

An oil painting of an elderly woman with grey hair, wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt and a brown apron, standing in a dimly lit pantry. She is holding a glass jar filled with yellow contents in her left hand and a lit lantern in her right. The pantry shelves are filled with various jars and stacks of bread. The lighting is warm and focused on the woman and the lantern.

LYLA'S PANTRY

By

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Lyla's Pantry

The Quiet Work

The mornings belonged to Lyla.

The Bitter Sweet kitchens held a hush at that hour, the kind of stillness that came just before dawn unfurled itself across the fields. The walls breathed warmth from last night's hearth, and the faint creak of the pantry shelves echoed whenever she opened the door. Steam rose from kettles on the back stove, filling the air with a low hum, while flour dust lingered in the shafts of lantern light like early snow.

It was her favorite time, when the house was hers alone and the only sound was the rhythm of her hands moving through work.

She started with the shelves. The pantry was narrow, lined with wood that had been rubbed smooth by years of jars pressed against it. She touched each one as she checked: clear glass glowing faintly in the lamplight, full of summer captured in liquid and salt. Pickled beans, tomatoes sealed bright in red, cucumbers resting in brine. Peaches, their skins turned honey-gold, stacked in quart jars like sunlight waiting for dark days. On the lower shelves, baskets of onions lay cushioned in straw, potatoes dusted with soil, garlic heads braided in thick ropes.

She breathed it in. This was her wealth. Not the kind written in ledgers or counted in coins, but here, in jars, roots, baskets, loaves.

The dough had risen in its bowl overnight, swollen high, its surface soft and pale. She pressed it with her finger, watching the dent hold before springing back. Good. She tipped it onto the floured board, working it with the heel of her hand. Push, fold, turn. Push, fold, turn. The rhythm was steady, older than her memory, carried in the muscles of her arms and wrists. She liked the way it grounded her.

The oven was hot already, embers banked low, ready to catch when the pans were slid in. She shaped the loaves with careful hands, pressing seams closed, setting them aside to rise again. Each one a promise against hunger.

On the side table, apples waited in a wide basin. Their skins glowed crimson in the lamplight, a mix of orchard harvests that Pike and Rayne had helped gather days before. Lyla peeled them quickly, fingers sure with the knife, turning each fruit into thin spirals of skin that fell onto the table like ribbons. She sliced them into rounds and laid them on racks to dry, arranging them so the air could pass through evenly. She could already imagine them in the winter, soaked back into porridges, softened into pies, or handed to children as sweet snacks when other fruit was long gone.

The mastiffs padded in quietly, curious noses sniffing at the warm scents. She smiled and nudged them back with the flat of her hand. "Not for you," she whispered, though

their tails thumped against the stone floor before they curled back down to rest near the hearth. They seemed to know she liked their company, even if she pretended to shoo them away.

This was the part of life at Bitter Sweet few noticed. By the time the others woke, the bread would be cooling, the jars neatly stacked, the apples spread for drying. Meals would appear as if by magic, and shelves would fill themselves as though the earth provided without hands. Most never saw the hours she carved from sleep to make sure of it. And that was fine.

Lyla didn't need recognition. She needed only to know there would be enough.

Still, the weight of it pressed sometimes. She had lived through hunger, winters where cupboards stood bare, where her stomach gnawed at itself until even sleep couldn't dull it. That memory never left her. It was there in the way she sealed jars tight, in the way she wrote down numbers of loaves and sacks of grain in a small ledger tucked behind the flour bin, in the way she whispered under her breath as she worked.

Her hands folded the dough again, and she murmured the words she never spoke aloud in daylight: *let this be enough*.

Preserving the Season

By the time the first thread of light broke across the windowsill, Lyla was already deep into her second rhythm of the morning. The bread loaves rose under their cloths, the apples lay in careful rows on drying racks, and the pantry door stood open to receive more.

