Home of the peaceful, passive Halflings, the Vale was far removed from much of the conflict that plagued their world. Far enough away from the militaristic empire that had slowly expanded from the North, but not quite so overtaken by nature so as to run afoul of the larger Orcs that laid claimed the woods and mountains as their own, the halflings could live peacefully and romp among the hills without worry that anything too terrible would happen to disrupt their bucolic way of life.

Forming an insular community that didn’t quite *abstain* from violence so much as it shied away from it, the halflings led charmed lives as farmers, inventors, artists, and bakers. With their nonviolent natures and modestly long lifespans, most halflings went as long as a hundred years without seeing much more than a scuffle between neighbors.

However, this this was not to say that they didn’t have the potential to be warriors. In times of old, it hadn’t been too terribly uncommon for halflings to pick up armor and swords and the like in order to claim or defend their homesteads. When the world was a little more wild and the halflings themselves less tame, they had fought just as hard as any other settlers and colonizers in order to claim the Vale for themselves. In another world, they may have been more apt to join wars and start battles, cared little for the electives that wrapped up so much of their collective time, and melded more seamlessly with the World of Man. Had their race been even a head taller, they would have come to eye-level with the average Dwarf, so it wasn’t as if they couldn’t have been *useful* on the battlefield nor that armor simply couldn’t be made to fit them.

However, in the Vale, things are now as they always had been, and how they would be for many generations after.

Which meant that hailing Primrose Proudbush as the greatest warrior to have ever come from the Vale was something of an understatement—she had been the *only* warrior to have ever come from the Vale in something along the lines of five generations.

Barely as high as the average Man’s thigh, Primrose had cut quite the interesting figure on the battlefield—with armor forged to be even smaller than those worn by the child soldiers, and a halberd that reached eye-level on fully-grown opponents—such a small creature would have normally been far beneath the notice of any of the opponents she’d faced down during her adventuring party’s campaign, but she had a way of getting the attention of anyone who underestimated her.

After felling a Hill Giant that had thought to terrorize the Vale for a few weeks, and when she was just a girl at that, Primrose had always been looked at from the side of her more conservative neighbors’ eyes; leaving the idyll of the Vale had only reinforced how “strange” she was.

But once she had come home from her trek, she had been welcomed back with open arms.

After all, any excuse to hold a party, right?

After more than five years away from the Vale, Primrose cut quite a different figure from the rest of the Halflings that had come out to her Welcome Home party. Battle hardened and sturdier, the halfling paladin had returned from her journey with lean muscle in place of her race’s more commonly stout physique. She was one of the only of her kind whose biceps were prominent enough to be visible and defined even beneath the partywear that she’d donned for the occasion.

It was clear that her time away from the Vale had changed her, but she was home now. And, in the eyes of some of the more *traditionalist* halflings in the Vale, the sooner that she could adjust back to her old life meant the sooner that things could go back to normal for everyone…

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Primrose had spent her nights back in the Vale as any seasoned warrior might have. She had been going out to the small pub built into the hillside near the center of their community, and regaling her friends with stories from her adventures. As a paladin, she made it a point not to drink too terribly often. But the order of Lliira was about spreading joy—a couple of drinks after a hard-fought battle wouldn’t be enough to impede her ability to commune with her patron goddess.

That being said, after the night before, even *she* had felt that she’d been going a bit hard on the spirits lately.

“Oh Rosie-Posie!” her mother’s high-pitched coochey-cooing was like a dagger to the brain, “I made you breakfast~!!”

The halfling struggled to her feet, the room still spinning as she grappled with a particularly nasty hangover. Her childhood bedroom foreign to her now, after years away, Primrose still stumbled more than usual against things like dressers and bedframes than she might have if she had woken up in a decoratively minimalist inn, or even outside on a bedroll.

In the comparatively short time that she had spent at home, Primrose had often remarked (mostly to herself, out of fear for upsetting her parents) that it had felt strange to go from an adventuring hero who fended for herself and her fellow party members in the wild to going back to living with her mother and father where pretty much all of her needs were met for her.

Primrose had grown up rather sheltered and a little spoiled, even by Vale Halfling standards, due to her parents’ wealth and status among their peers. Her father Hawthorne was a famous artist, known even outside of the Vale and to the other races of man, and her mother an artisan baker and culinary master who had been responsible for every birthday cake that the younger generation of halflings had ever had. Their estate was far less modest than the others, though not quite as ostentatious as some, and had been decorated lavishly with soft beds and comfortable throws with cozy rugs and beautiful paintings.

