

CHOOSING AN INSTRUMENT

by Tyler Tillerson

Shana followed her captain into the store, her heart trembling with excitement and fear.

“Welcome, welcome, are we looking for something in particular today?” asked the shopkeeper.

The captain answered, “She just got recruited for her first quest. Bit shy.”

The portly shopkeeper beamed with excitement, but it was the way he leapt into the air that struck Shana most. His feet seemed to *flutter* as if holding him aloft before he landed with a solid thump on the polished hardwood. She cast a wary glance at her captain, Hamrol, but he ignored her.

The captain continued, “Anything will work. Just make sure she can play it.”

“Of course! Absolutely! Oh, what a day! I *love* new customers!”

Hamrol commanded, “Don’t come out without an instrument.”

Shana started to protest but a hard glare saw her mouth clamp shut. Then the captain left. She was alone in the shop, her guide for the last two months out of sight for the first time in as many days. She winced as the shopkeeper bubbled with barely contained glee. Turning slowly, she found him grinning ear to ear and awaiting a handshake.

Always give a firm handshake. You’re supposed to be here. Make sure they know it.

Shana forced a smile and reached out. The shopkeeper didn’t wait to lunge forward, grip tightly, and shake so hard the girl nearly lost her balance. He leapt into an elaborate introduction.

“Galbreth Gobblegor, Giver of Goods at Gobblegor’s Grand Gallery, and the gregarious and grand guide for the greatest game in the galaxy! But of course, that’s a mouthful and the truth is best kept small: call me Gil! *You are?!*”

She mumbled, “Shana.”

“Shana the Slayer? Savior of Seven Savannahs and Sovereign of Sultry Singing?”

“*W-what?*”

Gil released her hand and giggled uncontrollably. For a goblin, he was strangely upbeat. Then again, she’d only met four before and they had tried to eat her. So, maybe she wasn’t the greatest judge of character when it came to the green folk.

“Or perhaps...OH, OH! I like this one!” Gil cleared his throat and then hollered boastfully, “*SHANA THE SUBTLE!* See what I did there? I shout it but you...my, you really *are* shy, aren’t you? I mean, we *could* do Shana the Shy...but...hmm...”

Just as quickly as he had focused on her, Gil was wandering away, pondering aloud various titles that played on her name. Why, she hadn’t the faintest idea. Still, with room to breathe, Shana got her first real look at the shop and its keeper. He waddled a bit, as overweight goblins typically do, and was adorned in enough jewelry to fund a small invasion of Castle Karnth. Two pronounced fangs jutting up, one capped in silver, and a nose so pointy it could probably pierce plate armor. He had all of six hairs on his head, but only five ran straight back. The sixth was twice as long as the others and curled down into his left ear. As he mumbled to himself the goblin kept pulling it back, but the lone hair just curled right back into his pointed ear.

Like Gil, the shop was small but equally lavish in appearance. Redwood floors were offset by an inlaid rug of striking purple, gilded in a gold border. At its center was a hilariously ugly stitching of a goblin, but *this* gregariously grinning goblin somehow had all six hairs neatly combed to the side. Along the two side walls were ornate mahogany cabinets filled to the brim with all manner of things. Most of them didn’t look *anything* like a musical instrument. On the far wall was a simple counter, devoid of the typical register. Instead, there were just two quills, an inkwell, and a large stack of sheet music.

“OK!”

Shana jumped, pulled from her thoughts by the declaration.

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“Well, come on! Can’t go questing without your first instrument! Unless you can sing. You *can* sing, right? Instruments aren’t much good when they get broken and, well, you’re not much good if you can’t make music!”

“Uh...”

Gil cocked an eyebrow then said, “*Roland’s Rescue!* Go!”

Shana heard in her head the captain’s echoed command, issued almost every night since she was first recruited.

I call it, you sing it, recruit. Roland’s Rescue! Go!

Without missing a beat, Shana gulped and then launched into song. Her voice was shaky, Gil looked deflated, and a few patrons in the street peered in the front windows before shaking their heads and moving on. She didn’t even get halfway through before Gil stopped her. The goblin slapped a hand over his snaggle-teeth then shook his head in disbelief.

