



The Continuing Adventures of Stamp
No. 3: Bugged

Entry No. 1

Stamp take a break from hauling copper to pile outside Saru Steelfury's forge.

Stamp blacksmith teacher Master Ug'thok tell Stamp that Stamp soon be ready to learn bronze smithing from Snarl. Stamp glad! Stamp a little tired of hit and hit and hit and hit anvil to make copper belt after copper belt after copper belt after copper belt after copper belt.

"It's not the best copper belt I've ever seen," Ug'thok say, looking over one Stamp made. "I wouldn't wear it, of course. But it is functional and the quality is acceptable."

Master Ug'thok then toss copper belt after copper belt after copper belt after copper belt after copper belt into smelter.

Stamp guess Master Ug'thok notice the look on Stamp face. "You feel insulted, perhaps?" Ug'thok ask.

"Stamp just spent many hours working on those, is all," Stamp say.

"You think *Saru Steelfury* is going to put them on display as an example of excellence by our celebrity pupil?" Ug'thok ask. "Maybe he'll ask you to autograph them and sell them for twice the value?"

"No, Stamp not think anything like that, but ..."

"Your work is passable, but you are not yet a master of the craft, Stamp," Ug'thok say. "But, as I told you, you *are* ready to advance to bronze. I can teach you no more. My expertise is copper. But Snarl is a master of bronze and silver. When he is satisfied that you are qualified, he will teach you more." Ug'thok put hand on Stamp shoulder. "The belts you made are being smelted down so the copper can be re-used by other newcomers to the craft. The prices in the auction house for copper bars get outrageous. Three times the value of the same quantity of *silver bars*, sometimes! If you want compensation, I can arrange for it."

"No," Stamp say, shaking head. "Stamp not want money. Stamp glad it getting re-used. Stamp was just confused. Stamp meant no disrespect to Master Ug'thok. Stamp honored and proud to have learned so much from Master Ug'thok."

Stamp ride Gloweyes to mailbox just outside Valley of Honor in orcie town of

Orgrimmar. Stamp climb down from wolfie and check for mail. Stamp got packages! Stamp clan friend Sarya send Stamp iron bars for when Stamp move on to iron crafting. Stamp clan friend Tsuneo, a gifted armorsmith, put in good word for Stamp with Saru Steelfury. Stamp friend Kaletha send Stamp scribbly-scrawlies for mithril spurs. Stamp friend Pengot send Stamp scribbly-scrawlies for radiant breastplate and deadly bronze poniard.

Stamp got great friends!

Stamp not grumpy.

Entry No. 2

Stamp not sleep much working for Snarl. Stamp got many things to make! Stamp hit and hit and hit and hit and hit metal. Stamp make swords and armor and axes and boots and boots and more boots and belts and grindstones and sharpening stones and the heat from the forge never let up and Stamp not drink very much and Stamp get kinda woozy and ...

A female orc rogue skulks through the corridors of the Scarlet Monastery alone, past flickering torches and oblivious guards in the crimson armor of the fanatics.

She doesn't notice the patrol behind her, or the snarling dog that sniffs her scent even though it can't see her at first. She stops near an archway, cast half in daylight, half in shadow, in time to see the guard dog bounding toward her, barking. Her stealth broken, she's now seen by all the other guards.

The swarm closes in ...

Stamp drop hammer and slump against anvil. Master Snarl growl: "Too much partying last night, Stamp?"

Stamp shake head. "No. Stamp just ... had vision."

That get Master Ug'thok's attention. Ug'thok wander over as Stamp get back to Stamp hooves. "A vision of what?"

"A clan friend," Stamp say. "A monastery on a hill. Sarya in trouble."

"Hmm," Ug'thok say. "Could be the future you see. Or it could just be delirium brought on by heat exhaustion."

"Sarya could die!" Stamp insist.

"Difficult to see *that*," Ug'thok tell Stamp. "After all, it is far more likely, assuming it's the Scarlet Monastery near Tirisfal Glades, that they will take her to that lovely torture chamber..."

Stamp walk over to pile of armor and start picking up pieces, strapping on shoulder pads. "Stamp gotta go help."

"Decide you must how to serve her best," Ug'thok say. "If you leave now, help her you could, but you would destroy all for which she has fought and suffered."

Stamp blink. Sarya a Frostwolf orc and a pretty selfish and sometimes cold-hearted rogue. Stamp never heard that Sarya even got a cause in any true sense of the word. Unless, maybe, that cause was Sarya herself. "Master Ug'thok never met Sarya, Stamp think." Stamp put on last of Stamp armor. Stamp grab obsidian-edged blade off table next to anvil. "Stamp come back! Stamp promise." Then Stamp start walking away.

Master Ug'thok turn to Master Snarl. "Told you I did. Reckless is he. Now, matters are worse."

Snarl just stare at Ug'thok. "Why in Thrall's name are you talking like that? You think that Tauren's our last hope or something?"

"Oh, erm, no," Ug'thok say. "There are many others."

Snarl smack Ug'thok on the back of the head. "Then cut it out."

Entry No. 3

Stamp clan leader Kadingo nudge Stamp hoof. "Wakey-wakey, Stamp."

Stamp sit up in camp on a hill in the misty-boggy Dragonmurk. Stamp look around at the scattered tents and the white smoke from fresh-doused campfires. "It time?" Stamp ask.

"Yah, mon!" Stamp clan leader Kadingo say with a sly grin. "We take her down this time! Joo see!"

Stamp nod. Stamp not so sure. Stamp and Stamp clan friends in Storm Earth and Fire

and Stamp friends in Dissonance clan tried before to defeat the mighty hissy-burny Onyxia in her lair. Stamp blame Stamp for this. Stamp armor not good enough to face barrage of flame. Stamp not shout *just in time* to distract shrieky-burny whelps before they hurt clothie clan friend Terrick. Just one thing go wrong and Stamp and Stamp clan friends and Stamp friends in Dissonance gotta retreat.

Stamp pick up shiny slashy-stabby sword. Stamp strap on scuffed gold shield. Stamp see Stamp clan friend Crul'jin. Stamp and Stamp clan friend Crul'jin gotta keep shrieky-burny whelps under control.

"Joo know what to do, mon?" Crul'jin ask. "I blow my shout and get dey attention. Den joo blow your shout. Got it?"

"Stamp got," Stamp say. Stamp got. Aye. But Stamp might shout too soon. Or too late. Seconds matter. Stamp not want to ruin things. But...Stamp not say this out loud. Stamp say: "Stamp do this!"

Stamp and Stamp clan friend Crul'jin and many more from Stamp clan and Stamp friends in Dissonance get on mounts. Stamp ride Gloweyes through mist. Stamp not say much. Stamp just think and focus.

Stamp clan friend Bura ride up next to Stamp. "Here," Bura say and put a vial in Stamp hand. "Fire resistance potion. Don't drink it too soon, though. Just drink it when the battle's well underway. If you drink it too soon, she'll cook you up good."