It was going to be an adjustment living in the carefully crafted work of art that was the Proudbush ancestral home, for that reason and another one in particular…

“There she is—there’s my girl!” her mother called out, waddling over to embrace her prodigal Primrose, “Come come, sit sit, I made *all* of your favorites…”

And that was getting used to living with her mother again.

Priscilla Proudbush was especially stout and particularly round, even for a halfling. Given her chosen profession, it wasn’t all that surprising. The town beauty in her youth, Priscilla’s marriage to Hawthorne gave way to disposable income and the ability to indulge her creative wants as well as her appetite. By the time that she was into her middle age, with her metabolism slow and her penchant for worry-eating in full swing while her daughter was away, the lady of the house had grown to be nearly circular.

Given how fully she loaded the breakfast table for something as simple as the thirty-seventh day that her daughter had been home, nobody could have been particularly surprised.

“You make my favorites every morning, mother.” Priscilla laughed weakly, “What’s so special about this morning?”

“Because *this* morning, I put little chocolate shavings over your pancakes—just the way that you like them.”

The older halfling waddled away from the breakfast table and further into the kitchen, grunting and struggling to stand on the chubby tips of her fat little toes as she reached for the small satchel that she had stored away in the cubbards.

“Aaaand, I have something else for you too—” she descended back to the hardwood floor of their hillside home, a little winded from the effort, “—I managed to steal you away some donuts from the bakery; just like the ones you used to love when you were a little girl!”

Primrose grimaced for a multitude of reasons. While the most predominant of which happened to be the gut-wrenching hangover that she was still struggling against, the second (or third, depending on the day) most prominent reason was the fact that since she had come home, her mother had been feeding her practically non-stop. As if she were making up for every meal that she missed while she had been roughing it out in the wilderness during her campaign, all at once, over the course of just a little bit over a month.

The appetite that she had whittled down while she was an adventurer was nothing like how it had been before she’d left—even after a month of indulgences, it still wasn’t quite up to par with how much halflings *usually* ate. The soft amount of pudge that had already developed due to a combination of lethargy, celebratory overindulgence, unfortunate Halfling genetics, and her mother’s pampering wasn’t *noticeable*, but to Primrose it may as well have been a protruding beer belly.

“Oh mother.” Primrose rolled her eyes, “I swear, if it were up to you, I’d be so round that I wouldn’t be able to fit through the front door!”

“So are you saying that you *don’t* want these?” her mother bounced the satchel temptingly in front of her daughter’s nose, “Because if you *don’t* I’d be *happy* to—”

“Well, hold on a minute now…” Primrose backpedaled, “I mean, you *did* go to the trouble of scrounging these up for me…”

“If you insist.” Priscilla relinquished the small satchel with a kiss on her daughter’s cheek, “Now eat up, love. Enjoy your breakfast.”

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Compared to the fast-paced world of adventuring, time seemed to move more slowly in the Vale.

It was a simple existence, and one without much toil or effort even for the layman. But for someone like Primrose, who was already quite wealthy even before she had come back with the spoils of her adventuring, there was almost literally nothing to do to pass the time in any meaningful way. She and her friends were too old for childish games, and she didn’t have much need for a job. The only thing that she even remotely enjoyed doing was regaling her friends and taverners in stories about her years of adventuring—but even then, that had its limits.

The more frequently that she gathered a crowd, the more she was aware of the possibility that she would become one of those washed-up heroes that she had met while she was campaigning across the land. It wasn’t the *worst* possible outcome for an adventurer like her, but it certainly wasn’t comforting to think that her best years were behind her at the tender age of twenty-nine.

It wasn’t as though she could venture out on her own though—despite her tenacity and skills in battle, she *was* still just a halfling. Her healing skills were sub-par, her blessings primarily reserved for augmenting her skills to compensate for her small size, and she didn’t have the slightest lead on just where she would venture off to in the first place. What’s more, she was so small that a hawk or an eagle could have felled her; maybe even swooped off with her entirely if it was an especially large one, up from the mountains…

“Though, I’m starting to think that the hawk would struggle a bit.”

Halflings were built to be stout, chubby little things. Generations of peaceful lives had meant that it had taken constant exercise and stimulation for Primrose to slim down from the rather portly physique that her charmed upbringing had leant unto her before she’d become a Paladin. Without the endless walking, hard-fought battles, and bare-bones diet that had come with the life of being in an adventuring party, Primrose’s halfling genetics were back in full throttle as she slowly expanded back outwards to the “usual” halfling shape.

And then some.

Even upon her return to the Vale, she hadn’t been thin so much as she had been sturdy and thickset. With an overlay of fat mixed with the muscles that she had picked up through her many battles, Primrose had come home with a trimmer waist than most of the other halflings—though that still left her a bit squishy around the middle.

