

The Fool

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The badger looms over a small table, the short sleeve of her smock tugged down toward the table by a glass candy thermometer. A deck of colorful cards rest neatly stacked on its surface.

Contrary to expectations, the room is bright and spacious. No hint of incense or dark velour drapes, just a simple living room in a simple home, a simple badger and some simple cards. She can't be older than fifty, and she's of a more motherly bent than a mystical one.

More motherly than my mother, at least, I think. More earthy and far less mystical.

"Tell me about your day, Avery," she begins, and as I speak, she shuffles a worn deck of cards, nodding along with me. She draws cards yan tan tethera, and lays them face up on the table with a casual slowness that does little to distract from my words. Still, my language is stilted, and I find myself tracing the edges of the table with my gaze or watching her paws rather than making eye contact.

"Now," she says when I trail off to an uneasy silence. The badger, the table and cards, a bright room with motes in afternoon sunbeams; an image more meaningful than I anticipated. And me — dingy clothes draped over a broad frame I never wanted — out of place. "Here are three cards. Look, and tell me the first thing you notice."

"Notice?" I ask. I sound dubious even to myself.

"Notice," she confirms. "What do you see? When you look at the cards, what jumps out at you? Colors, motions, angles and lines. What do you see?"

I stare at the badger. She stares back, then lets out a kindly laugh and gestures down at the cards.

Three cards, laid out in a line. I move my stare to those, more bewildered than anything, trying to pick out singular things. “From each of them? One at a time?”

She shrugs, smiling not unkindly.

Odd, I think. How such a small task could feel overwhelming.

I puff out a breath of air, whiskers bristling, and tap at the first card. “Well, this one’s upside down, for starters. The, uh... Page of Wands.” Digging through memories, I try, “A page is like a squire or something, right? Someone who helps a knight?”

“Yes, a young person, someone in training.” She grins and nods down to the remaining stack of cards. “There are knights in the deck, too, but that’s for another time.”

Whiskers still canted forward, I nod and hesitate for a moment. “So, what does it being upside down mean?”

“You tell me.”

I roll my eyes. Still, she sounds kind rather than petulant or snide, so I think about upside-down cards. Upside-down figures, upside-down and tipped over, upset in the literal sense of the word. Upside-down meanings. Meanings inverted, reversed, turned over.

“I think I see.” I intend it as the beginning of a sentence, but seeing the badger’s smile widen, I leave it at that. I shut out the other cards, focus on the Page. “In training, hmm? They looks like they’re investigating or contemplating. The, uh... I guess the wand. The wand is the only thing growing, the only thing with green in the entire scene.”

“Learning about life. Investigating growth.” The badger nods, but neither confirming nor sage. Simply agreeing. “But reversed.”

“Not learning?” At this, I sense her expression close down. It’s not a visible thing; it’s a sensation of her movement of thought being put on hold. “Not... not doing anything with learning, perhaps?”

The badger nods. I can see the clip on her thermometer holding it to the over-washed fabric, see beads of sugar still clinging to glass, bobbing with her move-

ments. “Wands are for beginnings, for doing. Or perhaps activating is better.” She sets a paw next to the card. “This Page — a bear, maybe? I’ve never figured that out — is learning, but not moving, not beginning. There is knowledge, but no decision.”

“Activation energy!” I blurt, and, seeing questions in her eyes, continue. “Like in chemistry. It’s dorky, but there has to be enough energy for an electron to jump from one sphere to the next; it just sits there otherwise. It needs the proper amount of activation energy to get going.”

Questions turn to understanding, but her gaze stays locked on mine, waiting.

“I don’t have the energy.”

“Perhaps not. Or perhaps you do, but you’re — you or something within you — is not letting it reach the activation. The energy may be there, but blocked.”

I have to restrain myself from a snide smile. A reaction to my mom’s mysticism, maybe. To crystals and blocked energy. In the badger, though, I sense only earnestness. “Energy as in will? Purpose?”

