

Don't
Cosplay with
My Heart

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**ANGELES
COMIC CON**

One

It's no wonder when I see the cheap Gargantua mask I picked up on Free Comic Book Day this past spring on my desk, I put it on and leave it on when I am called down to dinner. Gargantua, my favorite character from Team Tomorrow, is ten feet tall and so is the size of my being pissed off at everything right now.

"Take that mask off, Edan," my dad says when he sees me.

"No," I say. "You can't force me to."

I make myself comfortable at the table. I feel indestructible. He cannot say anything to me with any authority.

"Edan. It is impossible to eat with that on," he says.

"No, it's not, see." I shove the fork into my mouth and chew big and exaggerated. Truth be told, the plastic does cut into the side of my face a little, and it's a bit hard to chew, but not enough to make eating *impossible*.

Nothing is impossible for Gargantua. You don't have to have read every Team Tomorrow comic book to know that.

Right now in my heart, it is like a classic superhero battle between good and evil. It is every feeling all at once run amok. I could go down either path.

“Let Edan be,” my mom says quietly.

“This is one of my last dinners with my family, Mel,” my dad says. “I want it to be nice.”

No matter how delicious the food is in front of us, no matter how many candles are lit, this is not going to be a nice dinner at all.

The past few months, there have been quiet rumbles in the family. My dad has been different. *Cagey*. It started with fights with my mom behind closed doors. Then there were late-night sneak-outs for meetings at the office and worried long phone calls at strange hours. And now it’s all come out. “There’s an inquiry at the corporate head office,” he explains, and Dad has to be *sequestered*.

“You shouldn’t have gotten involved with this mess,” my mom’s voice warbles.

My dad is with a company that deals with payroll for Hollywood productions, and from what I can understand from all of his recent overexplaining and question dodging about the situation we’re in, some of the money meant for one place went to pay for another place and some of the money didn’t get to where it was supposed to end up at all. And now that it’s been discovered, he’s the one left holding the bag.

“Why aren’t Mark and Bobby and Lawrence and Tyler part of the inquiry?” Her voice may be cracking into a million pieces,

but she slams the table with her hands with the force of a person wielding superhuman strength when she asks the question. It startles everyone because it is so unexpected.

“You have to understand the corporate structure,” Dad says, trying to mansplain things to her. “There’s a hierarchy. The team has a plan for how this is going to roll out. I’m going first.”

My mother snorts.

“I was a senior VP at a production company once upon a time,” she says. “I know how these things go.”

Mom pushes her full plate away from her.

“I just can’t,” Mom says, and then it’s as though all of a sudden the fight she had in her just winks away.

I adjust my Gargantua mask and then push my plate away in solidarity.

“May I be excused?” I ask, even though everyone here at this table knows that no one needs permission to do anything anymore. I cannot get into trouble, because whatever he’s allegedly done is way worse than anything that I’ve ever done or likely will ever do.

Unless I go totally rogue like Gargantua did when she was betrayed.

She was one of the original members of the team until she left and changed from good to bad and then back to good-ish again.

Gargantua was fierce and did terrible things when she turned against the team. But can you blame her? When they fought their enemy, Split Second in the Time War, a choice was

made by Team Tomorrow to save the area where New Big City would one day be from winking out of time. It was a cold calculation meant to cause minimum damage to the team, but the result was that Gargantua's whole history was wiped out of time. The team tricked her into sacrificing her past so they could save the future. It was for the greater good, but it devastated her and altered her view of the world.

Gargantua went rogue and systematically destroyed the life of one of her former team members' relatives in revenge.

But of course, that just left her hollow. Most people will go along with anything to keep their past and keep their friends. Maybe that's why Dad was acting like it was all going to be all right. Maybe it's easier.

Instead, Gargantua became a woman without a past and without friends. But that was only until they rebooted the team and started back at issue 1. In comics, the stories always change.

My dad looks from Mom to me, and back to her again. He shakes his head from side to side sadly. He doesn't even try to use his charming smile on us.

