed ginger cat. He remembered the day he had first discovered the power of *Noitanigami*, when he had accidentally said Maharaja's name backwards three times, immediately sending the hapless cat back through the cat flap, across the lawn and up into the apple tree. He smiled, drank his milk in one gulp, grabbed his battered old canvas bag and went outside.

Through the window of the newly built workshop, Walter could see his dad, Harry Speazlebud, working away on some new invention, happy as a swallow in flight. As Walter grabbed his bike his phone beeped. It was a text from his friend, Levon: 'Did u hear abt d asteroid? I bet dats wat killed d dinosaurs.'

Walter quickly texted him back: '***Hsibbur. Teb u ti t'nsaw***.'

Backwards spelling and talking was Walter's gift, and his appearances on TV had made him famous across the country. So it was easier for Walter to write backwards, and no problem for Levon – he had programmed a text-reverser into his phone to allow him to read Walter's texts easily.

Walter hopped on his bike and headed through the village to the community hall at the bottom of Nittiburg Hill. As he parked his bike against the wall his phone beeped once more.

'Betcha one euro.'

'***Eruoy no***!'

Walter changed into his kung-fu gear and

entered the room just as the class was beginning. At eleven years of age, his friend Annie Zuckers was by far the youngest kung-fu teacher in the country. She smiled as he entered, although she generally frowned upon lateness. She then joined her hands together, as if in prayer, and bowed to the class.

'Choose your partners, and assume combat positions,' she said calmly and gently. This always amazed Walter because he had seen the other Annie – the one you didn't want to mess with. She had called these two sides of her personality, 'Yin and Yang: the extremes that create the balance.' Walter didn't quite know what she was talking about, but he and Levon both loved saying the words 'Ying and Yang'. It sent them into convulsions of laughter.

When Walter finally woke up from his daydreaming all his possible partners had been snapped up.

'Guess it's you and me, cowboy,' said Annie, and the look in her eye said that today was not

Walter's lucky day. He swallowed hard and scrunched up his face, hoping his silent plea would find her mercy. Suddenly he felt the room rotate 360 degrees as gravity disappeared and, with a THUD!, he landed on his back on the soft mat.

Annie smiled down at him with her smoky blue eyes. 'Those who are not prepared are easy prey.'

Walter was feeling a little sore as he cycled home down Station Road, but his face glowed with happiness. Looking into Annie's eyes always had that effect on him, like eating Mrs Frost's NEW! Sherbet Lemon Zingers, or mango ice cream topped with Wilma Cartwright's whipped-cream fudge. He swung a right at the church on to Main Street, where he spotted Mrs Green polishing a pumpkin for her vegetable display.

'***Olleh, Retlaw***,' she called out.

'***Olleh Srm Neerg***,' he replied, chirpily. '***Sti a lufrednow yad***.'

But, as he crossed the river bridge on to

Sycamore Road, his smile began to fade. Then, as he slowed down and stopped outside St Anthony's graveyard, the smile vanished completely. Through the open gates, in the distance, he could see the tall, hand-carved headstone that marked his beloved grandad's grave. It had been almost a year now and Walter still had not made it through those gates. It was as if some invisible force field was holding him back – a force field of sadness.

Suddenly a man jumped out of a hole in the ground, giving Walter a fright. 'Oi! Master Speazlebud! I got one for ya today.' It was one-eyed Sam the gravedigger.

'Sam,' said Walter with a sigh of relief. 'You frightened the life out of me.'

'Sorry, mate,' said Sam as he ambled towards Walter, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. 'I spend 'alf me life diggin' 'oles and the other 'alf climbin outta them.' Sam had a London accent but nobody knew why – he had never been out of Nittiburg in his life.

Sam leaned up against the gatepost.

'Hippopotamus,' he said with a grin.

'***Sumatopoppih***,' replied Walter in a flash. 'Now I have one for you, Sam. "Dog".'

Sam had a good long think about it. 'G-O-D – God!'

'Excellent,' said Walter with a grin, 'but don't you think that if God knew his name backwards was dog, he would have called himself something else?'

'It's a wonder a'right. I never did think o' that before!'

Walter took a ***Retlaw Dubelzaeps*** backwards-spelling certificate from his bag – he never went anywhere without one – signed it and handed it to Sam.