Stamp thank Stamp clan friend Bura, but Stamp sigh. Something else for Stamp to mess up.

Stamp friend not-deader hit-and-hitter Knute from Dissonance meet Stamp and Stamp clan friends at the giant maw that lead into the lair of hissy-burny Onyxia. Everyone dismount. Stamp clan friend Knute say: "Let's go. We'll do it *this time*."

Stamp look around at burny 'locks and clothie priests and totem-throwing shamen and leafy druids and sharp-eyed hunters and zappy-blasty mages. All Stamp friends. All important. Nothing can go wrong. Stamp gotta not mess up.

Stamp and Stamp clan friends and Stamp friends from Dissonance push through caverns. Stamp and Stamp clan friends and Stamp friends from Dissonance hit and hit and hit and hit and hit and hit and hit dragonkin guards!

And then, again, Stamp and Stamp clan friends and Stamp friends from Dissonance see

the big purple-black beast: Hissy-burny Onyxia.

"Odd groups, left!" Knute shout. "Even groups, right!"

Stamp clan friend clothie healer Terrick grouped with Stamp and Stamp clan friend Crul'jin in the seventh formation. "So, we go right?"

"Left," Stamp and Stamp friend Crul'jin say in unison.

"So, this *isn't* the eighth formation," Terrick consider, chuckling.

"ONWARD!" shout Knute. The eight formations break off to the left and right as ordered, with Stamp and Stamp clan friend Crul'jin and many others moving left to stand watch by the shrieky-burny whelp pits on that side. Knute run right up to hissy-burny Onyxia and whack the dragon on the nose to say hello.

Stamp not do much besides watch Stamp friend Knute get hissy-burny Onyxia turned around and hit and hit and hit and hit and try not to die and die and die and die. Then Stamp clan friend Crul'jin hiss: "Whelps comin', mon. Joo ready?"

Stamp turn to see flapping cloud of shrieky-burny whelps. Stamp start shaking, but Stamp try not to let it show. "Stamp ready."

Stamp clan friend Crul'jin shout! Shrieky-burny whelps swarm around Crul'jin, who hit and hit and hit and hit while mages and warlocks zap and zap and zap. And then it time for Stamp to do the shout! Stamp do this! Shrieky-burny whelps swarm around Stamp, who hit and hit and hit while mages and warlocks zap and zap and zap shrieky-burny whelps to death.

Stamp not mess up! Stamp take out portable Howitzer gun, turn and shoot and shoot and shoot at hissy-burny Onyxia. Hissy-burny Onyxia hurt from Stamp friend Knute and many others hit and hit and hitting her, so dragon take flight! Stamp spend next minutes mostly running around to avoid fire blasts. While hissy-burny Onyxia fly, Stamp drink potion Bura gave Stamp. Not too soon, Stamp hope. Hissy-burny Onyxia not burn Stamp to a crisp, so Stamp guess not.

Hurt even more, hissy-burny Onyxia come thumping down on the cavern floor. Stamp and Stamp clan friend Crul'jin fight more shrieky-burny whelps while Stamp friend Knute keep hissy-burny Onyxia busy. Then the ground quakes and lava bursts from cracks and Stamp go running through and ... Stamp not burn! Stamp protected by potion! Stamp aim Howitzer at hissy-burny Onyxia and shoot and shoot and

shoot!

"FOR THE HORDE!" Stamp shout.

Finally, Stamp friend Knute give order: "ALL IN!" Stamp and Stamp clan friends and Stamp friends from Dissonance swarm this time and hit and hit and hit and hit and zap and zap and zap and shoot and shoot and shoot and ... hissy-burny Onyxia FALL!

Stamp sag to the cavern floor next to purple-black dragon corpse. Stamp lean against the heavy beast. Stamp look around at all Stamp weary friends. Stamp shaking all over. Stamp still not sure it true.

Stamp not mess up. Stamp not fail. Stamp clan and Stamp friends in Dissonance not fail.

Stamp. Not. Grumpy.

Entry No. 4

Master Snarl just shake his head and sigh. "I suppose, now that you and your friends have defeated Onyxia, that you're going to demand special treatment."

Stamp scratch snout. "Nope." Stamp walk over to anvil in orcie town of Orgrimmar. Stamp pick up hammer. "Stamp got boots to make."

"Right," Snarl say. "Let me guess: You want to make only the best boots. You don't want to trouble yourself with petty training boots."

"Nope." Stamp grab some iron bars and dump them in the smelter before Stamp get molds to shape into boots. "Stamp make what Stamp supposed to make."

Master Snarl peer at Stamp. "So, hmm, how many hits did it take you to drop that beast?"

Stamp sigh. "Stamp barely did anything. Stamp mostly just stop shrieky-burny whelps and try not to die. Stamp friends did a lot more than Stamp."

"I hear you sold your first chestplate armor for six gold at the auction house," Snarl say.

"Aye."

"Should've asked more."

"Why? Stamp not greedy."

"It's *worth* more," Snarl say. "It'll be worth even more soon. Pieces by apprentices of Saru Steelfury are always worth more."

Stamp shrug and hit and hit and hit anvil. "Stamp student of Master Snarl."

"Not anymore," Snarl say. "Your new master wants to see you, Stamp. Now."

Entry No. 5

"Your previous teachers and other apprentices of mine tell me good things of your work, Stamp Bloodhoof," Master Saru Steelfury say while put down hammer next to anvil in shop in orcie town of Orgrimmar.

"Stamp learn much from those who kind enough to teach Stamp," Stamp say.

Master Saru nod. "Good. You join as my apprentice at a most ... interesting ... time."

"Hmm?" Stamp ask.

"Thrall wants weapons and armor! Lots of it! Quickly!" Master Saru bellow.

Stamp blink. "Stamp do what Stamp can to help. But...why Thrall want so much?"

"We go to war, Tauren," Master Saru say. "We go to war against the monstrous bugs that taint the cursed sands of Silithus."

Stamp scratch snout. "Stamp know of these bugs. Stamp not like bugs. Stamp hit and hit and hit!"

"Soon," Master Saru tell Stamp. Master Saru frown and say, "I hesitate to say this because I pride myself on the quality of the goods produced in my forges and on these anvils. But we lack the luxury of time, Stamp Bloodhoof. Quantity will take precedence over quality. The weapons and armor must work, of course, they must be functional. But not every piece will have to be a work of art. War is not pretty. The implements of war are even less so when splattered with the blood of our foes. You just make sure those weapons can draw blood and be certain the armor keeps our own

inside our bodies. Understood?"

"Stamp understand," Stamp say. "Stamp do what Stamp can. Stamp help."

Master Saru nod, then jerk head toward door. "Get to work."

Entry No. 6

Meanwhile, in Shimmering Flats...

Gizmik Fazzle sighed as the competitors zoomed around the final curve, dust billowing behind them before the goblin rocket car outpaced the gnome bot car past the finish line.