There is only raw truth served up at this table now. And it's pretty ugly.

"Do what you want," he sighs. He knows he's lost this round.

My mom and I both quit the table, leaving him looking small and crumpled as he sits alone.

Mom goes to bed, even though it's only 7:00 p.m.

I head to the family room to play video games. Only exploring fantastical realms and destroying evil aliens can get me through

the night. This time while I'm playing the game, I do something that I never do. I make all the *bad* choices. The ones that get me totally into the personality red rather than the blue. I am evil.

It feels really good to not follow my regular path.

Maybe it's the Gargantua mask that makes me bolder in my game-playing choices.

The most interesting thing I notice is that all these parts of the story I had never seen before in this game, my third play through, open up. It is as though I am playing a whole new game and becoming a whole new me.

Maybe I need to be her more and me less.

This kills a few hours, which feels good, but I still have the whole summer to save. Usually, we go on some family trip somewhere. But now that my father will be away, this summer is different, and we're going nowhere and everything feels hard. Not as hard as losing your past hard. Not as hard as going through something totally horrifying hard. Just emotionally hard.

I power down the game and go to my room and try to figure out how to save my summer. That's what Gargantua would do. She is self-rescuing.

"Make your own fun," I say, repeating the mantra that my best friend, Kasumi, always says. I wish she was here and not in Japan for the summer. "Make your own fun," I say again, flipping on my tablet and surfing the net.

I search for things to do for free (or nearly) in Los Angeles in summer.

"Boring. Boring. Boring. Boring."

I reject one thing and then another and then another.

“There is no fun!” I bellow to the action figures and Funko dolls that live stuffed to the brim on the shelf in the corner of my room.

That’s when I see an ad, while catching up on a gaming news site, that Angeles Comic Con is coming to Los Angeles.

It reminds me that Kasumi, who knows about everything cool before anyone else and thinks of things that we should be doing or start doing, had mentioned Angeles Comic Con. She was bummed that she’d be in Japan when it happened and emailed to say we should try going to a comic book convention sometime in the coming year. I agreed.

I’ve never been to a convention before. Not that I haven’t wanted to go. I like nerdy things. It just hasn’t been a thing I’ve done yet. Angeles Comic Con is not a big con. It’s medium size. Just enough celebrity guests but not the biggest ones. Not the hottest exclusives but cool ones. It’s not like the legendary San Diego Comic Con, which is on every nerd’s bucket list, but it is local and something excellent to do this summer.

Kasumi’s not here, but *I* could go. I could check it out. Do a kind of scouting mission for us. I scroll through the guests and events. It’s every kind of thing that I am into. But I still hesitate because I don’t know if I want to do something like that alone. It seems like something that wants to be shared. But my scrolling stops and my mind is made up when I land on their big news announcement of the day. They are going to have a panel with the cast of the upcoming Team Tomorrow film!

That settles it. How could I sit here in my Gargantua mask and not go?

This Angeles Comic Con is something I want to do.

Team Tomorrow. My favorite comic book ever. I lift my hand up to touch the mask I'm still wearing.

I start doing searches on Gargantua and pinning pictures to my various boards and posting them on social media. One website leads me to another to another, and I start learning all kinds of things about Gargantua and the history of Team Tomorrow that I didn't know, and I thought I knew it all.

With an icon like Gargantua and a team like Team Tomorrow, it's pretty easy to fall into a wormhole of information. I get lost for hours. The more I learn the deeper I go.

She's a true antihero.

I may be self-rescuing, but it's always nice to have Gargantua in your corner.

Gargantua is here to save me.

TEAM TOMORROW

Team Tomorrow has been around since 1952. It was created by Jeanne Bernier and Hal Ritko, a husband and wife team. They met overseas during the Korean War. Jeanne was a Franco-Canadian nurse and Hal worked on the newspaper doing war cartoons. They married and moved to New York, where Hal got a job drawing comics for World Comics (WC). They created a bunch of comics, but Team Tomorrow was their legacy.

