

Avery and the Bakery

By: Indigo Rho

As Avery passed by the old standing mirror in his office, he noticed that a single button of his pastel pink shirt had come undone. It was the usual suspect, the button directly over his navel. The large elk stopped and rebuttoned it. He felt his shirt stretch tightly over his belly as he did.

He'd always been a bit on the stocky side, but didn't mind. He ate properly and found the time for exercise. Walking all over Echo making house calls helped. As a doctor, the only advice he'd give himself was to cut back on the sweets, at least enough to avoid outgrowing his shirt.

A quick rapping at the door drew Avery away from his reflection. A light brown donkey leaned in. "There's a miner here to see you, Doctor. It's Nik."

"Thank you, Duncan," Avery told his assistant. "Send him in." Since Nik had come by on his own, Avery assumed there hadn't been an accident at the mine. Then again, the miners could often be stubborn when it came to injuries. He'd seen them carried into his office wearing blood-soaked clothes and swearing all they needed was a stiff drink.

A doughy globe of a belly entered the office well before the thick badger it belonged to. Nik abruptly stopped halfway through the door frame. His hips brushed against the wood. His eyes shot open as he realized he was stuck. He turned his head in shame and pushed his way in, grunting.

Nik had never been a small man. He was as wide and sturdy as a bear, with a soft belly and plenty of muscle. It only took a glance for Avery to tell the badger had gotten thicker recently. A *lot* thicker. His shirt no longer covered his round gut, which jiggled considerably. His muscular arms had softened slightly. His belt was on its final notch yet it still dug into his waist, no longer necessary. Appearances aside, the badger had never gotten stuck in the doorway to his office.

Avery kept his observations about Nik's weight private. They could wait till later, if at all. "What can I do for you, Nik?"

"My ankle needs to be looked at," Nik answered, brusquely. "And a few small scratches, perhaps."

"Alright. Have a seat and I'll see what I can do." Avery gestured

towards a wooden chair.

Nik sized up the chair before carefully lowering himself onto it. It creaked plenty beneath his bulk, prompting him to divert his gaze once more.

Avery knelt to examine Nik's ankle. He gently ran his hoof over the ankle while watching Nik's reaction. The badger grimaced some, but didn't cry out. "Okay. It's swollen. Likely sprained. You'll need to keep off it for at least a couple of days."

A grave look came upon Nik's face. "I am needed."

"Better to miss two days than two weeks or two months," Avery said. Nik nodded reluctantly. "Now what about those scratches you mentioned?"

Nik pulled up his pant leg to reveal a few shallow scrapes on his knee. He also had a few on both paws. Thankfully the scratches were shallow, and Avery easily cleaned the dirt out of them.

"So, Nik, what did you do to rough yourself up on this fine day?"

"It was nothing," Nik said, sternly.

"You don't get a sprained ankle doing nothing." Nik looked away from him. "Whatever it is, I won't judge you for it. Or share it with others, if that's what worries you. It's important I know the details so that I don't overlook any potential injuries you're not feeling or seeing yet."

Nik let out a long, belly-jiggling sigh. "I...I got stuck." He spoke as if admitting his deepest secret, shame plain on his broad face. "It was a narrow passage, but I'd fit through every time before. But not this time." His ears flattened. "I fell over when I freed myself and hurt my ankle then."

Avery suddenly understood the shock Nik had expressed when he'd become stuck in the office door. He must have feared he'd be going through the ordeal all over again. "As long as you didn't hit your head during any of that, you should just have the ankle to worry about." He looked at how far the large badger's middle pushed onto his lap. "Nik, have you been any less active than usual?"

Nik scoffed. "I've been working as hard as ever."

"Has your diet changed at all?"

"No." His voice lacked the same conviction as before.

"Are you sure? Not even a little?"

"I visit the new bakery now and then, but so does everyone else." Nik

looked away. While the badger's weight hadn't been mentioned outright, he saw where Avery's questions were leading.

Avery hadn't heard about any new bakeries opening in Echo. "Well, Nik, you appear to have put on some weight." He spoke as diplomatically as possible. "I'd hazard to guess that's why you've started getting stuck in places you fit through fine before."

Nik raised a thick paw to his brow to cover his eyes as he fought to maintain his composure. "That is...true."