The scorekeeper chalked another mark down for the goblin team. "That's four today! Good work, gobbies!" Gizmik then closed his score ledger, capped the inkwell and put the quill aside. He carried the ledger to the hut that served as his domicile out here on the alkali flats, in the midst of mechanics' work tents and clanking equipment sheds.

He put the score ledger on a shelf next to his bunk, above stacks of boxes full of various Stamp dolls. From the same shelf, Gizmik pulled the leatherbound tome in which he chronicled his Tauren friend's many adventures. The big guy hadn't been by to see Gizmik much since throwing away a perfectly good career in gadget-making.

Gizmik needed some new stories from Stamp. He needed them soon! Hard to sell books and dolls to the Stamp-hungry masses when the hulking celebrity couldn't be bothered to drag his massive self out of Saru Steelfury's forge long enough to regale Gizmik with more exciting tales. But, Gizmik reasoned, if you can't get to the coins stacked on the high branch of an oak tree ... well, you blow it out of the tree with a stick of dynamite. And, while you're at it, use seaforium to take out the tree for good. And then sell the splinters. Hmm...maybe little wood carvings of Stamp would sell. Yes...Stamplinters! Or...hrm... Blowing things up really wouldn't do Gizmik much good in this case, though. No, in this case, he'd have to *go to Stamp*.

Not a big deal, really. Just hop in the rocket car, drive over the pass to Gadgetzan, catch a wind rider to Orgrimmar and steal the big fella away for a few minutes to chat.

Night was falling over Shimmering Flats as the car thrummed along, rockets billowing smoke and flame. Gizmik gave a gentle pat to the chronicles on the seat next to him. He swerved to avoid a giant turtle waddling through the middle of the near-unseeable road. "WATCH IT, POKEY!" Gizmik shouted angrily, glowering back over his

shoulder at the turtle and totally missing the insectoid shadows moving across the gibbous moon in the sky ahead.

Shadows growing larger with each passing moment...

Entry No. 7

Stamp hit and hit and hit and hit glowy hot red metal sword on anvil with hammer in Master Saru Steelfury's shop in orcie town of Orgrimmar.

Stamp tired, but Stamp make good progress on swords for soldiers to stab and stab and stab and stab bugs in Silithus.

Stamp plunge sword into bucket of water. Stamp listen to the cooling metal hiss and hiss and hiss and hiss. Stamp watch steam coil up. Through fading steam, Stamp see Master Saru walk up to Stamp.

"Someone to see you," blacksmith master tell Stamp. "Goblin. Says it's important. You talk outside. Don't want anyone stealing trade secrets."

Stamp set new sword aside. Stamp nod. "Stamp talk outside. Stamp thank Master Saru."

"Keep it short," Master Saru add. "Those swords aren't making themselves."

Stamp nod. Stamp walk toward front of shop. Stamp figured Gizmik come around sooner or later, wanting more Stamp stories. Stamp just been so busy, and now the war coming ... Stamp think it less important to make money off Stamp stories than to learn new craft and help the Horde fight the bugs. Gizmik not going to like that, Stamp know, but Gizmik got to live with it.

Stamp go outside, but Stamp not see Gizmik. Stamp see shrieky-shouty gobble with green skin, sharp ears and broad face, but it not Gizmik.

"Stamp!" shrieky-shouty gobble say, arms going wide. "You're even bigger than the books make you seem!"

Stamp sigh. Stamp shake head. "Stamp sorry. Stamp not mean to be rude. But Stamp got a lot of work to do. Stamp not sign book with Stamp's hoofmark right now. Stamp work and work and work. Thrall need Stamp help more than Stamp need to feed Stamp ego."

"Oh, I'm a fan, sure," shrieky-shouty gobble say, "but I'm not here for an autograph! Nosirree. Not here for an autograph. Not here for a sword. Not here for a shield. Not here for a shield spike. Not here for spurs..."

Stamp scratch snout. Stamp kinda want shrieky-shouty gobble to get to the point. Stamp know Master Saru watching and waiting. "Time is *blood*, friend," Stamp say.

Shrieky-shouty gobble snap fingers and say, "And blood is money! I'm with ya on that, big guy! My name's Hazamfrak Fazzle. Gizmik's my baby brother. My blood; your money! He's gone missing, y'see."

Stamp blink. Stamp know Gizmik been in trouble before over loans and - hmm, what Gizmik call them? - "misdirected funds." Stamp sigh. "Kneecappers?" Stamp ask.

"Nope," Hazamfrak say. "Bugs. Big ones. Couple of dwarves out near that excavation site in Shimmering Flats said they saw a swarm of 'em fly in from Tanaris way, dive bomb Gizmik's rocket car and snatch him from it. Carried him away, back south. Probably bound for Silithus. The car crashed and exploded, but the dwarves found this." Gizmik brother reach into pack and take out scorched leatherbound book. "Your stories. I figure Gizmik was on his way to Gadgetzan when the bugs ambushed him. Maybe coming to see you."

Stamp confused. Stamp shake snout. "Why bugs want Gizmik? Gizmik owe bugs money? Why bugs need money?"

"No idea, big guy," Hazamfrak say. "I hear they've been snatching people all over Kalimdor. Maybe for prisoners or maybe to feed their little buglings. Either way: Gizmik's in trouble and he needs *your* help."

Stamp frown. Stamp know Master Saru not going to like this. Thrall counting on Stamp. But Gizmik been sometimes good friend to Stamp. Stamp start making some extra money thanks to Gizmik. Stamp not like to let friends go unhelped. But Stamp got to think about the greater good. Stamp got to think about whether the life of one shrieky-shouty gobble is more important than making hit and hits for soldiers in the bug war.

"C'mon, Stampy, whaddya say?" Hazamfrak ask. "You going to track down my brother or will the last entry in your chronicles talk about how you let the goblin who *made* you die?" Hazamfrak wave scorched tome at Stamp.

Entry No. 8

Stamp promise to go to Macabre Ball in not-deader town of Brill in Eastern Kingdoms. Stamp like to keep promises. Stamp figure Stamp just stop in, make appearance, and then catch shrieky-shouty gasbag to Stranglethorn Vale, ride wind to Booty Bay, and then take boat to Kalimdor.

Then Stamp go find Stamp friend Gizmik.

Stamp ride More Stamp from not-deader Undercity to Brill. Stamp sister Raysha brought More Stamp from Thunder Bluff. Stamp sister Raysha keep Gloweyes safe for Stamp. Stamp want More Stamp for this trip so Stamp not got to worry about heat and heat and heat. More Stamp not mind heat so much. Gloweyes ... Gloweyes not like heat a lot. Tanaris very hot. Un'goro kinda swampy. Silithis ... hot and dusty and dangerous.

Stamp find party in crowded graveyard in Brill. Stamp clan friend Eryne introduce Stamp to Eryne friend Akwar. Stamp sign Stamp's hoofprint on parchment for Akwar. Stamp meet new Stamp friend Tabee. New Stamp friend Tabee want Stamp hoofprint on arm. Stamp try to do this, but Stamp fall over. New Stamp friend Tabee still manage to get print on arm. Stamp also meet new Stamp friend Krain, a strong Tauren warrior.