She wiped her hands on her apron and stepped outside, basket on her arm, the early air cool and fragrant. Dew beaded on the herb beds, glistening like pearls in the soft dawn. She bent low, her fingers brushing stems of thyme, oregano, rosemary. She pinched the sprigs, sharp oils releasing into her skin, and placed them in her basket. Nearby, sage leaves waited, broad and velvety, catching the light like silver coins.

Harvesting was never rushed. Each snip of her shears was measured, mindful not to strip the plant bare. She whispered as she cut, not words exactly, but the hum of care, a tune she carried from her grandmother who once taught her that plants remember kindness.

By the time she returned indoors, her basket was full, the scent of herbs strong enough to perfume the entire kitchen. She strung them into bundles, tying them with twine and hanging them from beams overhead. They would dry slowly, their leaves curling in on themselves, concentrating strength for winter.

From another corner, jars awaited. She had washed them last night, rows of glass gleaming, lids stacked neatly beside. Today's task was plums. She fetched them from a

crate in the pantry, their skins dark and taut, sugar-sweet even before they touched the syrup. She worked carefully, scoring the skins, slipping them into simmering water before plunging them into cool bowls. The skins loosened like silk, sliding free with the lightest touch.

The mastiffs shifted near the hearth, heads tilting as if even they could sense the sweetness filling the air. Lyla laughed softly. "No, not for you either," she told them, though she laid a plum pit on the table and traced its smooth oval with her finger. Each fruit, each pit, carried its own story, of tree, of season, of labor that came before.

She ladled the plums into jars, poured hot syrup over them, sealed them tight. The lids clicked into place, one by one, like tiny affirmations. When she lined them on the shelf, their skins gleamed purple and red, jewels waiting in glass. She stepped back for a moment, simply looking. There was beauty in it, though no one spoke of food storage as beautiful. To her, it was more art than labor. Rows of jars catching light were her stained glass.

Mid-morning, footsteps passed the kitchen. Teal peeked in, her arms laden with willow twigs meant for weaving. "You're at it again," she said with a shake of her head, though her voice held affection.

Lyla shrugged, not pausing her work. She had moved on to beans, snapping the ends, blanching them, sliding their green bodies into jars. "If I don't start now, winter will come sooner than we think."

"You always say that." Teal leaned against the doorframe, watching the steady line of Lyla's hands. "Do you ever rest?"

Lyla smiled faintly, eyes on her work. "Rest comes when the shelves are full."

Teal was quiet for a moment, then set her bundle of twigs on the table. "You remind me of my mother," she said softly. "She worked the same way. Always storing, always thinking ahead. We didn't thank her enough."

Lyla's throat tightened, but she kept her movements even. Snap, blanch, jar, seal. "That's the way of it," she said at last. "If you've done your job right, no one notices. They only notice when you haven't."

Teal nodded slowly, then slipped back out, leaving the smell of willow and the echo of her words behind.

By noon, the kitchen was heavy with steam. Pots simmered, lids clattered faintly as jars cooled, cloths lay damp on the tables. Lyla's apron was streaked with flour and fruit, her hair damp around her temples, but her eyes stayed sharp, fixed on each task.

Next came berries, blackcurrants from the parish trade. Their juice stained her fingers purple, tart and sharp. She cooked them down with honey, stirring until the liquid thickened, then poured it into jars where it would hold like liquid dusk through the winter.

Then carrots, scrubbed, chopped, tucked into brine with garlic and dill. Their orange color glowed like embers in the row of glass, another brightness to remember in darker months.

She paused only long enough to sip water, wiping her brow with the corner of her sleeve. Her muscles ached, but it was the ache of purpose.

This was her prayer. Not words whispered in pews, not hymns carried by choirs, but the quiet act of filling shelves, of knowing no one here would lie awake at night with hunger gnawing at them.

She remembered too well what it was like to ache with emptiness. To chew stale bread so slowly you might trick your body into believing it was more. To see children pick through scraps and know there was nothing left to give.

So, she worked as if warding off ghosts. Every jar sealed, every loaf baked, every herb hung to dry was her way of telling the past it would not win here.

