

The Tyranny of Gargamel- Santa's Adopted Son

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The camcorder's small video display shows a long shot of a room. A simple wooden stool is set up at the bottom of the frame. The wall behind the stool is painted like a candy cane, alternating red and white stripes. Directly behind the stool is a huge fireplace, trimmed in garland with a small fire crackling inside.

The shot stays this way for a few moments, and then a very small man walks into view. He's dressed in shorts and a short-sleeved shirt with pointy-toed flip-flops. The entire ensemble is a shade of green that is, if possible, a shade or two brighter than the wall behind. The man walks up to the stool and hops on top of it with a grunt. His stubby legs barely poke over the end. He takes a deep breath, and begins to speak.

"Uh. Hello." He says in a deep voice. He stops, touches his neck with his fingers and then clears his throat. When he speaks again the deep voice is gone, replaced with a cute little high-pitched voice. "Hello. My name is Balthazar. I am an Elf in the employ of Mr. Christopher Kringle, more commonly known by his pseudonym, Santa Claus. I am recording this from the Gift Wrapping Room in the heart of Santa's gift manufacturing operation on the uncharted Caribbean Island known as 'the North Pole.' I know that it is the common story that we live at the actual North Pole located at 0 degrees longitude. We did, up until the 60's. But then Santa got turned on to the pot when he visited the Beatles during the height of Beatlemania. We hung around up north for a few months afterward, but Santa decided living in the freezing cold was harshing his buzz so he bought an entire Caribbean island and moved the entire operation to the warmer climate. It turns out the new location is quite ideal. The reindeers love the sun, and being able to go outside has helped Santa a great deal with his weight problems.

Santa is, of course, independently wealthy, having inherited his fortune from Baron Von Claus, a man who cornered the toy market in Germany in the 1840's with his blockbuster toy 'The wheel and the stick.' There were some lean years during the early 90's but once Santa was able to lock down distribution in China in front of the always pesky Jesus, things have gone back to normal.

At least financially.

From time immemorial we elves have lived with Santa with Mrs. Claus and the reindeers; first at the Pole; and now here on the island. They've never had any children so it was just us. Everything was just perfect. Sure, there was the odd orphan, but they always grew up sweet and good and had Christmas movies of their own made about them.

And then, on the Christmas Eve of '96 Santa discovered an eight year old boy stowed away on his sleigh. Nothing has ever been the same.

The boy's name was Gargamel. He said he didn't remember his last name but I think he knew it just fine. I think he just didn't want Santa to be able to check out his story. But that's just conjecture. What is for sure is that the first day Gargamel showed up his hair was long and dirty and his many layers of clothes stunk like reindeer shit. We elves felt very sorry for the boy- we really did. He told us he was an orphan, living on the streets for almost a year before he saw Santa's sleigh landing on a roof of a large apartment building. He made his way up, climbed underneath a pile of emptied toy sacks

and promptly fell asleep. He didn't wake up until Santa found him in the early hours of Dec. 26th.

We gave him hot chocolate with a candy cane in it and fed him all the gumdrops he could eat. Once he was cleaned up the boy was adorable, his eyes were almost preternaturally large. They practically glistened with innocence. So much so that we should've been suspicious- but we weren't.

After a long discussion with Mrs. Claus they decided Santa wasn't getting any younger and that they could possibly groom Gargamel to take the Santa Claus mantle. They adopted him and gave him their last name, Kringle. In the beginning, Gargamel fit right in. He was smart and funny, even if his jokes did tend a little toward the mean side. He had a knack of going right at your weak spot. But still, he was always ready to give a hand whenever anyone needed it and he never complained, even when it was his turn to swamp out the reindeer stalls.

And so the first five months passed. Then, one afternoon Pee-Wee elf refused to go with Gargamel to the storeroom to get a new batch of magic dust. He was really adamant about it. In the end, Yohan went with him instead. The refusal was a big deal among the elves. Gargamel was Santa's adopted son. Disrespecting him was like disrespecting Santa himself- and we elves never disrespect Santa. Santa's the greatest.

The incident ended up causing Pee-Wee to be called in front of the Elf Disciplinary Board. At first he refused to talk. But when his syrup ration was threatened Pee-Wee spilled the beans. He said he didn't want to go with Gargamel because he'd hung him upside down by his foot over a cliff two days previously while they were out gathering mangos for lunch. No one believed him and Pee-Wee had to eat his sugar raw for the next two weeks. But through it all, Pee-Wee insisted he was telling the truth.

If Pee-Wee would've been an isolated incident I wouldn't be here speaking to this camera. But it didn't stop. In fact, Pee-Wee disappeared four months after the incident without a trace. Gargamel himself suggested perhaps he'd run away because he didn't think anyone believed his outrageous story.

And yet, over the next few months, the rumors about Gargamel's sadism started to become quite prevalent. I didn't know what to think until the first time Gargamel caught me by myself. He grabbed me by the wrists and stretched until I thought he was going to tear my arms off. When he told me that was what he was going to do, the look in his eyes, Santa help me, I believed him. When he was done hurting me, the sick bastard was careful not to do anything that would leave marks, he said I had better keep my mouth shut about it.