Stamp then tell Stamp clan friend Sarya and Stamp clan friend Teldra that Stamp not stay too long at party. Stamp gotta catch a boat. Stamp ride More Stamp toward gate. Stamp clan friend Sarya gallop up on wolfie.

"Did I hear you say you have a boat to catch?" Sarya ask Stamp.

Stamp nod. "Stamp gotta go find Stamp friend Gizmik." Stamp tilt snout. "Sarya not staying at party?"

Sarya shake head. "I'm going with you."

Stamp blink. "Stamp go where it not safe for Sarya."

"And when has that ever stopped me before?" Sarya ask.

Stamp sigh. "Stamp guess if Stamp ride away, Sarya just follow?"

Sarya just smile a wicked smile.

"Stamp think one rescue mission enough, but Stamp let Sarya make Sarya's decisions," Stamp say. Stamp give one last look to all Stamp friends gathered in graveyard and then Stamp ride More Stamp toward gasbag tower at top of hill outside Brill. Sarya follow on wolfie.

"No running! We're not insured against trips and falls on the stairs!" shout shrieky-shouty gobble attendant as Stamp run toward steps leading up tower. Sarya follow and give shrieky-shouty gobble a thump on the noggin with the hilt of Sarya dagger to keep shrieky-shouty gobble quiet.

Stamp get to very top of tower and see gasbag to Stranglethorn Vale. Engine rumbling. Spinny-thingies going round and round and round and round. Gasbag moving! Stamp glance back and see Sarya coming up steps. Stamp run. Stamp run and run and run. Stamp hooves thump on wooden planks. And then Stamp leap! Stamp almost not make it. Stamp thump against side of gasbag and then grab ballast bag full of sand. Stamp hang on. Stamp glance back toward tower deck and see Stamp clan friend Sarya lope out to find Stamp getting away.

"GAH!" Sarya shout.

Entry No. 9

Stamp let go of sandbag and splash into blue water near Grom'gol Base Camp. Stamp not want to take chance of running into anyone Stamp know that might try to stop Stamp or come with Stamp. Stamp go after Gizmik to help Gizmik because Stamp owe Gizmik, but Stamp not get anyone else in trouble if Stamp fail.

Stamp do this alone or Stamp not do it at all, and not do it at all not an option for Stamp.

Stamp follow coast around to Booty Bay. Stamp wait under dock until dark and then make Stamp way toward the ramp to the Ratchet boat. Stamp sit in a corner and try not to be conspicuous.

Stamp feel bad. Stamp trick Stamp clan friend Sarya. Stamp abandon Stamp work for Saru Steelfury. Stamp do this for Gizmik, even though Stamp know Gizmik not always been good to Stamp. Gizmik cheat Stamp. Gizmik embarrass Stamp. Gizmik not very good person sometimes. But, Stamp agree with Gizmik brother, Stamp not *be* Stamp if Gizmik not tell Stamp stories.

Stamp watch boat workers cast away lines and the ship to Ratchet set sail. Stamp go. Stamp find. Stamp bring back. Simple. Stamp like it simple.

"If that bull-headed Tauren thinks he's going after Gizmik on his own, he's got another thing coming," Mottle growled as she paced on the shore of the pond on Thunder Bluff's central rise.

Raysha shook her head, chuckling. "My brother is difficult to persuade otherwise when he gets his mind set on something. You should know this by now."

"We're not that different then, he and I," the younger Tauren female said. "So, he fled that party on a dirigible to Grom'gol. After that, he's sure to catch a boat to Ratchet. He'll do all he can to avoid contact with people he knows, but there's one place he'll *have* to go if he's on his way to Silithus."

"Gadgetzan," Stamp's sister replied.

Mottle nodded. "I leave tonight."

Entry No. 10

Gizmik Fizzle found himself in a universe of gauzy fog, white and dream-like, with a thrumming undercurrent.

One moment, he'd been zooming across the alkali flats toward the Gadgetzan pass. The next, he'd been snatched out of the rocket car. He remembered seeing it smash into the ridge ... from above. He'd definitely seen it from above.

Dead, he thought. I'm dead! I was out of body! I wrecked and died trying to go visit that too-good-for-his-friends Tauren!

So, he began to wonder: If I'm dead, where am I? The good place? The bad place? Or no place at all?

Gizmik actually thought the good place would be annoying. Everyone would treat each other fairly. They'd be cloyingly nice. No one would come out on top in a deal. People would bend over backwards to ensure no one had the advantage. Where's the fun in that?!

He didn't think the bad place would be a lot better. Chances are, he'd be on the losing end of bargains all the time and he'd probably get taunted by the infinite naked-dancing night elves and over-salivating paladins for eternity. Definitely no sale!

But if he was no place at all ... then how could that be any good? It takes two to haggle! Gizmik didn't want some kind of ethereal existence where only his consciousness dwelled alone.

...alone. Not alone.

Not a voice, exactly. Just a sense of meaning within his mind.

"Who's there?" Gizmik asked, although it came out sounding like: "Huh-hair?"

You are not alone. You are not dead.

For some reason, this didn't make him feel relieved.

Entry No. 11

Stamp ride More Stamp from Ratchet to Crossroads in the Barrens. Then Stamp ride More Stamp south, on the Gold Road, past growly-gallop Centaur camps and hissy-claw raptors and chuckly-snappy hecklefangs.

Stamp get close to Camp Taurajo. Stamp remember last time Stamp come here, with Stamp sister Raysha and young warriors. Stamp remember the fight with the gnolls and the dead troll and the stupid spitty pally plan to kill Tauren brother Hadoken Swiftstrider. Stamp remember Stamp sister Raysha nearly die saving Swiftstrider. Stamp remember Mottle save Stamp from stupid spitty pally.

Stamp think about stopping at camp as sun set beyond red stone ridge, but Stamp decide More Stamp get Stamp to Thousand Needles tonight.

Stamp wave to orc watcher on hill outside Camp Taurajo. Orc watcher wave back, then get back to watcher work of watching. Stamp pat More Stamp on the neck and ride onward.

"Can't go another foot," growled Mottle wearily as she rode her kodo, Rudiment, up the hill from Mulgore toward Camp Taurajo.

Since last night, she had ridden from Thunder Bluff. Mottle hadn't realized just how tired she was when embarking on this adventure. For three solid days before, she had been on combat training trials with Raysha. She'd also been studying all she could about herbalism and practicing alchemy.

Now, with the sun setting over Kalimdor as she neared the camp where they had uncovered the plot to assassinate Hadoken Swiftstrider, Mottle realized she needed rest. She sighed. No use chasing after Stamp if she just passed out and rode off the face of the cliff served by the Great Lift.

She eased Rudiment into the northeastern gate of Camp Taurajo. An orc watcher on a western hilltop on the camp outskirts waved to someone passing on the Gold Road, but the view was obscured by a fence made from animal skins.