By late afternoon, the shelves looked different than they had at dawn. Where there had been gaps, now stood rows, plums, beans, currants, carrots. Herbs dangled from the rafters, apples spread across the racks. Loaves cooled on the board, their crusts golden, the air thick with yeast.

No one would see this transformation except her. By the time the others gathered in the hall, they would simply eat. They would laugh, talk, share bowls of stew and bread, berries spooned into honey. They would not think of the hours folded into each bite. And that was as it should be.

Lyla leaned against the pantry door, letting her eyes travel the shelves one more time. She felt the ache in her back, the soreness in her hands, and beneath it all, a steady hum of satisfaction.

This was how she loved them. Quietly, without fanfare, without needing thanks. In jars, in loaves, in fruit laid by for tomorrow.

Her work was prayer, and her prayer was simple: *Let this be enough. Let this always be enough.*

The Ledger of Storage

Evening pressed in slowly, like a shawl being drawn across Bitter Sweet. Outside, the sounds of work shifted toward laughter and voices gathering, but in the kitchen the air was thick with the last steam of the day's labor.

Lyla slipped into the pantry, lamp in one hand, ledger in the other. The shelves gleamed with the work she had done since dawn, plums dark and glossy, beans green against glass, carrots shining like coals, currant syrup settling into a deep jewel tone. Apples curled on the drying racks. Bread cooled in the bins above.

She set the lamp on the table and opened her ledger.

The book was small, bound in worn leather, its pages yellowed at the edges. The cover bore no title, just faint scratches from years of use. She kept it tucked behind the flour bin, out of sight. Not because it was secret, but because it was hers.

Her pencil hovered over the page, then pressed down.

Beans - 8 jars
Plums - 12 jars
Carrots in brine - 10 jars
Currant syrup - 6 jars
Apples - 4 racks drying
Bread - 7 loaves, 3 stored, 4 for table

She paused, tapping the pencil against her lip. Numbers on a page, yes, but they meant more than that. Each one was a safeguard. Each one was proof she had bent hunger back a little further.

Her eyes drifted to the earlier pages.

Dried rosemary - 6 bundles
Onions - 3 baskets
Garlic - 2 braids
Potatoes - 4 bins

She traced the words with her fingertip, the way one might trace the lines of a prayer book. To anyone else, it might look like inventory. To her, it was story.

She remembered the year she first began keeping this ledger. The school had just opened its doors, and supplies were thin. People had arrived carrying little more than what they could hold in their hands. Some nights, meals had been so lean, she had wept after the children went to bed, ashamed of her own emptiness as much as theirs.

She had started writing the numbers down because the sight of them steadied her. A small list was better than none at all. A little bread was still bread. One jar was still one jar more than nothing.

Her hand shook slightly as she wrote the next line.

Grain - 2 sacks (half a sack less than last year at this time)

The memory of scarcity sat heavy.

She had vowed then, a girl too young to make promises she didn't understand: *If ever I have a home of my own, no one will go hungry in it.*

Now she lived that vow every day.

She turned the page and began a new column.

What we have...

What we need...

What we cannot lose...

It was a ritual she did at the end of each week. She spoke the words softly as she wrote them, giving them weight.

What we have: enough bread for the week, jars of plums and beans, apples drying.

What we need: more grain, more salt, more honey if the parish can spare it.

What we cannot lose: the herb stores, the potato bins, the dried bundles of sage and thyme.

She set down her pencil and rubbed the place between her eyes where worry always lived.

To the others, this was simply food. To her, it was a fortress. Hunger was not only a physical ache; it was a thief. It stole strength, stole kindness, stole the will to hope. She had seen it turn neighbors against each other, parents against children. She would not let it cross these walls.

The dogs had followed her into the pantry, as they often did. The brindle one stretched along the cool stone floor, restless even in rest, while the ash-gray settled by her chair, his head heavy against her boot. She bent to scratch behind his ear, whispering, "You understand, don't you? This is the real guarding."