But after just a few months home, it was becoming clear that the cleaner figure that she had developed over the course of her adventuring just wasn’t meant to last. Outside of the Halfling’s naturally big appetite, few opportunities to exercise and fewer reasons to leave her home, Primrose was mostly just eating because she was *bored*.

And it was making her quite a bit squishier around the middle than she would have liked—she was back to filling clothes that she had worn before she left! And with the added mass of whatever muscles hadn’t melted away, she wasn’t it doing it very well either…

“Please, mother, you’re spoiling me…”

“Nonsense my girl, eat and be merry!” her mother had always been able to dismiss her daughter’s refusal quite easily, something that hadn’t changed even after she’d come home a tried-and-true warrior, “After all, you never know when your little friends may come back and drag you out of the Vale and away from your mommy again; you should enjoy having her around to cook for you while you can!”

Primrose frowned tightly, her recently returned double chin creasing into a smaller, second scowl just above her neck as she looked down to the smorgasbord of fattening Halfling cuisine that her mother had whipped up for her. It was as though she never tired of being in the kitchen or of cooking—how she managed to balance her responsibilities at the bakery in the center of town while also whipping up three truly heroic square meals a day for her daughter was something that had always made Primrose stop and wonder. Since her return from adventuring, it was as if she hardly left the house at all with how much food she insisted on making every night.

And despite herself, Primrose *was* still a halfling by nature. Her appetite had returned to her eventually, meaning that she could hardly stop herself from eating what was placed in front of her as much as her mother could help herself from cooking it, apparently.

A round stomach pressed against the once-comfortable tunic that she had draped over herself, her plush limbs filling the sleeves to the point that her softening biceps were clearly outlined by soft fabric. Her seat spread wide in the trousers that she’d pulled up to just over the swell of the lowermost fold of her belly—the button that had clasped the two ends shut hanging on (quite literally) by a thread.

“If you say so, mother…”

And Priscilla often did; the chance to swaddle her willful daughter and keep her out of harm’s way, while also getting to enjoy her company at home, meant that there was much incentive to make big meals to keep her there. She liked to think of it as a sort of reward, if not an outright bribe, to keep her daughter’s thoughts away from adventuring and leaving the safety and seclusion of their idyllic little community.

After all, who could go adventuring on a full stomach?

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Over the course of the weeks and months that Primrose spent at home, she very quickly fell back into the very same routine that had dictated her life pre-Paladinhood.

Every day she would wake up to a big breakfast, kill time until a bigger lunch, and then close out the day with a fully-coursed dinner. Whatever happened to fall between those three meals tended to differ now and again—sometimes she would go out to the bar with old friends, others she would simply stay at home and try to digest the enormous portions—but it had become clear that Primrose the halfling’s post-adventure life was going to be dictated by those three benchmarks whether she liked it or not.

Even for halfling standards, Primrose was becoming especially plump and shiftless.

“There’s my baby—just in time for lunch!”

Primrose’s stomach sloshed from side to side as she waddled through the doorway of her childhood home, stuffed full from a second breakfast with her girlfriends down at the pub. Her belly wagged back and forth with every beleaguered step. Swaybacked and stuffed stupid, Primrose’s fat pink tongue lolled out as she struggled to breathe after such a (comparatively) long walk across the Vale.

“Oohhh…” she moaned, “Mother… I don’t… think I can…”

Priscilla frowned in concern, helping her daughter take her seat at the table and steering her so that she was belly-out from the edge. A veritable feast awaited her, just as it always did around this time of day. But just looking at it was enough to make the huge halfling feel queasy.

“What’s wrong, Rosie?” her mother asked, “Do you feel well?”

“M’mates and I…” she huffed and wheezed, “Ate too much…”

That was not entirely true. The other halflings that she had gone out with after breakfast had eaten a perfectly reasonable amount (for them). But Primrose’s self-control had been shot dead in the dirt, thanks to returning to the spoiled, lazy life she had led before she’d gone off and become an adventurer. With more gold than sense, she had ordered everyone in her party a meal, plus a little “snack” for herself that had quickly become about four plates and a couple of pints of “breakfast beer”.

Piled on top of the ridiculous amount of food that her mother had served her for breakfast just a few hours ago, there was little wonder that Primrose looked like she was about to burst!

Laying her hands on her stomach, plump fingers spread wide as her head lulled to the side, the poor thing looked absolutely drunk on the amount of food that she’d stuffed into her poor, unsuspecting stomach.

“Well, Rosie, why don’t you go upstairs and take a nap?” her mother suggested with a smile, “Your food will still be here when you wake up. Though it might be a little cold.”

