

FICTION

STUMPY'S KITCHEN

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His hands had become his life and life was good.

Stumpy, the pale blue troll, founded Stumpy's Kitchen four years ago and had been the head chef since day one.

He had no formal culinary training, but his quest for flavors and new tastes fueled him in his business. Fiery passion radiated so intensely inside him that many said it crackled as hot as his wood-fired oven.

Stumpy was often found foraging for ingredients across the Isle of Hash, a hidden land populated by a large variety of creatures many would deem monsters. He'd grab herbs, berries, meat; anything that could be a part of his one-pan dishes, pastries, sauces, or main courses. Contrary to his size, his hands were fast, efficient, and even graceful. His motor skills were more developed than the common troll, for Stumpy had worked hard to ensure he could pursue his passion and avoid clumsy mistakes.

"As delicate as a painter," a satyr once said, and it was true. Even kneading dough was a breeze once Stumpy had learned the technique.

His restaurant had a high reputation on the Isle of Hash, and Stumpy's Kitchen flourished. In a cave below the tall, crooked tree was where the restaurant sat, as cozy as a home, with light equally as warm and welcoming. Hashians gathered there daily. There, all monsters could live peacefully and enjoy each other's company, bound together by Stumpy's gourmet dishes. His food fed all and all were happy.

But one foggy morning, unforeseen catastrophe spread across the Isle of Hash. Eleven nightmares rowed ashore, gleaming and bearded, with swords on their backs. How they had found the secret island was unknown, but once the panic and chaos came that no longer mattered. They began to destroy the village, slaying as many Hashians as they could. Upon seeing this, Stumpy sensed something inside him that was far more primal and troll-like, and it came down like an embodied storm.

He sat down his pristine chef's hat, embraced his protective rage, and rushed out with his trusty iron pan. His swings were clean and mighty; his hand-eye coordination became useful. Stumpy's pan parted the fog with purpose, turning the nearest nightmare's organs into jelly.

The rest of the nightmares continued to tear through the village, crumbling stone houses, setting trees ablaze, and sinking their swords into anything that moved. Their searing, orange torches whistled across the dawn like malicious spirits cloaked in fog and smoke.

The troll growled with anger and pounded his chest. His battle cry challenged the remaining nightmares, who began to muster more courage.

"Down with the troll! Kill the beast!" they cried.

Stumpy was ready. His large pan slammed on the ground with intimidation, and then the troll advanced. The nightmares raised their blades and planted their feet in formation, but Stumpy's arm swung hard. Many nightmares fell as fog blanketed their bodies. But four remained, and they fled into the tall trees to communicate a new strategy. Stumpy chased them. Yet all at once, in a single moment, it was over. Stumpy passed out.

He awoke slumped on the ground, dazed as he tried to piece it all together in his echoey mind. A few seconds passed when slowly everything started coming back. The whoosh of his pan. Screams of death. Shouts. Gauntlets pointing. Swords swinging amidst the fog. Pain. Blood. Shock. Stumpy slowly looked down.

They had taken his hands. They were nothing but useless log ends clotted in red. Stumpy blinked several times as his heart slowed. He couldn't wiggle his fingers.

Dwarves, goblins, and other residents had gathered around the island's only troll, returning to him his beloved pan. Stumpy looked down at it, then down at his missing hands and wept.

The Isle of Hash was slow to rebuild. Stumpy's Kitchen had remained untouched, but without his hands to cook, the place was nothing more than a cave to him. The depressed troll kicked a large boulder into the doorway, shutting himself in the dark of the cave for many months. During that time, he tried to cook again, but it was hopeless. Chopping, kneading, preparing—all of it was impossible without his lovely blue hands. He sat with his shrinking candles in misery.

But on the first day of the third month, the boulder was kicked aside. Stumpy the pale blue troll stuck his head out and blinked into the midday sun that shone down and welcomed him back into the world. The air was fresh, the birds were singing, and the village had been mostly repaired. Through the thickness of the stone, he was dead to the world. He wondered if any Hashians had come to try and get him out. He could not recall.

Stumpy sauntered into the heart of the village and was met with the warmth of the community. The dwarves came forth with an idea to make him new hands, not like his blue ones of course, but ones that would allow him to continue his passion for cooking. Stumpy very much wished to be a chef again and agreed.

After the pounding of iron, hot fire, sparks, and hammer slams, Stumpy's wrist-caps were complete. The fire in the dwarves' forge was left to die down and with it went Stumpy's misery. He held his arms outward and the dwarves fastened his metal replacements to his body. They felt cold, awkward, and uncomfortable, but he had no choice. With the hope to cook again, Stumpy's inner fire began to crackle once more. He was done being a shell in a cave.

Thanks to the dwarves and their engineering, Stumpy was able to hold his meat cleaver. Once it had clicked into place, his body began to tremble. This was a step in the right direction. All his cooking utensils needed handle modifications to account for the change, but with his advanced motor skills Stumpy was certain he could adapt.

Progress was made over the first two weeks, even if it was slow. Stumpy grew more and more determined every day, but the setback of relearning his craft in a new way was the biggest problem. He just couldn't move fast enough, and that frustrated him to no end. Some days were better than others, but overall it just wasn't the same. His chef's hat no longer stayed pristine, and due to Stumpy's clumsiness, most ingredients and creations spilled across his kitchen cave. His patience was wearing down. His hands were once his life and life had become miserable.

Amid the fourth month he stormed out of his cave. Stumpy huffed towards the shore of the island, sitting among the pebbles that made up the grey beach. The sun began to set in pinks and oranges as he took a few deep breaths. Stumpy looked down at his new wrist-caps.

He thought of his craft. He thought of foraging for ingredients, making the perfect meal, and how happy everyone was. The Hashians hadn't stopped coming to his restaurant, even during the first three weeks when the food was poor and the undercooked meat caused sickness. Even in his personal struggles, they were there for him, and Stumpy realized throwing his passion away because of an inconvenience wasn't an option. He was a troll after all, and being stubborn was in his nature. He couldn't give up.

A cool breeze brought new breath to Stumpy's lungs. He stood on the shore, looked toward the supernatural-looking sky, and sauntered back home with his chin higher than before.

The weeks that followed proved to be the most challenging, but Stumpy could not quit. He knocked and bumbled and made a mess of his cave restaurant, but the fire inside him crackled ferociously. He had to try harder in new ways. Stumpy struggled, failed, struggled again, succeeded, and struggled some more—the cycle seemed endless. Nearly ten months had passed since his life changed, but his passion to cook motivated him like magic. Even when the day was awful, the willingness to try again brought him back with the next sunrise.

On a brisk sunny morning, everything he'd been working towards fell into place. Stumpy could maneuver and chop as he wished, even if it was slower than before. The ability to cook again was his prize and a new era of Stumpy's Kitchen was born. A warmth grew inside him and stayed there.

Placing his chief's hat upon his head, Stumpy proudly announced his milestone. News spread quickly and soon all Hashians came to witness Stumpy's regained skills. He fed them all just as he did before, even if his methods of getting there were not the same. But a chef is a chef, and with his up-to-standard dishes and precise motor skills, Stumpy was finally able to exhale a sigh of relief.

His wrist-caps became his life, and life was good.