The shelves creaked softly as if answering.

She lifted the lamp higher, scanning her work again. Rows of jars caught the light, glowing faintly like stained glass. To her, they were more than food. They were prayers sealed in glass, a bulwark against despair, each one saying silently: *we will endure*.

She whispered as she closed the ledger: *Let it be enough. Let it always be enough.*

Ledger Fragment (in Lyla's hand)

Beans - 8 jars

Plums - 12 jars

Carrots in brine - 10 jars

Currant syrup - 6 jars

Apples - 4 racks drying

Bread - 7 loaves, 3 stored, 4 for table

Grain - 2 sacks (half a sack less than last year at this time)

What we have: enough for now.

What we need: more before frost.

What we cannot lose: hope, stored on shelves like light in glass.

A Hidden Feast

Evening drew down over Bitter Sweet, shadows stretching long across the courtyard until lanterns were lit one by one. From every doorway came the sound of boots scuffing, laughter, children's voices trailing, the rise and fall of a place gathering itself at day's end.

In the hall, the long table had been set. Clay bowls, simple spoons, loaves of bread cut thick and steaming, the root stew ladled out until the air itself seemed to smell of earth and hearth together. A dish of preserved berries gleamed dark at the center, syrup glistening under the lamplight. It was not extravagant, it never was, but there was enough. Enough for every stomach, enough to bring conversation, enough to carry them toward morning with strength in their bones.

That, Lyla thought as she passed through the doorway, was all she ever asked for.

She did not sit right away. She lingered near the sideboards, tucking a basket here, setting down a jar there, refilling a pitcher of water, sliding quietly between those already finding their seats. Children laughed at the far end, knocking elbows as they tore into bread. Tekren leaned back, smiling faintly as Kai told him some story with hands flying. Teal's voice carried above the rest, weaving a tale about dreamcatchers she'd taught the younger ones to make.

And at the heart of it, Willow, her braid silvering in the lamplight, her eyes lit as she bent to listen to whoever spoke, always steady, always anchoring. Beside her, Jareth was already reaching for the pot, teasing that if they didn't fill his bowl quick enough he'd faint of hunger. Laughter circled the table like a tide.

Lyla smiled softly and withdrew. Her place, she had long known, was not at the center but in the quiet edges. By the time anyone looked up from their stew, she was already back in the kitchen.

The pantry waited, hushed and cool. Shelves lined with glass, bins steady with roots, loaves cooling under cloths. The air carried the faint sweetness of plums, the sharpness of onions, the homely scent of bread. Lyla set down her lamp and reached automatically for a rag to wipe the worktable, though there was little left to do. Her hands simply needed motion.

From beyond the doorway drifted the sound of spoons against bowls, laughter spilling, a song someone started. She listened, hands stilling at last. No one spoke her name out there, and that was fine. They didn't need to. Their full bowls were thanks enough.

The door creaked behind her.

"Why aren't you at the table?"

She turned, rag still in her hands. Pike leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. His shirt was loosened at the collar, sleeves rolled to his elbows, hair still damp from tending the animals earlier. The brindle mastiff had followed him in, nosing curiously at the bins, tail sweeping the floor.

"I will," Lyla said, voice low. "After."

"After what?" He stepped in, head tilted, a half-smile on his face. "The stew's half gone already. If you wait, there won't be much left but the bottom."

She shrugged, glancing back at the shelves. "There's always enough."

He studied her for a moment, then pushed away from the door. The floor creaked under his boots as he crossed to her side. He picked up the ledger that lay open on the table, scanning the neat columns of numbers and notes.

"You keep this every day?"

"Yes." Her tone was simple, but her hand hovered, as if to take it back.

Pike closed the book carefully and set it down. His voice softened. "You keep us alive, Lyla."

The words caught her off guard. She looked at him, brow furrowing as if she hadn't heard right.

He met her gaze, steady, without jest. "All of this." He gestured at the shelves, the jars, the bins, the loaves lined in their cloths. "It doesn't just happen. You do it. And you don't sit at the table to hear it said. So, I'll say it now."

