

# Victorious

by Alex Dankers

Claus Magnus looks like a pack mule today, with two axes strapped to his back. His dew-soaked size 20 boots stomp in the early spring frost and crush dirt laced with icicles. Branches snap under his steps, and the dawn air echoes with the crackles. Claus reaches a manmade clearing. A couple hundred trees had been logged, stripped, and taken from the woods. It's the logging operation Claus and his coworkers are working on. Claus has been working in this industry for thirty years, inhaling sawdust from obliterated trunks and the soft sap scents. His coworkers wave to him and he joins them for the day. Unlike his fellow lumberjacks, however, Claus thrives on the daily routine. He needs to feel the pang of an axe against timber to feel complete.

Even as a child, Claus had an inextinguishable drive. He was the scrawniest boy in school for years, a skeleton amongst people. His almost sickly form was seen as a sign of weakness. Claus remembers three upperclassmen ganging up on him. He remembers them knocking him to the ground, but he struggled through, rolling to the side and pulling them down one by one. He remembers that, by the end of the fight, the three of them were on the ground instead of him. One had a broken nose and a concussion, another carried three broken ribs, and the last had a broken pelvis and needed emergency care. Claus had a few bruises, but was otherwise fine. There were no witnesses besides the victims. They never said what happened beyond this: they started the fight. Claus would boast that he finished it.

Claus wasn't a one-hundred pound boy for long though. Puberty was sudden, shifting him quickly from a meek figure to a hulking mass of a student. He graduated weighing slightly over 300 pounds and he stood a few heads taller than most of the class. It was only a small graduating class of twenty students for the small town, and most of them were destined to stay in the town for their entire lives. Various employers went to each graduation, eager to recruit healthy young workers before they had a chance to escape the town. Claus had considered going to law school, but he became one of those trapped by the town's curse after he was hired for the lumber mill.

That was when he met his boss, at graduation. He is a small man and he always needed to lean up at Claus whenever they talk. Claus hears a shout and notices the small man patting the flatbed of his truck, inviting Claus to talk. They converse over lunch.

Despite thirty years working with the boss, Claus keeps himself distant. His work and private lives stay separate. Claus only divulges information as it becomes relevant to his well-being on the job; most of the workers only know him as 'the big guy.' His coworkers know he has a child because of the day he asked for time off to care for Lucas. They knew he had a lover from the time Claus called in to say he needed to visit his spouse in the hospital. Beyond these vague statements, Claus remained an enigma, purely by choice.

"Hey, Claus, how old is the kid now?" his boss asks with a mouthful of sandwich. It's harmless, generalized small talk.

Claus finishes chewing and swallows. "He turned seven in January. It will be his first day in the first grade tomorrow. I'm so proud of him."

"That's great Claus, I'm really happy for you." His boss takes another bite of his sandwich. "Hey listen, my tenth anniversary is coming up next week and I'm having a little party. It'd be great for you to come up, maybe bring the wife and have a few drinks." The wife. Claus' heart sucks inward, like quicksand is in his ribcage, pulling all his organs deeper inside his chest. "There will be a playhouse and whatever for the kids, it'll be fun."

Claus bites at his thumbnail. "Oh, yeah, I'll be there, it sounds like," he looks down at the rest of his sandwich. The cold salami cuts blend together and look like flesh, mayonnaise oozes from the sides and wets the bread with grease. He tosses it to the ground and three blue jays swarm it, each giving a raspy caw. "It sounds like a good time."

\*\*\*\*\*

A single tree sits in the middle of the field with a girth unlike all the others around it. The largest tree harvested in Claus' life is a twig by comparison. Claus crashes down on a stump and looks up in awe at this indomitable spirit, the one that he said the workers couldn't touch. This was his tree and he would take it down the old fashioned way.

Claus gently sets an axe to the left of the stump and unstraps another, laying it across his lap. He will give the tree until sunrise. He always does. The tree is coated with wounds from past attempts to take it down, each unsuccessful. Large bulges grow around them. This tree mocks Claus and his very profession, laughs at his pitiful attempts to slice it in half. It is a costly mistake for the tree; there is nothing he cannot cut down to size. In his fifty years of life, only this tree has taken the brunt of Claus' wrath and stood strong to tell the tale.

