



# THE TIME SPONGE





YOU GLANCE AT YOUR WATCH and wonder how much longer you'll have to wait for your boss to turn up. Since you started work as assistant to a private detective, you've got used to hanging around strange places. For the most part, Haventry is a very ordinary town but its shady side is populated by vampires, werewolves, ghosts, goblins and various other strange creatures of the night. Your boss, Klaus Solstaag, is a yeti. Working with him is usually pretty interesting but right now it's early in the morning, freezing cold and you're locked out of the office.

It's grey and miserable, the sky heavy with the threat of rain, so you're relieved when you hear the unmistakable sound of Klaus's car, Watson. The engine barks and snarls because, unlike most of the cars driving around the town, Watson used to be a dog. There was a time you would have considered that strange, but you've been working on the shady side long enough to understand that things are a little different here. Watson parks next to you,

enthusiastically wagging his exhaust pipe.

The passenger door pops open.

"Morning," growls Klaus. "Get in."

You do as you're told. You're still fastening your seatbelt when Watson pulls away. An air freshener hangs from the rear-view mirror, but it isn't strong enough to mask your boss's distinctive aroma. He yawns and you cover your nose to avoid inhaling his morning breath. You wonder how long he's been awake. It's not unusual for him to spend the early hours trailing a suspect or chasing up a possible lead, but it's been a couple of months since your last big case.

A jingle plays on the radio.

***"Oh yes! Oh no!  
It's the Nick Grimm Show  
On Shady Side Radio!"***

"It's just coming up to eight thirty," says the DJ. "I'm Nick Grimm and now it's time to get more on today's big story..."

"Listen to this," says Klaus. "This is what we're working on."

The DJ continues, "Last night, a rare and valuable

exhibit was stolen from the Museum of Magical Objects and Precious Stones. The Unusual Police Force are investigating the theft of the Time Sponge. Here's time-travel expert and author Professor Timothy O'Leary explaining this object's powers..."

A higher-pitched voice says, "The Time Sponge is utterly unique. While ordinary sponges grow on the ocean bed and absorb water, this object was formed by the temporal tides and can absorb time itself. In other words, squeeze the sponge and everything freezes."

Klaus takes a sharp corner so fast that you have to grab the side of the seat. Watson yelps. He doesn't like being pinched. You wonder why Klaus is in such a hurry. You haven't seen him so wired since the case involving Dr Franklefink's missing Monster Maker.



On the radio, the DJ says, "Curator Doddwhistle, who has run the museum for over two centuries, is appealing for anyone with information to come forwards."

"We simply must get the sponge back," an elderly female voice says. "It was on loan from a very old friend of mine and the consequences of it falling into the wrong hands are unthinkable."

"For more on this story, we go over live to *News of the Unusual* reporter Gretchen Barfly-Sewer who is on the scene and, hopefully, on the line."

"Thanks, Nick," replies a rasping female voice. "Yesterday, I attended a press night at the museum, after three mermaids delivered the sponge to Haventry. Curator Doddwhistle was the host and the sparkling pop was flowing. Other guests included the academic, Professor O'Leary, and two senior members of the Unusual Police Force, who were on hand to oversee the sponge's security, all of whom must now surely be prime suspects in this mystery."

"And should we include your name on the suspect list, Gretchen?" asks Nick.

Gretchen lets out a burst of laughter that goes straight through you like a dagger. You've heard that a banshee screech can render humans helpless.

You're certainly relieved when she stops.

"I hardly think I'm a suspect, Nick," says Gretchen. "I personally witnessed Chief Inspector Darka lock the exhibit room with the Time Sponge inside when the press night finished. That was at ten o'clock. Darka says he checked the room at midnight and discovered that the sponge was gone."

"I see," says Nick Grimm. "I gather the sponge was to be featured as part of a new time-travel exhibition at the museum."

"It was the key exhibit," says Gretchen. "Also on display were the Memory Basin, which shows images of the past, the Occasional Lamp, which shifts between different time periods, and a bowl of Fortune Cookie Dough. But the Time Sponge was the only thing taken."

"Still. It must be a blow for the museum," interjects the DJ. "They haven't been doing so well recently, have they?"