Well, it was a wave, right? So, whoever it was must have been friendly. Nothing for Mottle to worry about. What she needed to worry about now was food, drink and sleep. Stamp was on More Stamp, she knew, so he wouldn't be nearly as speedy as if he were on Gloweyes.

"I'll catch up," she sighed. "Eventually."

Entry No. 12

Stamp ride More Stamp across Shimmering Flats. Stamp follow ruts in ground that form road to Gadgetzan. Stamp ride More Stamp past race track. Stamp see checkered flags at half-staff for Gizmik. Stamp frown.

Stamp tug on More Stamp reins and go toward shrieky-shouty flagkeeper goblin.

Stamp ask, "Why checkered flag at half-staff for Gizmik? Gizmik not dead."

"Hey, pal, we don't know that for sure," flagkeeper goblin say. "But we're making a *killing* on Gizmik Fazzle Memorial Scorepads! So, hush, a'right?"

Stamp sigh. Stamp think if Gizmik know about this, Gizmik totally approve. Gizmik just that way. Of course, Stamp think Gizmik gonna want a cut if Gizmik still alive.

Stamp ride More Stamp further south, away from the race track and toward the ridge where Gizmik rocket car zoomed and zoomed and boomed. Stamp stop More Stamp near wreckage. Stamp look up at blue sky. Stamp sigh. Stamp still not sure how Stamp

find Gizmik. Silithus big place. Many hives. Stamp search every one if Stamp gotta, but Stamp wish Stamp had some idea where to look.

Then, next to wreckage, Stamp find a shimmery-glossy thing. Like plastic wrapper stretched on a sticky frame. Bug wing, Stamp think. Flap and flap and flap and...hmm. Stamp know shouty-grumpy dorfs at Shimmering Flats camp know something about bugs. Stamp take wing and ride More Stamp back northwest toward the Dorf camp. Stamp show them bug wing. Dorfs nod and tell Stamp: "Hive Ashi. Definitely Hive Ashi."

Entry No. 13

A gritty cloud of white dust swept across Shimmering Flats as Mottle rode Rudiment along the western fringe of the race track, southbound on her way to the pass leading to Gadgetzan.

She had picked up More Stamp's tracks back in Thousand Needles, but with the fresh windstorm kicking so much dust around now, Mottle could only take it on faith that Stamp had continued on this course as well.

And she had to hope against the elements that this burst of turbulent weather wouldn't slow her down too much, allowing Stamp to slip off into the Tanaris desert on his way to Un'goro Crater and the waiting wastes of Silithus.

"Might as well wait the storm out here, big'un," dig-and-digger Stout Proudfoot tell Stamp. "Not likely to make very good time on the way to Hive Ashi, anyway."

Stamp look out at Shimmering Flats ... but Stamp only see swirling gray-white clouds of dust. Stamp pat More Stamp on the neck. Stamp not want to choke or blind Stamp old friend More Stamp.

"Stamp thank," Stamp say to Dorf dig-and-digger.

"Yer kodo can stay in the big horse tent over yonder," Stout say, and point a pudgy finger at large tent.

Stamp nod and lead More Stamp to horse tent. Horses kinda small compared to More Stamp. Horses get nervous and whinny and shift about. More Stamp not much more comfortable around horses. So, Stamp decide to stay with More Stamp.

Stout walk into tent, scratching at beard. Stout ask: "So, you're *the* Stamp, eh? The one in those stories?"

"Aye," Stamp say.

"You seem okay for a Hordie," Stout tell Stamp.

Stamp sigh and shake head. "Stamp just Stamp."

"Yeah, but I've known some Hordies I didn't like much, y'know?" dorf dig-and-digger say. "And I *know* you've known a dwarf or two that *you* didn't like. That pally fella, for example."

"Cups," Stamp say.

"Aye," dorf say. "Cups. We ain't all like him."

"Stamp know this," Stamp say. Stamp not sure what else dorf dig-and-digger want to hear, but Stout not leave yet. So, Stamp guess Stamp say more. "Stamp grateful for shelter." Stout nod and wait some more. Stamp grind Stamp teeth, pondering. Then Stamp say: "Stamp think Stout okay for Alliance dorf."

Stout grin. "Stout glad to hear it!" Stout pat Stamp on the arm and say, "When you get to this part with Gizmik, be sure to spell my name right: P-R-O-U-D-F-I-S-T. Got it?"

Stamp chuckle. "Aye. Stamp got it."

"So, if I'm not dead - where am I?" Gizmik growled at the disembodied sense of communication within his mind. "And who are you?"

Again, his own voice came out muffled. But his companion in this space of seeming nothingness appeared to understand him just fine: *You are with the Hive. We are the Hive.*

"Ah, information!" Gizmik exulted. "Now we're making progress! So, why did you bring me here?"

To learn, the Hive replied. And then to feed.

Entry No. 14

Mottle felt absolutely sandblasted by the time she and Rudiment descended the slope toward the goblin town of Gadgetzan on the verge of the Tanaris desert.

She had layered herself in clothing against the storm and had spent just an hour or so in the worst of it before entering the pass from Shimmering Flats. Nevertheless, the intensity had been such that she still felt pummeled and bruised and worn.

Rudiment, eyes masked in leather and snout shrouded in a cloth skirt, seemed all right - but she wouldn't want him traveling in this weather much longer.

In Gadgetzan, the storm lessened to the occasional gust of swirling sand rather than a steady pelting. Mottle paid a goblin - "Too much," she grumbled - to stable Rudiment for the night. And then she made her way into the tavern and looked around. No immediate sign of Stamp. Well, she supposed he probably wouldn't lurk in public if he was trying to avoid notice. But unless he was farther ahead than she calculated, Mottle figured he **must** be in town somewhere.

First, she realized, she should confirm that More Stamp was in the stables. Stamp wouldn't leave his old kodo hitched to a post in the storm. She paid the goblin stablekeeper - "Still too much," she growled - and then wandered around inside the barn. She found Rudiment, gave him a pat on the snout, and saw riding wolves, horses and rams alike. A few other kodos, too. But none of them were More Stamp.

Consternated, Mottle huffed and stomped out of the stable. She made her way back to the bar for a drink, some food, and a gathering of her thoughts.

It seemed highly unlikely that Stamp was so far ahead of her that he could outrun the sandstorm, especially if it was only now dying down. Even if he had made it through the pass before her, he would have seen the storm and taken shelter. Stamp might be stubborn and reckless sometimes, but he wasn't stupid.

So, if he wasn't ahead of her, then he must be behind her. She knew for certain that Stamp had gotten at least as far as Shimmering Flats. Possibly, she had ridden right past him in the storm. Maybe he took shelter at the racetrack or somewhere near there. She didn't like it, but she supposed she didn't have any choice: Tomorrow morning, she'd need to backtrack to Shimmering Flats.

Entry No. 15

Stamp ride More Stamp away from dorf dig-and-digger camp. Stamp wave farewell to friendly-growly dorf Stout Proud fist - P-R-O-U-D-F-I-S-T.