The sunlight begins to creep down the large tree, ebbing closer to Claus. It falls on his rough brown vest and flannel shirt. Eventually, it reaches down to his thick overalls and the back of the stump. He observes the tree before him and moves a callused hand over the bulging, scarred bark, the rough grit scraping against him, sap spread thinly over his palm. He feels a fresher wound, one cut by him over time, the deepest in the behemoth. He grasps an axe with both hands and pulls it behind him.

He swings. A solid thunk sounds from the wood, the axe head digging in deep. He rips the axe out. He swings. He cuts into the tree with fervor, gaining a joy he never could with his coworkers. It's a joy seeped in solitude, a joy ringing in the ache of his muscles, a joy one can only gain from weeks and months of pent up frustration and stress released with each coming action. His body is toxic, but with each swing of an axe, the venom fades from his body and he is left cleansed. Claus is sweating heavily, the day catching up to him. He removes his vest and continues to hack into the tree until the sun hovers above his head. His lower back begins to lock up and he begins panting, nearly exhausted. Nearly. He sets aside a dulled axe and lifts another, surpassing his limits and digging deeper into the tree until the sky bleeds orange.

This has happened for the past year. Once a week, Claus heads to the clearing early in the morning. He prepares two freshly repaired axes, and he leaves for the clearing before the break of dawn. He sits on his stump, staring at the one mighty tree. Wind knocks over the few other stragglers, small saplings grow or wither, seasons change, but the large spruce in the center always remains.

\*\*\*\*\*

Claus looks in the mirror. His beard is turning grey. He strokes the aging mound of hair and sees the large man before him. He thinks of his baby pictures that his mom kept in frames in their living room; he had been so small. He had been a premature birth weighing in at only four pounds: perfectly healthy, but tiny. The doctors assured his parents he'd grow and, eventually, they were right. Claus hadn't seen the doctor since he was young. He imagines how the doctor's face would contort if he knew the size of the preemie from fifty years ago.

Claus' husband, Richard, calls from downstairs; breakfast is ready. Claus shouts that he will be down in a minute. He stares in the mirror, the image of a four pound baby has distorted into a greying giant; his curious newborn eyes are now sunken and filling with tears. Claus lathers up some shaving cream and picks up a razor, taking pleasure in the decimation of the greyer hairs. The razor is a time machine. He is no longer fifty, but thirty again, young and dumb and thirty. For the first time in years, his face was naked.

He walks downstairs to Richard and their son, Lucas. Lucas pokes at a small pile of scrambled eggs with a fork, having no interest in finishing them. Richard stares at Claus' face. Claus squats next to Lucas and gently bumps his arm with a closed hand.

"Gonna finish those off, little guy?" His voice is still beastly, despite him lowering the tone to his 'Lucas Voice'. It's a slightly less raspy, baby-talk voice he had used since they adopted Lucas. Lucas turns to answer, but instead gasps. "Daddy, your whiskers are gone!" Lucas reaches up, his soft damp hands slide down Claus' face without resistance.

"Yeah, Daddy decided to take them off." Claus catches Richard's gaze.

“Is that what you’ve been doing for the past twenty minutes?” Richard sighs. “Your breakfast is probably cold by now.”

“That’s alright; I’ll just nuke it real quick.” Lucas pushes his scraps off a small plastic tray onto Claus’ full plate. Pieces of scrambled egg raining down on a criss-cross of bacon strips, a group of sausage links, two pieces of French toast stained and widened by absorbed syrup, a portion of hash browns taking up half of the plate, and two sunny-side up eggs, the yolks blanketed with pepper. Claus opens the microwave door and sets the plate in, dialing the timer for 59 seconds; when he was younger, he would always feel sorry for nine buttons and how they never get used, and it became a habit of his to push them whenever he could.

“I don’t think I’ve even seen you without some scruff, actually. Wow. Fifteen years and I haven’t seen you without scruff. I’m going to go ahead and sit down and reevaluate my life.” Richard pulls a chair quickly to the side, dramatically mock-fainting into it. “Wow wow wow, it’s a new world, new changes, new Claus.”

“Well, it’s a new day for our big boy.” Richard’s eyes narrow at this excuse. Richard had noticed the greying hairs before Claus, but he doesn’t interrupt Claus’ speech, now addressed at Lucas and a few notes softer. “Your first day of first grade, huh? Who’s your teacher again?”

