

THE SINGER AND THE CHARLATAN



BOOK ONE OF
THE WICKED INSTRUMENTS
BY
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Chance Encounters

Leanna Moonbody stepped out of Top's Inn, adjusted the guitar case on her back, and dragged out a young nobleman by his ear. The spring sun made her bright blue eyes squint. Undaunted, her heels clicked against the cobblestones of Kingsfield's Main Street. The noble tried to put up a fight, but Leanna tugged his ear and forced him to follow. She ignored the boy's complaints and threats, opting to smile and bow her head to each passing onlooker as she made her way towards the Knight's Guard barracks.

"My lord will have your head for this," the young man protested.

Leanna stopped in the street and faced him. "Your lord? Who are you?"

The nobleman craned his neck to look up at the songstress. "I am John, Page of Lord Lloyd Demarq."

"Page?" Leanna kicked him in the shin. "You're not even important! You're an errand boy for some lord I've never even heard of and you interrupted my performance!"

The bustling streets of Kingsfield slowed to point and laugh at the scolded nobleman as Leanna continued walking him down Main Street.

"Where are you taking me?" John demanded.

"You're taking me! I want to meet this lord of yours and explain to him what a thoughtless, rude little boy he has sent out in his name," Leanna said.

"You can't do that, my master would never tolerate such insolence from a strange woman," he replied.

"I'm Leanna Moonbody. There, I'm not strange anymore. Now you can properly introduce me."

John walked at an awkward angle down the street, past the merchant's square, heading toward Tiger Street. His face flushed red, and he stared at the ground to avoid the gaze of onlookers of his woeful state.

"Please," John begged. "Please let me go, and I will take you to my master."

Leanna gripped him closer. "...and introduce me properly?"

"Of course!"

"What's my name?"

"Lenora Moon. Mooney. Please don't kick me again."

Leanna released the boy, and he got his first good look at the fair Leanna. Her fiery red hair glowed in the light of the sun. She wore a light blue dress, tailored to fit and accentuate an ample bust, as was the latest style. He was stricken by her beauty and fashion, as any man would be. He stood up with his mouth hanging open.

"Leanna Moonbody," she said again.

"Leanna Moonbody, of course. My apologies. For everything."

Leanna turned her head and motioned him forward. "As well you should be."

"Had I known a proper lady was in that tavern, I would never have..." John trailed off.

Leanna raised an eyebrow. "What? If I wasn't dressed like this, it would have been alright to barge in with your silly bulletin?"

"My master implored me to put up the bulletins where all the sell-swords would be," John said. "What would bring you to sing your songs in such a place?"

"I go where the crowds are," Leanna replied. "How much farther?"

"This way, not far," John said.

Once they passed the Knight's Guard barracks, standing before the Great Cathedral, John led her left, down Tiger Street, a place not known to have done well in Kingsfield. They veered around the large potholes in the cobblestone street and the few shady characters that walked the street in the lunch hour. Each step brought Leanna further into squalor. Many of the homes were in disrepair, and Lord Lloyd's estate was no exception to that rule. It was the kind of decrepit manor home that old, stodgy men hid in, waiting to throw rocks at children for coming onto their property.

Leanna turned her nose up at the lack of refinement in the decor as she approached the entrance. Vines grew wild up the rusted gate and scaled the manor up ahead. Windows were foggy and blacked out by dark curtains. The riffraff waiting at the door was no better, either. She first noticed a filthy, ugly dwarf with a great chestnut beard that hadn't been washed since his last meal. He turned toward her, revealing a scar down his right cheek that somehow managed to make him uglier than he was when glimpsed. Beside him was a detestable looking halfling, dressed in leather armor. Halflings were even smaller than dwarves and nowhere near as stout. Even as fit as this one was, he still bore a resemblance to a malnourished toddler.

The other side of the front door was more appreciable. A fair-skinned, blue-eyed priestess in white robes turned to Leanna and smiled from beneath her hood. She stood beside a fetching young man who clearly knew how to dress the part of one about to hold court with a noble. His short-cropped black hair and cleanly shaven face were as neatly groomed as his custom-tailored vest over a white, bell-cuffed shirt.

"What are they all waiting for?" Leanna asked.

John sized up the small group as he walked Leanna through the untended lawn toward a cracked stone stoop before the door. "That inn was not my first stop, my lady, it was my last."

Leanna and John joined the group at the front stoop. The dwarf spoke ahead of everyone else.

“You the guy that posted the bulletins all over town?”

“Yes, sir, you shall all have court with my master. First, there is some business to be handled with this young lady here.”

Leanna smiled and bowed her head at the group, approaching the priestess and offering her hand.

“I’m Leanna Moonbody, pleasure to meet you.”

