

Sharlatan - Travis Hisstoe



Sharlatan



I was loosing purchase, dangling above a dark chasm. Travis Hisstoe The Sharlatan swung down with a rope. His green half-cape and cloak fluttering madly, I was sure he'd collide into

me. But he landed softly on the ledge above.

“We’ll be out of here in a min,”
h e



said, grabbing me by the collar. The ledge wasn't that big and he was starting to slide himself. With his small build, the young man, I was sure, couldn't hold me up. With his free hand, he unrolled a strip of paper from his mouth. "Cheat sheet", he smiled as he tossed it away. He did with wayyy too much flourish, and we both slid off the ledge.

Though we were falling to our deaths, he took a moment to make sure his cloak was secure. I was screaming at the top of my lungs and clutched at him. I thought I had his hood, but was holding on to handfulls of straggly mullet. As we fell away from the light, the last thing I saw was him with

an abashed grin, pulling a vial out of nowhere.



Suddenly it was cold, and the rush of wind slowly halted.

“What’d you do this time?” I asked. We were rising. The cave entrance was getting nearer. With the light from above I could see around us again. We were in a cloud! It cush-

ioned us up and out, back to solid ground, then disappeared.

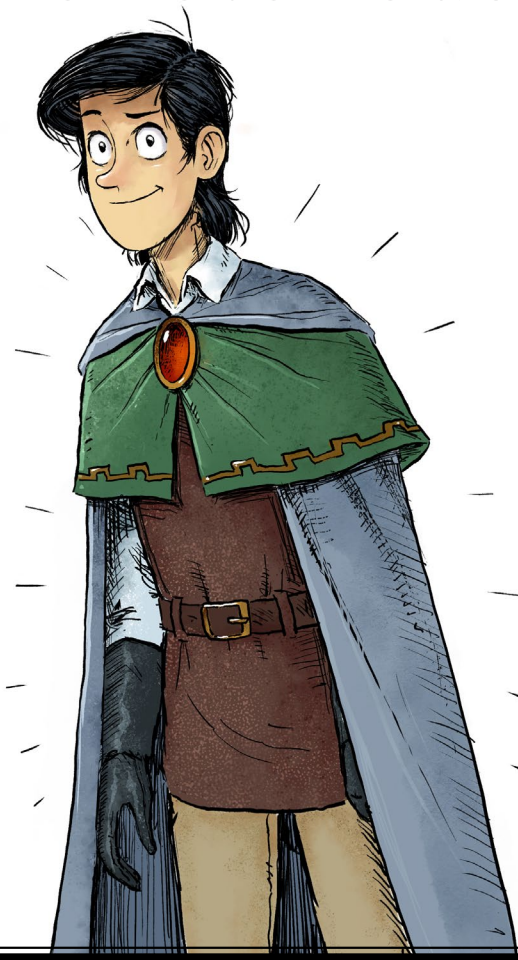
“Well, let’s see it!” said Sharlatan. I opened my satchel and withdrew the X of Aeronautto. For the first time in centuries, it’s gold and jewels sparkled in sunlight.

Suddenly, the Sharlatan snatched it from my hands. He jumped back and held it up dramatically. “Sorry, friend! You’ve been shenanigot by the Sharlatan!” he said, with his sly smile, wind touseling his ever-messy dark hair. Had this been his plan from the start? Like a stage magician, he revealed a handful of purple powder and continued, “This device does not belong in a

mu—”...

Before he could finish he was interrupted by the powder, sputtering sparks, then bursting into flame. The Sharlatan had vanished, taking the bejeweled “X” with him!

Cottonous Monotonous



The first thing I noticed was his cloak—staggeringly ordinary and overlookable. Absolutely nothing stood out or was memorable. It beamed with unembellishment.

A shoulder cape partially covered it, clasped with a gold and ruby brooch where the hood came through. His disheveled hair fell upon it as he scratched his head and shook my hand.