A classic team favorite is Gargantua. She started off as a flagship member of Team Tomorrow, and it's said that she was modeled after Jeanne. But when Jeanne and Hal's marriage hit bottom after ten years, they divorced, and Gargantua left the core good guys team and became the head of an evil organization. Her minions, all disposable C-list villains, took to calling her *my liege*.

This was probably a rib to Jeanne by Hal, as he was widely quoted as saying that Jeanne was like a tyrant that he had to worship. Of course, due to the fact that Hal still worked at WC and because he was a man, he owned the characters. Jeanne moved back to Canada and sued him

over and over again for the rights to the characters. She never won.

Hal went around calling Jeanne “that French witch” and a bunch of other horrible things. But in the turmoil of their disintegrating marriage and subsequent rights battle, one of the most formidable and iconic female superheroes/villains was born.

Two

Someone knocks on my door.

After a few days of silence filling the house and me giving my father the stink eye while he paced the floors and talked heatedly in his office, or the bathroom, or the backyard, trying desperately to make it all go away, it seems a weird thing to have to go down to Sunday breakfast and say good-bye.

“Edan.” I hear my grandma Jackie on the other side of my bedroom door. Usually, I like to see her. She’s the fun grandparent. The one who lives not too near but not too far. But right now she’s just the reminder that things are not going well in this family. She arrived late last night after her shift at the hospital. Grandma Jackie is a pediatric cardiac surgeon, so she’s no stranger to somber affairs.

She knocks on the door again, this time a bit louder.

“Edan,” Grandma Jackie says again, but this time she opens the door. I’m going to yell at her, but then I stop myself. She is just doing what she’s supposed to be doing. Keeping the family together in this crisis. And so I can’t be mad at her for opening

the door without permission. Isn't that what superheroes do sometimes? Bust down doors to do some saving and ass kicking?

Instead of opening the door and insisting that I come downstairs, I wish she could take her scalpel and fix the heart of this family. But that's not the way it works. You can't operate on a feeling.

"I'm up. I'm up," I say, and throw the blankets off of me.

"Are you still sleeping on your Team Tomorrow sheets?" she asks.

"Always," I say. "I'm never going to be too old for that."

The sheets I'm sleeping on are from the cartoon show, which is the thing that made me fall in love with the team in the first place. I've had them since I was small and they are my go-to sheets. I always feel better when I fall asleep on them. Like the team is going to take care of me while I dream.

"I still have your mother's original Star Wars sheets in storage," she says. "And some other things."

I think it's kind of cool that Grandma Jackie has kept my mom's Star Wars sheets. I wonder if she'd give them to me. I wonder what else she has tucked away that I might think is cool.

"I know this is hard," she says. "But you really need to be downstairs."

I swing myself out of the bed. I have to admit, it's an effort. I feel about as heavy as Gargantua must feel when she goes full mass.

My dad always looks put together, but somehow this morning he looks sharper than usual. He is wearing a very fine suit and his hair is perfectly coiffed. It's hard to look at him straight on, like he's blinding me with how crisp he looks.

My stomach drops, so I stop looking at him and turn to my mom. She is in a frilly bathrobe, which is weird, because she is the kind of person who dresses for breakfast and puts her face on, but right now her eyes are wet and red. A crumpled-up tissue is pushed against her nose. She keeps holding on to the edges of things, like she's going to fall down if she's not steady-ing herself. It makes me feel like this is all a lot worse than I already think it is.

I don't really know how to say good-bye. I kind of stand there at the kitchen island, buttering a bagel while I shuffle and look at my feet.

My dad is the one who breaks the ice.

"I hardly saw you this week, Edan," he says. Dad actually sounds a bit hurt.

He hardly saw me because I wanted to disappear from his view. I didn't want to look at him in his face and think bad thoughts.

"Do you have some plans for the summer?" he asks. He's trying desperately to connect with me before this separation happens. Trying to make small talk as though nothing is happening. That's what he does, that's what he's good at. Charm. Deflection. Misdirection. How did I never see it before?