“Oh my” he mumbled, “That was awful.”

“S-sorr...”

“*AWFULLY AMAZING!* You’re a natural! Ok, ok, I know just the thing. How do you feel about a Boggle-Womp!?”

“You’re serious? Wait...a bog-ol-what-now?”

“A boggle-womp! LOOK! *ISN’T IT GREAT!?*”

Gil pulled from one of the shelves a kettle drum nearly as wide as him. He dropped it onto the hardwood floor with a clatter, deftly pulled two strikers from a pouch slung at its side, and then winked at Shana. He then began to rhythmically drum. It felt like noise, at first, and Shana didn’t hesitate to cover her ears as the shop rattled and echoed with the pounding of the instrument. She was about to bid him to stop when a peculiar detail caught her attention.

“They’re...glowing?” she murmured, temporarily forgetting Gil’s obnoxious beating, and lowering her hands in awe.

Every other instrument in the shop shimmered a faint red hue. The more she looked, the more vicious and dangerous the instruments seemed. A flute looked more akin to a warpike. A guitar now a mighty warhammer. Even the display of tiny harmonicas appeared more as lethal ninja stars. Before her eyes, the shop warped into an armory fit for slaying the deadliest of foes.

“W-what? *How...*?”

And then it stopped. Gil ceased his beating and, instantly, Shana was staring at rather ordinary music instruments in a rather ordinary shop with an *extraordinary* shopkeeper grinning at her.

“*Wumpus Warricus!*” he declared, “It’s a classic. They still play it for the Master Wumper on his birthday, but not too long or everybody gets rowdy. That’s how the last Master Wumper died. Pretty neat, right!?”

“I...don’t understand” Shana replied, bewildered at magic coming from a *drum*.

“What’s not to understand? You bang on this, your stuff looks scary, enemies get the heeby-jeebies, heroes try to keep up as the bad guys run away with their tails between their legs!”

Shana tilted her head in confusion, but Gil’s grin only widened. At this rate, she half wondered if his mouth would stretch back to his pointy green ears. Yet, the smile faltered.

“No?” he asked, his surprise apparent, before mumbling, “Ok...hmm. A *tough* new customer. Never *not* sold a Boggle-Womp before. These were all the rage just last week!”

Gil stashed the kettle drum away and hurried to the other side of the shop. Getting up on his yellow-nailed-tippy-toes, he slapped at a strange bag with tubes poking every which way out of it. A finger caught it, and the tube-bag-thing tumbled atop him. Shana winced, awaiting the crash of the instrument and goblin, but no such sound came. Instead, she found Gil sat cross-legged, grinning once more, with the unusual bag of tubes in his lap.

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“Ever heard of a bagpipe?” he asked, before gloating, “*This isn’t that!*”

“Umm, ok...what is i...?”

But Gil was already playing his heart out. The sound was *amful*. Shana had heard bagpipes before and, true to the goblin’s word, *this wasn’t that*. Rather, the pipes produced what could only be described as the noises of snoring, farting, and belching. Worse, it smelled it, too. Perhaps Gil didn’t brush his teeth that morning, but Shana suspected the instrument itself was producing the range of throat-clenching, nostril-pinching, gag-until-you-drop-dead smells. He paused briefly and Shana started to beg him to stop, but he interrupted her.

“Ok, ok! That was a warm-up. Here’s the *good* stuff!”

“W-WAIT, NO!” Shana pleaded, but Gil was off again.

Except she didn’t smell poo or rotten eggs this time. In fact, she didn’t smell anything at all. At first. Then Gil turned a pipe towards her, puffed hard, and she caught a whiff of...

Gold? Gold has a smell?

He turned another tube, flatulating noisily, and her nose detected thick, choking smoke. Gil winked and turned a third pipe towards her. It smelled of something fearsome and dangerous. Shana’s heart pounded as she became certain there was a dragon in the shop. Just as she was about to scream in terror, for no rookie is prepared for such a beast, the music ceased. A goblin sat with a funky bag of tubes, chuckling to himself.