Unless I wanted to end up with Pee-Wee.

For ten long years I never told anyone about that incident. But even though I didn't talk, quite a few others did. Before long, everyone knew not to let Gargamel get you alone. But it was hard.

He's sneaky, so sneaky. He's done something to almost every elf on the island at one time or another over the past decade. But on every occasion the victim was alone. We've been actively trying to catch him at it for 5 years now.

The difference between Gargamel in public and alone is terrifying. If there is more than one elf around he is almost disgustingly sweet. His gigantic eyes were so massive, so convincingly harmless that I found myself questioning whether I had

misinterpreted what he was trying to do when he stretched my arms as far as they would go.

When Santa is around it's even worse. The helpful, enthusiastic, happy-go-lucky tone in his voice is so extreme even we elves, known for our jolly nature, even find it a bit overwhelming. But the second Santa turns his back- even for a minute- he'll pinch you or give you a nasty kick. Even when he was ten his foot was gigantic. By the time he was fourteen he had a growth spurt and was big enough that he could kick us like an oversized footballs.

In the ten years he's been with us seven elves have "run away." Prior to Gargamel's arrival, no elf had ever left the North Pole, and still Santa, blinded by his fatherly love for the boy, is unable to see what has been obvious to we elves for years now. The boy is pure evil. Like the kind of evil that makes you want to shave the little bastard's head to see if there is a birthmark of 3 sixes.

Most of us figured he would get better once he grew up, but if anything, he's gotten worse. On top of that, for his 12th birthday Santa gave Gargamel a kitten, which he promptly named Azreal. That cat is just as evil as his master. It won't hesitate to take a swipe at you. But he does it with retracted claws. Like Gargamel, Azreal the cat is sneaky. Once Azreal entered the picture we knew it was hopeless; now he had a partner in crime. Together they tortured us and caused us all to live our lives in fear of him.

Only one elf was foolish enough to try to bring any of this up to Santa directly. Poor little guy. Not only does he have the dubious distinction of being the only elf to actually get Santa angry enough to yell, he's also the only elf ever exiled from North Pole Island. Last we heard he was unemployed, in Greenland.

Needless to say, no one tried to convince Santa again. Time passed, and we learned to live like sheep penned in with a wolf- a wolf that would only attack if you were by yourself. We were careful, and spent most of our time being happy that sooner or later the boy would leave and we, with our 400 year life-spans, would go back to business as usual. We also intended on rigging the sleigh with a motion alarm so no more orphans can stow away on Santa's sleigh.

Then came the bombshell that changed everything.

We were at dinner when Santa stood up and told everyone that he had an announcement. As he talked his stomach rumbled, yes, like a bowl full of jelly.

"I want to take this occasion to tell all of you are loved. I want you to know I am grateful every day for all of the wonderful friends I have. And you, Rita..." He bent over and kissed Mrs. Claus on the cheek. "You are the light of my life. But most of all, I want to take this opportunity to tell you, Gargamel, just how wonderful it has been watching you grow up."

All of us elves exchanged nervous glances- Santa was usually only effusive like this on Christmas. It was July.

"Now you all know how much I love this job, but I'm not getting any younger. The fact of the matter is, I'm not the young wiper-snapper Santa anymore and that bag of toys is mighty heavy."

We all looked from Santa to Gargamel. He sat grinning at Santa like an angel. I got a lump in my throat, I knew something very bad was coming. I felt it approaching, like, well... like Gargamel.

"But last night I was talking with Mrs. Claus and telling her that my back had really been bothering me since I threw it out doing a cannonball into the pool last month at the Summer Solstice party. And it got me and Mrs. Claus to talking about retirement. In the course of that conversation Rita and I realized that even though I've crossed the entire world a few hundred times in the course of my duties, I've never actually had a chance to really see it. Not in the daylight, and certainly not in a great big hurry. I don't have to tell any of you how hard it is to keep up, even with time dilation and quantum sled technology. Not only that. Rita hasn't been anywhere. She's lived on this island and at the North Pole. Do you people realize she's never seen a mountain? Or a prairie?" He frowned. "I didn't realize. Which, means, sadly, that I've been a crappy husband. This is not a mistake I plan on continuing."

Now you have to realize, at that moment, I've never been so torn. On the one hand, I heard what he was saying about Mrs. Claus and never having gone anywhere in his life. I think he should've realized that statement was true for us too, but I guess that's beside the point. On the other hand, I thought I saw where he was going with his speech- and I sorta felt like I was going to puke on my chocolate cake.

He continued, "So I am going to retire. Or at the very least take a very long sabbatical. This afternoon..."

"Here it comes." I thought to myself.

"I had a talk with Gargamel and asked him if he would perhaps like to take over the full duties of Santa Claus, at least for the interim. And if he likes the job, I will turn over the entire operation. I think he's going to do an absolutely fantastic job!"

Santa smiled his gigantic smile and walked over to Gargamel. He leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek- a big wet one that sounded to me like a body hitting the ground after being thrown from a tenth story window.

We were stunned. I saw it coming and I was still stunned.