She shrugs. My choice, apparently.

“Everything’s yellow in the card—”

“Energetic color, yellow.”

“—yellow except for the black of the salamanders on their coat-thing.”

She nods, murmurs down to the card, “His creations, perhaps. How many full ones do you see?”

I lean closer, nudging glasses further up my blunt snout. “Two, maybe three out of a dozen or so.”

“If the card were upright, those other ones would be creations yet to happen.” Her voice carries knowledge, and more authority than she’s shown yet. “Reversed, that becomes flipped around. It could be creations abandoned, or it could be things you’re afraid to start.

“These cards named after people or titles — the page, the knight, the king, the queen — they’re sometimes about people. Maybe this card’s about you. Or they all could be. Maybe—”

I smirk, nod my head toward the second card. “So I’m the fool?”

“Maybe they’re just facets of yourself.” She finishes, returning my smirk.

Thus chastened, I look at the second card. “Okay, well, there’s a dog, one of those breeds with short fur, though it doesn’t look like any of the dogs I’ve met. He’s—” I catch myself, seeing androgyny in the dog’s features and tamping down the yearning for my own. “They’re stepping toward the edge of a cliff, with a little spirit thing dancing at their feet. They have one of those sticks with a bag tied to the end, but their tunic thing is what has me thinking. It’s all growing things.” I lean in closer and add, “And little splashes of water. Green and blue with flowers on navy.”

We sit in silence for a moment while I think about the card more.

“There’s a good balance of colors, come to think of it. More than the Page, at least. Blue and green and red and yellow.” I hesitate, staring at the lean canine muzzle: the balance continues there, masculine and feminine, hard and soft, focused and uncaring. I say nothing, and wonder why.

The older woman nods slowly. “It’s a fancy shirt, no denying. It’d look good on you.”

I laugh, to which she looks up, smiling. “Seriously. It’s a good mix. You’re a good mix, too. But you wear all drab colors. Why’s that?”

There’s a sudden flush to my cheeks, at my appearance being so deliberately addressed. I lay my ears back. A blush along with the first hints of annoyance. These are soon replaced with simple embarrassment. “I don’t want to— I mean, I don’t think I’d look good in bright colors or fancy clothes.”

“I think you would.” She hastens to continue, speaking over my mounting disagreements, “I think you’d look good, if you dressed how you wanted. Don’t you?”

I frown at her. She continues, “You didn’t say you don’t want to dress in bright colors and fancy clothes. You started to say you didn’t want to do something else.”

I held my breath. Anger is the wrong word for what I feel. Frustration? Humiliation, perhaps. Am I so transparent?

“I don’t want to,” I begin in a rush of pent-up breath, feeling that struggle blown out with it. My shoulders sag, and I complete the statement more slowly. “I don’t want to be seen like that.”

“The fool, here, they’re everything. They’re the beginning of all things, and they’ve already got all of the endings inside themselves. At the beginning of all journeys, there’s the fool: taking that first step is a fool’s gamble, after all.” She

pauses, looking at me earnestly, intently. “You caught yourself earlier, you said ‘he’ and then switched to ‘they’.”

I hunch down into my slouched shoulders, muzzle dipping as I struggle for words. “They looked— I mean, It’s on my mind, I guess.”

“I’ll come clean,” she admits after a pause, dark paws fiddling with the remainder of the deck, straightening cards. “Your mom told me you were coming, so I know that much. Even if she hadn’t, though, it’s written on your face. I mean this in the best possible way, Avery, but you don’t make a very good man.”

I close my eyes. I shut out the cards, the motherly badger. Motherly in the sense of speaking truths, in the sense of knowing children, in having seen them grow up. Motherly in lived experience. Experience lived in the moment, not in some dream world of crystals and chakras. *More motherly than my mom*, I think.

When I open my eyes, her gaze has softened.

“Why three cards?” I ask, deflecting.

“Past, present, and future.” She laughs.

I nod, then sit up a little straighter, murmuring, “So it’s more that past me that didn’t have the activation energy?”