"There's no shame in gaining a little weight now and then. It happens to the best of us." Avery smiled and tapped his middle with two fingers. The last thing he wanted to do was shame Nik. "All the same, I'd recommend keeping a closer eye on how much you eat. Don't starve yourself, but maybe you should visit that bakery less. Do that, and you'll shed those pounds soon enough. But until then, be careful about what you're squeezing into."

Nik blushed and nodded. "I will try," he said. "Thank you." The chair groaned loudly once more as the badger lifted himself off it. He walked up to the door, stopped, and then shuffled through sideways, his belly and rump still brushing opposite sides of the door frame.

Two hours passed quietly, with Avery having little to do aside from tidy up his office and enjoy a modest lunch. The familiar rapping at his door brought Avery to attention.

"Deputy Bronson here to see you," Duncan declared.

A river otter waddled into the office. His round belly bounced ahead of him while his thick tail swung behind him. The buttons of his shirt were strained tighter than Avery's, and his open vest seemed too small. He wore a bandana *just* long enough to tie around his pudgy neck. His round cheeks wobbled gently and he had a wide smile on his face. "Afternoon, Doc!"

Avery took a moment to speak. "Afternoon, Todd." Nik had been a surprise, but Todd shocked him. The otter had been fit a mere two weeks before when he'd seen him last. Now he was fatter than the doctor. He considered and swiftly dismissed the possibility Todd was wearing thick layers of clothing, or that he was suffering a strange allergic reaction. No, the otter was simply fat. How someone could gain so much weight in so little time confounded Avery. "How can I be of service?" he asked, trying to hide his astonishment.

“Well, uh, William sent me, actually,” Todd said, referring to the Sheriff. “He ordered me to head on down so you could figure out what’s wrong with me.” He frowned. “I tried to tell him I’m fine, but he poked my middle so hard I nearly toppled right over and said he’d roll me over himself if I didn’t go.”

Avery nodded along, still taking in how fat the otter had grown. “Is there anything in particular that’s been bothering you?”

Todd rested his chubby chin on his fist, deep in thought. “Well, I guess I *have* been feeling a tad bit sluggish lately. None of my patrols have changed, but they all take longer to finish and leave me tuckered out.” He shook his head. “I’ve been napping more, too.”

Low energy was a symptom of many things, but Avery couldn’t get Todd’s gains out of his head. Going from being athletic to being doughy could certainly be a cause. Either that or the weight was another symptom. He’d have to learn more about the otter’s situation, and he couldn’t exactly tip-toe around their heft. “Alright. So, Todd, I see you’ve gained weight recently.”

Todd looked stunned. “Is it really that noticeable?”

The reaction baffled Avery. Nik’s gains had been more subtle, and the badger had gotten stuck in a doorway. “I’ve got a, hmm, doctor’s eye for changes like that in my patients.”

Todd’s frown shifted to a grin and he nodded. “Of course! Just like William’s got that detective’s eye from working in the big city for so long. Must be why he noticed it, too.”

“Certainly. Have you taken any time off work or changed your eating habits recently?” Avery asked.

“Nope. William’s got me runnin’ around more than ever. And I do plenty of chores around the house. I’d never slack on those, even though they sometimes leave me huffin’ and puffin’ after.” It didn’t take much for Avery to imagine the otter’s belly bouncing up and down as he tried to keep up with tasks that’d been a breeze before he’d plumped up. “I *have* started grabbing breakfast at that fancy new bakery. Gotta start the day off right, after all!”

Avery perked up. Nik had admitted to frequenting the new bakery as well. It could’ve been a coincidence, but it was the only common connection

between their mysterious gains. “A new bakery? Mind telling me a bit more about it?”

“It’d be a pleasure! Mr. St. James runs the place. He’s brand new to town but treats everyone like they’ve been regulars for years. Makes the most delicious pies I’ve ever tasted, and by golly, I’ve tasted quite a few!” Todd said, cheerfully.

Avery nodded while staring at Todd’s belly. “I can believe that. Pie may not be the healthiest breakfast, though.”

“There’s more than just pie. There’s also bread and cookies and cakes and donuts and a lot of pastries with fancy names I’ve never heard of, but they all taste so great!” Todd’s gaze wandered, the otter lost in thoughts of baked goods. “I lose track of time when I’m there, but it’s worth it.”

“So what do *you* order when you’re there, Todd?”