“*Dragon’s Doom*” he said with a hint of pride, “is one of the most *difficult* pieces to play, but also extraordinarily powerful! Many a truce with my kind has been forged over that one. *THIS...*” he paused with dramatic flair, “...is a Caddy-Con, the penultimate instrument for deception! If you’ve got a thing for lying and cheating, this is what you need. It’s so good, it makes rogues second-guess their calling!”

Shana pressed a hand to her heart, willing it to slow down. Gil watched her intently, then shook his head once. He set the caddy-con down by its case and scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“Hmm. Too honest. Ok...NEXT! Let’s see...OH! How about...!”

Shana called, “G-gil, um...!”

“Yes?!”

“C-can, um, can we just, uh, wait for a bit? Could I, j-just look around?”

“What’s the fun in *that!*?” Gil declared with obvious disappointment, before adding with a smile, “Sure! No problem. Let me know if you see something you like.”

He bounded over to his little counter, popped atop a stool hidden behind it, then set to writing on a page of sheet music. The shop was quiet, save for his scribbles that seemed as dramatic as their composer. Shana breathed a sigh of relief and considered just leaving.

Don’t come out without an instrument.

She grimaced and then sighed. Anytime the captain made such a command, it had an unspoken addition: *or else*. ‘Or else’ usually being ‘you don’t go on the quest’. She’d dreamed her whole life of doing this and all that stood between her and her first quest was a crazy goblin and weird instruments. Of which she only had to pick *one*. Easy.

Except it wasn’t! Shana had practiced plenty of ‘normal’ instruments over the last two months. The captain had quickly decided she would be best as a bard. She’d been disappointed at the time, much preferring the mental image of ‘Shana the Slayer’ wielding a battleaxe or sword and shield. But Captain Hamrol had determined she was best suited to the role of bard on account of her singing one evening after a *horrible* day of practicing with a sword.

Shana *did* like to sing and, if nobody was listening, she was rather good. This didn’t change Gil’s opinion – one shared by anyone who knew anything about questing – that bards depended on their instruments and singing was a *last resort*. Practically speaking, it made sense. If running from a band

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of kobolds or about to be barbecued by a dragon, singing was notoriously difficult when out of breath, scared witless, or both.

Shana was *terribly* talented at being both out of breath and scared witless. Hence the captain choosing her profession *for* her. She'd been too terrified to ask a fortune teller, fearing her fate might be right back on the farm she'd left behind.

She headed over to the cabinet featuring the boggle-womp and eyed the other instruments set around it. Intricate silver nameplates gave names but little else. A 'fleur-tan' looked a bit like a tambourine but had many loose harp strings dangling from its rim. The 'biddy-banny-banner' at least resembled its name: it was little more than a tiny, blue, triangular flag on a stick. How one played a little flag was beyond Shana.

Dracor remtas, white ortas, harpoon harmonica, retching trump, and many more names boggled Shana's mind. She was starting to believe that Gil had named all of these himself. Slowly, a minor frustration grew into a big fear: what if she couldn't play *any* of these? A bard that couldn't play their instrument wasn't really a bard.

You can be a bard, or you can go home. How's that?

Shana scowled at the display case, the glass reflecting her desperation back at her. She spied one of the harmonicas and cocked an eyebrow. That couldn't be too hard to learn, right? The captain had said get an instrument. He didn't say she had to be *good* at it. Just as she turned to call for Gil, she paused. The shopkeeper wasn't behind his counter. She turned to look the other way and screeched in surprise. The goblin stood right beside her, his approach somehow silent. Gil paid her no mind, his pointy nose hovering just before the glass as he nodded knowingly.

"Heard a story once, about wizards" he said rather somberly, "big part of it had to do with them picking wands. Or rather, wands picking them. Dunno why. Wizards are a bit like bards...don't need a wand to do what you do, it just helps."

"Umm..."

