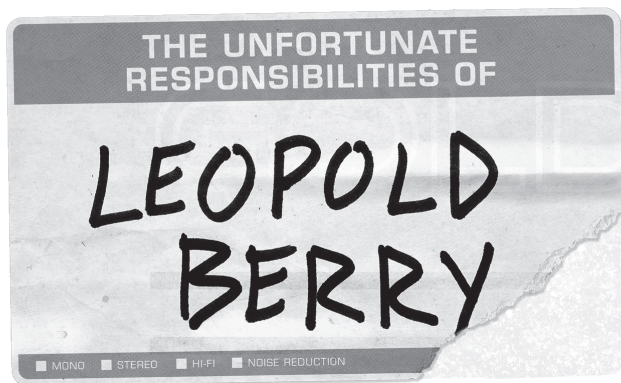




SUNDERWORLD

V-02

THE UNFORTUNATE
RESPONSIBILITIES OF

LEOPOLD BERRY

■ MONO ■ STEREO ■ HI-FI ■ NOISE REDUCTION



RANSOM RIGGS

DUTTON BOOKS



*The universe is full of magical things
patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper.*

—Eden Phillpotts, *A Shadow Passes*

Magic is never free. But it is frequently weird.

—*Sunder Manual of Magical Operations*, Section 7.1.4

Bill? Strange things are afoot at the Circle K.

—*Ted, Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*

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PART ONE

Leopold Berry knocked a puck of espresso into the trash, slid a concoction of pink-and-green liquid across the counter, and called out to Destiny. As a woman with glazed eyes and blond dreadlocks drifted forward to claim her drink, Leopold wiped his hands on his apron and gazed across the sun-spangled coffee shop.

It was a Friday afternoon in Silver Lake. The grinder shrilled in its endless high monotone, the ancient espresso machine harmonizing with worrying squeals and dyspeptic burbles, as if perpetually on the brink of exploding into a cloud of steam and vintage Italian shrapnel. The tables were filled with the usual crowd of students and screenwriters tethered umbilically to their devices, heads canted at chiropractically unsustainable angles, dressed like they'd just fallen out of bed.

Amidst this sea of oversized denim and artfully rumpled hair, one man stood out.

He wore a trim gray suit with narrow lapels and a skinny tie. His shoes were shined to a mirror polish. His hair, combed hard to one side, had a vaguely military aspect. Stranger still, he had no laptop, no phone, and apparently nothing better to do than stare at Leopold over the top of a newspaper he was only pretending to read, lowering it now and then to scribble something in a pocket-sized notebook.

The man in the suit had been parked at the same table since noon, nursing the same black coffee, backlit by the glaring pink sign that everyone was pretty much required to post a picture of, the words *CAFFEINE IS F***ING MAGIC* rendered on the wall behind him in swooping pink neon.

Though a small parade of people had already posed in front of it, none seemed to notice the man dressed like he'd come to foreclose on the coffee shop. Or the strange behavior of his newspaper, tinted an unmistakable blue, the pages of which occasionally turned by themselves.

"Did you change your name?"

Leopold startled, then dragged his focus to the blond apparition staring at him across the counter. Destiny had collected her cartoonish drink—an iced cereal milk latte with matcha foam, the shop's signature beverage—then paused to squint at the tag on Leopold's apron, where *Larry* had been stickered over with a handwritten label.

"No," he replied. "I've always been Leopold."

He could hardly remember why he'd allowed people to call him Larry for so long, or whether he'd ever met this woman before. She looked familiar, which was to say she looked like most of the people who hung around Cereal Killer.

Her eyes narrowed. "Leopold." She said his name like she was weighing it, brushing a dreadlock from her forehead with the back of one tattooed hand. Finally, with the line lengthening behind her, she rendered her unsolicited opinion. "It's kind of an old man vibe? But in a hot way."

Before Leopold could figure out whether Destiny was trying to hit on him or if she was just another spy sent by the Executive, she had floated off on a cloud of peppery perfume and weird confidence.

Feeling slightly paranoid as the next customer slid in, Leopold

launched into another explanation of the differences between the single origin espresso and the house blend while cutting his eyes at the suit.

The suit was just staring, not even pretending anymore, jotting another note without bothering to set the newspaper down. Now the pages floated in front of him, unsupported.

No one seemed to notice that, either.

It had been like this for weeks—ever since the day Leopold and his friends walked out of the Sundered wing of Cedars hospital, Isabel with a vivid new scar down one arm; Emmet with his memory restored to all its wisecracking, seventeen-year-old glory; Leopold sporting a limp and one arm in a sling, both of which he'd shed only recently.

A Sunder nurse and a Sunder cop had trailed them through a crowd of slacks across the hospital's white-tiled lobby, the nurse gently urging them to be reasonable, the cop informing them in no uncertain terms that they were being not just idiots, but fucking idiots. But once it became clear that nothing short of violence or magic would prevent them from leaving, Leopold and his friends had been released into the blinding bright afternoon and the custody of Isabel's uncle Norm, waiting at the curb in his long pink Cadillac.