“Or didn’t want to use it, yes.”

“That makes more sense, then.”

“How so?”

I shrug, continuing, “If I’m at the beginning of something now, it’s because of how much time I spent fretting — and not starting — before.”

She nods. “And are you at the beginning of something now?”

“I think so.” I sound dubious, even to myself.

“Why now?”

“College,” I say.

“Away from home?”

“Mmhm.”

She nods again. “It’s a little freeing, isn’t it? Being away from parents. So you, like the Page of Wands, have been investigating, leaving all that energy pent up inside. And now you’re ready to... to what? Take that step?”

I catch myself fiddling with the hem of my shirt. It's an olive color, faded further into drabness by countless washings, no fancy tunic; even her washed-out smock is brighter than my shirt. It doesn't go with my fur. Nor do the well-worn khakis. A darker animal dressed in those would look rough and tumble, ready for a hike. A mountain lion looks like a mess of dirty laundry.

I look up from my dull self to the table once more, speaking to the cards. "I have an appointment to start talking about it — talking about gender — with a counselor."

"Congratulations," the badger says, smiling. And I realize she doesn't need to say anymore. I realize *that's* what I needed from my mom. I realize that's probably why my mom sent me here. I realize that there's probably more to my mom than I gave her credit for.

I realize I've stopped thinking of this — the tarot card reading — as something mystical.

I speak up, "The third card, then."

The badger returns her gaze to the table.

"It feels impenetrable to me."

She laughs and shakes her head. "It's not a book. You're not writing a report on its deeper meanings. You're picking up on some of those meanings, but you don't have to do it right away or all the time. Or at all, for that matter." Still grinning, guides my attention back down to the card with a gesture, badger and cougar looming over the table. "Just tell me what you see."

Abashed, I return her smile as best I can. "Alright. It's a... well, I want to say a woman and a child being ferried across a lake or something, but the boat they're in has six swords in it. They're upright, like they've been stabbed through the bottom of the boat."

"Stabbed? Like they're going through the wood?"

"Yeah."

"Is water coming up around them?"

I look harder. The bottom of the boat is pitch dark. "I can't tell, but no one seems in a rush to get them out, anyway."

This gets a chuckle. “No, no they don’t. Maybe they’re plugging the holes in the boat. Maybe it’s best to leave them in.”

Nodding, I keep looking at the card. There are lines to draw the attention. The swords, the boat, the pole of the oarsman, the horizon, the water. . . the water. “The front of the boat, where the swords are, isn’t sinking. The people still weigh something, though. Look, the back of the boat’s low in the water.”

She nods, “Maybe they—”

“Like they don’t weigh anything,” I add hastily, cutting her short.

“—don’t weigh anything, yes.”

I lay my ears back and grin, “Sorry, didn’t mean to trample.”

She returns my grin, pats my tan paw in her black one. “You’re excited. It’s really nice to see.”

“So why swords?”

“I don’t know. What do swords do?”

I laugh. “Cut and stab. Kill people. Stuff like that.”

“Fair enough,” she chuckles. “Why would one do that?”

Her words stop me short. “To. . . to kill,” I begin. “But that’s what I just said. Are you asking me why people kill each other?”

She nods.

“To get something,” I murmur, fumbling for words. “To gain something. To get what one wants, or needs.”

“So, since this is the Tarot and there’s bound to be a lot going on here, can we just say the swords are a tool?”

“Well, I’m not about to hack and slash my way to get what I want.”

She leans in close to me, stage-whispering, “I’ll let you in on a secret. None of the cards in the swords suit — in any suits — show blood. Death, yes. Change, definitely. But no blood. It’s hardly hacking and slashing.”

“But they’re still—”

She holds up a paw, “They’re still swords, but they’re tools. Swords show work. Strife, sometimes, sure; striving toward a goal. But what they is show work. These swords aren’t working right now, they’re just standing there. So where is the striving?”

