

A Certain Silent Suffering

a *Game of Thrones* fanfic

by Rodo

SQUIRING FOR LORD TYRION wasn't that bad. No, really. Podrick Payne kept telling everyone who asked, but nobody believed him. They all looked at him like he was mad when he said it, or raised their eyebrows as if to signal that they understood he had to say that, even though it was obviously a lie. But it wasn't a lie. For all his faults, Podrick liked Lord Tyrion. Sure, he was grumpy, drank too much and had a terrible lewd sense of humor, but underneath it all, he was kind. He remembered Podrick's name without having to be reminded, never punished him with more than a few harsh words whenever Pod (as he was slowly coming to think of himself) made a mistake, and Pod had a roof over his head, a bed, and three meals a day. So, there wasn't anything to complain about, really, especially considering that this was supposed to be a punishment by Lord Tywin.

Podrick supposed the other squires and servants just didn't know any better. They heard his last name and thought he should hold a more prestigious position in the Red Keep, just because his distant cousin did. But Podrick had never exchanged so much as glance with Ser Ilyn – the only member of their house to ever make anything more than a knight out of himself – and his mother had been lowborn. For all intents and purposes, squiring for a son of Lord Lannister, even one as despised as Lord Tyrion, was more than Podrick could have ever dreamed of.

And so, Pod was content with his lot. He was more suited to life as a servant than life as a soldier anyway, and had no ambitions of ever being knighted, even if that was what squires were supposed to do. He just did his best when it came to serving Lord Tyrion, learned all the banners and names, paid attention whenever Lord Tyrion talked to him and even learned the differences between all the different sorts of wines there were (and he hadn't known there were this many), just to do a better job. Really, there wasn't anything more he wanted from life.

Until he saw her. Pod had been on an errand – he didn't even remember what it was – when he walked past the godswood and saw her standing there through the gate, admiring the... trees, Pod supposed. He didn't really pay attention to anything but her. She was pretty. Really pretty. Really, really pretty. She made Pod wish he were more of a poet so that he could find better words than “really pretty” to describe her. She was a little younger than he, had beautiful long red hair and seemed a little sad, although Pod couldn't quite pin down why he thought that. She was the kind of girl that boys dreamed about marrying one day, and for one glorious second, Pod did. Then, reality came crashing down.

“What are you staring at?” a voice asked. It belonged to Alyn, one of the other servants who worked at the Tower of the Hand.

Helpless and not really capable of finding the right words, Pod shrugged, so Alyn followed his gaze, then nodded sagely.

“Ah, Sansa Stark. She's been in the godswood a lot lately. Probably praying for her traitor family. Come on, Pod. Lord Tyrion is waiting.”

And with that, Alyn dragged him along, back towards the Tower and their master. Pod didn't want to go. He wanted to look at her a little bit longer, wanted to forget that the reason she looked beautiful enough to be a queen was that she would one day be a queen. It took him the rest of the day and a couple of stinging reprimands by Lord Tyrion to get her out of his mind. She was a highborn lady, the daughter of a great lord. She'd never even know his name. There was no use in someone like Podrick Payne, squire from a lesser branch of a lesser house, to think about her. It still stung. He'd dreamed of more, for a little bit, and regretted it. Dreams were for people who could make them come true, and Pod knew very well that he wasn't one of those.

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War turns boys into men, they said. Well, Pod didn't really know who said it, but he was quite sure someone had said it to him at one point. Maybe before he'd gone and joined Lord Tywin's host. Now that he'd killed his first man, Pod was quite sure it was “horseshit”, as Lord Tyrion would say. He didn't feel one bit more like a man, and he had nightmares to boot. Whenever he closed his eyes, he could see the eerie green glow of Lord Stannis's fleet as it was being devoured of wildfire. Really, if this was what being a man meant, he'd rather stay a boy forever.

The nightmares had been taking their toll too. Podrick could barely keep his eyes open as he walked towards Lord Tyrion's rooms one morning. He wasn't as enthusiastic about

doing his duty as usual. It wasn't as if Lord Tyrion took his bad mood out on Pod, but he didn't like being around him when he was as morose as now. And he was tired. So tired he yawned when he walked around a corner – right into someone else.