Sam looked like he had just been given a million dollars. 'You should see your grandad's grave,' he said, his eyes still wide with gratitude. 'It's lookin' like a High King's garden for the anniversary next week. The geraniums and begonias and the roses are comin' along well.'

'Grandad loved roses,' said Walter.

'And where do you think I got the cuttings for my lovely roses? He gave them to me himself, he did. I reckon the day them roses bloom is the day you'll come through those gates, Master Speazlebud. I feel it in me bones, I do.'

Walter smiled. Grandad's anniversary would be a good day for him to finally pay his respects. He just didn't know if he would ever be brave enough to do it.

As soon as he arrived home, Walter turned on the brand-new computer, then opened Levon's email reverser, which allowed him to read his emails as quickly as anybody else. His mum was in India doing a yoga course and she emailed both Walter and his father Harry every day.

Today's email said: 'I have never felt so relaxed in all my life. I feel that nothing could disturb my inner peace,' and ended, 'See you next week. Love Mum.'

Walter's second email looked like junk mail but had mysteriously made it past Levon's 'junk mail' filter. It said: 'Global Emergency IMPORTANT.

US Gov.' Strangely, when Walter dragged it into the wastepaper basket, it bounced right out again.

He switched on his phone – Levon would know how to delete it. The phone beeped. His inbox said he had one voicemail. He pressed play.

A male voice with an American accent spoke slowly and clearly, 'Please check your email, Vice Commander Speazlebud. It contains urgent information.'

Walter raised an eyebrow. Only the National Aeronautical Space Authority (NASA) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CIA) knew his official Apollo 11 mission title. He opened the email.

Dear Walter,

It has been many years since your historic journey to the moon as Vice Commander of Apollo 11. History itself will forever be indebted to you for your heroic endeavours. Unfortunately an emergency of global importance has arisen and we feel you are our only hope. You will find attached an

email booking for you and a guardian to come to New York tomorrow morning to discuss this urgent matter. I beg you to look favourably upon our request.

Sincerely
John Hellerman
Head of Operations
CIA
PS. To prepare you for the meeting please google 'Roswell 1947'.

Walter stared at the year 1947. Had the CIA got a time-travelling mission in mind? It caused his tummy muscles to tighten. Maybe he should just pretend that he had never opened the email.

There was a mechanical click, followed by a hum. The printer was printing out the email, but he hadn't pressed 'print'! It must be an automatic print-out mechanism programmed in by the CIA. He grabbed the print-out and headed for the kitchen.

As Walter poured himself a bowl of Choccopops, he heard his dad at the back door. *Good, he would soon help him make sense of the email.* He relaxed his tummy muscles and poured some milk into the bowl.

Harry Speazlebud came bumbling into the kitchen, his ragged red hair looking like it had been dipped in golden syrup and blow-dried by a turbo jet. He took his canvas bag of knick-knacks from his shoulder and put it on the ground.

'Nice bag, Dad', Walter said. 'I could do with one of those! Mine's full of holes. I lost one of my trainers on the way home.'

Harry appeared not to hear him and his scrunched-up brow told Walter there was something on his mind.

'Everything OK, Dad?'

'It might not be ready, Walt.'

'What might not be ready?'

'The world!'

'For what?' said Walter taking his bowl of Choccopops to the table and sitting down.

'My new invention.'

'What is it?'

Harry's puzzled expression suggested that this rather simple question was difficult for him to answer. 'It doesn't matter, Walt . . . according to the news, we're all about to be blown up . . . by an asteroid.'

Walter raised his eyes to heaven. 'Yeah, in a zillion years or something . . .'

Harry shook his head. 'Five hundred years, that's what they're saying.'

'Better run for cover then, Dad,' chuckled Walter. 'I'll dig the bunker if you nip to the shops for a thousand cans of beans.'

'Don't you care about the destruction of your lovely planet, Walt?' said Harry. 'If Hellvega doesn't annihilate the whole planet, it could still wipe out entire continents – many species of plants and animals will become extinct. Look at what happened to the dinosaurs!'

Walter dug his spoon into his cereal. 'There's absolutely no scientific proof that an asteroid

killed all the dinosaurs. They could have simply evolved into birds! You should know that. You're a scientist.'

'Inventor, actually.'

'You're a scientist who invents, then!'

'I'm an inventor who . . . whatever . . . Is something wrong, Walt?'

'What do you mean?'