He is acting guilty even though he insists the charges against him are false. Everyone is looking at me and I wish I could turn invisible. Or time-phase into the floor.

“There’s a comic book convention,” I reluctantly say. “They are making a movie of Team Tomorrow and the cast is going to be there.”

“Your favorite,” he says.

I nod. Surprised that he knows anything about me at all.

“Maybe you could send me a copy of it so I can see what you like about it,” he says. “I think I’ll be doing a lot of reading.”

That kind of punches me in the guts. Here he is looking dapper and trying to be cheery, and Mom is pretty much crying, and I’m being surly, and really *his* whole life is about to change.

I feel like a little girl again. And for one brief second I don’t care if he’s the bad guy in my story. Even if he might be a thief and if the things I’ve overheard are true, that he did mess around with production payrolls. He is my dad, and despite how pissed off I am, I am going to miss him.

I go to him like I’m five years old and don’t know anything about the world, and I throw my arms around him and bury my head in his chest, and he ruffles my hair like when I was little.

“I’ll be back soon,” he says.

The kitchen door opens and Bobby, one of his business partners, steps in. He looks just as dapper and they say some stuff to each other. I don’t know if it’s because I haven’t been able to eat the bagel I made or because my heart is beating really

hard, but everything is kind of in a fog now. It's muffled and it's hard to hear.

Dad turns and waves at us like he's going to get some milk or something and not up north to be put under a magnifying glass.

"Good-bye, then," he says, and then he leaves. He is gone.

Once the door closes behind him, my mom rushes straight to her room. Grandma Jackie sits herself at the kitchen table, nursing a cold cup of coffee. I hover by the closed door, like I can see through it, watching the car that is leaving, driving down the road, all the way to the uncertain future that is ours. I want to be able to see into tomorrow.

"Well, what kinds of plans do you have for today?" Grandma Jackie asks, breaking the silence, trying to keep things normal.

"I think I'm going to go back to bed," I say.

"I think you should go take a walk," she says. "It's a beautiful day."

"I don't think so," I say. "Mom went back to bed, so I think I can go into a cave, too."

Grandma Jackie stares at me for a good long moment, and then she digs into her purse and gives me a twenty-dollar bill.

"I need you to run an errand for me," she says. "Go to the Sunday farmers' market down the street and pick up some fresh flowers. This house could use some color."

I weigh the situation. I could ignore her and go to the family room, turn off all the lights, and keep playing video games. That would be a compromise of a kind. I wouldn't be going back to

bed, I'd be doing something. Or I could take her money, take the walk, and use the change to buy myself a coffee. Because I know that I don't have an allowance anymore. I don't have money. And this is going to be it if I want to ever go out and get a cappuccino again.

It's not unlike when Gargantua, in the battle of the North and South (Team Tomorrow issues 52–58) punched Magnetic Pole so hard that her polarity reversed and she became unable to navigate, going down when she wanted to go up. Going east when she wanted to go west. It wreaked havoc on all of her teammates during a few fights and she had to be grounded. It's one of the reasons Gargantua had to leave. After her family was wiped out of time, she couldn't find north. No one could.

I accept the money without saying a word and pad up to my room to put my clothes on.

There is always time to play games and become darker. A little time in the sun won't change that.

It didn't change Gargantua. She still went dark no matter how much Green Guarder tried to bring her into the sun.

Three

Being outside doesn't make me feel any better. Standing in the middle of the flower tent surrounded by color and smell doesn't make me feel better. Drinking a double doesn't make me feel better.

The only thing that saves the day is a text from Kasumi asking me for a Skype chat.

Do you know how good it feels to see your best friend's face when you are feeling low? *So good.* My heart is lifted by her voice. Her head looks small on my screen, but she is a sight for sore eyes.

"How is Japan?" I ask, sitting at one of the temporary pop-up table tents at the market.

"Oh, it's the best," she says. "I blew my manga and anime budget in two days. And I've taken a ton of great pictures."