For weeks we'd spoken across screens about a magic treasure he was hunting down. Something that streamlined understanding of airfoils and raised comprehension of lift. I looked into it, and he decided to pay a visit.

“The X of Aeronautto isn’t from this world,” Sharlatan had explained. “But it would bring alot of prestige back to your family’s old museum.” He reached into his bag to look over his tools for the catacombs.

“Wait,” I said. “Are those things magic? They won’t let magic inside.” I explained that, long ago, a witch supposedly woke some of the residents. He wasn’t concerned as he placed his stuff back in his satchel, but I was certain they were exuding awesome amounts of extraordinary energies.

We ran into guards before even remotely near the tombs. Electricians

aimed dish antennae at us and held up meters. I thought we were in trouble when one of the needles broke. But the guards said the meter was faulty; broke trying to go lower than 'zero'. So, none of Sharlatan's implements registered, but they made a strange comment to me. "You'll have to keep it down in there."

The tunnel entrance was visible when we were next stopped. This time they had an old wizard standing by, who closed his eyes and waved his hands before us. I caught my eyes roving over Sharlatan's cloak again, trying to nail down exactly what it was that made it so commonplace. The wizard gave us the 'okay', but as we walked onward,

a guard mumbled after us, “He better quiet that horn!”

“Horn?” I asked Sharlatan. “Is there a horn in your bag?”

“I can’t remember. Don’t think so...”

The final sentries were stationed just before the crypt’s entryway. No dishes or wizards this time; just a polite cautioning that the entrance itself had powerful magic sensors. Surely we would now be found out. If the cloak was magically hiding Sharlatan’s things, shouldn’t it also set off alarms? Turns out, that wasn’t the concern.

A guard pointed at my head and said,

“Your horn is humming.”

“I’m sure you’re wrong.” I told him. I’d heard of horns emitting tones, but it was a very rare thing.

He explained that most can’t hear the sound. Only the guards are equipped to hear it since it’s on the list of things that could possibly maybe disturb the dead.

“So, I can’t go in?!”

He put something on my horn. “This will create an anti-phase wave. Dead won’t hear a thing...”

And we were in! I couldn’t understand

how they didn't detect his incredible implements, which were undeniably pulsing with prodigious power. Certainly the cloak couldn't cover them up. It was undeniably without magic of any sort. It was as far from enchantment as anything could be. Proposterously, overpoweringly, prodigiously plain. The most un-magical thing I'd ever encountered in my life. Unconveyably unremarkable.

Wherewithdrawl



We were past the barring magic detectors and into the catacombs, which was lined with electric lights. I was fiddling with the sound-canceler on my horn, thinking of the X of Aero-nautto—the treasure rumored to be hidden in these tunnels. A treasure that would allow the museum to stay open, even though it's original artifacts had been stolen and scattered to the far reaches of our world.

Sharlatan kept looking over a folded paper. “Is that a map?” I asked. He said it wasn't. Every time we came to a locked door or force-field, he produced some kind of implement that would get us past it. Various keys, wands, or powders.

“Where’s that all coming from?” I asked. “There’s no way you’re carrying that all in your bag.”

He explained to me his “Wherewithdrawl”. “It’s a way to carry stuff, or hide stuff.”

“I’ve heard of stuff like that,” I said. We were now reaching deep parts of the catacombs, and some of the electric lights were out. He seemed to reach under his sleeve, and produced a flashlight for me.

“No,” he said. “The Wherewithdrawl is special. There are many methods used to hide or store treasures. They’re all

a bit limited and they all have vulnerabilities.” He said he’d found a way to mix and merge these multitudes of methods, creating something much more powerful. Something unique and impenetrable.