"No. Curator Doddwhistle was hoping that her time-travel exhibition would help revive the museum's fortunes following recent money problems. Back when the snakes on the old gorgon's head could still turn people into stone, Doddwhistle had a fine collection of statues, but these days she's

losing her sight and her museum is rapidly losing its appeal."

"It's certainly been a while since I visited," admits the DJ. "And wasn't there a rumour about the museum being turned into a shopping mall?"

"That's right," said Gretchen. "The recently elected Night Mayor Franklefink has made no secret of his ambitions to convert the old building. Unfortunately, Franklefink was unavailable for comment as he is currently on an official visit to Transylvania."

"Thanks, Gretchen," says the DJ. "We'll be keeping our listeners up to date with all the developments in this locked-room mystery, but right now, it's over to our weather witch, Chloe Cleverly."

A witch cackles then says, "After a clear night, there will be a rainy spell this morning. Then I'll do a sunny one around lunchtime. In the afternoon there will be a downpour of worms, which will be disgusting for most of us but nice weather for ducks..."

Klaus switches off the radio. "You and I are going to find the Time Sponge," he announces. "Business has been slow. Solving a high-profile crime like this could give us just the boost we need."

You've never known your boss to take a case

without being hired to do so. You wonder if there's something he isn't telling you. It wouldn't be the first time. Klaus often plays his cards close to his chest. You decide not to say anything at this stage and spend the rest of the journey jotting down details you picked up from the radio report.

By the time Klaus pulls up outside the museum, you've finished your list of subjects. It's an old, grubby building with ornate turrets and smeary windows. The sign outside reads: *MUSEUM OF MOPS*. Most people on the other side of town wouldn't dream of going inside such a drab-looking place but the residents of Haventry's Shady Side understand that there's rather more to it than meets the eye. A police officer is inspecting tyre marks running up the ramp that leads to the entrance. Hearing Watson's engine, she spins around and says, "Hey! You can't park there."

"Ah, morning, Elphina," Klaus responds breezily as he opens the car door and steps out. You follow his lead.

"It's Detective Sergeant Rigmarole to you," replies the officer, "and you must have a hairball in your ear, Solstaag. I said, *you cannot park there*."

Klaus opens the trunk, pulls out a spare tyre and



lobs it down the road. "Fetch!" he yells.

With a happy rev of his engine, Watson sets off after the tyre. Cars swerve to avoid a collision as he snatches it up and zooms straight through a red light. Horns beep and drivers shout at him but Watson has already disappeared around a corner.

"Problem solved," says Klaus.

"Do you have any idea how many laws you've just

broken?" Rigmarole pulls out a pad and pen.

Klaus laughs. "So you've been promoted to detective sergeant? Congratulations."

"Yes, there've been quite a few changes since Darka threw you off the force."

"He didn't throw me off." Your boss sounds irritated. "I left the UPF."

Rigmarole turns to you. "Is that what he told you?"



Klaus rolls his eyes but Elphina continues. "I'll bet he never mentioned that Chief Darka gave him a choice: either start doing as he was told or leave."

Klaus has never spoken to you about his reasons for leaving the UPF, but what Rigmarole says doesn't surprise you. Your boss often goes about things in an unconventional way. He doesn't seem best pleased that Rigmarole has brought his dismissal up now. He changes the subject.

"Is it my imagination or have you grown, Elphina?"

"New stilts." Rigmarole opens her long coat and you see that she's actually an elf standing on a pair of stilts. She wiggles her leg. It rattles. "I'm still wearing them in," she says, "but don't worry, there isn't a thief in this town who could outrun me." Rigmarole tightens the straps of her stilts and buttons up her coat. "The new mayor wants this town cleaned up and I'm the one to get the job done. I'm moving up in the world, Klaus."

"Why? Are you planning on buying some even taller stilts?" Klaus chuckles.

"I should have you arrested for insulting an officer," says Rigmarole.

"Come on, I'm only teasing." Klaus grins. "I'm just here to take a look around. I heard about the Time

Sponge being stolen. I thought maybe I could help you find it."

"Sorry, I can't let you in." Rigmarole blocks his way. "This area is sealed off until the Ghoul Forensic team sweeps it for evidence. Besides, if anyone is going to solve this mystery, it's me."