Heat rose in her throat, a sudden tightness. She turned quickly, wiping the table again though it was already clean. "It's just work," she murmured. "Someone has to do it."

"Yes," Pike said. "And you do. Quietly. Every day. Without fail."

She didn't answer. She couldn't.

The brindle mastiff had come to lean against her leg, and she pressed her hand to its head, grateful for the cover of the motion. The dog sighed, eyes closing, as if it too knew the truth of Pike's words.

He didn't press further. He simply gave a small nod, as though his words had already been enough, and left her there with the shelves and the lamp and her racing heart.

When the room quieted again, Lyla set down the rag and sank into the chair by the pantry door. She stared at the rows of jars glowing faintly in lamplight. The words echoed in her chest: *You keep us alive.*

She tried to shrug them off. Tried to fold them into the ordinary rhythm of a day, as if they were no more weight than the cloth she had used to cover the bread. But they settled deeper, in a place words rarely reached.

For all her life, she had worked unseen, and she had never minded. It was enough to know there was food, enough to know hunger was held at bay. But tonight, in the quiet, she let herself hold Pike's words close, as if they were another kind of bread, another store against the leaner days of her spirit.

She whispered, so softly even the mastiff didn't stir: *Let this be enough. Let it always be enough.*

And for the first time, she thought perhaps it was not only the jars and loaves that filled the shelves of her heart, but the knowledge that someone had noticed.

Ledger Fragment (written later, in smaller script)

*- Seven loaves baked. Twelve jars plums sealed. Ten carrots brined.
And one word spoken aloud: enough.*

The Weight of Provision

The feast had ended hours ago. The hall was quiet now, bowls stacked, lamps extinguished, voices faded into the shelter of sleep. Only the soft murmur of the night wind moving along the walls remained, carrying with it the scent of cooling earth and distant rain.

But Lyla was not in bed.

She stood again in the pantry doorway, lamp in hand, listening to the silence. It wasn't the kind of silence that pressed heavy with emptiness, but one that wrapped itself around her like a cloak. This was her time, the hour when the world seemed to bow to the shelves she had built, the shelves that carried more than food.

She set the lamp on the table and looked over what she had stored. Jars glowed faintly in the lamplight, each one a captured piece of the season. Tomatoes suspended in red, beans stretched long and green, plums dark and glistening, berries thick with syrup. The bread loaves under their cloths gave off a low, steady fragrance, and the apples curled slowly on their racks, giving the air a sweetness beneath the sharper notes of vinegar and brine.

To most, it was simply food. To her, it was promise.

She drew out her ledger once more, its spine warm from her touch. The pencil moved almost of its own accord.

Today sealed: 12 plums, 10 carrots, 6 syrup. Bread: 7. Apples: 4 racks. Beans: 8.

She tapped the pencil against the page. Numbers, but more than numbers. She felt each one in her body as if it were a heartbeat. The shelves breathed with her.

Her mind slipped backward as she wrote.

She remembered another pantry, though it hardly deserved the name. A bare cupboard in a house that smelled of damp wood and cold ashes. She remembered opening it as a child, heart racing with hope, only to find it empty save for a heel of bread hardened to stone. Her mother's face, gray with exhaustion, her hands cracked from labor. The way hunger made silence louder, stretched the minutes into something unbearable.

She had vowed then, silently, fiercely: *If I ever have a home, its shelves will never be empty.*

And now, here she was, shelves full enough to hum against the walls. Yet still, the memory clung like frost in her bones.

She moved along the shelves, running her fingertips across jars as if they were prayer beads. The glass was cool, slick under her skin. She paused at the carrots in brine, their bright orange muted by the liquid. She had packed them tight, sliding in garlic cloves and sprigs of dill. She thought of the winter ahead, bowls of stew brightened by that tang, children crunching them with delight, life carrying on even when the world outside froze.

