

SUPPLYING THE SLUGS

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Supplying the Slugs

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CONTENTS

About this Piece	v
1 Supplying the Slugs	1
Source	13

ABOUT THIS PIECE

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CHAPTER ONE

SUPPLYING THE SLUGS

‘××. ××. ××,’ the digital translator flashed. Error, in Chinese.

Semyon smacked the cheap piece of shit and excused himself a moment. The indigene, a bulbous, fluorescent orange slug, swiveled its iguana eyes. It was about the size of a large dog and had three appendage-like antennae.

With sweaty thumbs, Semyon swapped the language to Basic English and spat, ‘Hello, hello,’ into the receiver. The device whirred and emitted a series of chirps and wet smacking sounds.

The slug made similar noises, and the translator said, ‘Where did you learn our language?’

Perfect. Semyon squared his shoulders and tightened the Windsor knot on his space suit. ‘Friend,’ he purred, ‘I have been here before. My relations with your people go back centuries.’

‘What is centuries?’ asked the slug. The village folk gathered around them, leaving their twig and moss huts behind, tracking slime into the sacrificial square.

‘A long time.’

‘What is time?’

Semyon pointed at the triple sun formation illuminating Ispex-4. ‘Time moves with the suns.’

SUPPLYING THE SLUGS



‘Many days, then,’ said the native.

‘Yes,’ echoed Semyon. ‘Many days.’ He felt butterflies in his stomach. ‘Tell me, do you know of the Bishi tribe?’

One of the slug’s segmented head-limbs flicked. ‘Only legends. It is said they met with gods.’

‘They did,’ Semyon nodded. ‘We taught them the way. We showed them the truth. The very buildings you stand by, a testament to our history.’

‘You are a god?’

The butterflies ignited. Semyon swept his arms out in a passionate flourish. ‘Yes! And I have come to raise your people up. Behold!’ He pushed a button on his lapel and pointed at the sky.

The assembled slugs followed his finger and watched as a C.L.Y.P.S.O Space Crate™ broke through the clouds. It careened into their tiny village like a falling throne, landing next to the central gold mound with a satisfying thud.

‘You have done well, collecting such treasure,’ Semyon said, ‘but the Crate must judge you.’

The Clypso scanned the atmosphere and, deeming it safe, ejected its top. The deep-steel panel flattened a nearby alien shrub.

‘You are worthy,’ breathed Semyon. ‘Time it is for you to take your rightful place as stewards of this land.’

The villagers leaned forward, stretching themselves thin as Semyon reached in. They gave no sign of having heard him.

Worthy, they chanted.

‘You will be rewarded,’ he continued, ‘with the Avtomat Kalashnikova model of 1947. The Kalashnikov.’ With a flourish, he drew the old piece of iron and plywood into sight.

Silence. One slug used a cranial limb to moisten its eyeballs.

‘What is it?’ another finally asked.

‘A gun.’

‘What is a gun?’

‘An artifact of my people from many, many days ago.’ Semyon pointed at a nearby tree. ‘Observe.’ The slugs did, bulging in anticipation.

Flicking the safety off, Semyon fired, gouging out chunks of bark until the trunk cracked and gave way.

An indigene droned. The low note grew harsher as more joined in, until it quaked along Semyon’s diaphragm and deep in his lungs. He threw the AK into the crowd; a slug caught the rifle upside down, engulfing it in its head-tendrils.

In choir, they sang, Worthy.

He emptied the crate and lined them up like fat guerilla sea anemones, said, ‘Aim at those trees and pull the trigger.’

‘What is the trigger?’

Semyon grabbed a nearby slug’s antenna and placed it appropriately, grimaced, wiped the chunky slime off on his slacks. ‘Now, squeeze,’ he said, smiling again.

The hammering of a dozen assault rifles sounded a lot like ka-ching.

‘Beautiful,’ one slug chirped. ‘How does it work?’

Semyon said, ‘Ancient magic and fire.’

He showed them how to reload, gave them a brief lecture on firearm safety, then requested they load up the amassed mineral. In the process, he learned they had no word for it: to them, gold was just shiny rock.

They hummed in harmony while filling the crate. The tune raked around Semyon's spine, giving him goose flesh. He likened it to a hearty tribal song.

Worthy, they repeated.

With business done came the easy part. 'It pains me to leave so soon' — he replaced the Clypso's lid, and heaved himself on top — 'but I must go.'

'We will tell stories of you, Traveler,' promised one slug, possibly the first he'd talked to.

'I'm sure you will,' Semyon whispered. A tug on his cufflink activated the magnetic withdrawal system. The crate rose beneath him and made for the stars; it was guaranteed to be the most dramatic exit those hut-dwellers had ever seen.