"Take care of yerself, big'un," Stout shout.

"Stamp see again!" Stamp answer.

Sandstorm swirl and swirl all night, but now it morning in Shimmering Flats and storm gone. Stamp glad. Stamp bet More Stamp glad too.

Stamp ride More Stamp through the dusty pass that lead to Tanaris. Stamp start descent toward Gadgetzan when Stamp see other Tauren on other kodo coming uphill.

"There you are!" Mottle shout. Mottle nudge Rudiment. Rudiment pick up pace to intercept Stamp and More Stamp. "I was worried you'd gotten ahead of me."

Stamp peer at Mottle. "What Mottle doing here?"

"Raysha told me what you're up to," Mottle say. "I know you'd rather do this on your own, but those Silithids are sneaky creatures. You *need* someone to watch your back."

Stamp sigh. Stamp had this argument with Raysha. Stamp had this argument with Sarya. And now Stamp gonna have this argument with Mottle. Except Stamp not got many ways to evade Mottle. No gasbag to jump onto!

"You won't talk me out of it," Mottle say. "Come on. The sooner you accept it, the sooner we can get on with this. I'll buy you a drink in Gadgetzan. You look thirsty."

Stamp frown, but Stamp nod. Stamp go along with this. For now.

Entry No. 16

Mornings in Gadgetzan: Relatively cool, always dry, arid. The husky scent of sweat and dust is slightly muted by the more welcoming smells of cooking meats and fresh-brewed ciders in the tavern for the breakfast crowd.

A small, hastily-assembled market sometimes forms outside the subterranean auction house, with a tight cluster of tables where goblins shout about their wares and assure would-be customers that they won't find a better deal anywhere else - and certainly not from that slick-fisted scam artist at the next table!

This morning proved little different as Mottle and Stamp rode through the north adobe archway. They dismounted and started binding the kodos to a hitch outside the tavern.

Stamp hadn't said much since they'd reunited in the Tanaris Pass, and Mottle knew better than to press. She'd outflanked him and forced herself into his rescue plan for Gizmik Fizzle. More than that, she understood that what frustrated him most was that he now needed to worry about her *too*. She finished looping Rudiment's lead around the hitch, then looked up at Stamp and said, "I can take care of myself, you know. And I want to take care of you too."

"Why?" Stamp asked, scratching his snout. "Stamp go. Stamp find Gizmik. Stamp bring Gizmik back. Why Mottle gotta make it harder?"

Mottle smiled. "I'm not making it harder. You trained me. Your sister trained me. I've saved your flank before, in case you've forgotten. I've listened and I've learned."

"Stamp not want anything to happen to Mottle," the male Tauren said, brow knitting.

"Oh, be careful, Stamp," Mottle teased. "I might get the wrong impression and think you've got feelings for me."

Stamp blinked. Stamp opened his mouth. Stamp raised a hand. Stamp lowered it. Stamp clamped his mouth shut. And then he tied More Stamp's lead to the hitch and started walking toward the tavern.

That's when they both heard the screams from the little market by the auction house. Goblins and their customers, scattering in all directions as a flurry of winged insectoid things barnstormed through the south archway from the desert. The silithids swooped and buzzed and fluttered and zoomed around the roughly circular interior of Gadgetzan's walls, sending inhabitants in a panicked frenzy.

"I count six," Mottle said, drawing two long-bladed daggers from sheaths at her hips. "Don't kill them all. I want some fun too."

Stamp drew his obsidian-edged blade from over his shoulder. No time to argue, he

understood. Only time to say: "Stamp think be careful."

Mottle nodded, smiled, and then both Tauren split up to take on the Silithids menacing Gadgetzan.

Entry No. 17

Mottle spied one of the bugs fluttering and buzzing its way toward a couple of goblin kids hiding under a table outside the auction house.

She growled and leapt into action, flinging herself between the silithid and its intended targets. Her blades flashed in the Tanaris morning sun as she slashed through the tough carapace and loosed a slurry of ichor with one blade while the other hacked off a wing. This sent the bug spinning on its own inertia until it hit the dusty ground and skidded to a stop next to the tavern, where Rudiment grunted and dropped a hoof on the squeaking, hissing bug to finish it off.

"Stay there," Mottle cautioned the goblin children, a boy and a girl, still huddled under the table.

The little girl's eyes were wide and her mouth fell open as she pointed at Mottle - or behind her. The boy shouted: "Look out!"

Stamp see Mottle run to help shrieky-shouty gobble kids, so Stamp jump up on wagon and wait for another bug coming around the rickety battle cage.

Stamp draw back slice-and-slice and whack-and-whack-and-whack at bug while Stamp leap and spin and come down on dusty ground. Stamp turn and see dead bug smack into Gadgetzan wall. Stamp see dead bug slide down wall and leave gritty trail of black goo. Stamp kinda want to wipe the goo off Stamp slice-and-slice, but Stamp not got time. Stamp see another bug swoop at fleeing hummy pally in shield bubble. Stupid hummy pally waving hearthstone and shouting: "Home! Gotta get home! HOOOOOME!" Stupid hummy pally lead bug right to squeaky-wobbly gnome warlock next to gadgetmaker's hovel - and then stupid hummy pally vanish, hearth away.

"Look out!" Stamp hear boy shout from behind Stamp, near the auction house. Stamp turn and see three bugs zooming toward Mottle. Stamp let squeaky-wobbly gnome deal with pally bug. Stamp not let Mottle fight three bugs alone!

Stamp stomp from wagon toward auction house. Stamp roar and swing slice-and-slice so that blade whack through one bug wing - away it spins - and k-chunks into the shell of the second. That one veers away. The third...well, Mottle cut and cut and stab and stab and spin and swirl and stab and punch. Down it go.

"Stamp think not bad," Stamp say to Mottle.

Mottle draw back a dagger and fling it at Stamp. Well, toward Stamp. Stamp barely got time to notice as it whistle over Stamp's shoulder. Stamp feel something thud into Stamp's back. Stamp turn and look down. Second bug - the one Stamp nicked with sword - got dagger in the head.

"Told you I can get your back," Mottle say.

Stamp look around. Stamp see squeaky-wobbly gnome warlock fall down dead, but that bug look cooked and crispy for the trouble. It flit around, bounce off a wall, careen off the battlecage bars, and then settle on the dusty ground next to More Stamp. More Stamp stomp bug.

Stamp sigh. Squeaky-wobbly gnome warlock fought bravely, unlike stupid hummy pally. Now squeaky-wobbly gnome warlock dead. Stupid hummy pally probably back in Stormwind, talk about how brave stupid hummy pally was.

"We should go now," Mottle say.

"Soon," Stamp say. "Not yet." Stamp walk toward fallen squeaky-wobbly gnome.

Entry No. 18

"But you **hate** gnomes," Mottle said, peering at the small bundle wrapped in dark robes and laid in the back of a small cart next to the graveyard outside Gadgetzan.

Stamp nodded. He jammed the shovel back into the sandy earth, then flung the load off to his right onto a growing pile.