“Priestess Trixi. And this is Jonathan, we just met,” the young woman replied with a smile.

“Pleasure, my lady,” Jonathan kissed her hand. “Have we met?”

“I don’t think so,” Leanna replied. She was sure she would remember such a fine looking man.

The songstress offered a pleasant smile to the dwarf, but not her hand, and introduced herself to them as well.

“Cort,” the dwarf said in a gravelly voice as ugly as his face. “I don’t know this dipshit’s name.”

“Weevil,” the halfling announced with pride. He smiled with a mouth full of yellow teeth. Leanna had to avert her gaze not to sneer.

“Well, pleasure to meet you all. I play in Top’s Inn, you should come and hear me sometime. Right now, I have business with this Lord Lloyd about his bulletins and this foolish boy that’s been posting them.”

“Hey,” Cort shouted, stopping Leanna and John as they tried to walk by. “Why does she get special audience for the job and not us? We were here first!”

Leanna thought about it for a moment and looked back at John.

“He’s right. They shouldn’t be inconvenienced because of me. Anything I have to say to your master about you I can say in front of them. Let’s get on with it.”

John led the five of them past the creaking front door into the foyer, overlooking a grand staircase. The place smelled of ancient tomes and ancient cleaning methods. The sun was blocked out from every window by dark, thick, musty, maroon curtains.

“M’lord, I have acquired several candidates for your mission!” John called out.

From the second floor landing, an old man slowly made his path along the banister, stopped, and looked out over the group. He looked like the type of old, bitter, stodgy man that would trip someone with his cane, immediately apologize, and then smile about it as he walked away. Whatever long, gray hair he had left ran out in every direction, trying to be rid of him.

“Quite a group, there,” Lloyd remarked.

“First, m’lord, I present you with Leanna Moonbody. She wished to speak with you on a separate matter,” John said.

“I would like to, yes,” Leanna said, with the practiced, formal curtsy of a countess.

“A separate matter?” Lloyd inquired. He didn’t budge from his perch.

“Yes. Your page here, Joe or Jay or whatever, felt your message so important that it required interrupting my performance at Top’s Inn.”

“Well, that is a mess, indeed,” Lloyd replied. “You have my apologies, of course. What house do you belong to, my dear lady?”

“I am from the south, m’lord.”

Lloyd nodded with understanding, even if no one else in the room could fathom what that meant.

“Did you travel all this way by yourself, to our Kingsfield?”

“I did.”

“Fire, beauty, and you can take care of yourself on the dangerous roads here from the south. You’d be a valuable addition to the group I’m hiring for,” Lloyd said. “Are you good with the blade? Magic? Surely you didn’t protect yourself with good luck.”

“No one would want to hurt me,” Leanna explained as though the lord were a child. “I can perform some magic, of course, but I’m not looking for a job.”

“Shame. It pays two hundred gold coins.”

“Each?” Cort interrupted.

Lloyd’s brow furrowed at the filthy dwarf. “No, for the lot of you.”

“Nah, we’re a package deal,” the dwarf explained. “Two hundred each, and you get the five of us.”

“It is not your place to question the reward,” John said.

Lord Lloyd giggled to himself and waved John silent. He found great amusement in Cort’s audacity. His raspy laughter was equal parts sinister and childish, as if he had just kicked a house cat.

“You don’t even know what the job is, yet,” the lord said.

“For two hundred gold, pretty sure none of us will give a shit,” Cort replied. “You put up the bulletins all over town, we answered. Pretty sure we’re the only ones coming.”

Lloyd mulled over the dwarf’s proposition and glanced at Leanna. “What say you, my lady? If I invite these adventurers to my lunch table, will you join us?”

Leanna looked over the motley group, giving a particular eye to the audacious dwarf that tried to involve her. On the other hand, two hundred gold could finally finance a trip to Saul, the music capital of the world. It was far better than singing for coppers at Top's Inn, that much was certain. She brought her eyes back to the decrepit face of Lord Demarq, his attempts at a warm smile failing to look anything less than perverse.

“I will hear what you have to say, m'lord,” Leanna said.

“Wonderful,” Lloyd clapped. “John, escort our guests to the dining hall. We shall eat and discuss business.”

Lunch With Lloyd

Leanna sat to the right of the empty chair at the head of the table, uncomfortably awaiting Lord Demarq to join them. After finishing their meal, an uncomfortable silence set in. The halfling, Weevil, sat across from her, gently setting down his glass.

“The wine is good,” Weevil said.

The dwarf beside him nodded, looking into his empty glass. He folded his filthy, soaked beard into his mouth and slurped.

“Not half bad, yeah,” Cort said, pointing at the cup. “Maybe top me off, there, Johnny?”