Lucas looks up, his hair freshly trimmed in a first-day-of-school haircut. “Mrs. Smith! She’s the good teacher!” His parents chuckle at the honesty of a six-year old. The microwave beeps; Claus pulls his refreshed breakfast out and sets it on the kitchen table. Richard eyes his watch

“Lucas, we have to get in the car and leave soon, okay? Do you have all your things packed up, are your shoes tied, do you have your lunch money with you, remember you have to give it to the secretary or you can’t eat at lunch!” Richard rattles off necessities and Lucas nods his head, interjecting a quick “Yeah!” whenever appropriate.

Lucas hops from his seat, thumping toward the front door in a hurry. Claus interrupts his steps halfway. “Aren’t you going to give Daddy a kiss before you go?”

Lucas leaps to Claus and pecks him on the cheek. “Bye Dad, say hi to Barrett for me!” He thuds across the dining room to the door once more. Richard prompts Lucas through with quick gestures, as if shooing away an unwanted cat. He turns to Claus. Claus shoves a large forkful of potato and egg in his mouth, a piece of bacon in his free hand rushes in as well.

“Is there anything you want to talk about before we head off?” Richard crosses his arms, his brow furrows slightly upward. Claus shakes his head and puts his hand over his full mouth.

“No, I’m fine, Rich.”

Richard gives a quick grin, his cheeks slightly forced into it. “Alright, I’ll see you tonight then. Be safe.” He gives Claus a quick kiss on the cheek and feels the freshly shaven skin with his hand, giving a quick giggle of appreciation. He begins to walk out the door, but is stopped by a sudden shout of “Wait!” Richard turns to Claus.

Claus is biting his thumbnail. He moves his hand and speaks up, “The boss uh…” he stares at his gnawed fingertips. “He invited me to a party sometime and told me to bring you guys for a change.”

Richard's concerned expression softens. "Oh? And do you want to actually go?" He always knows how to ask the hard questions, the questions Claus was truly contemplating.

Claus nods his head. "Yeah, I think we should go."

Richard smiles. "I'm glad that's settled then. Have a good day, dear, we really need to go now. Love you!" Richard rushes out the door, shouting a quick final goodbye as it shuts behind him. Claus sighs. Richard can read him too well, seeing Claus' motivation behind each small action through intuition and fifteen years of companionship. Claus slowly finishes his breakfast and rinses off his plate. He notices the rest of the dishes in the sink and begins scrubbing them.

Claus was going to see the tree again today. He once took Lucas when he was four, carrying the child down the trail on one mammoth shoulder, holding those small hands in one palm. He moved Lucas quickly to the other shoulder; his back regularly beginning to grow sore.

"Hey, Lucas. See that?" He pointed at the tree with his free hand. It stood tall, bearing a large, horizontal bulge that had grown all around it. "That's Daddy's friend. That tree is the only thing stronger than Daddy in the whole world." Lucas leaned backwards, nearly parallel to the ground, and stared straight up at the canopy. An impressed coo involuntarily escaped his small lips.

"What's he called?" he'd asked.

Claus pondered for a moment. He remembered his grandfather telling him various name meanings. Claus would ask 'What does Claus mean?' and, like a name encyclopedia, his grandfather replied, 'Claus means victory of the people!' And he would ramble on. Claus' mom's name meant kind-hearted, his father's name meant hopeful, but, more than any name, Claus' grandfather loves his own. 'My name, oh, I like my name best: Barrett! It means strong as a bear, and, I'll tell you what, it's true.' He would tell stories of his accomplishments at work and at war, describing himself as a fiery soul, striking fear into a savage world.

"That's Barrett. And your Dad is going to be stronger than him someday, Lucas."

\*\*\*\*\*

Richard, Claus, and Lucas arrive at the house in an SUV. It's a log cabin styled, two-story building near the top of the biggest hill in town; the only better view is from the hospital. Claus can easily pick out Barrett from the cabin. Claus has one hand on the back of his neck. He is chewing his fingernails of the other. Richard slaps it away, telling him to stop. Claus apologizes. They knock on the door. After about ten seconds, the door creaks open. Live piano music leaks through the cracks. The boss is on the other end of the knob.