“Ouch,” a melodious, feminine voice said.

Pod froze. Women and girls tended to have that effect on him. And when he opened his eyes (and belatedly closed his mouth, still open in a half-yawn) he only froze even more. He hadn't really seen her in a while, and he had succeeded in not thinking she was pretty – he really shouldn't think about a lady that way – but seeing her now, sprawled awkwardly on the floor with her maid hovering beside her, he couldn't help but think it again. She really was pretty. And even prettier up close than she had been from a distance.

“Pardon, my lady,” Pod all but stuttered. He felt the heat rush into his cheeks and didn't know what to do with his hands. Should he offer to help her up? Or would that seem untoward? And so, they just twitched uselessly at his side while her maid helped her up instead.

“You're forgiven,” Sansa Stark said when she finally stood up straight again, brushing dirt off her skirt. “I'm sure it wasn't intentional.” She was smiling kindly at him. Her maid, on the other hand, looked like she wanted to tut at him when she examined the skirt.

“It wasn't, my lady. I'm really sorry. I'm just really tired.” He still didn't know what to do with his hands and looked anywhere but at her face until his eyes finally came to rest on the hem of her skirts – a good, safe place to look.

“I think we all are,” she answered diplomatically. “And I'm sure you're especially busy these days. You're Lord Tyrion's squire, aren't you? I hope he is doing well. I heard he got hurt defending us all from Lord Stannis.”

Pod almost forgot how to breathe. She knew who he was! She knew who someone as insignificant as he was! And just like that, he'd fallen in love with her again, and in this very moment, he was too wrapped up in it. Pod knew he'd regret it again the moment she was out of sight, but for now he was ready to swear his eternal love.

“Thank you, my lady. He's doing better, my lady. Lord Tyrion, I mean. He's still hurt, but he's getting better. I'll tell him you asked,” he stammered, eyes still fixed on the hem of her skirt.

“I'll pray for him,” she promised, and then her skirts moved. She wished him a good day as she walked past him, her maid in tow, and Pod was left staring down at the red stonework. He fixated on a crack in the masonry until his heartbeat had calmed enough to continue on his own way.

When he arrived at Lord Tyrion's quarters, Bronn looked at him weirdly, as if he was about to say something, so Pod hurried inside, hoping that Shae was keeping Lord Tyrion distracted. Or that Lord Tyrion was too wrapped up in himself to notice whatever had tipped off Bronn. It was only then that Pod realized that his face still felt like it was on fire. That realization just made him blush even harder.

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If there was one person in the world who hated the marriage between Tyrion Lannister and Sansa Stark more than the married couple, it was Podrick Payne. Not that he let it show on his face. Podrick was simply utterly miserable. So miserable, in fact, that he thought it was a miracle nobody noticed. He had tried at first. He had really tried. He'd managed to forget how pretty and nice Sansa Stark was twice already, and it had worked both times. Pod had a good head on his shoulders, even if half the people he met seemed to think he was simple minded, and that head knew how to get his heart to stop yearning for impossible things. But this time, it didn't work. Not when he had to see her every other day. Not when she was just so... Pod still didn't know the right words. Maybe he should go to the library some day and look for romantic poetry. Sansa Stark was just wonderful. Perfect in every way, at least if you asked Pod. Weeks into the marriage, Pod had even made a mental list, to keep himself from going insane and from keeping some form of control over himself.

First: Sansa Stark was the most beautiful woman in Westeros. Not the most stunning – that honor went to either the queen or the queen-to-be. Both of them could enchant men with their looks in ways that seemed almost magical. Sansa was different. She was like the maiden incarnate. Beautiful in a way that would outlast her looks because her beauty came from within as well as without. Where the Queen's and Lady Margaery's beauty was loud, Sansa's was quiet. It was calming and steady and just what beauty should be like, if you asked Pod. (Nobody did.)

