

Bad Medicine

Chapter 1: The rules of magic

Ghent, Belgium, not so long ago

Eddie burst through the open door as a rush of fire filled the passageway.

Instead of squinting back into the sudden inferno, he gripped the totem around his neck and channelled more bear. His skin tingled with power. He grew ever so slightly wider, and taller, and, after a few seconds, let out a soft, deep growl. Then he charged forward and dived through the cheap drywalling into the next room.

An oversized part-man, part-bear crashing through a wall like a juggernaut, knocking the table, chairs, and wall hangings through the air like a tornado in Kansas, was not what anyone expected. Let alone Chance, the infamous Louisiana Rat.

Chance yelped, backpedalled, and cast a leaping spell. As if shot out of a cannon, he flew through the doorway and out of the room. Eddie gave chase. Endowed with the strength of a bear, he could jump further and run faster, and – sadly for Chance – that meant he barrelled through the doorway, not too far behind.

Far enough, however, that Chance could pull some knives out of his backpack and start hurling them at the chasing mage. Three knives flew towards Eddie with dangerous precision, faster and more accurate than they had any right to be. Chance had cast The Gooseknife, an old

spell, rarely used as the modern versions were quicker and required less power. Still, it was a beautiful spell, and Chance cast it well.

The deflection charm on Eddie's wrist hummed as it kicked out energy and two knives whistled past him. One knife still hit, slicing into the side of his arm – thankfully, a minor inconvenience to a man who had a hide as tough as a bear's.

Chance turned and ran again, slipping down an old, wooden, spiralling stairway lined with rich carpets. It looked like he was heading for the ground floor, fixing to make his escape into the road.

The fires behind him were beginning to die down, there were two daggers buried deep into a nearby wall, and in the room at the top of the stairway behind him, a drywall had been utterly destroyed. Thus far, Eddie mused, it was an interesting start to the morning.

He called after the fleeing wizard, "Chance, I just want to talk!"

Chance's breathless voice echoed up from the bottom of the stairwell, "That's what your mother said!"

Eddie shook his head. Everybody thought they were a fucking comedian. He bounded down the stairs in pursuit of the small, pale wizard from Louisiana, jumping four stairs at a time. Chance ran as fast as he could, but Eddie was gaining ground. The rat-like wizard dropped a smoke spell. Eddie had seen him use it before, and it was the go-to that Chance used for quick escapes. Eddie hit the small landing just above the ground floor, before the wood- and carpet-covered stairway dropped down to the rooms below. His khaki overcoat, with the bottom two buttons torn off, flew behind him as he leaped and landed, a bit like a light brown cape. He grinned at the thought – Captain Beige.

As soon as his feet hit the marble floor, Eddie carried on running, charging through the smoke Chance had dropped.

He made out the fleeing wizard faintly through the smoke. Chance was making for the front door, and then, presumably, out into the street.

Chance ran like a man who never ran. He was not athletic, or fit, or co-ordinated in any way. However, he was sneaky, and he was desperate. Also, he was a wizard with some power.

Eddie was gaining on Chance, for sure, but it looked like Eddie wouldn't be able to catch him before he got outside, and once there, escape options increased. Outside was good for Chance, but poor for anyone on his tail.

With his heart pounding, his breathing ragged and desperately sucking in buckets of air, Chance, streaming sweat, ran across the entrance hall, only feet away from the thick, dark, wooden front door.

Eddie hit the reception area and, with a single hand, ripped the fire extinguisher off an elegantly wallpapered wall. He threw it violently and powerfully at a fleeing Chance. To say that the fire extinguisher flew like a rocket would have been wrong. A rocket flies smoothly, and in a clear, beautiful trajectory. The extinguisher flew more like a plague-ridden corpse that had been flung through the air by a ballista, accelerating violently and crashing through the air with absolutely no consideration for grace or aerodynamics.

Spinning like an out-of-control, high-speed, car crash, the fire extinguisher thundered into Chance. It hit his back and broke his ribs, smashing him forward off his feet, launching him face-first into the front door, so hard that when he hit it his nose broke with a sound like a dog crunching a chicken bone.

Chance lay on the floor, suddenly unable to breathe through his nose, battling to get air into his lungs, his eyes watering, and his head ringing. It felt, for the fleeting seconds before he passed out, like everything was in pain.

Chance woke up.