No one was more surprised than Leopold. After refusing to answer any of the Executive's questions about the object, he'd assumed windowless rooms and interrogations would be next. Instead, the Executive had assigned a surveillance detail of besuited lackeys to follow him all over the city: to and from work, to Norm and Isabel's place in Hollywood, down grocery store aisles. Even all the way home to Brentwood, lingering in Leopold's cul-de-sac in their bulbous, gas-guzzling sedans from the last century.

Lately, they'd started coming into the coffee shop. They were

always so goddamn polite—they waited patiently in line, tipped well. Sometimes they even brought gifts from the Executive, wrapped in lavender paper like something from a boutique. But they never missed a chance to lean close and whisper.

“We could really use your perspective on a couple things down at HQ. Sure you won’t reconsider that sit-down?”

“We’re not going to take the whatchamacallit from you. We just want to learn more about it.”

“The Executive thinks you have huge potential. Hope you won’t let a few ruffled feathers stand in the way of working together.”

There was a time when this campaign of creepy stalking and lame flattery might’ve worn him down. He still didn’t know how the object worked or why his mother had led him to it, and sometimes, when he was lying awake at night while the moon inched across the bare wood floor of his bedroom, the Executive’s offers almost sounded tempting. But the version of him that would’ve believed her compliments or accepted her help was long gone, dead by the hands of one pissed-off Noxum and the inescapable truth of his own extraordinary mediocrity.

Leopold, risen from the ashes of old Larry’s obliterated ego, knew he was nothing special. And that, more than any object, more than any spell, was his power.

Leopold spared the suit a hearty middle finger, then purged the espresso machine’s steam wand until it hissed like a dragon. It sent up a curtain of white vapor, erasing him from view.

“So I’m coming back from the bathroom when Coach Harker calls me. *Calls* me, on the actual phone, which is practically an act of violence.”

Emmet Worthington had just pulled up to the counter, parting the cloud of steam with a conspicuously empty mug dangling from one finger. He clapped it down and pushed it toward Leopold, who dumped the dregs and set about refilling it.

“I thought you told him you were quitting.”

“I did. But apparently my ‘I’m too busy for cross-country this season and probably forever’ text didn’t land with the appropriate weight.”

Leopold reached for the pot of drip coffee he kept on hand just for Emmet, then bent to grab a carton of half-and-half from the under-counter fridge. Emmet was the only coffee drinker under the age of seventy-five who preferred diner-style swill and gas station drip to fancy espresso drinks or pour-overs.

“So what did you tell him?”

Emmet shrugged. “I gave the usual excuses. Senior year’s about to kick off. College apps. I recently discovered I can read an obscure, ancient rune language, and my best friend’s being stalked by pathologically annoying magical bureaucrats.” He tossed a look over his shoulder. “He’s still here, huh?”

“Three and a half hours.”

“Maybe he just wants the Whoopsie Kid’s autograph. Take pity on the guy, Mister Berry. Sign his collectible action figure.”

Leopold almost spilled the coffee he was pouring.

“There better not be—”

“Don’t freak out, I’m kidding. If there were collectible action figures, I’d have the whole set. I’ve already got the Leopold hat, key chain, both T-shirts—”

Emmet opened his denim jacket to reveal one. Beneath a stylized illustration of Leopold being menaced by a Noxum, it read:

**I BATTLED A NINTH REALM HELLBEAST AND
ALL I GOT WAS THIS LOUSY EXISTENTIAL DREAD**

“You’re going to burn that. Immediately.”

“Hell no, that’s a fire hazard. And this is a priceless collectible.”

“Stop saying *collectible*. No one’s collecting anything—”

“I’m telling you, selling this on eBay is going to put my kids through college one day. Believe in something.”

“I believe I’m going to kick your ass after my shift is over.”

Emmet snatched his coffee mug from the counter. “Which is when?”

“About an hour.” Leopold glanced at the line forming at the register.

“Cool. I’ve got reading to do.”

Emmet nodded at the folder pinned under his arm, stuffed with blue newspapers that poked out from the edges, then retreated to his usual table in the corner. It had become a kind of mobile home base, where either he or Isabel, or sometimes both of them at once, were posted up most days Leopold was working.

The three of them had fused into a unit over the past few weeks, rarely apart for long, and Leopold had come to rely on their steady

presence. Whenever his frustration with the suits reached a boiling point, or their search for answers hit another dead end, or the extremes of his new reality threatened to unhinge him, being able to glance over and see his friends sitting a few feet away always pulled him back to center. Convinced him all this strangeness was survivable.

Reminded him he wasn't alone.

He took a few more orders. Wiped down the counter. He was in the midst of making a pour-over when his pocket buzzed with a text, and he checked his phone with one hand while tipping a kettle with the other.

ISABEL: suit update?

LEOPOLD: Still here.

EMMET: And staring at Leopold like a psycho. I'm filing
a restraining order. This one's got crazy eyes.