Second: Sansa Stark was kind. She didn't make fun when bad things happened to other people, not even when Pod dropped something because he was distracted by her smile or the way she held her hand. He'd heard stories too – of her saving a knight from Joffrey's wrath. Of her singing during the siege. Sansa was kind because she could be, not because she expected something in return, and that alone earned her Pod's loyalty – even if Lord Tyrion would always come first.

Third: Sansa Stark was smart. Maybe not in the same way Lord Tyrion was. She couldn't duel with words the same way knights dueled with swords. But she knew how to survive. She knew which words to choose when a fool like Pod could only make out twenty bad choices and not one good one.

Fourth: Sansa Stark was strong. Pod had heard how she'd mourned her family. She'd lost more than Pod had ever had in his life – a father, a mother, brothers, a sister, a home, a future. If it was him, Pod thought, he wouldn't have survived. But Sansa did survive, and there was still fight left in her. Pod didn't think he'd ever met a stronger person. Not even Lord Tyrion could compare.

In short Podrick Payne was doomed, and he knew it too. He was lucky nobody else did, since he knew quite well how pathetic it looked. Here he was, Podrick Payne, squire, from no particular family, with middling looks, few talents and no prospects, mooning over one of the most distinguished ladies of the realm, who was married to his Lord, no less. No, he'd keep it to himself, this stupid, hopeless love, and hopefully it would hurt less, eventually.

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In the end, much changed. Pod changed. Sansa Stark changed too. Pod supposed this was what people meant when they said war turned boys into men. It wasn't the fighting or the killing, it was having to learn how to live with your fears and regrets, it was learning how to have ambition and something to fight for. When Pod rode into Winterfell, at the side of Lady Brienne, after it had been conquered by the Stark forces, he was no longer the boy who had barely survived the Blackwater. He had seen so much since then. He'd lost Lord Tyrion and he'd gained Lady Brienne. Where Lord Tyrion had been a comfortable home, Lady Brienne made him want to be more, be better, and she taught him to be too. One day, if he lived through what was to come, Pod knew he would be a knight. And if he didn't live to become a knight, he'd die fighting for a good cause.

Lady Sansa had changed too. Pod only had an inkling of what she had had to go through, but that was more than enough. The strength he'd seen in her in King's Landing had been tempered into pure steel. She had become a fighter too, if in a different manner. She looked like a queen even if it was her brother who wore a crown. But she didn't seem to envy him, and Pod could understand why. A brother was more important than a crown.

One thing had not changed, though. Pod still loved her. But it wasn't like in the songs. He no longer felt the burning, fiery passion he had at first. He no longer saw a goddess

when he saw her, nor did he feel the need to stumble over his own feet in her presence. He hadn't felt the desperate need to get back to her when they were apart either, like they sang about in the songs. He still loved her. That sad, longing hurt was still there, chipping away at his heart, but his love had changed. Or maybe it hadn't been love before, just infatuation. Maybe *this* was true love. This heavy, grounding sensation that spread through his body as he watched her stand on the battlements surveying her domain. All Pod knew as he followed his lady and teacher up the stairs was that he would die for Sansa Stark. She but had to ask.

"I'm glad you're back," Sansa told Brienne, also sparing a nod and a smile for Pod, who took them gratefully.

"I'm sorry I failed you," Lady Brienne began, but Sansa held up one hand to silence her.

"You would have failed me had you never tried. You're no more responsible for my uncle's actions than I am. I'm just glad you're back. I need you for what's to come."

There was so much more to it, both for Lady Brienne and for Pod. They had friends on the other side, even if they served Lady Sansa. Sometimes, that felt like a betrayal to Pod. But as he had changed, he had learned that nothing, not even love, was simple. He might love her, but that didn't mean he loved his friends any less. He just hoped he'd never be asked to choose.

"And what is to come?" Lady Brienne asked.