'It's your voice . . . if it was a bird it would be flying crooked.' Harry was quick like that. He could read Walter's moods as if they were written across his forehead in Day-Glo lettering.

'I've just got an email from the CIA.'

'I knew it,' said Harry with a wicked smile. 'They're on your tail. They've heard you're a serial killer!'

'I'm a whaaaaaat?'

'A cereal killer. There's not a day goes by you don't murder a bowl of those Choccopops!'

'Ha, ha,' said Walter, handing Harry the print-out.

As Harry read the email his left eyebrow

began to rise like the eyebrow of a ventriloquist's dummy. 'An "emergency of global importance"! Hmm. Intriguing. Hmm. Fascinating.' He read to the end of the email. '"Roswell 1947". Roswell was where one of the most talked-about alien sightings *ever* took place, Walt! Let's hit the "Big Apple" and find out what it's all about!'

Walter shrugged his shoulders.

'How can you say no to an offer like this? It could be an adventure.'

'You can go. Tell them I'm afraid of flying.'

'They know you flew to the moon in 1969! You weren't afraid then.'

'People change.'

Harry put his hand on his son's shoulder. 'They do, Walt – people like Granduncle Bob, whose life was changed for the better by you travelling back in time.'

Walter had never thought of it like that but he was glad that Bob no longer had to carry a lie around inside him.

'*And* you were the first person on the moon,

Walt!' continued Harry. 'You're brave, you're adventurous! You've got to throw yourself back into life again.'

Walter jumped up from the table. 'I went back in time for Grandad, but he's not around any more!' He grabbed the email, ran out through the kitchen door and up the stairs.

Walter lay on his bed staring at the plastic stars on the ceiling and wiping a tear from his eye. How he wished his grandad was here right now. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine him singing 'Danny Boy' backwards, like he used to do every night before he went to sleep, but it was no use, he couldn't make the sound of Grandad's voice come alive in his mind. He glanced at the email on the bedside table. Imagine if Grandad could send him an email, or a sign, just to let him know he was out there somewhere, that he had not gone completely from his life. Just then he felt a strange sensation that sent a tingle up his spine. It was as if an invisible cloud had brushed his skin. Then he

noticed something shimmering in his peripheral vision. He glanced across at the email on the table again. The words 'you are our only hope' glowed, as if they had just caught the rays of an invisible sun. Then he heard the voice of Grandad from deep inside his mind, so clear that Grandad could have been in the room beside him. 'Be brave, Walter, be brave.'

Later that evening, Walter heard a knock on the door.

'Come in.'

When Harry entered the room he found Walter looking through his telescope. 'I haven't seen you use your telescope in a year,' said Harry.

'Take a look, Dad. It's a new moon.'

Harry put his eye to the eyepiece. 'You were there, Walt. You landed on the moon; you walked on its surface.'

Walter smiled. 'Sorry for storming out . . .' he said.

Harry smiled and placed his hand on

Walter's shoulder. 'Is no your final decision, Vice Commander Speazlebud? There's a Leonardo da Vinci exhibition at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, you know.'

Walter glanced at the email sitting on the bedside table. 'Do you think they want us to go all the way to New York to talk about *aliens*?' he asked.

'Don't you believe in them?'

Walter hesitated a moment. 'I know Grandad did but I'm not sure . . . then when I was on the moon I saw a bright light jumping about in the distance. On the way back to earth I asked Commander Armstrong what it was and he said, "Aliens, probably. Every astronaut sees them."'

'So you'll go?' Harry asked.

'What would Mum say?'

'She's nervous about time travelling, but she loves New York.'

Walter stared at the wall. 'Annie's been on the subway. She saw rats as big as lambs!'

'Sure, but they're hard to catch. We may

The strange bright lights spotted by the crew of the Apollo 11 mission.

have to settle for pizza! Besides, I'm vegetarian,' Harry joked.

'I hate rats,' protested Walter as he looked out of the window at the moon.

'A new moon,' said Harry, following Walter's gaze. 'Your grandad said that the new moon was a good time to start an adventure.'

'It is,' said Walter.

'Is that a yes, then?'

Walter looked at Harry as a smile brightened

his face. 'If I'm going to New York I'll need a new canvas bag with a secret pocket for the Giftstone!'

Harry took twenty euros from his pocket. 'You pop down in the morning and get yourself one. I'll email Mum to tell her about our plans.'