

GRAVETENDING

a story about witches

by Dreyer

*We are not daily beggars, who beg from door to door,
But we are witches of the Tow'r, as you have met before,
So bring us a treat! Bring us a sweet!
Bring us a lovely thing to eat!
Should anyone not, we'll stamp our feet,
And no one will sleep at all! (At all!)
And no one will sleep at all!*

The singing of the witches grew louder as the costumed procession came down the road, marching and dancing and flying around, the amber glow of their pumpkin lanterns lighting up the dusk — and Samuel and Annalise waited eagerly at their doorstep to receive them. Indeed, the thing the newlyweds were looking forward to most, when they bought their new house, was being able to bake a whole platter of sweet treats in their very own oven and bring them out on Hallow's Eve, to lavish upon the witches of their local Tower when they came to call. To one of them, in particular.

It was more than a year ago that Samuel had first stepped foot into Milena's atelier, desperate to learn, by any means necessary, how he could win Annalise's heart. It was her communion with the spirits of generations past, conducted in pregnant silence over a divination board, that revealed that the young woman's wild antics were her way of begging him to tame her. And so it was that the next time she teased him, he gathered up enough courage to grab her by the ear, take her behind a house and slap her bottom until it glowed as red as a ripe apple — and then, to his surprise, she fell upon him. From there, it was love, and from there, marriage, and from there, a new house and a new life.

And so, as the crowd of witches came to their door and they received them one by one, complimenting their costumes and setting a pair of cookies in their baskets and then sending them off with a playful slap to the seat, they kept their eyes out for the witch to whom they owed no small part of their happiness. Sam knew her better, of course, though he was unsure if he could recognize her face in anything other than the black and white skull makeup that she had worn when he visited. He happened to spot a few with similar locks of long raven-black hair, but when they came to the front he found that their faces didn't quite match. As the line grew shorter and shorter with no sight of her, they resorted to asking the next girl, a chestnut-haired lass with painted-on freckles and her nose painted black, dressed in brown pajamas with a pair of deer antlers strapped to her head.

"Trick or treat!" the witch chirped, holding out a basket already loaded with treats.

"What a lovely deer costume!" Sam said, as he dropped a pair of biscuits into her basket. "I don't think I've seen you around before. What's your name?"

"Wreath!" the witch happily answered. She stuck her thumb in the collar of her pajamas, so she could show off the silver chain around her neck, bearing a small emerald cut into the shape of a leaf. "Medicine Witch."

"Nice to meet you, Wreath. I'm Samuel, and this is my wife, Annalise. Do you happen to know a witch named Milena?"

Wreath furrowed her brow. "Of the Dead?"

"Yes! We've been waiting for her, but we haven't seen her — or at least, we haven't recognized her. Is she among you?"

Wreath tightened her lips. "No... she's not here," she said, with a little shake of her head. "She has business elsewhere tonight."

The couple were surprised to hear this. Business, for a witch? On the Hallowed Night? They had always thought that this was a night of pleasure for their kind.

"Well, can you tell us where we might find her?" asked Annalise. "We wanted to thank her especially. We have a gift for her, and we don't mind delivering it ourselves if need be."

The witch grimaced and squirmed uneasily. "I, er... I, I don't think I'm supposed to tell you. I could get in trouble." She glanced off to the side. "Sorry..."

"Oh..." Annalise smiled patiently, but her disappointment surely showed. "All right. Well, next you see her, give her our regards, will you? And let her know to stop by our place tomorrow, so we can give her her gift."

"Mmmh... yes, I will." Wreath put on a little smile and turned around, sticking her bottom out and wagging her hips. Annalise thanked her with a firm but gentle spank, right under the cute little fluffy deer tail on the back of her pajamas!

Wreath pranced away from their doorstep, and paused to look back at the couple as they greeted the last few witches in line. She hurried back onto the road where the rest of her group was waiting, and she tapped the shoulder of one of her companions, a red-haired girl dressed as a dragon.

"Rosa! I'm gonna go ahead and check on Milena, okay?"

"Hey, *shhhhh*." Rosa held a clawed finger up to her lips. "Why do you want to go there now? We've still plenty of houses to visit!"