He had never been a good-looking man. Pale and balding, with an ever-growing forehead and round, pouty lips, he increasingly reminded Eddie of a sex offender on a police most-wanted list. His perpetual state of sweatiness and nervous, rat-like disposition didn't help much. Now, he looked even worse than normal. With his broken nose, his eyes were ringed with a fantastic set of dark bruises, making him look like a scrawny raccoon. It was not a good look for him.

Eddie had duct-taped him to a chair. A salt ring had been set around him, and Chance's hands had been placed in a rune-covered, velvet bag. Eddie had sprinkled enchanted silver dust on the Louisiana magician, and all in all, he had bought himself a few minutes at best.

None of the measures were significant enough to stop a caster like Chance permanently, and it was only a matter of time before he would be able to cast again. Eddie had no time to waste – in all honesty, he had never thought it would go down like this.

Chance had always been a reasonable guy. Questionable, yes, but reasonable. It wasn't like most of the magical community didn't surf a fine line between what was legal and outright criminality, but there were rules you just didn't break: the rules of magic.

Eddie pulled up a chair to face the Louisiana magus. "Chance, look at me."

Chance looked up.

“What the hell happened?” Eddie asked, his hands opening in an enquiring gesture.

Chance stayed silent.

“You need to speak to me, Chance. Let’s figure this out together. Come on! You were casting unsunk magic. Big unsunk magic! Talk to me.”

Eddie was fighting against his rising frustration. “You know that casting without a sink breaks shit and if you did it enough, we would have to stop you. You knew that exactly this was going to happen, but you did it anyway. You left us no choice.”

Chance sat there, still silent.

Eddie – who was never that patient even at the best of times, and with residue of bear still running through his veins – was growing increasingly irate at Chance’s silence.

Bear began to rise, unbidden, inside of him. Not just bear – like the kind in YouTube videos eating sandwiches at park benches at camping grounds, but Bear – the spirit that underpinned who and what the animal was. The archetype of what a bear was in the human psyche – strong, vicious, unrelenting, dangerous, powerful. One of the original dark forces that went bump in the night and gave our ancestors pause to leave their campfire.

The thing that rose up inside Eddie was one of the reasons we tell our children cautionary fairy tales at bedtime. Chance looked at Eddie and felt infinitely less safe. Eddie hadn’t moved, but the space between them suddenly seemed crowded, teeming with tension and danger.

Even though Eddie’s breathing hadn’t changed, Chance felt suddenly warmed by the hot, near breath of a predator. On his intake of breath, Chance smelt something like wet fur. The damp of an ancient cave. The smell of old bones.

Eddie sat in the same chair, in the same position as a few scant seconds ago. The difference was that only an instant ago he had been a man, relaxed and in control, and now there seemed to be something else in his chair – something primal and wild, and entirely unpredictable.

Chance knew Eddie, and some others in the family too. Eddie was a tough guy, but basically a good guy. The family were like that. They did the right thing and kept their noses clean. To be fair, they helped others out if they slipped up because they knew what it meant to be a magic user – but he had never seen Eddie like this. The Bear this big and out of control. This was dangerous, and very scary.

But it still wasn't as dangerous or as scary as talking.

“Eddie,” Chance spoke through a cracked and parched throat. Nervous tension pulled his neck taut and he shifted uncomfortably in his bonds. “Eddie,” Chance began again. “You don't know what these guys are like. You don't know what you are asking me... what they'll do.”

“Well, if you tell me what it is I am asking, or maybe what these guys are like, we could do something. We're pretty tight with some powers. We could get you safe...”

“What do you mean, 'safe'? These guys own everything. They are everywhere...”

“Not in the Elven Kingdom, they aren't. If that isn't safe enough, I know some places in Mexico. Sko is the best tech mage in the world. We can keep you safe.”

“Arguably.”

“What?”

“Sko is *arguably* the best tech mage in the world.”

Eddie felt the Bear begin to subside. Chance was talking, at least; this was a good sign.

“If I come, how would you get me out? They own this city.”

“Eric Deschamps, the head of the Ghent coven. He and his team are on their way already. They’ll cover your tracks, leak your death out to the press. We’ll keep you enchanted until we drive across the border, then get a plane out of somewhere they’ll never expect. What’s more...” Eddie held up a black, passport-sized book. “I have one of these for you. They’ll never know which plane you’re on or under which name you flew, how it was paid, or which airport. These things are perfect and untraceable.”