ISABEL: S o annoyign;;

Across the shop, Emmet smirked at his screen. Isabel, newly armed with her first cell phone and still figuring out how to text, was across town pulling a shift at the MagiPawn, where Norm had managed to jerry-rig a workaround to Sunder Hill's signal-jamming veil barrier.

EMMET: I'm going to start documenting it every time
these guys stalk us. Pictures. Video. Live stream.

ISABEL: don't. They'll take your phone and destr

ISABEL: destroy it

EMMET: I'd like to see them try.

ISABEL: no you wouldn't

LEOPOLD: Don't worry. No one's taking pictures.

ISABEL: we're still meeting up later right?

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LEOPOLD: For sure

ISABEL: ok. use angels flight though. I saw some
photogs by the main entrance. think they're
waiting for Leopard

EMMET: lol. best autocorrect ever

ISABEL: leopold

ISABEL: crap

LEOPOLD: Don't they have enough pictures of me
already?

ISABEL: got to go, custmr

LEOPOLD: me too

ISABEL: cusomer

EMMET: haha

EMMET: Isabel, don't ever change.

ISABEL: whatever

ISABEL: heart

ISABEL: heart

ISABEL: crap

ISABEL: how do you emoji

She ended it with an accidental selfie of the top half of her face, eyes wide, adorable. Leopold shook his head, grinning at it a little too long.

When he finally looked up, a man in a suit was staring at him, bellied up to the counter like he was about to order.

It wasn't the same suit, though. Leopold glanced across the shop—Mr. Military Hair was gone, his table empty, coffee cup abandoned. This one had floppy hair and a baggy pin-striped suit. Stooped shoulders. A doughy face so aggressively unremarkable it dipped into the Uncanny Valley.

Slouching before him was Keeves, first name unknown, the Executive's favorite flunky.

"Aren't you getting tired of this, Leopold?" Keeves's mouth curved into something like a smile, his eyes flat and cold. "I've got a car waiting out front. Why don't you come along so we can speak in private?"

Leopold topped off the pour-over he'd been making and gave the same answer he always did. "I'm working."

Keeves's eyes drifted around the shop. "Yes," he said. "You have a lot of responsibilities here, don't you?"

"I already told you guys, I have nothing to say. I'm not interested. Do I really need to keep repeating myself?"

Keeves folded his hands on the counter. "After what happened in the cemetery, I understand your hesitation."

"Hesitation?" Leopold clapped down the kettle, his voice dropping. "Your cops almost killed us."

"Yes, that was . . . unfortunate," Keeves said. "I'm afraid those officers let emotion cloud their judgment, but they've been duly censured. It won't happen again."

Leopold didn't bother responding. "Pour-over for Brooklyn!" he shouted past Keeves's head.

A girl in owlsh glasses darted up to the counter, her eyes passing suspiciously over Keeves as she took her drink. Keeves waited until she'd gone, then pulled a plain white card from his jacket and set it down in front of Leopold.

"My employer is a patient woman," he said. "But her patience has limits."

He tapped the card with a long white finger. It was blank but for a single phone number, the crisp black digits stark against fine ivory stock.

"It's a recorded line," Keeves said. "Just state your location and a

Department car will come to retrieve you. Or don't." He smiled thinly. "We'll find you."

Another hand snatched the card off the counter.

"This guy bugging you?" Emmet towered over Keeves, crowding him back a step.

"Nah. He just came by so I could tell him to go to hell in person," Leopold said. "He was about to leave."

Keeves had to crane his neck to meet Emmet's eyeline. "We'd be interested in speaking with you, as well, Mister Worthington."

"I know. The guy parked outside my house yesterday made that pretty clear."

Leopold stiffened. "Wait, what?"

"You gotta cut that shit out before my parents start asking questions. You do not want to get on my mom's bad side. If you piss her off, even magic won't save you."

Emmet stretched out his arm, dangled the card over a trash can, and looked at Leopold. "You didn't want this, did you?"

"Nope."

It fluttered down like a leaf, settling atop a mound of soiled napkins and wet espresso grounds. For the first time, Keeves's bulletproof smile faltered. His nostrils flared, making him look more constipated than usual.

"Everything good over there?" Raheem, nominally the assistant manager, called from a table near the front. He was on his fourth break of the day, drinking coffee he hadn't paid for.

Keeves lifted a to-go cup that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. "I was just complimenting your barista on this par excellence macchiato." He flashed his wooden smile, dropped a crisp twenty into the tip jar, then turned back to Leopold. "If I were you," he said, slick

and saccharine, “I wouldn’t be so cavalier about rejecting our help. There are worse people who may come knocking at your door.”

The card floated up from the trash, settled on the counter, and slid silently back to Leopold. Somehow it was still clean.

“Or worse things.”

“Stay the hell away from my friends,” Leopold said.

Keeves turned toward the door. “Good day, Mister Berry. Mister Worthington.”

“You’re not allowed to call me that,” Emmet called after him. “Only my friends get to—”

The door swung shut behind him.

“He’s full of shit,” Emmet muttered.

“Probably,” Leopold agreed.

Something made him pick the card up anyway.