“It hides and stores better than all the other individual means, but the magics weren’t exactly compatible with one another.” He said that vanishing things into the Wherewithdrawl was a bit finicky. All the hiding and disappearing magics contested one another over whether a vanishing thing should ‘poof’ in a cloud of smoke, or sparkle with lights, or simply fade away. Until a day came when this was resolved, the Wherewithdrawl would

be a bit self-conscious about this, refusing vanish something if eyes are on it. “If I want to store something, I have to hide it from sight, like I’m doing a magic trick or something. And other magics amplified this problem. Now things have to be out of sight AND out of mind. That’s why I haven’t vanished this door-opening wand, yet. I can’t do it until your thoughts have stopped lingering on it.”

That wouldn’t be long. We’d turned a corner into a very strange room which had taken all of my attention. “Well,” I said, “It’s not as sophisticated as YOUR warehouse...”

I couldn’t believe the impiety. Deep

in the center of our sacred burial mountain, was a storeroom of pure junk. Shelves and fold-up tables filled the room, laden with decades of old and broken office machines. Copiers, printers, computers, monitors.

“This is awesome!” said an electrified Sharlatan. “I’m taking some of these. Look away! Busy yourself with something!”

I examined the wall at the end of the room. “Sharlatan!” I called. “Come see!”

He stepped over into the relative dimness; the lights were flickering here. “Is that a giant door?” he asked. This

was probably what we were looking for. The stone door behind which was rumored to be the treasure we sought. I pushed, but it was sealed with a spell.

“Use the wand!” I said. Sharlatan looked confused. “The wand! The one you couldn’t disappear because I was thinking about it.”

“I... I must have done so,” he said. “When you were looking at the wall. And now, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lacklister

Green Candle

Rusty Screw

Purple Toadstool

filligreed notebook

Silk Bowstring

Silver twin prong cork puller

Flourescent Green headband

Crystal Dice

Folded up Note

Forget-me-



“Call up one of your tools,” I said. “Any of them might open this door.”

“I can’t remember the stuff you’re talking about,” Sharlatan said, wiping the dust from one of the broken computers.

“Let me guess,” I said. “Another side effect of mixing the treasure-hiding magics.”

“One way to hide treasure is to make people forget about it. Of course, you normally want the person hiding it to remember, but...”

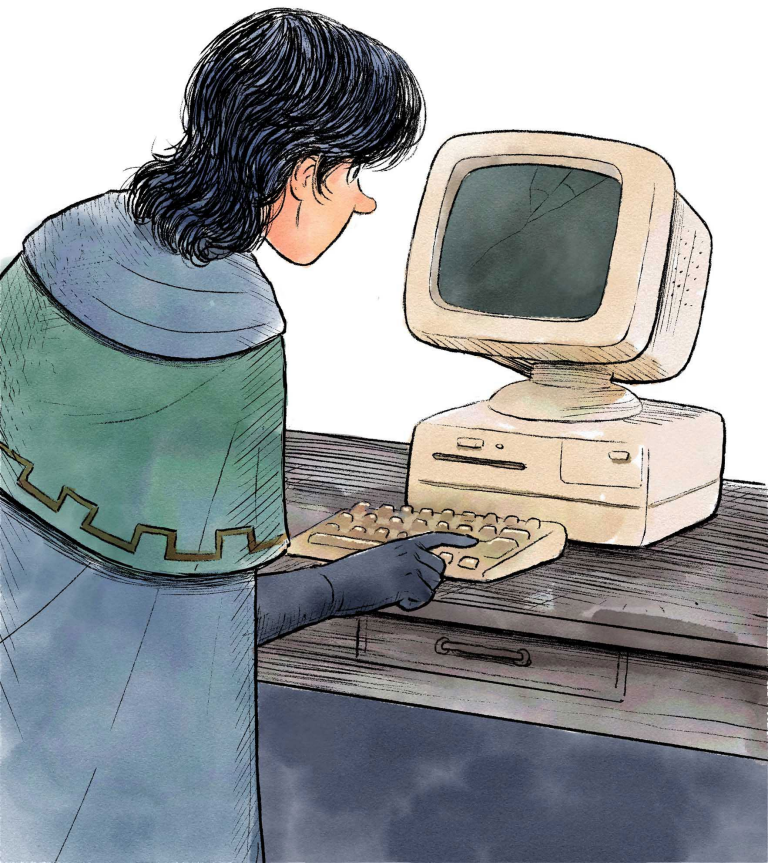
“So, how do we get that tool again?”

