

# Xander Greythorpe

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## *Wandering Philosopher*

*"And that is exactly the reason why your horde should turn north, and leave these lands."*

The barbarian chieftain slowly leaned back in his chair, his surrounding gang of thugs silently wavering behind him.

They had entered the tavern five minutes ago, filled with boast and ego. Slowly but surely they had been winding their way west through the lands, holding small villages and towns to ransom, and then raiding them regardless of whether they paid or not.

Xander picked up his cup, careful not to spill any on his long robes. They had likely circled his table first due to his weak outward appearance, but now each of them was doomed to prison or death.

Had the horde continued west, they would no doubt have wormed their way to the coast unabated. Now, however, the horde would turn north. There they would hit the town of Markeep. There they would foolishly attack the warrior-people, humble but strong hearted. There they would fail.

The chieftain grinned, nodding and grunting his approval at the doubtless riches ahead. Rising from his chair he confidently walked out of the tavern.

Xander observed their departure over the rim of his cup, a battle won without raising a fist. A relieved silence descended upon the bar for a brief few moments, before two of the chief's goons strolled menacingly back in.

*"... perhaps just one fist, then."* Xander murmured into his cup.

Two wicked daggers drawn, the pair of men swaggered back to the table, grinning. The other occupants of the tavern once again retreated behind their tables.

*"The Boss wanted us to personally extend his thanks to you, for your kind advice. He also wanted to make sure that you understood that you can't be going around, mentioning his plans to anyone."* One of them spewed, false gratitude dripping from every word.

Slowly, Xander placed the delicate cup back on the table.

*"Wise words, friends. You can assure your 'chief' that my lips are sealed regarding his movements."*

*"Ah, now see,"* the other one oozed out, *"it ain't your lips the Boss is worried about. It's your tongue. He wanted us to make sure it ain't going to waggle none."*

Slowly and intently, Xander smoothly rose from his chair, pushing it back. The two men, excited at the task ahead of them, began to circle around either side of the table. Waving their knives from side to side, they laughed and jeered at the old man.

The second to speak lunged forward with his knife, the blade aimed for Xander's chest. In one motion, the blade pierced past Xander's side, cutting thin air, stopping suddenly as an arm wrapped around his, an open palmed strike delivered straight to his leaning face.

Tumbling backward, the barbarian crashed into a chair, the force of his impact splintering the wood.

The first man shrieked a battle cry, lunging at Xander's exposed back. He found himself soaring through the air as Xander spun into the attack, adding his own

strength to the lunge and casting the thug forward. Patrons at the bar scattered as the thug crashed past them.

Turning, Xander faced the second man again, now untangled from his mess of a chair. Arms raised, feet spread, Xander dropped into his martial stance, the hidden strength under his robes appearing for the first time.

His knife lost, the barbarian reached back and drew a heavy club. Crashing it against his chest, he roared at Xander.

Lowering his arms and raising his posture, Xander extended one hand toward the barbarian and beckoned for him to attack.

Enraged by the audacity of this man, the barbarian charged, sweeping his club with both hands, blood-rage fully risen.

Xander arced, seeming to bend around the shape of the club. The barbarian, further enraged, began to swing wildly, but Xander continued to dodge his many attacks.

*"Martial power comes not from blind determination, but of discipline and control."* Xander quipped, catching the Barbarian's arm at the end of its swing. Striking him with a cross-palm to the chin, he set to work disabling the man.

Staggered by the chin blow, the barbarian was helpless as Xander landed blow after blow, taking out an elbow, a knee, spun around, a grab at the back of his head, the pillar ahead of-

The barbarian fell limp as his head collided with the sturdy pillar. Not dead, but firmly unconscious. Xander turned once again to the first man by the bar, watching in awe.

*"Would you like me to tell you the definition of insanity?"* Xander posed.

Eyes flicking back and forth, the man rushed to drag his friend off the floor and flee the bar.

*"Enjoy the north."*

Months continued to pass as Xander walked. It had been a year since he had discovered a truth- perhaps **the** truth to his existence.

Born in the remote regions of the land, abandoned in the mountains, and raised by the monks that found him, Xander lived a life of peace, thought, and solitude.

Since birth he had only been able to see through one eye, a defect born into him, a hindrance that would forever affect him. Despite this, he found solace in the works of the monks, their long hours of reading and debate, the simple lifestyle they lead, the martial training they endured to hone their bodies and minds.

He lived much of his life like this, until one late evening during a philosophical debate, that the elder monk posed him the question: "*Why do you exist?*"

Xander could not answer. To live? To have children? To make the world better? Any train of thought he could create was answered by the simple fact that anyone else could do those things.