Kasumi is a great photographer. She is in Japan because her dad, a cinematographer, is shooting a movie there and took the whole family for summer vacation. After our initial hellos and

blowing kisses and her telling me all about Japan (I want to go there one day) and the movie and the crush she has on one of the girls in the crew, she asks about me.

“Wait, why are you wearing that mask?” she asks.

“I’m trying to pull together a Gargantua costume for Angeles Comic Con,” I say. I’d forgotten that I was wearing it.

“Oh my gosh, jealous!” she says. “We should be going to that together.”

“I figured I’d check it out for us,” I say.

“So you’re going to cosplay?” she asks. “I’d like to cosplay. I’d maybe be Katana or Gamora or Wonder Woman.”

“You’d look great as all of those,” I say.

“Wait,” she says. “I thought you were going to be out of town for it when I mentioned it to you?”

“I’m not now,” I say. “Stuff happened.”

“What?” she asks. I shake my head. I watch as a cat walks across the desk in front of her. And then I realize that I don’t want to say it.

“It’s nothing,” I say.

She opens her eyes wide and makes a face. She knows me too well. You can’t hide anything from your best friend, especially when you’ve known each other since fourth grade. She knows everything about my face and all of my tells. Not even this mask can cover up the way I purse my mouth.

“Stuff,” I say. “My dad had to go away. So the summer is kind of messed up.”

“What’s up?” she asks. “Are they separating or something?”

“Something like that,” I say. Which in Kasumi’s mind means yes. I don’t correct her, because my parents separating is way more understandable than my dad being sequestered because the entertainment payroll company he works for may or may not have done something shady and there might be a trial. I don’t tell her that I feel a dread in the pit of my stomach that I can’t get rid of.

“Oh, man, Edan, I’m so sorry,” she says.

I am glad I am wearing the mask so that she can’t see I’m about to cry.

“It totally sucks. My mom is a wreck. My grandma Jackie is here taking care of us.”

Kasumi puts her arms out to hug the camera.

“Virtual hug,” she says. “Virtual hugs.”

I lift my arms up to hug her back. Somehow, even though her arms are thousands of miles away, the very act of the virtual hug does make me feel better.

“So instead I’m going to be doing stuff around here,” I say. “It’s all right.”

I make it sound like I’m really busy, even though everyone seems to be mostly away for the summer doing something. The people who are in town, like Yuri Ross, who I have a crush on, and the Ferrar twins, Joss and Gwen, have asked me to do stuff, but I can’t afford to do the things they want to do, so I just keep brushing them off to the point where I’m sure they’ve pretty much given up on me.

“Well, you know who’s a big nerd? Yuri! You should ask to go to Angeles Comic Con with him,” Kasumi says.

I look at her like I’m pretend shocked that she knows who my biggest crush is. I have been crushing on him from afar all sophomore year. I call him “the glancer” because even though we barely speak to each other, he glances at me a lot in class.

“I don’t know that I can just ask him,” I say. “We don’t know him that well.”

“Sure you can!” Kasumi says. She’s one million times braver than I am. “He posted online that he was going. His mom is on a panel or something. He has a spare badge that he’s been trying to get rid of for weeks.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say. I remember seeing that.

“I’m so glad I don’t like boys,” Kasumi says.

Then Kasumi and I troubleshoot a bunch of ways that I could approach Yuri and still seem cool and not desperate. We settle on me sending a casual text the day of the convention. Like, *Hey there, I’m here.*

“I’m most excited because there is going to be a Team Tomorrow panel, with the director and cast.”

“Get out!” Kasumi says. And even though she really only likes the cartoon and never really crossed over to reading the comic books, she starts doing a little dance in front of the screen. That’s what friends do. They comfort you. They know you. And I wish I weren’t lying and that Kasumi were here and not thousands of miles away and in a different time zone

so that we could have a sleepover and I could tell her the truth.

I want to pretend for just a little longer that everything is exactly the same as it is supposed to be.

That my life is right side up and not upside down.