Gil continued, "I was bard once. I was good, too! It's why I opened this place. Closest I could get to the music after my party died."

Shana watched Gil's demeanor drain into deep sadness. She'd never seen a goblin cry but judging by the snot slowly dripping from his nose, she took this to be that. Gil shrugged.

"You can be the last fighter. The last cleric. The last rogue, even, though some will look at you funny. A survivor is a survivor, and *nobody* doubts a survivor! This world is rough, we all know that. But a *bard* surviving?"

Gil looked at Shana and he forced a sorry smile.

"No such thing" he murmured, "only a *coward* comes back when you're a *bard*."

Gil stepped past her and waddled towards the counter. He rummaged behind it and returned with a violin, or at least it *looked* like a regular violin. Two strings were snapped, and the bow had only six hairs left on it. Deep scratches marred the varnish, and the head was nearly snapped off. Gil sighed then explained.

"We were in over our head something bad. Big ol' troll with brains to match. Bewitched with intelligence. Figured out how to tame two dire wolves. It was a bad quest. Bad, bad quest. None of us knew what we were in for. Everyone did their best, but...you know...things don't always work out. So it goes. In the end, it was just me and our warrior. Olrich, Champion of Karnst. Big fella with a heart to match. He was crying, even as we fought. He knew."

Gil tapped the violin and sighed again.

"*Roland's Rescue* was the last thing I played before this happened. Their courage went out of them just as quick as a busted mana-bulb. Before I could even open my mouth to keep it up, it was

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just me and Olrich. I'm a helluva bard, Miss Shana, but I'm a *terrible* singer. I was so scared...Olrich never stood a chance. I only made it out because I can sing *one* song halfway good."

Gil chuckled darkly, but then shook his head in shame.

"*Last Call*. Nothing gets you running faster, and it's easy. I just sang my heart out all the way out of that hell hole. *Last Call*...huh...didn't know how true that was. Bards don't come back alone. It just isn't right. Fugitive rogues, unethical warlocks, solo mercenaries...anybody else can be alone. A bard? What good is music if nobody is around to listen to it?"

The goblin shopkeeper sighed then strangely winked at Shana.

He whispered, "Ask me why."

"Erm, why what?"

"Ask me why I'm telling you this, Shana."

"Oh...um...why are you telling me this?"

His eyes twinkled, and he held up the broken violin before her.

"I'll answer you with a question of my own. Why take a bard along?"

Shana replied, "For the inspiration? To, um, to do the stuff you showed me?"

"A warrior greener than me behind the ears can instill bravery with a shout. A rogue with a light hand can lighten the blows of an enemy. A wizard that can only conjure fire bolts can still start a campfire. Who needs a bard? Why take one along?"

Shana considered the question and had to admit she had wondered the same. After all, she had gone to the captain begging to be something *other* than a bard. The only famous bard she knew of wasn't famous at all: Bert, who hung out in the town square back home singing songs of great battles and heroic people. None of which he had personally seen. Still, Bert's songs had convinced Shana that farming crops wasn't her calling. Now, inside a shop full of instruments, she was having a tough time accepting that she was probably just like Bert, likely to be singing songs about quests she, too, *didn't* go on.

"I don't know" she mumbled.

"A quest is only as good as its storyteller" the goblin said.

"Sir?"

"A quest is only as good as its storyteller. Dragons can't be defeated if we don't first have a story telling us so – even if that story is a *lie* – and inspiring us to try for ourselves. Nobody ever picked up a sword or bow without first asking themselves if they had any business doing so. There are few impromptu heroes and even fewer that survive."

Gil gently poked Shana's shoulder and his smile became more genuine.

"Who will remember the time the rogue swapped the paladin's holy water for lake water, just to see if faith was real? Who will sing of the noble elf laying down their life for a dour dwarf, one nearly extinct people for another? Who will tease the wizard when he can't solve the riddle, reminding him it's ok to not know sometimes? Who will calm the warrior's nerves and remind her to *just keep swinging?*"

Gil motioned behind Shana, and she turned to look out into the street. People of all sorts and specie ambled by, ignoring the shop of instruments as if it didn't exist. Bards were few and far between these days. It was a thankless job, Shana knew that, if only because she'd never heard of a *rich* bard before. It made sense. Nobody in their right mind would go into battle with a musical instrument.