“Behind them?” I ask. “They figures are all facing away from something.”

“Or toward something.”

“So,” I say hesitantly. “I’m going to go on a journey?”

She laughs, “Can you guess what my next question would be?”

I shake my head.

“My next question would be: are you? And then you sit and think about it for a moment.”

“I sit and think a moment, then say: no, of course not, it’s about the work of going through something. The journey is the work.” I hesitate, then nod and continue, more sure of myself. “Because I’m here at the beginning. I’m the fool, ready to take the step, and then I just have to take the next and keep going.”

She smiles and urges me on with a little gesture of her paw.

“So if I was stalling by investigating every possibility, never starting,” I say, nodding back to the first card, the Page of Wands. “Then I guess what I’m focused on is taking that first step, and after that, taking the next.”

“You’re doing my job for me,” the badger laughs.

My smile falters. “Fair enough, but what do I do?”

“That’s advice, kid.” That soft smile, again. She flips the cards over, one by one, and continues, “Advice comes from people, not from cards. And if I’m going to give you advice, you’re going to need to tell me what’s actually going on.”

She leans forward, folding her arms on the table, and looks past the cards and to me.

So I tell her. I tell her all that stuff from childhood, all those stupid things — the dress-up, the questions, the uncomfortable guidance, the frustration at forced roles. I tell her all those things that meant nothing, may still mean nothing, and yet add up to a picture of a different me than who I am now. A different shape, a different body, different face and voice and name.

I speak more freely than at the beginning of the session.

I tell her about my mom, about telling her bits and pieces of my feelings, and her insistence at first that it was just a blockage of energies, and then her reluctant acceptance. I tell her about my dad, and how terrified I am of him and his iron grip on masculinity. I tell her about leaving for school and deciding that becoming my

own self mattered more than their financial assistance and what belongingness they could offer.

“Your mom sent you to me,” she states again, after a comfortable silence. “Did you tell her any of this?”

I shake my head. “She knows just that I’m, er—”

“That you’re transgender?” she finishes for me. “Would that be fair to say?”

“I . . . yes, that’s fair.”

“But you don’t want to say it?” she asks, kind eyes on my own. “You don’t have to, can just say yes or no.”

“No. I mean, I don’t want to say it, but I should. Maybe that’s part of the first step.” I hesitate for a second, ears flat and eyes averted, before murmuring, “She just knows that I’m trans.”

The badger nods, unclipping the thermometer from her smock and turning it over in her fingers. “Alright. And she sent you to me for advice? She told me to talk to you, mentioned vague facts.”

“Yeah, she told me to go to you to work on things.” I give a wry smile and add, “Her words, not mine.”

She laughs and sits back in her chair, slouching and twirling that thermometer. “Your mom is nuts,” she says. “I mean that in the kindest way, of course: I love her dearly. Have since school. I suspect she wishes the world worked differently for her. And for you, for that matter.”

The unabashed laugh and words of affection are contagious and have me grinning. “Yeah, she’s nuts,” I echo. “Still, can’t say I’m upset with what I got out of this.”

“The cards, you mean?”

“Yeah. I was expecting fortunes, I got—”

“You got what you had when you came in the door,” she asserts. “And a chance to talk it through. Now, you want my advice?”

“Yeah. I want to know what you think I should do next.”

“About which bit?”

“Coming out, I suppose.” I scuff at the back of my neck, paw feeling clumsy. “Maybe starting transition.”

“Well, it sounds like you’re on your way to both, right?” She clips the thermometer back to her smock and straightens the remainder of the tarot deck in deft paws. “You’ve told your mom, and you have that appointment, right?”

I nod, brushing fingertips over the overturned cards left on the table. It felt like we were both acknowledging their presence in our own ways. “But I still haven’t told dad, and I’m still freaked out what the counselor will say.”

“Anxiety, then?” she offers, waving a paw above the cards. “A bit of the Page of Wands still left over?”

I nod again, silent.

“Do you want to dig at that?”