Pod wasn't sure he wanted to know. Lady Sansa didn't answer either. Instead, she sighed and looked down towards the great hall. There, in the shadows, stood Lord Petyr Baelish, talking with Lord Royce. A cold shiver entirely unrelated to the northern weather worked its way down Pod's spine when he saw him. Lord Tyrion had warned him about the man many a time, and Pod knew he was no match for a schemer. Neither was Lady Brienne. They could only hope that Lady Sansa was. His heart froze at the thought that she might not be, but there was nothing he could do. His love was a powerless one.

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King's Landing had settled into a kind of calm, Pod observed. After years, it felt as if people could finally breathe easy. After all the danger, destruction and dragon fire, there had been peace. An uneasy one, until the lords and ladies had decided the fate of the realm, but now everything was settled. The armies of the dead were gone, the last dragon had left, and the dead were buried. Now, people could concentrate on rebuilding the city

and their lives. And those that had survived found themselves with a plethora of opportunities they would never have had before. Among them, Pod.

He had been in the White Sword Tower before, on errands. But never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined he'd one day live here. And yet, now he did. One of seven. He stared at the innocuous book that lay on the weirwood table on display. He'd watched Ser Brienne as she'd added his name and deeds on a fresh page. She'd told of his faithfulness, of his dedication, of his fight against the White Walkers. Finally, she'd added how she'd knighted him just a day before on behalf of the newly crowned King Bran. Pod still didn't quite know how to feel about it all. It all felt like a dream. On a whim, he opened the White Book to its latest page, and sure enough, there was his name. "Ser Podrick Payne", it read. He thought back to his family, to Ser Lorimer, to all those who had known him before, when he was the least of House Payne. And now, he'd surpassed all of them. If only it didn't feel like half an accident, if only he felt like he truly was one of the great knights of the kingdoms. He didn't feel unworthy, like he once had, far from it. But worthy of a white cloak?

"You'll grow into it," Ser Brienne had promised him when she'd handed him his cloak, and he believed her. She was the greatest knight he'd ever known, and if she believed in him, who was he to argue?

The door opened, and Pod turned, expecting to see the Lady Commander, returned from her meeting with the small council, but it wasn't Brienne of Tarth who entered the common room. It was someone he hadn't expected to see again, at least so soon. It was the Queen of the North. Lady – *Queen* Sansa looked as lovely as ever, even with the austere black dress. That she smiled at him only made her look lovelier. Pod's heart jumped in his chest.

"Ser Brienne isn't here yet, Your Grace," Pod told her with a bow.

"I have spoken to her already," Queen Sansa said while her eyes took in the room. "I came to speak to you, Ser Podrick. I don't think I've ever thanked you for your service, not personally, at least. And I wanted to do so, before I leave."

"That isn't necessary, Your Grace," Pod assured her. Because it wasn't. Everything he'd done, he'd done gladly and would do again. He didn't regret any of it.

"Necessary? No," the queen all but japed. "But thanks should come from the heart, not from a sense of obligation, don't you think?"

Pod couldn't argue with that. And so, he didn't.

"I *want* to thank you, Ser Podrick, for helping House Stark, for helping save the realms, for serving me, and, for now serving my brother, who will need all the help he can get.

Starks don't fare well south of the Neck. But with you and Lady Brienne at his side, I have no doubt he'll succeed. If ever you need my help, for any reason, don't hesitate to ask for it."

"I..." Pod didn't know what to say. "Thank you," he finally said.

Queen Sansa smiled then, wide and genuine and free of worry. Pod didn't remember her ever smiling like that in all the years he'd known her. It made her look younger and more grown up at the same time. It was the smile of a queen, not that of a scared girl or a princess worried about her family's fate. It was infectious. Pod found himself smiling back broadly without meaning to. He wished he could see her smile like this forever – but she was bound to travel back to her kingdom, and he was sworn to protect her brother. A part of him was sad, but there was another, bigger one that was happy. They would both be where they belonged. And that would be enough.