Leanna rolled her eyes and looked away in disgust. Two hundred gold made for some very unseemly partners.

Lord Lloyd Demarq finally broke the tension as he entered the room, carrying with him a polished metal urn under one arm. He hobbled to the table at a snail’s pace, the sound of his cane scraping along the floor with each step. He reached the head of the table and triumphantly placed the urn in front of him.

“What ya got there, Lloyd?” Cort asked.

“The past, and the future,” Lloyd giggled to himself.

Jonathan leaned forward so he could be seen past the priestess beside him. “Cryptic, although I’m sure that has something to do with this job?”

“Yes, yes, of course. This urn holds the remains of one of my ancestors,” Lord Demarq said. His hands fumbled at the top, trying to pry it open. John walked over to his master and assisted him.

Everyone at the table leaned in as the ancient man reached a bony hand into the canister, their breath held as he withdrew a scroll caked in gray dust. He brought it up to pursed lips and

blew out a ragged breath, sending ashes all over the table. Leanna shot back in her seat, afraid to get any of the dust on her.

“Some respect you got for the dead, there, Lloyd,” Cort said, finishing off his second glass of wine.

“The body is gone, my friend,” Lord Demarq replied. “Only ash and memory remain, both equally as fleeting.”

“That’s very...deep,” Priestess Trixi said.

Lord Demarq unfurled the scroll and turned it for the guests to see. It was a map of a maze of tunnels.

“When I found this, I knew what I needed to do before I die,” Lloyd said.

“Stop sticking your hands in the ashes of dead people?” Weevil asked.

Cort choked back a snicker as Lord Demarq shot an evil eye at the halfling.

“An object of great personal significance rests in my family’s tomb,” Lloyd said. “I am hiring you to recover another urn, just like this one.”

Leanna threw her hands up. “That sounds like grave robbing to me. I think this is where I should bow out.”

“Calm down there, red,” Cort huffed. “It’s not robbing if the owner tells you to go get it.”

“Exactly,” Lord Demarq replied. “You will have my permission. My blessing, even. Find this, and I will agree to your price, dwarf.”

Trixi raised her hand, garnering the Lord’s attention. “Why would you need so many of us for such a seemingly small task?”

“A very good question, Priestess,” Lord Demarq nodded. “Tell me, what are you a priestess of, exactly?”

“Our Lord,” Trixi responded curtly.

“The Great Dragon Father?” Lord Demarq pressed.

“Our Lord.”

Lloyd nodded again. “Of course. Well, while you’re busy using the light of your god to repel the spirits and restless dead down in the crypt, someone must have your back, and someone must be able to disarm all the traps, of course.”

Leanna slammed her hands down on the table and stood herself up. “Spirits? Restless dead? Traps? I don’t know what you take me for, Lord Demarq, but I am a lady and a singer, and I have no business on such a fool’s errand!”

Leanna began storming off for the door. Cort jumped out of his seat and chased after her, his tiny legs reaching her as she made it to the front door.

“Hey, red, wait,” Cort shouted as he came up behind her.

Leanna spun around, incredulous. “My name is not Red!”

“Fine, Leanna,” Cort huffed and leaned in, his voice becoming hushed. “C’mon, this old coot seems to like you. We can name our price.”

Leanna hushed herself, while still trying to yell. “I will not go diving into some old crazy guy’s crypt to steal the remains of one of his ancestors from a bunch of angry dead people!”

“I promise,” Cort pleaded. “You won’t have to do anything. We got a priestess and my axe. Even if the other two are useless, we’ll get the job done. You just come along for the ride, and we can take this old guy for every copper we can get.”

“You’re a very disreputable dwarf,” Leanna scolded.

“Yeah, I hear we’re short, too,” Cort replied. “I promise you’ll be safe. You can’t tell me you couldn’t use two hundred gold coins...”

Leanna was at the ready with a sharp retort, but reality hushed her. At the current rate, it would be months before she could afford the trip to Saul, and by then she'd be wearing last season's clothes, and that was not even taking into account setting herself up in a nice enough place to get recognized by the decision makers that could put her on stage at the great Saul Amphitheater. She sighed, grudgingly nodding her head.

Cort led her back into the dining room where Lord Demarq and the others awaited their return in silence.

"We're back," Cort said. "Ready to dig into those crypts."

"Very well," Lloyd spoke up, smiling as Leanna sat down. "As I was saying, in the northern farmlands, about a mile outside Kingsfield, you can find my family plot. It is a network of caves and wings, dating back hundreds of years. Some of my ancestors and their servants do not rest well, and it has become overrun with undeath."

