

Mytan



Mytan surveyed his small fiefdom. He wasn't entirely sure how many rafts or other wards made up the Shanties, but this one was his. Admittedly it was not one of the more prestigious, its inhabitants were among those who had more recently arrived in Liberty. But still, he was the boss, and they paid him protection. He had coins to jingle in his pocket and could walk with a swagger. There again, his wife tended to point out, dryly, that he had more coins to jingle when he was a mere lieutenant of a greater boss, even if his swaggering had been more circumspect. But still, he was his own being and lord of all he surveyed.

He adjusted his armour slightly. It had been taken from the body of an alien who was built with subtly different proportions to him, but some judicious fiddling with straps meant the fit was reasonable. His helmet did fit well. He wasn't sure how many owners had worn it before him, the name embossed on the inside of the neck was not the name of the person he'd killed, and the script wasn't one he recognised. Still his heavy pistol was good, ex-Bretag military, and his carbine he had purchased new from the maker. His fighting knife he had retrieved from the kitchen where his wife had used it to prepare their previous evening's meal.

He heard raised voices and drifted in that direction. Two females are arguing, one an Ard, the other a Yaltin. The Yaltin was furious, her crest blood red with rage. Her tirade was so rapid that Mytan wasn't entirely sure whether she was speaking Liberty Patois, Old Earth Standard, or some alien language of her own. The Ard was more measured in her anger, gesturing with a measuring stick. Warily Mytan intervened.

"So what is the problem?"

Both females turned on him, he had to steel himself not to give ground. He pointed at the Ard. "You first. What is the problem?"

The Ard pointed with her measuring stick at the shanty behind her. It was quite substantial, had pretensions to a second floor and had even been painted. Mytan corrected his assessment, parts of it had obviously been painted, but not necessarily after they had been combined to make a shanty. The Ard was obviously restraining herself, she spoke in Old Earth Standard as if to let that human language give her words greater formality. "My clan mate and I have this shanty for our brood kin. We have dwelt in it for three (and here she was obviously groping for a word) sidereal years. Then this creature built her shanty next to it."

The measuring stick pointed toward a somewhat smaller construction. It was a one roomed affair made predominantly from pieces of dissembled stackers. It was covered over by heavy canvas, the waterproofing, made from boiling down bassat roots, still smelled strongly.

Mytan felt called upon to say something. "It is not built too close."

The Ard gestured to a rope lying on the floor between the two shanties. "She was erecting this."

The Yaltin female almost sneered. "It's a washing line. Perhaps the Ard don't wash their clothes so don't recognise one?"

Mytan ducked to avoid the measuring stick which the Ard swung viciously in the Yaltin's direction. The Yaltin caught the stick with a paw that suddenly extended razor sharp claws. Mytan drew his pistol and fired down at the floor. The round ricocheted off the steel plating of the raft and disappeared out over the canal.

"Silence."

Both females fell back and Mytan holstered his pistol. He turned first to the Yaltin. "The rope looks awfully thick for washing line." He examined the Ard's shanty. "Here is one hook for the washing line." He ran his hand along the horizontal beam. "And here is another hook, were you planning two washing lines? You Yaltin must be awfully keen on washing!"

The Yaltin had the grace to be embarrassed. Mytan continued. "You were intending to put up two ropes, hang canvas from it, and claim another room weren't you."

The Ard looked triumphant, but the Yaltin almost crumpled. In broken patois she said, "My sister-cousin and her kits have landed at Liberty Space Port. She has escaped from our oppressors and needs a new home. I am duty bound to take her in."

Mytan looked at her shanty. Like the Ard's it was close to the edge of the canal, there was no room to build on that side. He pointed to where his bullet had left a mark on the steel between the two shanties. "Move your shanty to here, but no

closer. This will give you room on that side to add more space. Go and see Fat Freddy. He has just had a delivery of beers. He will still have a pallet, perhaps two if you're lucky. Tell him I will ensure that you pay him the fair price. Extend your shanty in that direction."

He turned back to the Ard. He pointed to the area between her shanty and his bullet mark. "That area is yours. You have materials?"

"Yes, my mate has timber from work."

"Good. Built your wall there. She can use that wall as well, which means she will have material to put into extending her place."

He stepped back, glaring at the two females, daring them to find fault in his arrangements. Neither said anything which was probably evidence that they felt he'd been fair. He bowed equally to both, in spite of the fact that doing so made the armour dig him uncomfortably in the abdomen.

He walked on, leaving the two females to rebuild their relationship. This they would do well enough without his presence. As he assessed the situation he decided it wasn't a bad piece of work. If the Yaltin had further family coming, then they too could be expected to pay protection, and Yaltin were hard workers. Similarly he hadn't noticed the Ard's second storey before. This could be reflected in his next collection.

He pondered the day ahead. It was almost time for him to supervise the clinic. Richer bosses could afford to have a full time paramedic for their people. Mytan felt he was doing well to get somebody competent for an afternoon. Still he better stick his head round the door so that people remembered just who was paying for the service. People were more amenable when they could see what they were getting for their protection money.