“A slice of pie, of course. Sometimes two. Mr. St. James is always happy to leave an extra slice on my table if he doesn’t think it’s good enough to sell. Which is peculiar, because I don’t think he’s ever baked a foul thing in his life!” Todd’s middle jiggled when he laughed. “Oh, and a few brownies. Then a plate of cookies—he makes all sorts. Can’t forget the cake!”

“But what does your usual breakfast order look like?” Avery asked.

Todd blinked at him in silence, before repeating the exact same list. “I don’t think I’ve been eating that much. I don’t *feel* like I have, at least. Though sometimes I’ll drop by in the afternoon while on patrol to grab a quick snack.”

Avery would’ve thought Todd was exaggerating if he hadn’t seen the results on the otter’s figure. He no longer had any doubts as to what had caused the deputy to balloon in size. What he didn’t know was *why* Todd would suddenly start glutting to such an extreme extent. He was no stranger to indulging in a good meal, but Todd sounded like he’d been cramming pastries into his belly day in and day out. He wondered if Nik had adopted similar eating habits.

Still, Avery made sure to exhaust all other possibilities. He gave Todd a check-up and asked a few more questions. All answers led back to the bakery and the mysterious Mr. St. James. Every time Todd spoke of the bakery, he admitted to eating more, until it seemed as if he cleared a whole

table of desserts every morning for breakfast.

“Todd, I’m of the opinion that *this*—” he gently tapped Todd’s belly with a hoof, prompting him to sheepishly squeak “—is the reason you’ve been feeling tired lately. You’re expending more energy carrying around the extra weight, which is especially noticeable for someone like you who’s always on his feet. My advice is to avoid overexerting yourself, try not to work so many long nights, and cut down on the bakery trips.”

Todd frowned. “But Doc, the bakery’s the highlight of my day.”

“I’m sure it’s a fantastic place, but all those pastries are making you gain weight. You either need to lose the weight, or try to maintain your weight while your body adjusts to your new size.” Avery wasn’t sure the otter could shed his excess heft. He might only slim down to being chubby, his abs forever buried beneath pie pudge. “At the very least, don’t get fatter.”

“I’ll try. I still don’t feel as big as everyone says I am, though. I know I’m way smaller than the Byrnes boy. That fox is wider than a barrel, and the fancy stoat he’s been hanging out with ain’t much thinner.” Todd’s ears flushed red. “They’re at the bakery every morning, just like me.”

The last time Avery had seen either of the pair, they’d been lean. But so had Todd. Avery didn’t believe Todd had any reason to lie about the fox and stoat getting fat; he honestly didn’t believe Todd knew how to lie well, to begin with. If the bakery had fattened up four customers, then surely more had gained weight without him knowing. He needed to look into the matter personally. Otherwise, he’d have to get the door to his office widened and buy a sturdier chair.

“Well, Todd, we all handle food in different ways. Though where is this new bakery?” Avery asked.

Todd lit up and gladly gave the doctor directions. After thanking him, Avery sent the otter on his way, watching him waddle off.

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Avery closed his office for the day without seeing any other unexpectedly hefty patients, much to his relief. He followed the directions Todd had given him, intent on investigating the bakery. The city had had an odd feel to it the

last few weeks, though Avery couldn't quite explain it. Fewer people had come to him with injuries sustained in drunken fights and nasty quarrels. It was like something had calmed the city down. Though a good thing overall, the sudden nature of it made Avery uneasy.

He kept a close eye on the people he passed in the street on the way to the bakery. More people seemed to be chubby than he remembered. Their clothing looked tighter and ill-fitting. Maybe Nik and Todd had merely made him more acutely aware of people's weight.

Despite all the praise Avery had heard, the exterior of the bakery didn't stand out much. The sign above was new, but the rest of the place blended in with all the other wooden buildings on the street. Yet his gaze had been drawn to it well before he'd spotted the sign or smelled the pleasant aroma drifting from it.

The front door swung open. A platinum fox lumbered out, his massive belly preceding him by a good three feet at least. Every button of his white shirt had popped off, and his suspenders hung behind him. He struggled to carry his engorged gut, but a broad euphoric grin spread across his face rather than a frustrated scowl. He appeared high on something.

Avery let the dazed fox waddle past him and returned his gaze to the bakery entrance. He was having second thoughts. But something about the bakery was enticing people to gorge to an absurd degree, and he needed to figure out what.