"Good thing we got a priestess," Weevil spoke in a diminutive, nasally voice. Everything he said sounded sarcastic. Trixi looked back at him with suspicious eyes.

"Indeed it is," Lloyd replied. "This scroll will lead you right to the urn, and all of the traps are marked."

"Sure. Done, no problem. Half up front," Cort said.

"Of course, yes. John, fetch them a stipend."

"We might need supplies, too," Cort informed.

John had already walked off, but Lloyd let it go with a wave. "As it is needed, of course. Just bill it to my house."

Before long, John returned with five velvet coin purses, jingling away with their advance, and handed them out one at a time. He stopped at Leanna last, giving her a coin purse and the scroll.

“What’s this?”

“The map, dear,” Lloyd said. “Wouldn’t want you getting lost in there, finding some two-hundred-year-old malcontents with an ax to grind against the living.”

“No, who needs that?” Leanna replied with a roll of her eyes.

“Well, great,” Cort said. “Looking forward to doing business with ya, Lloyd. We’ll set out tomorrow. Daylight and all.”

“Yes, I imagine the dead get a bit rowdier in the darkness,” Lloyd laughed to himself, struggling to get up from his chair.

“Alright, wonderful meeting you, m’lord,” Jonathan said, leading the charge to form a line that vacated the room with the greatest haste.

Everyone followed the well-dressed man’s cue to leave, relieved. It was not until the group was on Tiger Street that anyone felt comfortable enough to speak.

“What was with that guy?” Weevil said.

“We hit the mother lode, that’s what,” Cort replied. “Crazy old man nearing death, throwing his money around, desperate for help...those are once in a lifetime jobs.”

“I have a feeling I’m going to regret you wrapping me up in this,” Leanna said.

“Geez lady, you just got a hundred gold for yelling at him and looking pretty. We don’t need some noble girl to come with us and fight.”

“I could, though, if I wanted to. I’m not helpless; I have some magic,” Leanna replied.

“Yeah, and I don’t need none of that, either,” the dwarf said with a snort. “Don’t trust the stuff, don’t like it, don’t want it. If you want to sit it out, I don’t care.”

Jonathan stepped from the priestess’ side and walked in between Leanna and Cort.

“I hate to interrupt,” Jonathan said, motioning to Leanna. “You’re staying at Top’s Inn, right?”

“Yes,” Leanna replied.

“Perhaps we should all get rooms there tonight, so we can get a good start first thing.”

“Eager there, fancy boy?” Cort taunted.

“You’re not? It’s a great deal of coin,” Jonathan said.

“Damn right it is. Sounds good to me, we’ll just charge the rooms to old Lloyd there,” Cort replied.

The group began walking back toward Main Street. The priestess lowered her hood, revealing long, blonde tresses.

“He was a scary individual, though, was he not?” Trixi asked.

“Yeah, he was...creepy. I truly don’t recall ever hearing of his house, either,” Leanna said.

“What are you, some kinda royalty?” Cort asked.

Leanna continued walking along the cobblestone street as she gave the matter some thought. She knew the only answer that she could give, but no one was going to like it.

“No. At least I don’t think so.”

Cort stopped, and everyone followed suit. “What in the Hells does that mean? You talk like one, you dress like one, you don’t know if you are one?”

“Nope, don’t remember. I’m from the south, though. I got that down,” Leanna replied.

“What’s the last thing you remember, exactly?” Trixi asked.

“The walk here. Took me a good while.”

“How long ago was that?” Cort asked, his voice louder with each word.

“A few months ago? Something like that.”

Cort was getting frustrated. Dwarves frustrate easily.

“So, before Kingsfield, you walked here. And before that?”

“Woke up in the woods. Head bleeding all over a rock. It was gross, I had to wash that out of my hair, like right away,” Leanna explained.

Perhaps it was the way she nonchalantly described her near-death experience or the way she recited it as though she went over her items at breakfast. Either way, Trixi, Cort, Jonathan, and Weevil all cocked their heads at a strange angle as they looked at each other, trying to wrap their brains around it.

“Just like that? No big deal?” Weevil asked.

“Well, it’s horrible, of course. But I have better things to do than just sit around and worry about it. I play at Top’s Inn now, getting my name out there,” Leanna said.

The group began walking again, turned the corner, and were once again in the massive, open expanse of Merchant Square. The entire corner was kept in the shadow of the Church of the Great Dragon Father on their left, and the castle-like structure of the Knight’s Guard barracks on their right. Top’s Inn was just down the street, past the barracks.

Trixi looked back at Leanna. “It really sounds like waking up bloody and losing your memory would be more important than playing music.”

“You’ve never heard me play,” Leanna replied with a smile.

Thank you for reading this preview!

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What could possibly go wrong?

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