The boss offers a 'come in' gesture with his arms. "Heeey..." He notices Richard and Lucas next to Claus and registers that they are his family. "...eeey! Come on in; here let me take your jacket." The boss takes Richard and Claus' jackets and hangs them on a coatrack. "The kids' area is over back there; we have waiters around with drinks when you need them. Go on, mingle! I'll

just talk with Claus for a minute.” Richard offers a brief smile and leads Lucas to the kids’ area. The boss pulls Claus aside.

“You could’ve told me you liked guys you know.” His voice is a tone lighter than usual, without the harshness of authority in it. It’s the tone of a concerned friend. “I feel like such an asshole now, telling you to bring your wife.” He slaps his right temple with his hand.

Claus bites at a fingernail again, but remembers Richard smacking his hand away. He moves his hand to his neck. “No, it’s okay, you couldn’t have known, don’t worry about it.”

The boss pats Claus on the back. “Hey, I just wanna apologize, alright? I may have accidentally said some things over the years that maybe rubbed you the wrong way...” He pauses. “You know, like the wife thing. I just want all my men to be happy, I hope you never took anything I said too seriously.” He takes his hand off Claus’ shoulder and playfully punches him in the arm. “Hey, come on, let’s get some drinks now, huh?” Claus feels free from the trap in his chest and spends the rest of the evening celebrating.

\*\*\*\*\*

It’s five in the morning on Saturday. Claus can’t sleep. He leans up and feels his back, lightly pulsing. He puts on a flannel shirt and jacket, Claus tosses back two painkillers and figures he’ll go see Barrett early today. He wanders into the living room, noticing the television screen glowing on Lucas’ face. Claus plops down on a couch cushion. His son is fixated on the screen, stretched across the floor with his chin in his hands. The screen shines on him, like a holy artifact in an adventure film.

A cartoon walrus is chasing a dolphin onscreen. “Whatcha up to, buddy?”

“Cartoons!” Lucas answers quickly. His voice is a bit loud for five in the morning and also sluggish; he skipped some sleep to get downstairs early.

Claus leans forward and stands. “Well, tell Dad when he gets up that I went to see Barrett, okay?”

“Okay, bye!”

Claus walks to the door and grabs one sharpened axe. “I love you, little man!”

“Love you too!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Claus trudges along the path he has worn into the ground over the years. It had rained the night before. His boots slam down into mud, and it splashes up onto his overalls. He slips forward a few times, but regains balance quickly before falling entirely. He stands at Barrett’s trunk. Claus has been making progress seeing Barrett twice a week in an attempt to finally fell the spruce. The night sky is covered with grey clouds, the outline of the moon faintly peeking through them. Claus pulls his axe behind him and lashes it forward, deep a fresh sap-filled gash. The

head becomes lodged in the muck of the wound. Claus pushes his foot to the tree and rips the axe out. It flies from his palms into the mud behind him. Claus is sweating and panting hard. His back is throbbing. He picks up the axe and steadies himself in front of the tree. He pulls the axe behind him. He swings forward and the axe becomes solidly stuck once more. Claus sighs and tugs at the axe handle, wiggling hard. With one great heave, the handle snaps. Claus lands hard on his back. Pain, searing pain, spikes to his skull, and he passes out.

\*\*\*\*\*

Claus wades through his mind. It is a tedious course and it bogs him down with each thought he has. The heavy burdens of dreams, fears, and memories pass him at every moment.

He sees himself, Richard, and Lucas on the beach. He always promised Richard they would all go to a beach sometime. He would assure them that it doesn't even need to be a fancy beach like in Hawaii, but it could be a simple visit to the coast. The thought of escaping the small town, if only for a week, was exhilarating.

This dream shifts to a fear deep in his mind; he always imagines fears at work, the fear of his two lives becoming intertwined. They're talking about sex over the lunch break and a worker comes up to him, probing at him, "Hey, you get any pussy lately?" Claus shakes his head and bites at his fingernails. It's just a fear, but it seems so real. He can feel blood droplets gathering at his fingertip and spreading along his nail's edge. One of the workers chuckles, "It's probably for the best, you'd probably tear her in half. I mean, look at you." Chuckles snowball into screeches of laughter. Claus fidgets. "Or maybe you're just a fag or something. Can you even imagine? You'd have to rip their asshole, huh?" They continue laughing. Claus bites harder on his fingers and tastes his blood.