Then the plums, their deep purple skins softened, syrup cradling them like jewels. She thought of serving them in February, when snow would crust the eaves and the sun would barely warm the courtyard. How one spoonful of sweetness could remind the heart that summer had not been lost forever.

Every jar was a memory stored forward.

She sank into the chair by the table and laid her hands flat against the wood. Her palms were rough, calloused from years of kneading and chopping and lifting heavy pots. But those hands had become their anchor. No one thanked her, not really. Not every day. But she did not need it.

Or so she told herself.

Her mind wandered back to Pike's words, spoken earlier that evening: *You keep us alive, Lyla*. The way he had looked at her, steady, unflinching, as if naming something she had almost forgotten was true.

She had shrugged it off at the time, but the words had rooted. They sat inside her now, heavier than hunger ever was.

Perhaps it was not wrong to long to be seen.

But even if she was never seen again, even if no one spoke those words aloud, she would still rise before dawn, still hang herbs from rafters, still write numbers into her ledger. Because that was her love.

Her love was practical.

It lived in the hiss of jars sealing, in the thump of dough against a board, in the scent of onions fried low and steady. It lived in baskets of apples carried in from the orchard, in herbs laid carefully to dry, in the straw pressed around potatoes so they would last through cold months.

Some people spoke their love loudly, in songs, in speeches, in blessings. Lyla's was measured in quarts and loaves.

She opened the ledger again, turning to the back where blank pages waited. On impulse, she began to write not only the numbers but the truths beneath them.

Plums - 12 jars. May they carry sweetness into the bitter months.
Carrots - 10 jars. May they remind us to endure.
Currant syrup - 6. May its strength be shared with the children.
Bread - 7 loaves. May it be enough to keep hope warm.

She paused, staring at the words. A ledger turned into prayer. She felt tears sting at the corners of her eyes, unexpected and uninvited, but she did not wipe them away.

The mastiffs had followed her again, silent and watchful. The brindle one shifted restlessly, nails scratching at the stone, while the ash-gray stretched long by the table, eyes half-lidded. Lyla reached down to stroke the gray dog's head. "You understand," she whispered. "You keep watch your way, and I keep watch mine."

The dog sighed, as if in agreement.

Her mind wandered further back, to when she had first learned to preserve food. She had been barely grown, working alongside an older woman in the village who had shown her how to boil jars, how to pack fruit, how to listen for the sharp pop of lids sealing. That sound had thrilled her then, the sound of safety caught in glass. She had never forgotten it. Even now, each pop still felt like victory.

She remembered her first loaf baked alone, how it had come out lopsided and too hard, and how she had cried quietly over it because it still wasn't enough. But over time, her hands had learned the rhythms, her senses had sharpened to know when dough was ready, when the oven was too hot, when a jar had sealed right. Now, everything she touched carried the weight of years.

Her body ached with fatigue. She knew she should rest, but she couldn't bring herself to leave yet. She rose and walked the length of the pantry once more, lamp casting her shadow against the walls.

The jars glittered like stained glass in a church she had built herself, a cathedral of provision. She felt both priest and congregation here, alone but not lonely, offering her work as sacrament.

She touched the wooden doorframe lightly, then rested her forehead against it. "Let this be enough," she whispered once more. "Let it always be enough."

The words echoed in the small space, caught between shelves, settling into the jars like breath.

She returned to the table, closed her ledger, and set it aside. Her eyes roamed the pantry one last time before she dimmed the lamp. She thought of the future, winters yet to come, storms yet to be weathered, children yet to be fed. She thought of hunger pressed back again and again by the quiet faithfulness of hands.

She thought of Pike's words and let them echo one more time. *You keep us alive, Lyla.*

She carried them with her as she stepped into the darkened hall, the pantry behind her glowing faintly with its rows of promise.

Final Ledger Fragment (in Lyla's own hand)

- Today: plums, carrots, syrup, bread, apples, beans.

Tomorrow: whatever the earth allows.

Always: the vow to make sure no one hungers here.

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