"They can heal and harm. Fight and forgive. Leap, smash, raise, and inspire. All of them. But there is one thing very, *very few* can do."

Gil tapped her shoulder and held out the bow of the violin for her. She gingerly took it, worried it would snap in half between her fingers.

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“Bards tell a story that inspires others to try any of that stuff in the first place. Sing a song when nobody else is brave enough to try. Might sound bad, you know?”

Shana mumbled, “You said I sounded good?”

“No, I didn’t!” Gil shot back, spindly green hands on his wide hips.

Shana grimaced but then gulped when Gil drew close and tapped her nose harshly.

“I *said* you were *awfully amazing*.”

“Is...is that a compliment?”

“Does it matter? You sang when asked, even if you didn’t want to. If that isn’t bravery, this goblin doesn’t know green from gold. So, *Shana the Shy*...”

Shana scowled at the moniker, but then managed a timid smile. Gil wasn’t too bad, the more she considered him. He chuckled at her then held out the violin, too. Shana eyed it questioningly, but he thrust it at her.

“Go on, take it!” he commanded.

“But...”

“No worse off than *you*, ha! I joke, of course. Really, now, not going to learn if you just stand here all day and gawk at them! Besides, Captain Hamrol is one of my favorite heroes! Which means *you* are going to be one of my favorite *heroines*!”

Shana took the battered instrument and Gil set about showing her how to hold it on her shoulder and beneath her chin. He twirled the bow in her right hand so it faced correctly, positioned her so she could play, then stepped back and winked.

“Get after it! Show me what you know!” he exclaimed.

Shana protested, “B-but...I don’t know ho...”

“*LET ‘ER RIP!*” Gil shouted with excitement.

Shana sighed inwardly and drug the bow across the two warped strings. Despite her assumption of a terrible screeching noise – for that is what little children learning to play violin sounded like – a rather mellow tone rang out, scratchy but otherwise solid. She’d never played a violin before and was surprised it didn’t sound nearly as awful as it looked.

“Hey hey! See? Look at you, expected the worst, didn’t you?” Gil goaded.

Shana smirked and then tacitly nodded. The goblin chuckled, then took a deep breath.

“*A LEGEND BEGINS!*” Gil boasted, “Shana the Shy! Mistress of Hymns and Lady of the Weary and Wary! Muse to the...*what?*! What’s the matter?”

Shana had lowered the violin and was staring at Gil with a mixture of surprise and awe. The goblin, taken aback, tilted his head back at her and repeated his question, this time with sincerity.

“What’s the matter, Shana?”

Her eyes glistened and felt a tad puffy. The goblin rushed forward to rest spindly hands on her shoulders. She forced a smile and shrugged; emotions much bigger than her usual fear tugged at her heart strings.

“I rather like that” she mumbled with a sniffle.

“What’s that? You like what my dear?” the goblin asked, his worry apparent.

“Lady of the W-weary and Wary. It, um, it sounds nice. I’d like to be called that. Someday.”

Gil’s eyes widened, black pupils like obsidian plates on a yellow tablecloth. A small dribble of snot formed off his needle-like nose. Shana frowned, worried she had somehow hurt the shopkeeper’s feelings. Gil gently patted her shoulders, sniffled loudly, and gave a toothy grin.

“Good. That’s, uh, that’s good,” he mumbled, “Um, hang onto that one for me,” he paused again, snuffed his nose, nodded, and finished, “Yeah, you keep that one.”

Gil released her then noisily wiped his nose on a satin sleeve. He chuckled and took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. He winked at Shana, then looked at the violin and smiled brightly.

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He mumbled to himself, “*Still got it.* Hmm. Always good to know I’ve still got it.”

“S-sir?” Shana asked, not understanding.