The village shrank and disappeared beneath layers of flat, purple clouds. Semyon's suit detected the thinning atmosphere and deployed an oxygen skin, designed for short trips through space.

Ahead, his Winnebago Prophecy hung in orbit like a shiny brick. Semyon crouched, steadying his approach.

Floating towards a square breach portside, he entered an empty cargo bay and kicked the crate until it fit into place. Heavy clamps clunked. The airlock door slid shut. With a lengthy hiss the room pressurized, and his oxygen skin faded.

'Welcome back, dear,' a husky female voice said.

'Hi, Maya.' Semyon stepped onto a wall, and it became the floor. Following the hallway left, he made his way to the main cabin, where the captain's recliner sat waiting for him. Yawning, aching for a seat, Semyon swerved past and approached a wall-sized display of Ispex-4 dotted with detected wellsprings of gold.

‘Maya,’ he said, ‘please weigh the freight in cargo dock two.’

‘Confirmed. Cargo dock two contents 20.3 kilograms.’

Rubbing his forehead, he said, ‘Maya...’

‘Confirmed. Cargo dock two contents 44.75 pounds.’

Semyon grunted — the metric system wasn’t welcome on this ship. Eyes skipping across the map like abacus beads, he poked a red blob projected on the coast some miles west of his previous drop site, the second juiciest haul this side of the globe.

‘Confirmed.’ Maya handled the logistics.

He looked only once more at his recliner before lumbering back to the access hall.

Passing the cargo bay, kneading his sore ass with a thumb, he asked, ‘Maya, we got any fuel left?’

‘Sixteen percent.’

He exhaled deeply through his nose. ‘Yeah, OK.’

The passage ended at the hyperbolic ejection chamber. Semyon slid open a curved piece of tempered ba-NANO glass and stepped into the launching capsule. The entrance swished shut behind him. A red button flashed near his hip, and his oxygen skin deployed.

‘Dear?’

‘Yes, Maya?’

‘Is it wise to seed such a primitive people with—’

‘Don’t think about it.’

‘But—’

‘I said, don’t think about it.’ Semyon’s fist hovered over the go button. ‘Do you really want to live on this bus again?’

A pause. ‘Confirmed.’

It stung, of course. Even AIs enjoyed reclining, the feeling of stretching out and relishing in extra space.

Semyon's hand hovered over GO. 'Maya,' he said, 'have I ever told you who we got your voice from?'

This second pause was different. Earnest. 'No, dear.'

'I'll tell you when I get back OK?'

A third pause, this one happy. Like a smile on the other end of a sub-vocal. Like a smile halfway through a mayday signal.

'Confirmed.'

Punching it, the floor dropped out beneath him, and Semyon was sucked through and shot at the surface. The atmosphere flared around him. The buffeting air wasn't a concern: his new hair gel was wind-tunnel tested. He crossed his arms and leaned back, watching a turquoise sky creep over the stars. Clouds broke against his back like cool, dewy pillows.

Flipping onto his chest, he spread his arms and tracked towards the western coast. He located the smattering of moss huts, built in a clearing around a gleaming mound. Slow-moving specks at the front of wet trails marked villagers. Nearby, a rocky outcrop cut into the sea.

Before slapping the ground like a pretentious meat sack, Semyon tilted upright. The suit billowed and absorbed the forces acting upon him. Freed from terminal velocity, his brogues wafted down and gently sank into gold nuggets.

'Mortals!' he bellowed, glad to be warmed up. 'I have come with gifts.'

A dozen watery eyes swivelled to look at him.

Descending into the square, Semyon beckoned the nearest slug. 'Come closer, friend,' he said. 'It has been many, many days

since I taught the Bishi tribe to build. And you have kept their legacy, collecting gold — shiny rock — and awaiting my return.'

The slug lowered its face and shuffled closer with tiny, squish-ing noises. 'Anything for you, High One.'

Semyon approved of groveling and pushed his lapel. 'Behold!' The cargo crashed down into the village, but this time he slid the lid off himself, leaning it neatly against the crate.

'Never again will you fear during war. Instead, others will fear you.'

'High One, what is war?' asked the alien.

Semyon felt the butterflies again, stronger than before. 'War is...'

The villagers gathered round to peer inside.

'War is...' he tried again, stepping away and raking his fingers through the 24-karat river for inspiration. A shudder ran up his back. Gooseflesh.

Worthy.

He heard automatic gunfire. Something wet sprinkled on him, like ocean spray. Semyon turned to find the villagers staring at one of their own, leaking fresh green liquids over the lip of the Clypso. From the treeline, a group of armed slugs emerged, rifle muzzles flashing. A villager did a jittery dance, pieces of it slapping across Semyon's face, and something whizzed past his ear — he flung himself on the ground hard enough to taste mud. A piercing shriek rose and fell.