“My ‘cheat sheet’ might have an alternative,” he said.

He was referring to his “Lacklister”. Another frankenstein of magics—retrieval codes, map legends, and answer keys for all the things hidden or forgotten into his “Wherewithdrawl”. Its counterpart of sorts.

When I asked where the list was, he said, “Well, you don’t want something that important just lying around to be lost or stolen. It’s one of those ‘everywhere and nowhere’ things.”

He handed me the folded paper he’d been consulting. “See if you can find something on this forgetmenote.” He



leaned down to the computer monitor and tapped its keyboard—though it wasn't even connected.

The paper was filled with scribbled lists and sketchy drawings. “These are the things in your Wherewithdrawl?”

“The lists of the Lacklister are never complete,” he said, searching the blank monitor. I saw nothing helpful on the paper’s portion of the list.

“Are you actually seeing a list on that screen? I don’t see anything. Is that part of your “Lack Log”?”

“Ah!” he said, turning from the computer. “I remember this!” He held up a green velvet glove; presumably from his Wherewithdrawl. It was decorated with gold filigree and studded with emeralds.

I was relieved. We were closer to the X. It would sustain our museum. My son would not have to look for a career in another part of our world.

He pushed against the door with the glove on. The glove hummed and rattled. One of its emeralds burst with light, then shattered. The giant stone door gave a rumble, and with an exhalation of wispy smoke, gave way slightly. Sharlatan pushed it open...

Weather Vein



This was surely the room. Behind the giant stone door, the final chambers we sought.

“There are no lights here!” I told Sharlatan. My flashlight had gone out and I’d left it with the computers.

“No problem,” he said. Suddenly, the room was lit. There were no bulbs or torches; it just suddenly felt like we were outside on an overcast day; not in an underground chamber. The Sharlatan was holding up a magnificent sword.

“Is that making the light?” I asked. The sword had a beautiful blue blade, only slightly glowing; it was hard to tell. I

looked closer, and as I did, it slowly became clear that I was peering into sky. A sliver of heavens.

“The blade is a remainder of the universe as it once was,” explained Sharlatan. “As I hope it will be again...”

All I understood was that I was looking into something impossibly pure and mighty. Clouds of power I saw within, and I heard rumblings of terrible thunder. It didn't light the room like a bulb or a flame. Light didn't beam or emanate from it. The room was just lit.

Holding this slice of sky was a peculiar hilt. It seemed made of brass, shaped

reminiscent of a weather vane.

He held up the sword, and I heard the faint sound of wind. “Dei-drafts,” he told me. “Divine winds moving through my sword Weather Vein. It will aid us in an orientational manner. Tell us which way to go.”

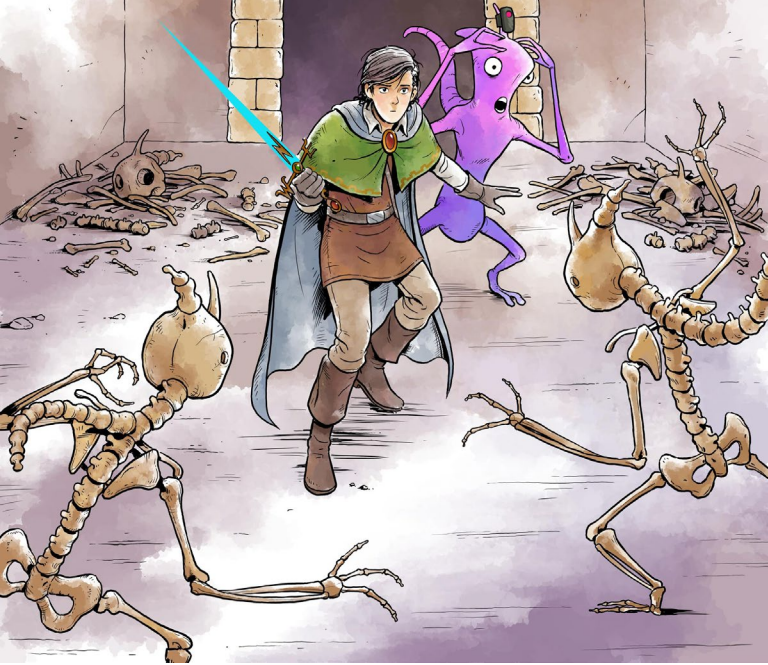
And it did! The tunnels were like a maze, but he took us through with confidence. The hilt seemed to morph slightly as we wandered. Different winds from different places, Sharlatan explained. Soon we were there. The secret chamber which stored the legendary X of Aeronautto. It was the first really scary room we’d found. Actual bones littered the floor. Whole skele-