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It had been four years. Almost as long as the wars had lasted and as long as he'd known her. Podrick Payne would be lying if he said he hadn't missed her. He'd also be lying if he said it had been unbearable. It had been more than bearable – Podrick loved his new life. Ser Brienne had been right when she'd said he'd grow into his role. And so, it hadn't been a surprise when King Brandon had decided to take Podrick with him on a visit to his sister queen. Ser Brienne was needed on the small council, so Podrick had been the obvious choice.

The North had changed in the intervening years. Podrick couldn't help but marvel at it; but then, he'd only ever seen it depopulated by wars, devastated by the Boltons and covered in winter snows. It looked friendlier now, its people too. But none were as welcome a sight as Queen Sansa. She stood in front of the great hall, where the delegation (sans her brother) bowed, and she looked regal and more of a Stark than Podrick had ever seen her. She wore a dress of gray with white accents, a silver crown in the shape of two direwolves sparkled in her auburn hair. And her smile, it was still as Podrick remembered it from their last meeting.

There was a feast of course. After the siblings visited the crypts and the godswood and then talked in the queen's solar. It was a feast more for the bannermen and servants than for them, but both king and queen attended it dutifully. It was pitch black outside already when Ser Alyn took Podrick's place and he could finally relax. He took a tankard of strong, northern ale, leaned back against the wall and listened to the bards play songs from all over the kingdoms. Soon enough, his eyes were drawn to Queen Sansa. He couldn't help it. Even after all these years, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever met.

Suddenly, she looked back. Podrick averted his eyes the moment he noticed – knights weren't supposed to stare at queens – but it had been too late. From the corner of his eye he could see her smile. Then she whispered something into her brother's ear and stood up, weaving across the room in a regal stride until she stood before him. She could still make him feel like a hapless little boy, it seemed.

“Ser Podrick, I haven't danced all evening. Would you do me the honor?”

Pod felt himself blush. He nodded, because who would say no to a queen? Not that he wanted to. He offered her his hand and led her to the middle of the room where other couples already swayed to the music. All eyes were on them and Podrick was grateful to the fact that Lord Tyrion had insisted he learn how to dance after the war.

“The years have been good to you,” Queen Sansa remarked.

“Not as good as they were to you,” Podrick replied in earnest, making her laugh out loud. For a few moments after, there was only music between them as they moved. The queen was a graceful dancer, and Podrick did his best to keep up. Time felt like it was flowing past him; all he could see was her, first for one dance, then for another. It was like a dream, and he wouldn't remember how or why he followed her out into the courtyard after, where the music and the laughter sounded as far away as the neighing of the horses in their stables. Above, the stars and the moon were following their own paths.

“Thank you, Pod,” she said. “I haven't danced like this in a while.”

And nobody had called him Pod in a while – well, except for Lord Tyrion, who was the only one who couldn't shake the habit. “I haven't either, Your Grace,” he told her.

The queen smiled at him – she'd been smiling the whole time, and Pod didn't want her to ever stop.

“Did you miss it? The North, I mean. I did for almost the entire time I was in the south. I missed the scent of the pine forests, the snow, even the ale. All of it. You've spent quite some time here too. Do you feel the same, or is it something that is unique to northmen?”

Podrick thought for a moment. He hadn't missed the North. But he didn't miss the Westerlands either, or King's Landing. He supposed he was never one to get attached to places, only to people. “No. But I did miss you.”

The moment he said it, he knew he hadn't said what he'd meant to say, and said more than he wanted to in the same moment. He saw it in her face too, the confusion, the dawning realization. He felt himself blush again, deeper this time. It was the ale, he thought. He'd never confessed his love to anyone, much less a queen.

“That wasn’t—” he tried to correct himself, but before he could finish, she laid a finger on his lips. She was smiling again, a little deviously this time. Then she moved closer until there were only inches between them. The torches and stars were reflected in her eyes.

“You know, Ser Podrick, when I was a little girl, all I wanted was for a dashing knight to sweep me of my feet. I wanted my own Florian – a brave and gallant man with a true heart. Then I grew up. I thought that part of me died in King’s Landing, but maybe not. Maybe there’s still a part of that little girl alive in me somewhere.”

With that, she leaned forward, and she kissed him.

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