

# Last Words

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Pudgy fingers walked Captain Crimson up the earthen mound, past the splayed bodies of his fallen companions. He tilted from side to side, each foot glancing the dirt only briefly, accompanied by a mechanical tch-tch-tch sound. His unarticulated knees were incapable of bending, keeping him from approximating anything resembling a real walk, but Brandon didn't mind.

Before the action figure had been given to him, Captain Crimson had been some character from one of his dad's old comics. Brandon liked comics, he liked the idea of comics, but he couldn't afford to buy any himself and his dad's were all expensive and important and kept in bags kept in boxes kept in the attic. Brandon's dad had bought them when he was a kid, and someday they'd be worth a lot of money.

He did give Brandon an old crate of his action figures, though, because they weren't in the boxes anymore and so weren't worth anything. He recognized a few of them, like Spiderman and Batman and Superman, but others -- like the one he called Captain Crimson -- were mysteries. He thought he remembered that his dad said that The Captain's name was Adam, but he liked coming up with his own characters and his own stories. Batman could stay Batman, but Adam in his red and blue jumpsuit became Captain Crimson. The green guy -- not the Hulk, the one who looked like a pile of moldy leaves -- became Garbage Man. The guy who looked like his head was on fire was The Flaming Scotsman, because Brandon liked doing the accent.

"Ach," Brandon said in falsetto. "Ye must avenge us, Captain Crimson. Punish Giant Spiderman for his evil deeds!"

Some of the action figures were much larger than the others. In the comics he'd drawn in the notebooks in his locker, Brandon had explained that this was because they were evil mutant clones. He'd made several such comics and passed them around to his friends, who generally agreed that he should send them in to Marvel or DC and get a job making real comics. Brandon kept forgetting to find out how much he'd need for the shipping. Money at home was tight, but Brandon was pretty sure that he could convince his dad that getting a comic book job would bring in enough money to cover it with the first paycheck. Assuming it was legal for 5th-graders to get that kind of job, of course.

He was getting a little old for action figures, honestly, but playing out in the back yard was a good way to plan out his next notebook comic. It was peaceful back there, by the shed, and the pile of bricks made a great evil fortress. More importantly, it was quiet enough that he couldn't hear what was going on in the house, and his playing didn't disturb his dad.

"I can't do it alone," Brandon said in Captain Crimson's deep resonant voice. "I'll need help from the Star Treks."

"Brandon?"

He didn't look up as his dad stepped out into the back yard. Didn't see that his eyes were red from the crying that Brandon had come into the back yard to avoid. He pursed his lips shut and stopped playing, staring down at the toys in his hands, moving them back and forth idly.

"Brandon?"

"Yeah?"

He heard his dad approach, but his father didn't say anything more at first. He could feel the gaze on him, could tell that his dad wanted him to look up, but he just... couldn't. The figures in his hands walked in place idly as the awkwardness grew. Maybe if he didn't say anything his dad would just walk off again and he could get back to playing.

"Brandon?"

He didn't look up. "Yeah?"

His father knelt next to him. "Brandon, I... we need to talk about something."

"Am I in trouble?" He couldn't think of anything bad he'd done recently, but Mrs. Fontana had it out for him, and was always trying to get him in trouble.

"No." His father placed a hand on his shoulder, and he looked at the man, eyes focused on the familiar nose, mouth, and jaw. "Oh, no, Brandon, no."

"Okay."

"Brandon?"

He looked up again, figures in his hands falling still.

"This is very important. Okay?"

A fluttery feeling started to rise up from deep within Brandon's gut, a strange clawing urge that screamed at him to run, to throw the toys at his father, to grab a brick and smash something. This, his dad's behavior, the way he was trying to bring something up, something terrible, was all too familiar.

"What is it?"

"You remember that asteroid they said they found yesterday?"

That was unexpected. "Um. Yeah. They mentioned it in science class."

"Well. It's... they say it's not going to be as far away as they thought."