Gil ignored her, beamed, and declared, “OK! Right. Tell you what, dear. You keep that violin, too, yeah? Only need one string to get started anyways, so two is a bonus!”

Shana was floored. She immediately shook her head and held the instrument out towards its original owner.

“What?! No! N-no, no, I can’t Mr. Gil...I...!”

The goblin folded his arms and shook his head dramatically as Shana held the violin out towards him. He then hiked a thumb over his shoulder.

“Already decided! Just need some music and you’ll be set. Step on up!”

Gil hurried to behind the counter. Shana hesitated, before approaching the goblin as he rifled through the stack of sheet music. She ogled the busted violin and, for a moment, wondered if she should push harder to return the heirloom. It didn’t seem right, taking such an important memory from the goblin. That and she worried what Captain Hamrol might say about the near-destroyed instrument. She looked up when Gil cleared his throat with intent.

“Right, so, I’ve got a handful of pieces here for you. Pretty easy stuff! Captain Hamrol knows them all, too, so he’ll have no trouble helping you. And...TA-DA!”

Gil waved his hands dramatically before reaching beneath the counter and pulling up the violin’s case. It was as ratty as the instrument itself, with a distinctive hole marring one side of it. Shana eyed it warily and the goblin cheekily winked as he poked a finger through.

“Skeleton Archer put a hole right there and I couldn’t get the violin out! So, I tore it wider and played it in the case! Pretty handy if you’re in a pinch.”

She nervously asked, “Are you being serious?”

“Absolutely! Now then, music goes *here*, bow goes *here*, violin goes *here*...”

Gil pointed at various recesses and pockets within the case, most of which, too, had holes in them. He then had Shana place the dilapidated instrument into its case. One rather large pocket was conspicuously empty.

Shana pointed to it and asked, “What goes there?”

“Money! Need to quest a little and have some stories, first, of course!”

The girl eyed the goblin, and he laughed aloud. He then set the case on the floor, stood behind it, and pretended he was playing a violin. Immediately, Shana understood. She also hoped she garnered more coin from questing than standing around playing, like Bert back home.

As if reading her mind, Gil commented, “Every adventurer remembers their first gold piece. Bards remember their first gold *tossed*. I’d give you one right now, but that’d ruin the moment.”

Gil laughed at his own joke then closed the case and handed it to Shana. He then clasped his hands and watched her with apparent expectation. Unsure of what to do next, Shana asked what she owed him in payment. Gil bowed dramatically.

“For you, *Lady of the Weary and Wary*, my fee has already been paid in full! My heart sings once more, my gift renewed, and adventure calls me even as I wait to hear more of your deeds, Mistress of Hymns, Shana the Shy. I thank you!”

Shana giggled then cleared her throat. She managed a wink at Gil as she thanked him in turn.

“Thank you, Galbreth Gobblegor, Giver of Goods at Gobblegor’s Grand Gallery, and the gregarious and grand guide for the greatest game in the galaxy. I must confess, I’d rather the truth remain large. It suits your equally large heart.”

The goblin beamed with pride then bid Lady Shana farewell.

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The next day, Gobblegor's Grand Gallery closed, indefinitely. Upon its door was pegged a note scrawled with dramatic flair:

I have found the next story to tell. It is mine.

An unusual amount of excitement permeated the town that day. It had been nearly three decades since the cowardly bard had returned with a tale of disaster and tragedy, bloodied and alone. Now he was gone again. Where had Gil traveled to? What had prompted him to take up adventuring once more? He had always seemed so wary of returning to that life, said one guard. A baker had commented that Gil had always been so weary after losing his party.

On and on, the questions went. What could inspire such a coward to try again? Had Galbreth learned of some great treasure? The taverns clamored with rumors and theories, but there was only one fact to be had: the goblin had left early that morning, singing terribly, with nary but a harmonica and a coin purse. The song itself had been one nobody recognized:

Mistress of hymns, you opened my heart's gate! Lady of the Weary, guide me to my fate!

Nobody but a shy bard with a ratty violin.