

## Hugs and Lullabies

By Uluscri

In the final breaths of night during her twenty-third birthday, Matlien took out the box her father had left for her. Over the years, she had tumbled around the thought of smashing, burning, or throwing the imperfect, scratchy thing in a river, and yet, there it was. Untouched.

Her fingers trembled at the key, though she was not sure if it was with anticipation, fear, or anger—the writhing thing within her had far too much energy to observe it for what it truly was. With a snap, the lock clicked, and the old wood cracked open. A deep, dusty smell rose.

Within was a letter, written in ink with a practiced hand.

*Beloved Matlien,*

*Gods, I hope you waited. It is more than important that you did. If, for whatever reason, you haven't, then cast this back into its box and have patience. I promise what I have to say will only make sense when you are my age.*

*The ink on this page cannot express how sorry I am that this has to happen. A pitiful word, sorry is. Too little weight. Devastated is more correct. Damned.*

*You shouldn't forgive me. You should hate me—the Gods know I do. I only ask that you understand. That you imagine yourself where I am.*

*They'll have told you any number of things, but most of all, they'll never have learned the full truth of what occurred. Of why I left you. Whatever has been distilled to you cannot be anything but a somewhat-truth—the kind that people believe in with their whole hearts, but is inevitably false. I only ask that you cast away whatever you think happened and read these words with open thoughts. Put this note down and wait for your head to clear before continuing, if need be.*

Matlien, of course, did no such thing. The remaining words were more erratic and smudged, though clearly written with the same hand.

*By the time you read this, I will have been long dead, whether or not you know it. If I could strangle the Gods one-by-one to make it possible to hold you again, to sing you one more lullaby, I would. But it cannot be so. No matter how much I scream into the sky, none of them will come down from Heaven.*

*I imagine they told you I left you for love, that I forsook you to run away with some woman. They put it in harsher terms, I'm sure. You've probably said far worse than they ever did. I do not blame you. That's what it must look like from the outside, after all.*

*Valen and I are not in love. In normal circumstances, I would hardly call her a friend. Sometimes I curse her for the decision she has forced upon me, but were I in her place, I'm not sure I wouldn't do as she did.*

*She has a family of her own. Her husband and children are all Dunmish. Should I do my job right, knowledge of this will never have come out. Gods, I hope you do not harbor any prejudice for the Dunmish, but if you do, I beg of you, whatever you have heard about them, cast such hatred from your heart. They are a scared people, and only evil has been done to them.*

*For reasons too long for this letter, hiding is no longer possible. They need to leave this land, and it is I they have come to for help. I wanted to spit in her face, to tell her that I*

have a daughter of my own to worry for, but it was precisely thinking of you that brought me to help her. What if you were the one in danger? I would do anything so that you might live. So I couldn't turn away a family asking for just that.

Should you have a family of your own, I know you will understand. I feel it from the depths of my sadness just as surely as I know you will live a hard life. It is an evil thing that you must grow up without a father, but it is still a life, and that is infinitely more than Valen's children could hope for here.

I'm certain there will come a moment when I must sacrifice myself so that they can all escape. The certainty lurks in my bones.

I wish there was more I could write here, but time is short. This is all so insufficient. This is both a goodbye and a greeting. I don't know the kind of woman you will have grown into, but whoever you turn out to be, I love you.

Matlien blinked, releasing the tears that had coiled at the corners of her eyes. They plipped onto the paper and soaked into its old grains. She set it on the table and stared at the words from afar. Her sobs started slow, but built, until there was nothing to do but hug her knees close.

Memory came, unbidden, ones she had forced away years and years before. She pretended he was there, holding her again. No other thoughts to think or breaths to breathe.