"I know, but... I, I'm getting impatient!" Wreath bounced in place. "And look! Look what I got from Peter's place!" She reached into her basket and pulled out a little paper box, and opened it so Rosa could see inside. "A block of fudge! I want to bring it to Milena, before I forget and eat most of it myself!"

Rosa sighed. "You sure you're okay to go on your own?"

"I'm sure! Don't worry, I'll be careful. I've got plenty of light, and I've got plenty of treats. And I'll make *absolutely sure* that I'm *not followed!*"

"Er... yeah, right. Fine. We'll catch up with you soon."

Wreath broke away from the group, just as Sam was sending away the last of the witches with a swat to her bottom. Over her head, they could see Wreath walking at a leisurely pace, sticking by the fence that separated the path from the meadow. She would take a few steps, kicking at the gravel by her feet, then stop and look over her shoulder. Take a few steps, kick a stone, stop, look over her shoulder again.

Sam and Anna stood at the door, and they waited for the witches' procession to disappear into the distance. As did Wreath.



The sun had all but disappeared, and darkness veiled the autumn reds and golds of the forest canopy. Wreath's lantern shone upon the dirt trail, littered with leaves that crunched softly under her boots. Behind, Sam and Anna followed Wreath's light from a considerable remove, sticking close together with their own lanterns low. Sam's other hand held Anna's shoulder, and Anna's other hand held a bulging sack the size of a pomelo, cinched shut with a length of thin cord.

The trail went on and on, further and further from the village, deeper into the woods. Wreath would stop every now and again, and look back over her shoulder, and skip for a few steps if the couple had caught up a little too much. The two of them wanted to ask where she was taking them, how much further they had to go, but the witch was making it as clear as possible that they needed to stay quiet, stay back.

Just as Sam himself was starting to have his doubts about all this, they saw another light up ahead, where the rough trail finally led into a small clearing. Wreath stopped and held up a hand behind her, and she held her wicker basket behind her as far as her arm could reach, giving it several pointed shakes. Annalise took the signal, and she stepped as close as she dared, reaching out as far as she could to drop the satchel into Wreath's basket. The witch then continued into the clearing, and the couple stopped just at the trail's end and watched from behind the trees.

In the middle of the clearing was a stone slab, about five feet tall, covered in ivy and moss; and all around it sat a number of small stone altars, each one bearing a lit votive candle. And there, slumped against the face of the central stone, arms slack and legs crossed, sat Milena of the Dead.

In the candlelight, they could see her features, and there was no mistaking them. Her raven-black hair, fallen over her shoulders. Her oval face painted in white and black, in the image of a skull, just as it was when she had read Samuel's fortune all that time ago. Her cold blue eyes half-open, her lips slightly parted. Her head was lolled to one side, and her left hand lay inside an empty wicker basket by her hip. The lantern's light reflected off the obsidian black scales of a pit viper that slithered slowly across her shoulders. On her clavicle, just above the collar of her shirt, were two perfectly round puncture wounds.

There was no light in her eyes.

Annalise was the first to notice — or at least, the first to speak up about it. "Sam, she's not moving..." she whispered.

"*Shhh.*" Sam was worried too, certainly — but more telling was that Wreath was not acting like anything was wrong.

The witch took slow and thoughtful steps across the leaf-strewn ground, and when she arrived in front of Milena, she carefully sat herself down on the grass, setting her lantern and her basket down at her sides. She placed her hands on her knees, and she bowed her head deeply, antlers nearly touching the ground, and stayed like that for nearly a minute. After she rose, she reached into her wicker basket and pulled out that little paper box, opening it up and pulling out the block of fudge — with one corner conspicuously missing. She broke the block in half, and she leaned forward and placed the unmarred half into Milena's basket. For a moment, something seemed to glow inside the basket, a little greenish glint in the midst of all the amber.

"That was from Peter's family," Wreath said to the motionless Milena, speaking just above a whisper. "I think they bought it from Geoffrey's shop. They always do well this time of year."

Her hand reached back again, and this time picked up the sack that Annalise had placed inside. "...And these," she said, holding the sack in both hands, "are from Samuel and Annalise. They..." She paused for a moment, and her shoulders drew in as she wiggled her finger into the opening. She drew herself in a little smaller — and then there was a muffled but unmistakable crunch.

Sam and Anna looked at each other, aghast. Did she just...?