“Mmhm. Do you have any thoughts on how to get past that?” She shuffles the cards and opens her mouth to speak, but I interrupt, “Wait, don’t tell me. Now you’ll ask if *I* have any thoughts on how to get past that.”

Her laugh is kind and her fingers sure as she slips another card from the top of the deck, laying it flat on top of the first three.

The image shocks me enough to get me to sit up straight, as if by gaining some distance from the card itself I could escape it. “What the hell?”

“The ten of swords,” she says, voice level, conversational.

I count the swords sticking out of the anonymous figure’s back. Ten. A feline laid flat on his front, a dark sky, a calm shore, and ten swords buried in his back, each as high as the cat himself.

I clear my throat and manage, “I thought you said there wasn’t any bloodshed in the swords.”

“Do you see blood?”

Despite everything urging me not to do so, I lean in close and inspect the figure. “No,” I admit. “Though his cloak is red.”

“The color of passion. And yellow, the color of action.”

“The dawn’s yellow, too,” I offer. I sound dubious, even to myself.

“Dawn, then?” The older woman looks down at the card curiously. “Dawn or sunset?”

I frown and shake my head. “Dawn, I think. It always feels like dawn chases the night, but sunset gives in to it.”

“Poetic,” she says, and her smile is earnest.

I count the swords again. “One in his ear, one in his neck. Three or four in his back.” I stifle a giggle and murmur, “That’s a lot of swords.”

Her eyes brighten. “Isn’t it? Overkill, in the truest sense of the word. Like an overreaction.”

A thought occurs to me, and I lean in over the table. “Staring at the dawn, killed ten times over. Look, the water’s even clear, like the—” I lift the last card up to peek, and continue, “Like the six. Like me staring at coming out and poking a billion holes in the idea without ever taking the step.”

Her eyes stay bright. “Maybe it’s an alternative to the six, then. Too much emotion, not enough action. Passion and action pinned down, rather than the work of the six. You could keep taking those steps, or you could keep killing yourself with indecision.”

I nod eagerly and ask on a whim, “What’s it like reversed?”

She gives a little shrug and turns the card over for me to see. “The swords fall out — that’s a relief — but he’s still dead, isn’t he? Resigned to his place on the shore.”

“Sure enough,” I laugh. “Wait, ‘he’?”

“You said it first,” she says playfully. “Seriously, though, most of the figures are ambiguous. Or androgynous, I think. What you read into them can mean something if you let it.”

“It could be nothing,” I mumble. “Or it could be the old me. The ‘he’.”

She shrugs. My choice, apparently.

A chime interrupts us, me staring at the card and her smiling at me. A clock tolling slow hours. I check my watch to confirm it. Five.

“Oh jeez, I’m sorry. It’s way later than I thought.”

She laughs, “Conversations go where they will. There’s no rush. I can pull together dinner for two if you want to stay.” She taps at the thermometer with a grin, “I even made marshmallows, though they’ll be sticky still.”

“No, it’s alright. Thank you. I’m getting pretty tired, as it is.” I shrug, realizing just how true that statement is. “This took a lot out of me.”

“It does that. It’s a wonder we need exercise at all, when just thinking about things wears us out.”

I laugh with her, nodding.

“Still,” she continues. “You’re in town, now. Don’t be afraid to stop by, say hi. There’s lots more we can talk about, cards or no. Don’t wait for your mom to push you my way.”

I lever myself up from the chair, swishing ropy tail once or twice to make sure it hasn’t fallen asleep, and offer my paw to the badger. “I won’t. I know she thinks we’ll work on things, but I just want to talk. This was more than I expected. I didn’t know I needed—”

She bypasses my offered hand and gives me a firm hug around the middle. Startled, I hold still. She smells of sweets. Sweets and baking.

I feel unfortunately tall. A rectangle. A lummo. A big, dumb cat.

I also feel understood, appreciated. Welcomed. I return the hug carefully. Then, with her farewell in my ears, take that first step out into the evening air.

And then the next.