

## **Last Action Zhero**

**by**

**Joseph Denize**

Since the tap was dry – probably a failure of the pump, which didn't have enough power to supply the little timber house on top of the hill – Clark had to walk down to the river to fetch water for his morning coffee. The sun was shining on the vast, green undulating plain that extended all the way to the ice-capped barrier of the Dreamlands in the distance. It was a low and lively sun, whose rays shot through outer space and the clear blue dome of the atmosphere to hit Clark's retinas, sending jolts of pain through his brain while he dragged his four hundred pounds towards the stream.

As usual Clark had exceeded with pork chops, tobacco and whiskey the night before. His tongue felt numb and he had strong bouts of nausea. When he arrived by the water, he couldn't bend over to dip his bucket because of back pains and his voluminousness. When he squatted, allowing the tip of his long beard to touch the stream, his knees cracked. "Time doesn't spare anybody, not even dreams" was Clark's first coherent thought of the morning.

He was halfway up the slope again when he heard the noise of an engine in the sky – a low rumbling sound at first, whose pitch rapidly rose to a deafening level when a black helicopter landed in the front yard of his house. Two soldiers jumped out of it – black helmets, bullet-proof jackets, rifles ready. Clark froze. His free hand instinctively went for the hunting knife at his belt before he realized that the only things he wore were a red woollen shirt, long johns and his big muddy boots.

Stately, a third man came out of the helicopter. He was tall, blond and wore sunglasses and a black suit. He waved hello to Clark.

"Mr Kent?" asked the blond guy, hesitatingly, when Clark had finally finished his ascension and the blades had stopped turning.

Clark stared at the man with eyes full of defiance.

"Yeah", he answered, with a guttural voice.

"Clark Kent?"

"Who the hell are you?"

The guy was young and tall, but Clark was a lot wider and a head taller than him.

"I'm agent Smith. I am honoured to meet you, Mr. Kent."

“What do you want? Why do you land that thing in the middle of my yard? You’re frightening the pigs.”

“I’m on an official mission for the Government. There are some extremely important matters that I would like to discuss with you.”

Clark’s eyesight had been giving him trouble lately but his vision, though short-sighted, was still super-vision. Clark could read the mixture of tension and fascination in the soldiers’ eyes as if the black visors of their helmets had been non-existent. As clearly as the grass, the helicopter or the sky, he could see the holster and the .45 through the fabric of agent Smith’s jacket. Like the soldier’s rifles, the gun was loaded with kryptonite bullets.

“Aren’t you cold?” asked Smith. “We have to talk. Maybe we’ll be better off inside.”

In silence, Smith followed Clark inside the house, which was flanked by a large shed of rotten boards from which came a rumbling noise of pigs.

Smith winced when he entered the only room of the house, which smelt like the musty armpit of some mischievous deity. The fireplace, around which a table, a chair and a single bed were disposed, was obviously the centre of Clark’s domestic life. The table was covered with books, empty bottles, piles of dishes and leftovers. The straw mattress and the blankets were smeared with brown matter. Around this small and relatively clear space, a chaos of objects was pushed against the walls into big heaps – dirty clothes, tools, logs, cans, books and all kinds of odds and bits. Two small, square windows let in the light. Smith spotted an old rusty telescope in the jumble, and a sink, opposite to the chimney, crammed with piles of dishes. No shower, no toilet.

Clark made a sign to Smith to sit on the chair. He put the bucket by the chimney, gathered a few sticks under his bed and pushed them under the log in the hearth. He then randomly grabbed a book on the table – a pocket edition of *Crime and Punishment* – and tore a few pages, which he shoved underneath the wood to light with a match.

“A guy like you, maybe one of your colleagues, came to visit me a few months ago – was that years ago? What was his name?”

“Agent Kosakowski?”

“No. Never mind. You all look the same to me anyway.”

The fire wouldn’t start. Clark repeated the operation with the first act of *Macbeth*. Agent Smith took a deep breath.

“Whenever and whoever that was, things have changed drastically since that time, Mr Kent. Do you pick up the TV signals from reality in this part of the Dreamlands? I can’t see any TV set in your... home... But maybe you’ve got a radio somewhere. If so, you certainly know that our country is at war.”

“Again?”

“Things are very serious this time. The future of the free world is at stake and we can’t afford to lose. Let me be straight: we need the old Superman magic.”

Shakespeare worked. Clark filled a charred, greasy kettle with the water from the bucket and hung it on a chain over the slowly growing flames.

“People are on the verge of collective hysteria. The global anguish indicators are way passed the red line. Our communication experts and drug designers don’t know what to dream up next to cool the situation. Our dream reserves are almost dry, that’s why our agents roam all the Dreamlands to gather all possible resources. Of course, it would be exceptional if you could come back on the scene.”

Clark took three dried sausages from the long line that hung on one side of the chimney. He sat down on the bed and bit in the first one without taking his eyes off the kettle.

“Our experts are ready, they have planned everything for your comeback to be a success. A new costume has been designed especially for you as well as special weapons and accessories that would complement your super-powers, or even replace those that you have lost.”