"You?" snorts Klaus.

"You can laugh all you like. I'll prove I'm the best detective in this town."

Klaus gives her a hard stare but she doesn't flinch. "They said on the radio that the door was locked at the time of the theft," says Klaus. "Of course, when it comes to locked-room mysteries, nine times out of ten, it's the most obvious solution – the person with the key. So who had it last night?"

"Chief Darka was taking care of the security personally," said Rigmarole.

"Yes, but you were both at the party last night, knocking back the sparkling pop, I'll bet."

"I don't drink when I'm on duty," says Rigmarole.

"Surely the chief had a few glasses, though," says Klaus. "I remember what he's like once the sparkling pop is flowing."

You've seen Klaus use this technique before,

acting friendly in order to get his suspects to lower their guard. Rigmarole momentarily forgets herself and chuckles. "You can say that again. A few more glasses and he would have been singing that song about the bull in the china shop."

"I remember that one." Klaus guffaws. "What's it called again?"

"Do the Smash!"

They're both laughing now.

"So, what happened after the party?" asks Klaus.

"He kept watch inside the building. I was positioned out here."

"And I suppose he had the only key, did he?" asks Klaus casually.

"I think there's a spare in Doddwhistle's room but—"

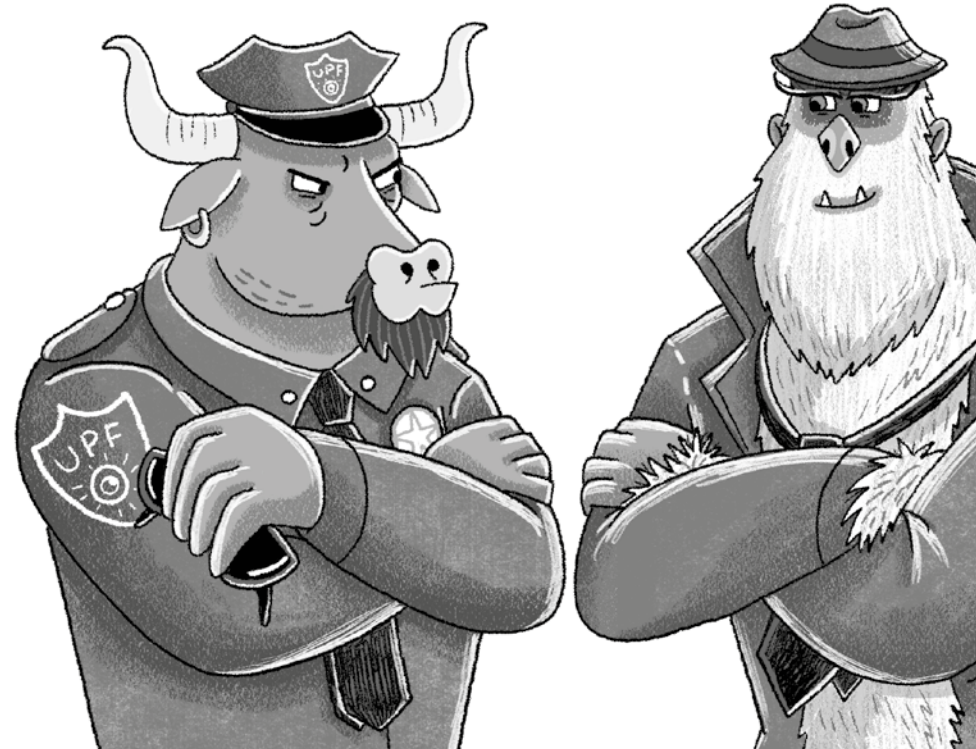
"DS Rigmarole," growls a low, gravelly voice. "I hope you aren't conversing with a member of the public about a police matter." You feel a blast of warm air on your neck. Rigmarole gulps.

You turn to see an expanse of dark blue material making up the uniform of a police officer as tall and wide as your boss. He wears a cap and a pair of sunglasses. His beard is dark and dense. He looks nothing short of terrifying.

"Darka." Klaus offers his hand.

Chief Inspector Darka snorts. He removes his glasses, revealing his bullish red eyes. He steps under the police tape and you spot his tail. Chief Inspector Darka is a minotaur, and, right now, not a very happy one.