The workers fade away and are replaced by a table with Richard, Lucas, and Mrs. Smith seated around it. More fears again. It's a parent/teacher conference. Claus is running late. He opens the door and comes up behind Richard. He asks how it's going. The teacher stops her discussion with Richard. "Well, no wonder he's slow, two dads? He must be confused is all." Claus slams the table and screams at her. Lucas starts crying. Richard picks him up and takes him to the car. Lucas' screeching makes Claus feel like a failure, even when it is only imagined, even when it is only an unrealized fear. Claus sobs, he's crying, screaming in his own mind, begging it to let him wake up and set him free and to let him feel sane again in his own head.

Mrs. Smith and her table turn into mist and rearrange into a new form. A two-story log cabin the boss's from earlier in the week. The boss opens the door and the piano music sneaks through. He is about to ask how Claus is doing, but is stricken with laughter. This fear had plagued Claus all week, this fear of rejection, from the tailgate to the ride up the driveway to the moment the boss answered the door he was sinking in this fear. Tears gather in the boss's eyes and he giggles. "Look! Look! Claus really was a fag the whole time  
Now Claus in high school and only one-hundred pounds again. He sees the three seniors he

fought. But Claus can't move. They push him to the ground and kick him. They kick his back, his ribs, his groin; one kicks him in the face. They laugh. Cackle. It sounds like the giggling of a sociopath killing a dog, a screeching hyena bark. The leader jumps on his chest, slams his head on the pavement, punches his eyes and Claus knows this is no simple fear, this is a memory, this is something that happened and he never fought back.

His eyes are already swollen shut, he can't see, can't cry, and the leader is screaming faggot faggot faggot stupid fucking faggot and in the very next moment, Claus is hearing his breathing through a respirator. A doctor is telling his mom he's lucky to be alive. There is a concussion, a horribly deformed nose, some broken ribs, and a broken pelvis. Claus still can't open his eyes. His eyelids seem to be replaced with balloons and with the slightest pinpoint, he thinks they'll pop. He has a migraine. His back is pounding. The doctor says they'll keep him on advanced trauma life support for a few more days. He's on life support. He's on life support He's on life support. Claus opens his eyes, and he is breathing through a mask as he had over thirty years ago. Richard is sitting next to him, holding his hand. There is a torrent outside. The occasional boom of thunder shakes the building. They're both crying. Claus was crying while he was under. He opens his mouth, but it's impossible to talk. His throat is thick with phlegm. He developed pneumonia. He breathes in with the aid of the respirator. He tries to talk, but his throat stings, like a jagged rock is jammed in the center. He mumbles.

"Rich... Rich, I hurt. I hurt bad."

"I know, I know, shhh. It'll all be okay."

Claus looks out the window. A panoramic view of the forest is before him. It's on fire. Richard catches this absent stare out the window. Claus holds his breath in, unable to expand his lungs, even mechanically. Barrett is on fire.

Richard's voice is sunken. "The forest got hit with lightning about an hour ago. They don't think they can stop the flames in time." This hurt voice sounds a mile away to Claus. The respirator releases Claus' breath. It breathes in. It breathes out. It breathes in. It breathes out. It tries to breath in one more time, but fails. The erratic beeping of the life-support machine speeds to a single, piercing tone.

\*\*\*\*\*

A pair of business shoes walks along an old trail, two lines of weeds growing tall in parallel lines. There is a clearing where trees sprout from the ground, each easily thirty to forty feet high. They form a circle around a charred stump that is wider than any other tree in the woods. This stump is overgrown with mushrooms and lichen, but the telltale black bark can be seen in patches underneath its growth. Lucas Magnus-Welch approaches the long burnt husk with an urn under his arm. A small handmade cross sits in the center of the stump.

"Hey Dad, I came to see you." Lucas holds an urn out to the small grave. "You know, he always wanted to be here next to you. He talked about you every day, even after you..." Lucas stops.

Each syllable scratches at his throat, making it impossible to say what he needs to, what he wants to.

He talks about work instead. "I made partner earlier this year, I don't think I told you that yet. We're the Adams and Magnus-Welch Law Firm now I guess." He pauses for a second. He looks to the urn and to the wooden cross in the charred stump; for the first time in thirty years, Lucas begins sobbing uncontrollably. "We both missed you so much..." Lucas pours Richard next to the cross in the burned out trunk and the family comes together again.

\*\*\*\*\*