

Right As Rane

by Robert Beacham

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Ceras Rane was woken by bright, early morning sunshine streaming from his window. The damn thing was obviously malfunctioning again because he'd set it for 'April Shower' when he got in last night. He slid his six foot two inch frame out of bed and thumped the window's plastic surround. It snowed. He thumped it again and got the purple fog and green lightning of 'Morning on Galadan'. He gave it his best menacing growl with no noticeable effect so, with a snort of resignation, he turned it off. He scrubbed fingers through his short dark hair, yawned and stretched expansively to relieve muscles that were cramped from sleeping in a bed a couple of inches too short for comfort.

Taking two paces across the small box that passed for his living quarters he slipped into the shower cubicle. He selected 'Forest Spring' from the menu and stood patiently as a thirty-second burst of spray and disinfectant more reminiscent of industrial bleach than forest spring cleansed his body. With a degree of trepidation he selected 'shave', standing as still as humanly possible while the tiny flashing blade flew at frightening speed around the contours of his face. He sighed with relief at having survived the whirling edges unscathed and pressed 'cool dry', stretching out his arms and pushing his palms flat against the translucent sides of the cubicle to steady himself. The blast furnace effect that followed was mercifully brief and a lightly-baked Ceras stepped back into his room. From the clothes unit within arms reach on his left he selected 'uniform' and waited a few seconds while the machine digested yesterday's clothing, recycled it and, with a small electronic burp, popped out his crisp new apparel.

Ceras turned to the full length mirror alongside the clothes unit. Though not exactly vain he was particular about his appearance and his blue-grey eyes reflected a twinkle of satisfaction at his well-proportioned, muscular physique. He dressed with meticulous care, experiencing a sense of pride and achievement as he did so. It had been his mother's greatest wish that he join the Rangers, like his father before him. It was unfortunate that she couldn't pin his parentage down to a particular individual but, she said, they were all fine men. He checked his watch; six thirty-five. Time for breakfast.

Ceras reached across the bed to the rectangular white kitchen unit and selected Full English. He stared at the machine through half-closed eyes as it whistled an annoying little tune and made odd sizzling noises in a pathetic imitation of someone preparing food. Not fooled by its apparently jovial air, Ceras waited patiently. The machine went ominously quiet and slowly, inch by inch, a white tray began to appear from the slot in its base. Suddenly it gave a metallic snarl and fired the plastic tray across the room at almost supersonic speed. Ceras was ready. With feline agility he launched himself across the bed and snatched the edge of the tray just before it impacted on the far wall.

"Got you!" he said, with a satisfied sneer at the now silent unit. It was as he turned away that he realised his mistake, but before he could react his toast struck him smartly behind the left ear. Fortunately the knife and fork which followed were made of plastic. Cursing himself for his poor judgement, and the machine for its malevolent streak, he retrieved his cutlery and, turning to the bed's headboard display, selected table and chairs. The bed crumpled into its slot and the required items unfolded from the floor.

With little relish – and no sauce because the machine had decided not to provide any – he started to consume the virtually tasteless shapes which constituted his morning meal. It might contain all the necessary vitamins and nutrients, but he was sure that calling it a 'full English breakfast' must contravene some regulation or other. For a moment he thought about using the power of his office to investigate the company responsible for producing the mush in front of him, but on reflection decided that he'd probably rather not know. In his ignorance he could deceive himself into thinking that the various items had some kind of relationship to a pig and a chicken, but it was just as likely that they were once a floppy disk

and an old sock. He considered selecting coffee, but the probability of having to wash a warm brown sticky mess from the walls decided him against it.

Ceras finished his meal and tossed tray and cutlery into the bin in the corner which, with a small whoosh, reduced the items to their component parts and shuffled them off to the building's recycling unit. He rose from the chair and, having stowed both it and the table back from whence they came, turned towards the door.

"Open," he said, and walked out into the passage. The door hissed shut behind him as if glad to be rid of him. "Yea, and sssss to you too," he snarled.

Ceras' current lodging was in a standard city residential block of 15,360 rooms divided over its 128 floors, thirty of which were below ground level. Around a fifth were family units, another fifth for couples and the remainder for singles like himself. As he entered the corridor it was seven a.m. and it seemed the entire population of the building was on its way to work. The mass of bodies jammed into the corridor took on a life of its own, gelling into a single shuffling centipede-like creature which issued grunts and curses as people tried to break in or out of the main body.

After a few minutes of rapid shuffling, Ceras saw the overhead display for Parking Area 9 and managed to squeeze close to the edge of the stream as they approached the curved steel filter channels. With a heave he popped free of the organism and was carried by his own momentum into one of the individual padded lift cubicles where he stabbed a button marked G. The lift door closed, carried him upwards so quickly he hardly had time to hear the musak, then stopped so abruptly his feet actually left the floor momentarily.