tons here and there. At the far end, on a dais, sat a box.

“I think your horn-thing isn’t working,” said Sharlatan. “Or maybe it’s something I’m carrying.”

“My horn thing? The noise-cancelling thing?” I looked around and saw that the skeletons were moving. They were actually standing up! “Booby traps?”

“Get to the X!” Sharlatan cried. I was too scared. Sharlatan had already swiped at two skeletons, crumbling them back into bones. But two were still in our way. “They’ll be drawn to my sword!” he shouted. “Go!”



I ran, and he was right, once again. I got to the box and opened it. There it was. I grabbed it and turned back to see how Sharlatan was faring. His blade swung at the skeletons. It didn't cut the bones or harm them. It seemed to pass through them, breaking the spell that moved them, and they fell

apart. I imagined I saw their spirits released, rising away in peace.

But I didn't have time to recover, for that wasn't all that fell apart! The room suddenly shuddered, cracks forming on the floor. More booby traps? Or just the wrath of more woken dead? The floor opened beneath me, and I fell into darkness...

Travis Hisstoe



After rescuing me from my fall into the chasm, The Sharlatan escaped with our prize. I guess I should have questioned why he was helping to find the X.

“Sorry friend! You’ve been shenag-igot by the Sharlatan!” Though he’d grabbed the X of Aeronautto, I was too focused on it for him to simply stow it in his “Wherewithdrawl”. But he’d found something on his “Lack-lister” that would carry him and the X away. “This device does not belong in a mu—“... Purple powder sparked and flamed, and I was alone, empty-handed after my adventure with The Sharlatan.

I was furious we'd lost the item that would've certainly drawn life back into our museum; that would've ensured my son a career right here in our town.

But then the treasures started trickling in. Unmistakeably, the lost treasures I'd told Travis about. Believed to be far out of reach in distant parts of our world.

They had been found by explorers. New explorers equipped with new flying machines. Made possible by the powers of the X of Aeronautto. One day, when all the treasures were restored in our museum, the Sharlatan returned. I caught up with him, relax-

ing on the shores of our beach.

“You were right to steal it,” I said. “I’d have never allowed you to take it. I’d have never gambled that the other treasures would be found, or that the explorers would be good enough to return them.”

“Plus, if the X had been lost, I didn’t want you to feel responsible for it.” He lazed back in his folding chair and sipped his drink. His bare toes tapped at the sand.

“Is that a snake head?” I asked.

Sharlatan peered over his sunglasses at one of his big toes. It gleamed gold-

en in the sun. “The Hisstoe,” he said. “It’s where I get my name—Travis Hisstoe.” He got up and stretched. “It’s like a thread, weaving and wending, trying to darn the universe back how it was. Repair it. That’s why I was after the X. It won’t do much in your museum, but it’s going to help people to make all sorts of ships. Interplanetary ones, eventually. Your museum is going to connect your world to tons of others.”

We sat a while and made plans for his short stay. When it was time for him to go, I noticed that he made no sound in the sand as he walked. A side effect, I guessed, of his golden toe.