His dislike of gnomes was legendary, thanks to the storytelling of Gizmik Fizzle. According to the stories Mottle had heard, it wasn't because of anything gnomes had done to Stamp as a child, gnomes hadn't killed his parents, gnomes didn't torment him or his favorite pet - nothing like that. He just had this irrational hatred of the squishy little things.

Yet, here he was, digging a grave for one under the midday sun of Tanaris. Granted, Stamp had relied on Mottle to wrap the body and put it in the cart. He would undoubtedly want her to handle putting the corpse in the hole once he finished.

"Why?" she asked.

"Squeaky-wobbly gnome dead because Stamp couldn't help," Stamp said with a shrug, continuing his work on the grave. "Squeaky-wobbly gnome fought with honor to defend Gadgetzan."

Mottle peered at Stamp. "You **admire** this gnome? You feel **guilt** because a gnome died? Earthmother preserve us all – are you going soft?"

Stamp shrugged again. He went back to digging.

Mottle frowned, scratching her snout as her tail lashed back and forth. She pondered the contradiction playing out before her. It was just this kind of thing that attracted her to him. He could be a fierce warrior, but he had about him a gentleness that others might have detected, but few recognized the depths. She opened her mouth to say something to that effect when Stamp set down the shovel, stepped away from the hole and motioned Mottle closer.

She picked up the robe-shrouded burden from the cart and then set the dead gnome in the grave. Mottle nodded somberly at Stamp as she took a few steps back so he could fill the hole with dirt and sand.

Eventually, only a low mound remained where the hole once was. Stamp stood at the head of the grave, shovel serving as a staff under his hands. "Stamp think something should be said."

Mottle nodded agreement. "Go ahead," she said, smiling faintly.

Stamp twisted his mouth a bit. He pondered for a few moments. Finally, he said: "Stamp not know squeaky-wobbly gnome. Stamp saw squeaky-wobbly gnome in trouble. Stamp saw Mottle in trouble. Stamp saw Mottle and shrieky-shouty gobble kids in more trouble than squeaky-wobbly gnome. So, Stamp make choice. Stamp let squeaky-wobbly gnome fight own battle. Squeaky-wobbly gnome fight well. Squeaky-wobbly gnome fight with honor for his people. Squeaky-wobbly gnome **won** fight, even if fight killed squeaky-wobbly gnome. Stamp wish Stamp could have killed bug, though, so squeaky-wobbly gnome might live. Stamp rather growl at live

squeaky-wobbly gnome than bury honorable dead squeaky-wobbly gnome. Stamp think the few honorable Alliance of Azeroth too precious to lose this way."

It was probably the most Mottle had ever heard Stamp say in one go. Ever. She blinked away a tear and shook her snout.

"Now we go," Stamp said, stomping back toward town.

Entry No. 19

Gizmik Fazzle didn't know precisely what his captor(s?) wanted to learn from him. But what he did know was this: The moment they stopped learning from him, they intended to drain him of his lifeblood and leave him a dried, dead husk.

So, it was imperative that he find out what they wanted to know, fast, and then dole out information.

As...
slowly...
as...
possible.

"I've got what you need!" Gizmik shouted - although it came out muffled, sounding like: "Ugh-ugh wahoothnee."

The Horde and the Alliance are working together now, said the entity that called itself the Hive. They unite against us. We wish to sunder the joining of their efforts.

Gizmik laughed. He'd heard about the war effort against the Silithids. His position in Shimmering Flats gave him contact with Horde and Alliance alike. What he knew for certain was that the Alliance races could barely bring themselves to work together in united cause under the best of conditions. Getting them to work with the Horde on equal footing for common cause ... well, not everyone was Jaina Proudmoore. Egos would easily get in the way of progress. If the Silithids just sat back and waited patiently, someone in the Alliance was liable to do something to besmirch the honor of the Horde and cause a total collapse of the ...

We are without patience, responded the Hive. Gah, Gizmik thought, so much for giving information at a trickle! Do you know someone who could get close to Thrall, perhaps?

Instantly, Gizmik thought of his Tauren pal, Stamp.

Hmm, replied the Hive. He would suffice. It must be a subtle but certain assassination. It must seem that the Alliance did it.

Oh, Stamp wouldn't go along with that easily. He was a creature of honor and kindness when he wasn't trying to hit and hit and hit and hit everything in sight. Gizmik wasn't sure Stamp had a setting for **Subtle**.

He can be made to serve us, the Hive answered Gizmik's thoughts. Share with us your knowledge of his friends.

Entry No. 20

Stamp and Stamp friend Mottle ride More Stamp and Rudiment up the long twisty trail from misty-swampy Un'goro Crater into dusty-thirsty Silithus.

"I could have taken that devilsaur down on my own," Mottle insist.

Stamp chuckle. "Stamp not think so."

"I certainly didn't need *you* imposing yourself on the situation," Mottle say.

Stamp shrug. "Stamp only impose when flappy-shrieky pterrodax join the fight."

"I *liked* those odds," Mottle grump.

Stamp and Stamp friend Mottle ride through little camp of Valor's Rest. Stamp and Stamp friend Mottle follow road through desert wastes, past floaty-glowy obelisks and clicky-clacky spiders and slithery-chompy worms.

As night fall over Silithus, Stamp and Stamp friend Mottle reach the purple verge of Hive Ashi. Dorf dig-and-diggers tell Stamp bug wing came from Hive Ashi. Stamp hope dorf dig-and-diggers right.

Hundreds of miles away, Crul'jin and Reia, fellow warriors in Stamp's Storm Earth and Fire clan, once again defended the Crossroads against incursions by Alliance troublemakers.

With help from dozens of weary but infuriated Hordelings, they continued to drive back the persistent foes.

As he drew the bloodied blade from the belly of a surprised-looking paladin, Crul'jin turned toward Reia and said, "Here's a fine way to foster cooperation, eh?"

"I wasn't too confident in that idea to begin with," Reia replied. She noticed a dwarf warrior charging a young orc shaman, then roared and flung herself after the dwarf.

In the twilit southern sky, the winged Silithids grew ever closer - unnoticed for now as the Crossroads conflict raged on.

Kadingo, one of the founders of Storm Earth and Fire, crouched on a rock off the western coast of Stranglethorn Vale. He watched the fishing bobber dance on the glittering waves under the moonlight.

The sun had already sunk low beyond the western horizon some time ago, leaving him the relative tranquility of a warm coastal night. The walls and huts of Grom'gol Camp rose behind him. The latest dirigible to Orgrimmar was just leaving.

A coral shark snagged the bait on Kadingo's hook and started thrashing about. Kadingo cackled and cheered as he struggled to control the rod and reel, giving the shark a little room to move before it could snap the flexible pole.

In the excitement, he didn't spy the Silithids winging in from the west, their fluttering reflections distorted in the glassy water below as they closed on their target.

On Thunder Bluff, Stamp's sister Raysha sat on the edge of the pond in the central rise, contemplating her concerns under the darkening sky.