The door slid open, allowing Ceras to enter the parking garage. He passed just two vehicles on the way to his cruiser, both nondescript dark blue models designated for government personnel. Given there were something in the region of twenty thousand people in the block, you might have expected more, but these days people walked as much as possible to keep up their required cardio-vascular exercise minimums or, if they were going any distance, took the extensive and efficient Free Access Rapid Transit network. The only ones with private vehicles were government officials (for protection should citizens wish to express their displeasure at the latest health and safety regulations), or law enforcement (who might need greater speed in getting to their destination, or want to transport people or materials securely).

Ceras checked the wall-mounted charger, unplugged the car from the mains, got in and turned on the heads-up display.

"Location of individual," he demanded curtly, "Joseph Andles." The screen filled with color, different areas flashing up briefly as the computer performed a rapid search for the person in question. After a few seconds a single grid emerged with a small red glow pulsating softly in the centre. A coffee shop in Mall 12.

"Go," Ceras commanded, and the cruiser slid silently away from its bay. Often he liked to drive manually but he had things to think about today. He slid back in the seat and carefully re-checked each stage of his plan.

He'd been struggling to justify what he was going to do for several weeks, not just because carrying it out threatened his future as a Ranger if he was caught but because it meant overstepping personal boundaries as well. He believed in the law, in the right of all sentient beings to have a fair hearing. The more he thought about it though, the more he realized he had little choice. Something had to be done about the one-man crime-wave that was Joe Andles and the system had failed time after time. Ceras might be the only person on the planet who could stop him.

It had all started a little over a year ago. Two local police officers had caught Andles running out of an electrical goods store clutching the latest Apple iWatchPodPhone. The store owner

had seen him take it, the store CCTV had recorded it. Open and shut cases didn't get any more tightly closed than that.

Except that in court the next morning, when asked how he pleaded, Joseph Andles had said, "It wasn't me." Which would have been laughable, if the judge hadn't immediately ordered him released. What's more, the prosecutor didn't object and the store owner and two arresting officers looked at each other in complete confusion, unable to understand how they'd got the wrong man.

In fact they hadn't. Examination of the video evidence clearly identified Andles as the perpetrator. DNA evidence showed he had handled the item in question. What nobody could account for was the undeniable plausibility of Andles argument when he claimed he didn't do it. In spite of all the evidence, everyone knew he was innocent.

When he was arrested for theft of a Wii-oo-e-oo games console three weeks later the chain of events was so similar as to be astonishing. Once again his innocence was upheld by everybody who heard him.

Ceras became involved when things took a turn for the worse. Andles entered a jewelry store, took a hammer to a display case and grabbed a handful of diamond-encrusted watches. The owner attempted to prevent him leaving, at which point Andles took the hammer to him. Physical violence was so rare on Earth that the case was immediately bumped from local law enforcement to the Rangers.

Not that they had any trouble apprehending the suspect. He even wore one of the watches in question during the interview. Once again there was corroborating video evidence.

Once again, in court, Joseph Andles expressed his innocence and was freed.

When he heard the news, Ceras thought his superior was joking. When he realized he wasn't he erupted into a series of explanations, demonstrations, demands and expletives that almost got him suspended.

The situation got worse as Andles got bolder. No matter how greedy he got, no matter how brazen, he always walked away from court a free man. Ceras came to an unlikely conclusion, but the only one that fit the circumstances: Joe Andles could, quite literally, talk his way out of anything.

So what was to stop him talking his way into anything? It took Andles a couple of weeks to realize this side of his abilities himself, but as soon as he did he began simply walking into places and asking for things. "Would you mind giving me that new suit?" "I'd like a table for one and a bottle of your finest champagne. That's on the house isn't it?" "Would you mind if I borrowed your car?" He might not be the brightest criminal ever, but he soon realized that if he didn't need to resort to violence - and if people gave him things willingly - he didn't even have to go through the short-term inconvenience of arrest and spending a night in the cells.

Ceras was at a loss. It seemed he was the only one immune to the effects of Andles' voice but it didn't do him any good. It became an obsession. He took to following him everywhere (which eventually got him a brief suspension) but technically there weren't even crimes being committed. Finally he formulated his plan, but even now he had his doubts. Not about whether the plan would work or not, he was certain it would, but whether he should really step outside the law - however justified his actions might be. He was still struggling with that aspect when, with the merest pshhh of the air brakes, the cruiser pulled up outside the coffee shop.

The decor mimicked one of those old-fashioned bars from back before they made alcohol illegal in 2062. The windows and door were half-frosted glass, the floor was broad wooden planks, the seating button-down red leather - or at least they were pretty good imitations of wood and leather. The air was filled with holographic cigarette smoke. There was even a vague hint of stale beer in the air. It was rumored that for the right money you could get coffee with real caffeine in it here too. Joe Andles was developing expensive tastes.

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