The inside of the bakery was as plain as the outside. There were a few tables with stools, though the place was void of customers. No one was at the counter, either, which had a glass display case showcasing a variety of cakes and pastries.

The smell of the place held a grip on Avery's attention. It changed with every sniff, switching between hints of chocolate, vanilla, lemon, and berries, amongst other things. The aroma alone conjured images of desserts in Avery's head. His stomach rumbled faintly.

"Welcome to my humble bakery!"

Avery jolted at the voice, which echoed all around him. He looked around, and found the source directly behind him.

A short, white goat stood at attention. He had red eyes behind a round pair of glasses. He was dressed in black pants and a black shirt, with a red

apron on top. He was plump, his belly as round as a globe.

The goat's smile widened. "You must be Doctor Avery. My customers have told me so much about you. Rest assured, every word has been in praise. It's a rare gift to find a doctor with such impeccable bedside manner."

The praise was a nice surprise. "I'm glad to hear it. My patients have been recommending your fine establishment lately, so I thought I'd finally take a look. It's good to meet you, Mr. St. James." Avery felt it best to avoid commenting on the apparently fattening effects the bakery had had.

"No need to be so formal, Avery. You can call me Levi." The goat pulled a small plate from behind his back. "Would you like a fresh slice of blueberry pie? On the house, of course."

Avery couldn't believe he hadn't noticed the pie before. He thought of taking his own advice to Todd and turning the offer down, but he knew he wouldn't be able to understand the otter's gluttony if he never had a bite to eat himself. Experiencing the taste might help him figure out how to coax his patients away from the bakery.

"I'd be glad to. Thank you."

Levi led Avery to a table and sat the plate down in front of him. Avery took the tip off the slice with his fork. "So, Levi, what brought you to Echo." He scooped the first bite of pie into his mouth and paused. Even his wildest expectations hadn't prepared him for how perfect the pie tasted. He couldn't compare it to any other dessert he'd had before. He went for a second bite the moment he'd finished the first.

"I just sort of felt drawn to Echo, I guess. I wanted to bring good desserts to the desert." He let out a short laugh. "It's a lovely little city, but I felt it needed a tasty distraction."

Avery couldn't deny that. Until recently, there'd always been a rough energy to the city, like a dam about to burst. The miners were dissatisfied, there'd been occasional riots, and a whole slew of stranger happenings. Then again, a bunch of citizens swiftly packing on the pounds wasn't any less odd, just more tame in comparison.

"I hope Echo treats you well," Avery said, as he went for another slice. His fork scraped the plate, and he realized it was already empty. He must have been hungrier than he thought. If the rest of the bakery's offerings

were as good as the blueberry pie, then he could see why the regulars would gain weight. Todd's gains still felt extreme, though. Not to mention the platinum fox he'd seen earlier, who looked like he'd cleared the bakery's entire stock in one sitting.

"It already is. Now, you must try the huckleberry pie," Levi said, retrieving a new plate from seemingly nowhere and placing it atop the old.

"I should really be careful about what I eat," Avery said. Perhaps all the free samplers were causing the weight gain. Todd had mentioned getting free desserts, after all. An innocent desire to please others and build a customer base leading to heavy consequences.

"But it's just one little slice, Avery. Nothing you can't handle." Levi nudged the plate closer.

The wonderful smell eased Avery's concerns, while the incredible taste brushed them away completely. He was still contemplating the taste when his fork struck an empty plate yet again. He'd finished the slice without realizing it. And another plate now sat beside it, with a fresh slice of pie. He didn't remember asking for more, or Levi offering it for that matter, but he found it impossible to resist. A third slice wouldn't hurt.

The soothing pie made Avery more talkative. "Levi, I couldn't help but notice that a couple of my patients have gained weight since they became regulars here."

Levi smiled as if he'd just been complimented. "I can't deny there are some side effects to my baking, which I'm clearly not immune to." The goat patted his belly. "But I feel the happiness my baking brings is worth the pounds that come with it."

With the memory of Todd's gains fresh in his mind, Avery couldn't agree with the goat. He politely refused to comment, though.

As soon as Avery finished the third slice, Levi held out a plate filled with donuts. "You *must* sample my donuts. I have all the classics, baked fresh to order daily."