*"Why do I exist?"*

He rolled the question around in his mind all evening, until eventually the elder monk called it a night, pleased that his question was causing such frantic introspection.

That evening Xander stood alone on the temple balcony, the reaches of the great mountains surrounding and towering over him. He stayed for hours, unable to still the question in his mind, when he began to feel a strange pull. Something out there, among the mountains, was calling to him.

Drawn like a fish to a lure, Xander left the temple immediately and without preparation. He hiked up, high into the mountains, far up to the tallest peak, spurred ever onward by this intense sense of urgency. A silent cry was beckoning him

further, further to the very peaks of the world.

There at the peak he found a cave, an ancient formation eroded by time. His feet moved as if by themselves, the trance over his mind intensifying as he delved further into the darkness.

Able to go no further, Xander fell to his knees in the pitch dark. The cave silently whispered around him, the certain cold of the stone beneath him. The trance passed, and the feeling slipped away back into the river.

Why had he come here, Here into this unknown cave? With no provisions he had no way of making light to find his way back out, no way of finding food or water.

As panic rose within him, Xander fought back, steeling his mental discipline. He had been led here for a reason. He knew it.

Placing his hands on the stone floor, Xander slowly and carefully began to feel the area around him. His fingers trailed over the rough stone, tracing their unseen shapes and edges. Hitting an abrupt wall, Xander trailed his hands upward, a strangely smooth marble not an arm's length ahead of him.

Fascinated, Xander reached out with his other hand. There was a construction here, something carved by the hands of men out of the smoothest marble. His fingers continued up the perfect surface, and finally he felt the indents of a symbol or writing.

Tracing the shapes, he swore once again to himself. If only he had a light, if only he could see what it was that he had found!

A slow light began to fill the chamber. At first Xander thought that his eye must be playing tricks on him, but the light grew and grew. The marble edifice ahead of him was glowing a brilliant gold, the symbol now illuminated, flooding the cave with its light.



A single, perfect circle grew before him. In that moment, Xander finally felt as though he was complete, a blissful, exalted feeling of wonder and joy. An answer to his question was close at hand, he could feel it.

Ragged and tired, Xander stumbled his way back into the temple a day later. He did not remember much of the journey either direction, and those that went in search of the cave found nothing but rock and snow. That one symbol remained, however. Burnt into his mind like a man staring too long into the sun.

Once recovered, Xander spent months searching for meaning in the symbol. With no answers to be found in the temple, he left and ventured into the world, seeking libraries, sages, and scholars. He felt watched during this time, an unseen eye observing him.

After some months he found a sect of monks, a small, focused order. While they

were tight lipped about what they knew, there seemed to be much knowledge in their possession.

Over time, as Xander spent time with them, they became more deferential to him, and by the time that Xander felt it was time to move on, three among the order swore themselves to his service should he need them. They would travel at his call in search of whatever knowledge he sought.

Travelling again, Xander felt that omnipresent feeling of being followed. Not a paranoid man, he shrugged it off as a trick of the mind. That is, until he became almost certain that a crow was following his wake.

Moving away from the trees and into the open, he halted and looked back for the bird. Something flew down and perched along the treeline fifty paces away. Digging into his pack, Xander withdrew a handful of dried seeds, offering them in the direction of the trees.

A moment passed. Two moments. The wind swept noisily, disrupting the stillness. The bird hopped on its branch, deliberating the risk of taking some seed. Xander stood motionless, the statue of a man frozen in time.

After a minute, the crow took once more to the air, soaring down onto Xander's outstretched arm. Reaching down to peck at the seed, it barely had time to react as Xander seized it with lightning fast speed.

He held the crow firmly, but gently. The crow struggled to break free, but eventually calmed and resigned to being held fast. Xander stared at the crow, looking for some sign of intelligence or a higher power within its eyes.

The bird stared back, unblinking. Xander could feel something. He couldn't place it,

but there was something tangible between him and the bird.

Months passed as Xander travelled. His new companion proved useful, and quite intelligent. He moved from village to town, asking questions and earning small amounts as a teacher, judge, and philosopher.

Life was just starting to become routine for Xander when he received a message from one of his wandering monks. They had found something, something of great importance and urgency.

Leaving immediately, Xander wasted no time travelling north, down into the valleys of the world, down to where an ancient sea once teemed with life. Down in that shadowed land he found his three sworn monks, kneeling in a circle around an ancient, gnarled oak.

As he placed a cautious hand against the bark of the tree, Xander once again felt that sense of knowing, a certainty of purpose, a connection to all things.

*"This is why I exist..."*