

Xerxes the Great

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Summary: Clark and Lex square off over ancient history.

Author's Note: This story is in response to the Queen of the Capes' "X Challenge." Thanks, Laura, for the quick beta comments.

Copyright disclaimer: Some dialogue from this story has been taken directly from the script of "The Pilot, Part 1," written by Deborah Joy LeVine. No profit is being made from this story and no copyright infringement is intended. Oh, and I confirmed some things on Wikipedia that I had vaguely remembered from my college classes. See, students of mine... I cited my sources!

Light glinted dangerously off the blade aimed directly at Clark Kent's heart. He took a moment to study the weapon. "Macedonian?" he asked.

A menacing look flashed in Lex Luthor's eyes. "It belonged to Alexander the Great. A brilliant tactician." Lex placed a mask over his face and lowered the sword. He offered it to Clark, who made a show of examining it. "Alexander's strategy was simple: always control the high ground. It was with this sword that he..."

"...defeated Darius III, and was proclaimed King of Asia." Clark had interrupted Lex, finished his sentence, established an equality. A move not often made by anyone. A challenge.

"You surprise me, Mr. Kent. I'm not often surprised." The tightness in his voice suggested that Lex Luthor did not enjoy surprises.

"I've studied history." Clark ran a finger along the edge of the blade. "Learned how leaders have used power for destructive purposes." He looked into Luthor's cold eyes. "Some say Alexander called himself a demi-god, the son of Zeus."

"He never lost a battle. Maybe he was ordained by the gods, chosen for a greater purpose. Better than mere mortals."

Clark shook his head. "No better than Xerxes. The Persians called him 'the Great.' But he suffered the same delusions of grandeur as Alexander. Herodotus wrote that Xerxes had an arrogant pride."

A thin smile formed at Lex's lip. "Xerxes did what his father was unable to do. Bridged the Hellespont, defeated the Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae. Sacked Athens and torched the place to the ground." A wider smile. "Exactd retribution for the Persians' earlier defeat at Marathon."

"Well, Herodotus was more of a storyteller than a true historian. And there's always more than one side to a story. The Persians say Xerxes was innocent." Clark slowly drew his eyes up and down Lex, making his examination obvious. "No matter how many stories a man wants to tell about himself, eventually people will learn the truth." Clark held Lex in a steely gaze. "Xerxes was a barbarous man who was doomed by his folly. Just like Alexander."

Clark turned the Macedonian's sword vertically with the guard at face level. He lowered it in a fencing salute, then passed the sword to Lex. Their fingers brushed slightly as they exchanged the weapon: a valid touch, but neither was sure who scored the point. Lex smiled broadly and returned the salute. Challenge accepted.

Lois Lane entered the private study. Guilt flashed across her face when she saw Lex, but she quickly rearranged her features.

"I hope you don't mind our looking around... you have a beautiful home, Lex." The pitch of her voice sounded forced – an obvious cover.

Lex glanced at Lois, but then looked back at Clark. And Clark's face betrayed him with a nervous glance at Lois, a look filled with unhidden unprofessional interest. Lex raised an eyebrow slightly when Clark looked back. He silently asked the question, because every battle should ultimately earn a prize. Clark's eyes narrowed slightly with determination.

Lex broke the gaze and moved toward Lois, hooking his arm into her elbow. He motioned to the terrace. "Have you seen the view from here?" Lex guided Lois outside. The lights of Metropolis shone from the city below.

Lois ran her finger along the edge of the guard rail. "It's beautiful."

Lex turned to watch Clark follow them onto the terrace. "Stunning," he agreed, but the look he gave Clark left no doubt about his double meaning. Then he continued, "Tallest building in Metropolis. I must confess a certain pleasure in knowing that everyone in the city has to look up in order to see me."

Clark stepped to the railing and looked down. "The ancient Greeks thought history followed a cyclical course, just like the four seasons repeat themselves year after year. Herodotus believed that history was just a repetition of destined events. Power crests and ebbs, empires rise and fall." He looked meaningfully at Lex. "It's a long way down."

Lex laughed quietly. "The Persians believed in Zoroastrianism. Cosmic duality. Life and death, day and night, good and evil. One cannot be understood without the other." He slid his hand down Lois' arm and raised her hand to his lips. He kissed it gently, but never took his eyes off Clark. "Life is a mixture of these two opposing forces."

Clark put his arm around Lois' waist, slightly drawing her away from Lex. "They also thought that Ahura Mazda would ultimately prevail over Angra Mainyu. Good triumphs over evil. It's only a matter of time."

"Or maybe it's a matter of perception. Who defines the terms?" Lex's mask slipped, then reappeared. He motioned back to his study. "Let's get back to the party. I think my announcement will interest you." Lois nodded and followed Lex's guiding hand.

Clark let Lex go ahead. "After you," he said, nodding in mock deference. Lex returned a slight dip of his head and a wry smile.

Adversaries cemented.

THE END