"You shouldn't be here, Klaus. You no longer work for the UPF," he says. "It's *our* job to find this sponge. Not yours. I have to answer directly to Night Mayor Franklefink on this one. Haven't you got a case you've been paid to investigate? A missing cat or something?"





"How do you know someone hasn't hired me to find the Time Sponge?" counters Klaus.

This strikes you as an interesting question. Klaus hasn't mentioned being hired to you. Is he bluffing? Or is there something he's holding back?

"Even if someone had hired you, this is UPF business. Sorry, Klaus." Chief Inspector Darka turns to Rigmarole. "See that no one goes in or out. No one."

He storms into the building.

"He's in quite a mood," says Klaus.

"Isn't he always? Do you remember that time when he—" Rigmarole catches herself. "You should go now, Klaus."

"See you round, Elphina."

You're relieved when Klaus turns to leave. He knows these UPF officers well but you don't much fancy being thrown in a cell. He walks fast. Seeing his nose twitch, you realize he's caught the whiff of something cooking. Klaus has a big appetite, which is hardly a surprise, given how huge he is.

Just up the road from the museum, a caravan is parked. The sign on the side reads: *THE WITCHES' OVEN*. The witches, Bridget and Burnella Milkbird, are sitting outside their food truck, sipping frothing liquid from silver goblets. Inside, their purple-

haired monster Bootsy is washing up dishes. Klaus eagerly peruses the menu but you hesitate. You've encountered this pair of magical mischief-makers before, and their wand-wagging too often spells trouble as far as you're concerned.

"If it isn't Klaus and his little human helper," says Burnella. "What are you after?"

"What have you got?" replies Klaus.

"Broth or steeeeeew," moans Bootsy.

"What's the difference?" asks Klaus.

"Broth ... is ... hot," he replies, taking his time over each word. "Stew ... is ... not."

"How about a couple of hot chocolates?" suggests Klaus.

You would like something to warm your hands on, but you're not sure how much you trust anything brewed by these witches.

"Hot chocolate for the yeti and his human pet. Coming up," says Bridget. "Get ready to catch."

"Mocca-chocca, loco CHAAA!" Burnella chants as she waggles her twig-like fingers.

You hold out your hands, unsure what's going to happen, and a steaming mug of hot chocolate materializes between your fingers. You flinch in surprise, sending hot brown liquid sloshing over the

top and scalding your fingertips.

You blow on the steaming mug and your burnt fingers, but Klaus downs his drink in one. "How's the catering game, then?" he asks.

"It's not what it was," says Burnella. "We were thinking of trying out a new line of work."

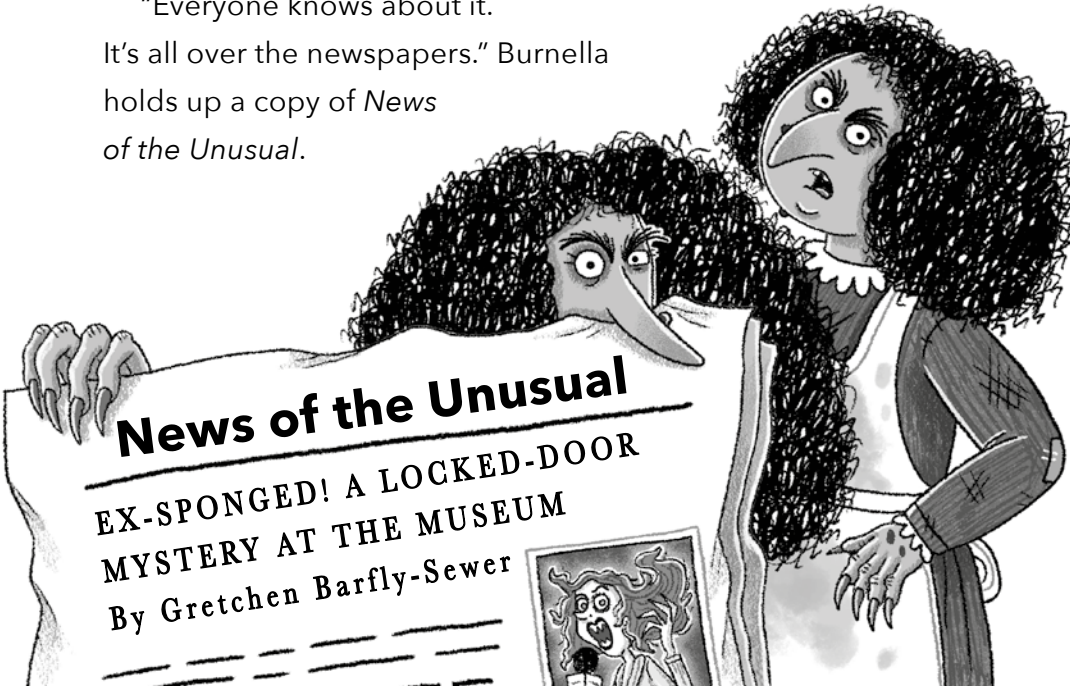
"Like what?" asks Klaus.