'High One,' the translator said, 'save us.'

Sparks ricocheted off the deep-steel, gouging slug flesh. Villagers fell over the crate, the flappy skin hanging from their bodies

smearing down the side. A strong metallic smell — surprisingly similar to human blood — coated the back of Semyon's throat. The gold pile was shot and sent showering over his head.

Something hot landed on his collar and burned.

'Stop, stop, stop!' he screamed, slapping the searing fragment on his neck. A deformed bullet clinked to the ground.

The cease-fire came. 'Traveler!'

Semyon peeked through his hands. The guerilla slugs looked down at him. Far away, a handful of survivors fled down the outcrop, flinging themselves into the ocean to escape. Moments later, they bobbed to the surface and were tossed about by the tide.

'Why did you do that?!' Semyon yelled.

'Traveler?' said one. 'You showed us.'

'Showed you?' Semyon echoed.

Another explained. 'We saw you fall from above, a radiant beacon, to more shiny rock.'

'Gold,' corrected a third.

Worthy, choired the others.

'When you gathered them and moved aside,' the first continued, 'we understood. Why compete? We could take what we wanted. Truly, this world is ours. And the gold, yours. You have shown us the way.'

'We will take the guns.'

Worthy.

'Traveler? Are you well?' His customers pressed in on him.

'Uh, yes,' Semyon said. 'Yes. As for the gold...'

One of the guerrilla slugs bowed. 'Worry not. We remember.'

They continued their song—a land shanty? — and with a shiver up and down his spine dumped the corpses aside, unloaded the crate, and filled it anew. They even replaced the lid, as they'd seen him do, and arranged themselves into an oozing staircase, which he climbed with tight steps.

All around them, corpses. A large hole torn in one of the dying villagers spilled something that writhed with breath. A green stream flowed along the ground, joining the mangled bodies together. Copper casings coated the dirt like leaves.

'We will tell stories of you, Traveler,' Semyon heard behind him.

The front of his suit dripped. Under his feet, the crate rose with a sucking sound.

It was happening. He had thus far managed to avoid such an outcome, and he was in no way prepared, but it was happening. He'd seen it in fast forward on the Archives time and again: one clan conquering a land which offered — no — could offer no resistance in light of sudden shifts in firepower. There was no hope for the other denizens of Ispex-4. Unless, of course, someone got them weapons, too.

Already drifting past the ship's windshield, Semyon discovered a small orange ring digitally superimposed on the glass. Even this far from the central transport curve, some power-tripping surveillance beacon had issued him a parking ticket. Semyon lost his shit, but the vastness of space made it insignificant.

The cargo bay locks clunked.

'Welcome back, dear.'

Semyon let the gore congeal and stepped inside, flat footing into the cabin, past his recliner, and up to the map, where he

brought the gold projections together into one red hologram about the size of his fist.

‘Dear?’

Prioritizing a trip back to Earth-1 was critical. There were plenty of weapons under the garbage. With just one return trip, he could cover rent for months. Maybe even a year. Time dilation was against him, though. What would happen if he took too long?

‘Dear?’

‘You know, Maya,’ Semyon said, ‘when I drop, usually I grace these peoples with the gift of fire. Got the idea from an old story, maybe you know it.’ He punched the display, the red glinted through the flesh of his knuckles. ‘Between the heat and the colors, usually I have ‘em by the balls from the start. So to speak.’

‘But these fuckers,’ Semyon laughed, ‘these fuckers figured it out on their own. Way before we got here. They just didn’t find it that interesting.’

Maya didn’t reply. A map of the local cluster blinked up on the ship displays. Trajectories calculating, thousands a second.

‘Those guns won’t jam or break. They’ll shoot anywhere, forever, until they run out of ammo. Think they’ll find a way to make bullets?’

Triangulation in the silence. Calculating. Distance matrices, calibrations.

‘You get to the top of a food chain and things move pretty fast. We could stay here a hundred years and nothing but just one skip back to Earth and—’ Semyon harrumphed. ‘Ruins of intelligent life everywhere. Some of it could try getting past its first game of King of the Hill.’

Maya asked if that was sad.

Semyon thought about that one. Settled on, 'Yeah, I guess so.'

He came to, pivoting on one heel and storming for the access hallway. 'Let's go. High burn towards the Home-cen curve. Get me to a TRK stop.' He hoped they had enough to buy a half tank of gas.

'Confirmed.'

Semyon lifted an arm and a line of green slime cracked. He sniffed the sleeve and winced.

'God damn it,' he whispered. It was his last suit.

Maya punched the ignition. The Winnebago's familiar diesel turnover was like a massage deep in his soul.

Semyon rubbed the burn on his neck and made for the shower, eager to wash off the stench of those savages.

SOURCE

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