Avery hadn't seen the goat leave to grab more desserts. His confusion was buried in the back of his mind as he took in their smell. Eating too many treats wasn't healthy. But how much had he even eaten already? He could only remember eating one slice of pie, but he couldn't remember if it'd been blueberry or huckleberry. The taste of both lingered on his tongue. As his

thoughts jumbled, he decided a single donut would be fine.

The first vanished into Avery's mouth in a few bites. His hoof reached for another without thinking. By the time he finished registering how incredible the first donut had been, he'd obliviously gobbled up half a dozen. Tastes blurred together, and he began to lose track of how much he'd eaten. But even as he struggled to figure it out, he continued eating.

Levi's grin widened as he watched Avery wipe out the donuts one by one. "Good, Avery, good. You deserve to relax and indulge for once, for all the hard work you do. You're clearly no stranger to a good meal. Your patients will appreciate having a doctor as rotund as they are. And you'll be able to better understand their struggles once you're carrying around as much weight as they are. So eat, Avery. Eat until you're more belly than buck."

The devilish joy in the goat's voice went right over Avery's head. He found himself unable to think of anything but the food in front of him. All he'd eaten before and all he'd eat after never crossed his mind. His thoughts were stuck in a loop. First, the surprise of a new dessert on the plate. Then the tempting smell that made his stomach growl. Finally, the unbeatable taste. And then he was right back where he began, with a new dessert to scarf down. He was going in circles, and his middle was fast becoming one.

Levi produced plates of every dessert imaginable, each more fattening and delicious than the one before. Avery plowed through them, equally addicted to it all. His soft middle swelled from the endless feast. Gaps formed between the strained buttons of his shirt, exposing tufts of brown fur beneath. His belt creaked under his growing underhang. Avery remained oblivious to the tightness of his clothing.

At last, a button flew off, then another, and another. His gut ballooned out through the opening in his shirt. The buckle of his belt snapped off seconds later. Unrestrained and filling with desserts, his belly steadily spread out over his lap.

No amount of doubt or concern could breach the euphoric daze Avery had tumbled into. The entire bakery could've collapsed around him, and he'd have still only thought about the next slice of pie or brownie. He forgot the very reason he'd visited the bakery, or that anything existed beyond it. His world was reduced to the plate before him.

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The wooden floorboards of Avery's office groaned as the huge elk lumbered around. His shirt—only a couple of weeks old—clung around his jiggly gut, highlighting the immense curve of it. New clothes never seemed to last anymore, always shrinking when he washed them or suddenly ripping down the seams after meals. He didn't mind that being the only concern in his life, though.

A shelf shook as his belly bumped into it. He held his breath, waiting for the all-too-familiar clatter or crash, but he heard nothing. He was getting better about remaining aware of his own significant girth, and didn't bump into things or people nearly as much lately. Which was good, because his boulder of a belly could floor even a sturdy man with enough momentum. He'd practically flattened Todd just the other day as he was rushing to lunch. It'd taken three bystanders to lift the blubbery otter back onto his feet. It'd taken another three to unwedge him from a doorway not a minute later.

Avery eyed the entry to his office. It'd been recently widened so Nik wouldn't get stuck in it anymore. Or Murdoch. Or himself, for that matter. He wasn't the fattest person in Echo, but he felt he had to be in the top ten at least. He smacked his gut and watched it wobble. And to think he'd once worried about getting fatter.

Duncan leaned in, the donkey's ball belly swaying as he arrived. "Sam's here for his appointment. Mind if I take my lunch break now?"

Avery nodded. "Of course, take all the time you need. It's not healthy to work on an empty stomach." Duncan smiled and disappeared, right before an athletic white mountain lion strolled in.

Sam took one look at Avery and raised a brow. "It's been a while, Doc. You're looking swell."

Avery smirked. "The last few weeks have treated me well. Now, what's ailing you today, Sam? Not another bump to the head, I hope."

Sam scowled. "No. Maybe related, though. I've been getting real bad headaches lately. Can't exactly hold up a coyote's gut to get down to business when it feels like someone's taking a hammer to my head."

"Fortunately that's an easy enough fix. First, try to drink plenty of water. *Water*, not whiskey. Or anything else you happen to gulp down on

the job.” He winked at Sam but only got a frown in return. “A change of diet may also help. Luckily for you, I know just the bakery to check out.” The doctor smiled wide. He loved nothing more than introducing more patients to a healthy snack or two.