“Hnnn…” Primrose gurgled out a response, “Thnkyu…”

Using her own heavy weight to help hoist her daughter out of the chair she’d plopped herself in, Priscilla managed to steer her daughter towards the den and onto an old couch. She fetched her daughter a blanket and a pillow, but almost by the time her head had hit the arm rest, Primrose had fallen asleep.

By the time she had woken up a little more than hours later, however, she was more concerned than delighted that her mother had managed to move the contents of her lunch into the den—where she could effectively have her meal from the couch…

—EPILOGUE—

It wasn’t often that a member of the species of Man walked through the Vale.

The various races tended to overlook such a seemingly small and insignificant stretch of land as much as they disregarded the halflings who happened to occupy it. But to those who knew better, those who had ventured with brave halflings like Primrose Proudbush, the occupants of the Vale were a proud and productive people—if not the sort who veer just a bit too far on the side of shiftlessness.

But even a career sellsword turned Chosen One like Alidon could tell you that most of these little suckers would be downright useless in a fight.

Hell, she could have punted most of them further away from the Vale than they would have gotten on their own in a lifetime.

Though she may have been reformed enough to join the knights of the new regime, heralded by the long-lost princess that she and her band of misfit adventurers had put into a position of power, she was most assuredly not tamed.

Using her talents in guile and skill, plus remembering a few key details that her old Paladin had told her along the trail of their five-year adventure together, Alidon had been able to piece together which of these hillside houses had to have belonged to Primrose’s family. If she had present when the little anklebiter had been recruited, or if the rest of her party hadn’t all gone off to who-knows-where and could have come along with her, this trip wouldn’t have been nearly as frustrating.

Bending down to knock on the large oaken door of the archway built into the side of the hill, Alidon stood there with her hands on her knees like an idiot while she waited for someone to answer the door.

“Hello?”

At last, the front door opened—an especially round little halfling had answered the door. Dressed in an apron and with a modest amount of makeup and jewelry on her face, Alidon could only guess that this had been Mrs. Proudbush who had answered the door; her descriptions matched quite well with how Primrose had described her.

“Yeah, uh… I need to talk to Prim.” Alidon said shortly, curtly, and awkwardly, “You know… adventurer stuff.”

A sly, almost smug smile cut across the halfling’s half-moon face. She turned inside ever so slightly, raised a hand to cup her mouth, and called out deeper into the hill.

“Rosie-Posie! It’s one of your little adventuring friends!” she cried out.

“Wh-Whuh?!” a husky voice emanated from within, “Oh no… Mother, I’ll… tell them I’ll be right there!”

Grunting filled the whole house as Primrose Proudbush struggled to rise to her summons. From her bedroom at the end of the hall, the sounds of her battling against her own bulk could be heard as far as the front door before clumsy, heavy footfalls sounded against the hardwood. The plump pads of her feet scraped against the floor as her elephantine steps grew closer and closer to the entrance of the Halfling home…

“Who… hah..ha… who is it?” she puffed out weakly, still trying to trudge along

“Who is it?” Priscilla turned back to the armor-clad woman

“It’s Alidon.”

“It’s Alidon!” the halfling matriarch cried out, “Come say hello, sweetie!”

“Oh no, not her…” Priscilla’s cursing under her ragged breath was no less muted than her huffing and puffing, “C-Coming…!”

The crest of her stomach made itself known as it piqued over the archway that divided the main living area to the hallway, wobbling and sloshing stupidly for a few more cumbersome steps as Primrose lugged her enormous self from one end of the hall to another. It had taken three full steps for something *other* than her great gut to make itself known, with her great swollen chest and thick swaddling chins being next. As she continued to struggle to so much as move under her own power, Primrose did her best to turn the corner—her sandbag stomach impeding her pathetic steps as she tried to present herself to her unexpected guest. It had taken another two steps inside for Primrose to be entire out of the hall; her great, quivering rear jutting out far behind her like a shelf.

“H-Hi… Alidon…” Primrose gasped, “What… haahhhh… brings you by?”

Alidon’s eyes were wide as she struggled to comprehend the vast change that had occurred in what had once been her party’s resident paladin. Always a bit chubbier than the other adventurers, though it hadn’t entirely been her fault given that she was a halfling, Primrose had undergone some *vast* changes in…

Wow, had it only been three years since they’d seen one another?!

“Um…” Alidon gulped, “You know what? Nevermind—I can… get someone else to help me.”

“W-Wait!”

Primrose lumbered towards the front door, her large gut sloshing back and forth. The larger adventurer turned tail and started walking at an uncomfortably brisk pace away from the mansion, leaving Primrose almost no hope of catching up in her current state.

“Alidonnnn!!” she cried out, “Wait up! I can… I can still go on adventures!”