"I don't know. Maybe we'll go into the detective business like you," she replies.

"Couldn't do any worse than you," says Bridget. "I'll bet you haven't got a clue who took this Time Sponge, have you?"

Klaus raises an inquisitive eyebrow. "What do you know about the Time Sponge?"

"Everyone knows about it. It's all over the newspapers." Burnella holds up a copy of *News of the Unusual*.



"There's been a new edition since then," says Bridget, holding up another paper with the headline:

## **TIME THIEF STILL AT LARGE BUT WHO TOOK THE SPONGE?**

"I'm beginning to wonder if it was good idea selling her that magic printing press," says Burnella.

"It's a good story, though, this one. I reckon it was the mermaids," says Bridget. "They're a slippery lot. I'll bet they're up to something fishy."

Both witches burst out laughing.

Klaus scowls. "Funny as that is, it doesn't make sense. The mermaids delivered the sponge to Haventry. Why would they bring it here then steal it?"

"Well, they're not all there, are they, mermaids?" says Bridget. "They've got memories like goldfish. We never get anything sent by Mermail since those wands we ordered never turned up."

"Besides, they only brought the sponge here. It actually belongs to Bernard the time-bending lobster," says Burnella.

Klaus nods sagely. You have no idea what a time-bending lobster is but your boss doesn't seem



surprised by this news. Once again, it occurs to you that he knows more than he's letting on.

"Thanks for the hot chocolate," says Klaus, handing over the money.

"Any time," replies Burnella. "Time. D'you get it? As in the Time Sponge."

"Honestly, Burnella, your jokes are older and stinkier than Bootsy's socks," says Bridget.

"Soccckkkks," repeats Bootsy.

"Come on," says Klaus. "Let's go. Mermail employees usually stay at Hotel Hostile, which is around the corner, so we could go there and talk to the mermaids." He pauses and thinks. "Or should we head back to the crime scene and try to take a sneaky look around before forensics arrive? It's your call."

? Do you want to talk to the mermaids?

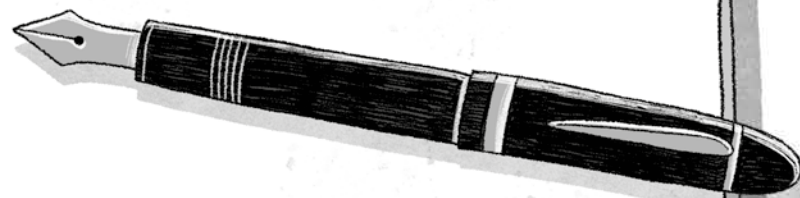
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**TWO MERMAIDS AND A MAILMAN**

? Or do you want to go to the crime scene?

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**GUARD-GOYLES**



**GUARD-GOYLES**

"RIGMAROLE IS STILL WATCHING THE front door so we'd better try the back," says Klaus.

You follow him down an alley lined with overflowing bins, feeling your heartbeat quicken. Chief Inspector Darka isn't the sort of person you want to upset, and yet here you are going against his strict orders to stay away from the crime scene.

The alley leads to the back entrance of the museum. There are a few stone steps leading up to a door. Klaus approaches but a nasal voice calls from above.

"Not so fast, you."

You look up. The ugliest gargoyle you've ever