“When will you grow up?” asked Kent, half to himself.

The green and blue flames slowly expanded to the log, crackling, turning orange and yellow. Clark scratched his beard, cleared his throat and spat on the floor.

“Mr Kent, think about all the innocent lives that you could save. Think about the people...”

“The people...” said Clark.

At that very moment, the front door opened and a pig appeared on the threshold. Clark smiled.

“Well, look who’s here... Here’s my babe... Come here, Ulysses, come here...”

The pig, all caked with slurry, squealed joyously and jumped on the bed to make a fuss of his master.

“Now, now... Yeah, me too... I’m happy to see you... Meet agent Smith, Ulysses. He has come from old reality to pay us a visit. Aren’t we lucky?”

Smith turned pale.

“Get off the bed now... Come on... Good boy...”

Ulysses hopped off the bed and went to smell Smith’s black leather shoes with an inquisitive grunt.

“At what point are you with your treatment?” asked the agent. The tone of his voice had changed.

“I don’t know for sure. You tell me. Do I look like a sane, healthy dream to you? You probably read my medical files before coming here.”

“As a matter of fact, I did. But the information in the doctors’ reports is very scarce.”

“What do they say? I’m curious.”

“Well, they mostly talk about the depression that affected you thirty years ago. And also about that vodka-kryptonite cocktail that you took after your last official mission that almost erased you from the surface of our dreams.”

“I remember that mission. Trying to save innocent lives, like you said, and not finding any. That upset me, confused me, depressed me...”

“Well, even the doctors were confused. They didn’t know that imaginary beings could be depressed when they weren’t originally conceived to be so. This brought new light on human depressions as well, since dreams control the human mind. Fortunately, we saved you and managed to avoid a public scandal. Can you imagine the headlines? ‘Superman Commits Suicide?’”

“Tell the doctors that everything began when I realized I was only a dream and suddenly wanted to be real. That’s when things started to go wrong, very fast... That bad moment brought me some kind of awareness, anyway.”

“I see that you still haven’t quit your drinking habit. What about all these books?”

“They comfort me.”

“Why do you burn them, then?”

“Superman is still a super-fast reader. I’ve read them all at least a hundred times each and know the best ones by heart. I’m into legends and fables right now. Did you know that all the stories that you read in books are true in these parts of the Dreamlands? Sometimes I read or recite something to Ulysses. He loves fables – don’t you, piggy?”

Ulysses lay on his back at Smith’s feet, obviously waiting for the agent to scratch his belly.

Agent Smith sighed, took off his glasses and pointed his steel blue eyes into Clark’s.

“Mr Kent, I really admire you. I do. So I’ll try to be honest with you. We’re running out of time. I came in the Dreamlands to assess your condition and try to convince you to fight on our side. When my superiors asked me to visit you, I felt a secret thrill of excitement. But what I see confuses me. What I see is a poor, melancholic, alcoholic soul living alone with his pigs in the middle of nowhere. I now understand the perplexity of the doctors. I didn’t expect the dream of my childhood to turn that bad.”

“What do you know about dreams? What interests you is manipulating them. But dreams have the right to live a life of their own. You won’t manipulate me like that other guy in that silly suit of his. What’s his name again? Captain something...”

“Nonsense. Maybe you still can get out of this depression. Our experts have designed a special rehabilitation program for you. If you only wished to get out of this hole, you could be the old Superman again in a few weeks. All you have to do is to accept my proposal.”

Clark stood up and patted his fat belly with both hands, laughing.

“Do you think that I can still fly in the blue sky like in old days with that silly optimism of mine, or change clothes inside phone booths?”

Still chuckling, Clark took the smoking kettle and poured boiling water into a cup. He put the kettle on the floor, rummaged through the mess and found the blue plastic bag that contained coffee powder, which he emptied into the water. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the soldiers standing behind the front door, ready to start the last phase of their plan. Clark took another sausage from the line.

“Those who are not with us are against us”, Smith said. “I came here to have a clear answer. There is no time for indecision. My superiors were strongly hoping that you would accept their help, but they also gave me strict orders in the event of your refusal...”

When Clark turned around to face Smith again, stirring his coffee with the sausage, the government agent had taken out his gun.

“en tò, tò tò, tò tò pàn” said Clark, waving the sausage in the air.

“What?” said Smith, before literally disappearing into his clothes. His jacket, trousers and tie fell on the floor, suddenly emptied of their limbs, while a squealing piglet came out of the shirt, which had remained on the chair.

While Ulysses was licking this new version of agent Smith, the front door opened and another piglet trotted into the room, still wearing his army ID badge around his neck.

“That’s Greek. I read that trick in Homer”, said Clark, and took a bite of the sausage.

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Born in France in 1971, he gained his Doctorate from Paris 8 University with the thesis titled The Creative Imagination in William Blake and James Joyce. He has taught at Paris 8 University and the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy at Florence University. He has published original fiction, reviews, and translations of works by Virginia Woolf, Giorgio Manganelli, Edgar Allan Poe, W.B. Yeats and others. He lives in Italy.