"Mmm... they're good," said Wreath. "You'll like them a lot." She stuck her hand into the satchel and pulled out a ring-shaped cookie dusted with sugar, and she placed it into the basket. She put her hand in the satchel to draw another cookie, and she pulled herself in once again...

Annalise rose up and stepped forward, her anger getting the better of her. "Now that's more than enough—!"

"Anna, wait!" Sam called out.

Wreath snapped up to attention, and she stared back at Annalise with eyes wide and mouth agape, almost looking like she was going to say something — before a sudden stray wind blew out every light at once.

At that moment, the dark of night somehow felt darker, the chill somehow colder. Samuel caught up with his wife and wrapped his arms around her, eyes scanning the darkness for a sign of the troublesome little witch. "Wreath!" he called out, his voice quavering. "What's going on?!"

"Umm...! It, it's okay! Probably!" Wreath squeaked. "Just, just stay where you are, and I'll — eep!"

An ill wind whipped and howled all around them, and husband and wife clung to each other for protection. Streaks of pale light began to cut through the dark, tracing circles around the two of them, and there came a sound like whispering. Slowly, the lights formed into shapes: gossamer cloaks with hoods, faces indiscernible, swirling around them like hunters circling their prey.

The whispers grew louder, harsher. One of the apparitions broke away from the circle, and drew closer. Annalise screamed, and Samuel shouted, and a pair of hands, emaciated, skin cracked and patched, nails like claws, reached toward them, and from the endless darkness within its cowl came a terrible hiss...

And then, the specter was pulled away from them with a single, strong jerk.

"All right, that's quite enough of that."

Grasping the ghost's cowl with her thumb and forefinger, like a mother pinching the ear of a naughty child, was a specter in the shape of the witch that they knew. Her long flowing hair, her cold and piercing eyes, her skull-mask makeup, all cast in a pale glow like the light of the moon.

The ghost snapped away from Milena's grasp, and it turned on her with a sharp hiss — only to be met with a swat on the head and a stern shake of the finger! "*No! No!*" Milena chided. The ghost rubbed its crown with a wizened hand, and it drifted away as if sulking. Its companions followed after it, and together they faded from view.

Sam's breathing came back to him at last, and he let out a deep sigh of relief. He turned his attention to the specter of the witch, hovering well above the forest floor. "Milena! You, you saved us!" he gasped. "What... what's happened to you?" Fear and worry were clear on his face. "Why is your body...?" A shaky hand gestured in roughly the direction of the central stone.

Milena blinked once. She casually turned her head to look where Sam was pointing, and remembered her own body sitting there against the stone, unmoving. "Ah. I see." She then shut her eyes and spread her arms, and from her body came a number of small wisps, flickering like the flames of a candle. They drifted in all directions across the shrine, illuminating the space in soft blue light. Wreath was squatting on the floor in a ball, shivering, and as she sensed light, she took her hands off of her head and quickly rose up, looking rather embarrassed.

"Fear not: I am not dead. Not forever so, anyhow. I have gone under what is called a 'death trance,' which separates my soul from my body. By sun's first light, the trance will be broken: my soul will return to its place, and I will awaken no worse for the wear."

Sam and Anna nodded slowly in understanding, but their furrowed brows and parted lips betrayed their continued confusion.

"More importantly than that, however." Milena folded her arms and crossed her legs, frowning and staring hard at the couple. "What are you two doing here?"

"We... we didn't see you among the trick-or-treating party tonight," said Annalise. "We wanted to find you, and Wreath here seemed to know where you were..."

"I— I never told them to follow me!" Wreath blurted! "I was coming to pay my respects and they followed of their own accord...!"

Sam and Anna stared at the witch, eyes wide and mouths agape in offense! Wreath flinched and withered under their stare.

"Wreath?" Milena turned her attention to the witch and narrowed her eyes. "Is that the truth?"

Wreath bowed her head and drew her shoulders in, and her fingers fussed with the fabric of her pajamas. "...No. That was a lie. I'm sorry," she mewled, and started to twist from side to side. "I did mean for them to follow me."

Milena's specter sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She floated back away from the three of them, toward the top of the monument, and she perched upon it like a dragon. "Samuel. Annalise. Do you know upon what land you tread?"