Chance exhaled, then inhaled. He seemed to be visibly calming himself down, like some sort of breathing exercise. He spoke again. “Okay, so maybe we can do this. Maybe you can get me out of here and get me in hiding. I suppose if anyone could do it, it’s you guys. If half the stories are true, then, yeah, maybe. But what then? What happens when you get me to wherever I am going? How long do I stay there?”

Eddie held up his hands. “Calm down, Chance. We’ll figure it out, we really will. I promise. Let’s first just get you out of here with Eric’s people – then we’ll work out which plane and airport. One step at a time. We don’t need to rush; we have some time...”

A floorboard creaked outside.

“It’s them!” Chance screamed through his hoarse throat. “Get me out of this shit!” He frantically struggled against the tape, and the chair fell over, his head and neck landing outside the circle of salt.

Eddie felt a breeze whisper past him.

They had no more time.

A tall, lean gentleman stepped into the doorway. His face was all angles and bone, his jaw a lesson in acute geometry. He wore a tan leather fedora with a bright red feather in the brim. For most eccentric dressers, that would have been enough, but the mysterious stranger took it several large steps further. He wore a pair of black jeans, ripped enough to make any teenager proud, with a silk, turquoise shirt, and a pair of yellow braces. In his left hand, completing his look as a Disney villain, he held a magnificently polished walking stick. The head was a silver hand, holding a silver needle. Draped across his arm was a dark overcoat, damp from the light snow outside.

Eddie growled out words through gritted teeth: “And who the fuck are you?”

“I am the Stitchmaker... Of Ghent, obviously.” He waved his walking stick around, as though that were a show of his claim to the city. He had a genteel, accented voice. “And you are?”

Eddie opened his mouth to answer, and he heard Chance kicking and squirming behind him. He turned to see a heavy-set man – equally outrageously dressed – blinking in and out of visibility, with his hands around Chance’s neck. As Eddie turned, the Stitchmaker raised his walking stick, and brought it down swiftly towards Eddie’s head. The walking stick glowed blue, and hummed with potency.

Sometimes, sadly, life is unfair. Sometimes our best laid plans devolve into cheap halls and queues of followers handing out Kool-Aid in small South American countries. Today, life’s great lesson turned out to be that swinging a magically powered walking stick at the head of Eddie Burma was an exceptionally bad idea.

Eddie dropped to the floor as the walking stick rushed at his head, and the Stitchmaker lurched unsteadily forward as the anticipated contact didn’t come. Eddie launched himself from all fours into the body of his lean attacker, the power of the Great Bear instantly returned.

Eddie gripped the tall man's neck in his left hand, and his crotch in his right, and squeezed them both in a grip that could hoist well over a thousand pounds. He lifted, roaring, and pulped them as hard as he could.

A windpipe crushed and throat tendons ripped and tore beneath his hand. Testicles burst and Eddie leapt forward, in a movement reminiscent of a giant ape, and threw the strangely dressed gentleman – the Stitchmaker – through the door, his head and legs catching the doorframe on the way out. If he hadn't already been unconscious and soon to be dead, it would have hurt immensely.

A scream went out behind him – the gut-wrenching, soul-raking scream of someone who had just lost everything. The beefy man wearing an open leather biker's jacket and a hot pink vest charged forward, his eyes scrunched in tearful fury and his mouth snarling beneath a thick, black moustache.

As the raging, bereft man charged towards Eddie, he suddenly disappeared, and a tug of wind gusted past Eddie, who turned to track the wind and got a meaty fist slamming into his face as Moustache reappeared behind him.

Again, sadly for the henchman, Eddie was as strong as an 800-pound grizzly bear. The punch, as impressive as it was, had the effect one might expect on a grizzly bear: it simply irritated him further.

Eddie responded with a slap that hit Moustache hard across the jaw. His head snapped to the side, and he slumped to the floor. Immediately, Eddie ran over to Chance, but the small man was dying. Ragged breaths were trying to come, but they could not. His eyes bulged, imploring Eddie to give him air, get some oxygen into his lungs. But by the time Eddie had crossed the

room, it was too late. It had been too late the moment Moustache had gotten his garrotte around Chance's neck.

Chance clutched Eddie by the arm and, with his last vestige of breath, uttered his final, dying words: "Oddly... dressed..."

His head slumped onto the floor, and Chance Belaflo, the Louisiana Rat, was no more.

Eddie dialled Eric Deschamps and his clean-up crew, still not believing that he had to ask them to clean up Chance, as well as Stitchmaker and Moustache... for sure, two oddly dressed gentlemen.