Blunthorn had gotten word from contacts in Gadgetzan that Stamp and Mottle met up there and thwarted a Silithid attack before proceeding south toward their destination.

By now, Raysha suspected, Stamp and Mottle were in Silithus. Hopefully, they'd quickly succeed in rescuing Gizmik Fizzle. The sooner both her brother and her student were clear of those monstrosities, Raysha felt, the better.

She let her gaze shift toward the melodious singing of a Tauren druid, and thus failed to notice the Silithids reflected in the surface of the shimmering pond, descending on Thunder Bluff.

Gizmik Fizzle moped in his pale prison. He had been unable to stop the Hive from taking the information it wanted. Now, Stamp's friends were in grave danger.

If captured, they'd be used to win the Tauren's help in killing Thrall, framing the Alliance and wrecking any chance for the governments of Azeroth to work in unison against the Silithids.

Do not fret so much, the Hive communicated. It is an inefficient way to spend your final hours.

Entry No. 21

Black ichor slicked Stamp and Mottle pretty thoroughly even before they made it into the deepest coils of Hive Ashi. The bugs swarming the tunnels and protecting the hive served their masters with ferocious tenacity.

Didn't change their fate, though. Despite a few cuts and scratches, the odd bruise here and there from impact with the tough-shelled insectoids, the two Tauren stomped into the final chamber without serious injury.

"So, which one's Gizmik?" Mottle asked, gesturing toward the dozens and dozens of white-wrapped cocoons wriggling in creches along the wall of the organic chamber.

"Stamp think Stamp and Mottle free them all," Stamp said, shaking his blade to get rid of some of the excess bug slime. Then he pointed at three particularly menacing Silithids arrayed in the center of the chamber. "But first Stamp think we deal with *them*."

One of the cocoons emitted a muffled shout: "THAM! ITHATWAP!"

Mottle frowned and glanced over at Stamp. Stamp shrugged. He charged at one of the bugs. Mottle followed, her dual blades at the ready.

"Home! HOME! Gotta get HOOOOOOME!" shouted the human paladin as he threw a shield bubble around himself and fled east toward Ratchet. He took out the smooth disc of his hearthstone, and green light began to dance around the artifact.

"Oh, no joo don't!" Crul'jin shouted, chasing after him, sword drawn back to strike. He didn't see the plummeting creatures descending behind him, spiraling out of control. One glanced against his shoulder, knocked him to the ground and bounced off to the right.

Another hammered through the paladin's shield bubble and caused him to drop his hearthstone. A third crashed into the paladin stinger-first, impaling his spine.

"What the hell?" Reia asked, peering at the motionless bugs piled on and around the paladin.

Crul'jin got to his feet and shook his head. "Dunno. But I liked their timin'."

Kadingo just about had the coral shark worn out and ready for the final reel-in when he first noticed the whistling sound.

He glanced up and saw a trio of spinning Silithids, coming right at him.

"MA FISH!" Kadingo shouted.

But when it came to a choice between a prize shark and trying to withstand the impact of hard-shelled bugs, Kadingo ... compromised.

"FROST SHOCK!" the troll shaman shouted as he waved one hand at the incoming bugs, striking them with a chilly blast that slowed their descent. That gave him time to scramble down off the rock, giving wide berth to the crashing Silithids as they hammered into and around that boulder.

"Stupid bugs," Kadingo grunted as he reeled in the defeated shark.

Raysha just blinked philosophically at the dead Silithids as they bobbed in the middle

of the pond. She was soaked from the impact splashes.

She sighed and shook her head, muttering: "Stamp."

"So this is what it takes to get you to come see your old pal Gizmik, eh?" the scorekeeper chided Stamp as he plucked gauzy cocoon stuff off his shirt.

"Stamp glad Gizmik okay," Stamp said. "Stamp think Gizmik brother Hazamfrak gonna be glad too."

Gizmik peered at Stamp. "Brother?"

"He doesn't have a brother," said a voice from behind Stamp. Stamp, Mottle and Gizmik all turned to look as the goblin who called himself Hazamfrak Fazzle wandered in with a couple of orc toughs at his sides.

Gizmik buried his face in his palms. "Yazmurk Nozzlefozz."

"You've done well, Stamp," the goblin formerly known as Hazamfrak said. "I have no quarrel with you or your female friend. But Gizmik owes me and my associates a great deal of money. So, while you are free to go, I am afraid that Gizmik must go with us."

"Stamp not come all this way to free Gizmik from bugs to give Gizmik to thugs," Stamp growled.

Yazmurk nodded and gestured toward the orcs. "I thought you'd feel that way, so I brought them along. Boys, neutralize the Tauren."

The orcs each took one step, and then suddenly their eyes rolled back in their heads and they fell forward, splashing in bug ichor. Poisoned daggers jutted from their backs.

"Oops," said the orc rogue Sarya as she slid out of the shadows of the tunnel behind Yazmurk and put a blade at his throat. "Stamp might have been too trusting to check out your story. I wasn't." Coldly, calmly, before the goblin mobster could utter a word in his own defense, the blade slit his throat. "No loose ends," she remarked as the body sagged onto the floor.

Mottle nodded her thanks to Sarya and then looked around at the other cocoons. "Let's free the rest and get out of here."

Entry No. 22

Saru Steelfury scowl at Stamp as Stamp walk back into workshop in orcie town of Orgrimmar.

"So good of you to stop in, *hero*," Master Saru grunt. "I suppose you'll want double the pay now that you thwarted a Silithid plot to kill Thrall."

Stamp blink. "Stamp get paid to work on hit-and-hits?"

Saru stare at Stamp. "You haven't been paid? Ever?"

"Nope," Stamp say. "Stamp just work on Stamp stuff and spend Stamp money on Stamp stuff when Stamp need to do so. Stamp thought Master Saru do Stamp favor by teaching Stamp smithing."

Saru growl and cross arms. "I'm not running some kind of goblin sweatshop here, Tauren. You work here; you get paid."

"Okay, then," Stamp say. "Stamp guess maybe Stamp *do* want double what Stamp got paid before."

Saru scratch chin. "But, Stamp, twice nothing is still nothing."

Stamp nod. "Stamp know this."

Master Saru snarl. "You don't *want* pay?"

"Nope," Stamp say.

With a sigh, Saru shake his head and say, "Fine, but don't think for a second that this gets you off the hook for any and all abuse from me." Saru point to anvil. "You saved Thrall, so that's one battle won for our side. But we've still got the war to worry about. Get to work."

"Stamp do this," Stamp say. Stamp get Stamp hammer from toolbox. Stamp look around shop. Stamp walk over to anvil. Stamp glad to be home again.

Stamp get to work.

Stamp, a Tauren warrior on World of Warcraft's Earthen Ring server, is played by Wes Platt, author of *OtherSpace: Red-Eye Flight* and developer of text-based roleplaying games at www.jointhesaga.com

Check out Stamp's mini-site at www.jointhesaga.com/stamp