"What?" Brandon shifted his feet under his seat. "Is it going to hit us?"

"They can't tell yet. Maybe. But even if it misses us, it'll be close enough to be really bad."

"Oh. How bad?"

His dad seemed uncomfortable. "Bad. Earthquakes. Bad storms. Even if it misses..."

"Are we going to go stay with Grandpa?"

"We can. Yeah. We should. But, Brandon..." he sat down, picking up one of the action figures.

"I have to tell you. You need to know. It's... probably not going to be okay."

"Dad?"

"Grandpa said I shouldn't tell you, you know?"

Brandon nodded. He'd heard his father having a whisper-argument on the phone that morning.

"But you're going to hear about it. It's all over the TV, and everyone's talking about it. People are going to get funny, and you're a smart kid, Brandon. I told him that I can't protect you from this. Like with Mom. Remember? We tried to keep that from you. Remember?"

Brandon remembered. His expression didn't change. He could see the tears glimmering in his dad's eyes, and he knew that he was doing that thing where he tried to be more of a grown-up than he was. It wasn't that his dad was a big kid, but when something bad happened he tried to be like Grandpa. Quiet. Dignified. Brave. And that was fine for Grandpa -- he had been in War, and he'd shot people. But it wasn't who Dad was, and when Dad tried to be like Grandpa it always made Brandon feel bad. Like there was something wrong with being Dad, and there totally wasn't.

Sometimes, he'd learned, he himself needed to be like Grandpa. For Dad's sake. So for now he didn't think too hard about what was happening.

He didn't want to say anything that would make Dad cry, but that was hard, because sometimes being strong like Grandpa was something that made Dad cry. He wondered if Dad felt the same way when he tried to make Grandpa proud of him.

Like with Mom.

Dad continued. "So I wanted to give you the chance to, you know, ask questions, or anything, in a safe place before you hear about it somewhere else."

"Are we going to die?"

The corners of Dad's mouth twitched, and he looked away. "Maybe. They don't know. There's a chance."

He knew his dad was lying, but he knew his dad had to lie, so he didn't call him on it. "Okay."

"But whatever happens, you'll be with me, and with Grandpa. People are going to get a little

crazy. Sad and angry. But we'll be together."

"Why angry?" Sad, he could understand.

"People get funny when they're scared," Dad said. "They look for excuses to feel other things. Things to be mad at."

Like Grandpa. "Okay. When are we going?"

"Do you want to say goodbye to anyone? Stevie or Paul?"

Brandon thumped Captain Crimson against the dirt a few times. "I... no. I don't want to. Is that bad?"

His father hugged him. "No. No, it's okay. You can feel about this however you want, okay champ?"

"Okay." Part of him really wanted to say his goodbyes. He'd never see Stevie or Paul again, probably. Maybe in heaven. Well, Paul, maybe. But it would be... awkward. Better to just go and not make a big deal about it. He could get all emotional around Dad, but not in front of the guys. That'd be like crying in front of Grandpa.

Dad stood, brushing the dirt from his hands. "It'll take a few hours to pack up. Then we'll head up to the cabin."

"Can I come in in a few minutes?"

His father tousled his hair. "Take all the time you need. I can handle the packing."

"I just need a few minutes. Hey dad?"

"Yes?"

"Can we bring your comics from the attic? And maybe read them together?"

His dad turned away quickly. "Sure champ. Anything you want."

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He watched as his Dad headed back into the house, then returned to his toys. He picked up Captain Crimson and took him around the corner of the shed, making the whooshing sound that indicated flight. The Captain landed in front of a brick set on its end in the corner of the yard. He knelt next to it, using the action figure's arms to dig up the dirt in front of it. With the care and patience of an archaeologist, he unearthed a Wonder Woman figure, clearing specks of mud from its face, clearing its blue eyes.

"I'm coming, Mom," he whispered in his own voice, stroking its plastic head with his thumb. "Me and Dad and Grandpa. We're coming."