I knew one thing immediately: Once Santa was gone; the true malignance of Gargamel's character would come to the fore. The repressed maniac we've lived with for the past decade will come into bloom.

But that was only the beginning. Sitting there at the dinner table, I knew Santa's retirement would eventually mean the end of Christmas. We wouldn't stay. We're dedicated, but we're not suicidal. It's not like there is an endless number of magical elves in the world. We're it. So we'd have to go. Maybe start working for whatever guy runs Hanukkah. We wouldn't want to go, but we'd have no real choice. And believe me, if we left, Christmas would be kaput.

Don't get me wrong, having Santa out front has been really good for us. He does the media, is fantastic with kids, and has the physical bulk necessary to handle the gigantic bags of toys that go along with the job. But that's just delivery. We do everything else, planning, design, manufacture, and packaging. We're the one's out front negotiating licensing rights and fighting the occasional patent violation lawsuit. Think about it- Santa really only works one night a year.

Ours is like a one-man show on a global Broadway stage. Even though there's only one guy out on the stage, there are 50 others behind him, doing a majority of the work. The guys who make the lights go on and the sound work. The actor gets all the credit but without us- they'd be in the dark.

Something had to be done.

That night, long after the time we were all usually in bed, every elf on North Pole Island met in a secret meeting to decide our reaction. I went to that meeting knowing I was probably going to have to be the one who said the things everyone was thinking, but didn't want to say; and I was right.

Elves are naturally optimistic and kind creatures. It is built into our DNA. Most of the time our nature's blend very nicely with our chosen profession- it is good to be optimistic and kind when your job is to make toys for every good child on earth. It is not good to be optimistic and kind when deciding how to deal with a homicidal killer. Everyone at the meeting counseled being passive. They said we should take a wait and see attitude. 'Maybe things will look up.' They said. I let them have their say.

Then it was my turn to speak. I stood up on my chair and waited until I had complete silence before I started.

"My fellow elves, I understand the desire to expect the best from life. But know this, we are dealing with a Hitler-style threat, not a Saddam Hussein style threat. Gargamel will mean the end of Christmas, and maybe the death of all of us. Maybe even both. There is only one thing to do."

I stopped and waited for someone to ask me. I couldn't bring myself to say it unbidden.

"We have to kill Gargamel." I responded when I got my requested question.

There was a collective gasp that came at me from every direction. As if every elf in the room hadn't thought about it. Especially since every single one of us has felt the sort of pain Gargamel so enjoys dishing out. Sometimes the elf bullshit can get a bit thick- you know what I mean?

Anyway, after a minute or two of everyone acting shocked and disbelieving, it was unanimously agreed that we would have to kill Gargamel, and very soon.

Big Mouth elf came running into the meeting, interrupting our plans.

'I just overheard Gargamel on the phone. He is ordering a half a dozen pit bulls- the hunting variety. The killing variety!'

Big Mouth's announcement was the final nail in Gargamel's coffin. After that, no one even tried to pretend we weren't going to kill him. The trick was how to do it. In very little time we had it figured out.

Our plan was simple- the best kind in my opinion. Since we cook all of the food and do all of the serving, it would be easy to put a slow acting poison in his supper. Then, at night we could finish him off while he was weak from the poison, take his body, weigh it down, and dump him into the ocean.

Then we'd all play dumb.

"Maybe he just ran away." We would all say, trying to look sympathetic.

Santa would be sad for a while, but eventually he would get over it. He certainly would never think of foul play. We're Santa's elves!

Of course it didn't work out that nicely. Not for me. That's why I'm making this recording, so that Santa will know what really happened some day. I'm going to wait five years and then I'm going to mail this tape to him and hope that he will forgive me and understand. He's Santa, he always sees the best in people. It hurts me to say this, but sometimes he's trustful to a fault.

Anyway, we poisoned his food the way we'd planned, but it worked too quickly or we put in too much or something. Gargamel began to lurch around the room, throwing

up blood and chunks of food- it was really gross. When his body was done twitching, with Santa and Mrs. Claus knelt down next to his body, there was blood coming out of the corners of his eyes, like the villain in the latest James Bond movie.

Adorable little elves or not, Santa knew someone had poisoned Gargamel. He was naïve, but he wasn't an idiot. He told us that one of us was guilty and that he would wait until the next morning for someone to come to him and confess. Otherwise he would call in the authorities and close down the North Pole, effectively pulling the plug on Christmas.

So I took the rap. I said I killed Gargamel because I was so jealous of not getting to be Santa when Kris decided to retire. Just before coming here to record this I left a note on Santa's chest of drawers declaring my guilt. He'll find it in the morning.

My friends are currently loading up a boat with the provisions I'll need to get away. I heard a rumor once that the next island to the west is inhabited by the Easter Bunny and a bunch of sprites that help him make up the baskets. Maybe I can hook on there for a while.

Well, I guess that's about it."

The elf slowly climbs down from the stool, his cheeks covered with tears. He walks straight toward the camera until his face completely fills the frame.

"I'm sorry Santa. I love you. Merry Christmas."

And there, the tape ends.