"I, I dare say if we did," Samuel answered, his teeth still chattering, "we may have thought twice about treading it!"

Exasperation showed on Milena's face, but she nodded in understanding. "Wreath. Move my body, if you would."

Wreath hesitated for a moment, but then stepped forward and slipped her hands under Milena's armpits, grunting as she started to scoot her aside. Samuel stepped in to help, taking Milena by the ankles so that they could lay her down gently on her back. With her body out of the way, and with the help of a wisp of pale fire from Milena's spectral hand, the face of the monument could be seen. At the top, there was a relief of a crescent moon, and against it the figure of a witch with a conical hat riding astride a broom, a cat perched at the tip of its handle; and below that, an epitaph:

HERE LIE OUR SISTERS
FROM THE TIME BEFORE

KILLED BY OUR FATHERS
AND BURIED WITHOUT NAMES

MAY THE TERRORS THEY WROUGHT
AND THE TERRORS THEY SUFFERED
NEVER BE REPEATED

Annalise's lips moved as she slowly and quietly read the epitaph... and then her hand raised to cover them. "This is...!"

Milena nodded solemnly. "Beneath your feet are the bones of the witches who could not be saved. Who we did not know how to save," she said. "Many of them still haunt this place, even now. On this night, when magic is at its strongest, their souls stir to life... As one who communes with the dead, it falls upon me to keep them company, to deliver them offerings of food and drink and celebrate this hallowed night with them. And to ensure that whatever wrath or hunger remains with them, is not visited upon the living."

A silence fell over the grove. There was only the rustle of leaves in the wind, and the distant call of an owl.

"...Milena, I..." Annalise swallowed and bowed her head deeply. "I'm so sorry. We had no idea your business tonight was so solemn... We only wished to find you so we could treat you for your kindnesses to us." She stooped down and picked up the satchel from where Wreath had dropped it on

the ground. "We meant to give you these cookies as a special gift for you, but..." She stood up and held out the satchel in both hands. "Perhaps you might share them with your sisters, too...?"

Milena alighted from atop the gravestone and drifted over to have a closer look. Annalise opened the satchel so she could see inside: dozens of homemade biscuits, some covered with a sparkling sugary crust, some checkered like a chess board, some set with glistening jewels of currant and raspberry jam.

"...They look wonderful," said Milena. She tapped her left finger against the inside of her right hand. "Pray, place them in my palm."

Annalise held the satchel out toward Milena's specter, who simply stared deadpan at her.

"My *palm*, please."

Annalise blushed, and her eyes fell down to the ragdoll of a body at her feet. Sam and Wreath worked together to sit her back up against the gravestone, and then Annalise gingerly set the satchel down in her limp, open hand.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, a wisp of blue flame rose from the neck of the satchel, and the couple watched as their gift was slowly consumed by the pale fire, filling the air with the smell of burning sugar. Within a minute, there was nothing left in her palm but ash... but Milena's specter, hovering just above, was holding a full satchel in her hand.

Several ghosts swarmed around Milena, peeking over her shoulders and around her sides. Gnarled and charred hands reached out from under their sheets and dipped into the sack, pulling out the specters of cookies baked with love and gratitude. They stuffed the sweet offering into their cowls — and even without faces, somehow their expressions seemed to brighten! They swept in to nestle against Milena, and they seemed to whisper something into her ears.

"My sisters are pleased by your offering," said Milena with a smile. "They forgive you your trespasses. As do I: You could not have known, after all." Her gaze turned to the witch standing beside them, and her expression turned cold. "Wreath, on the other hand, absolutely should have."

Wreath gulped.

Milena drifted down closer to Wreath, hands on her hips as she bore over her. "Why did you bring wights¹ to this place, of all places? On this night, of all nights?!" she scolded. "You realize it's only by God's favor that things ended as well as they did! You could have put them in terrible danger! What were you thinking?!"

"I...!"

Wreath bowed her head, hands at her sides, shrinking under Milena's gaze. Then her hands tightened into fists, and she lifted her head and stared back at her in defiance.

1 **wight:** n. (*primarily used among witches*) a human being who is not a witch.

"I couldn't just ignore them! They were so disappointed they couldn't see you tonight! You never come trick-or-treating with the rest of us...! It's not just me that misses you! The people of the village want to see you too! And... I don't know!" Wreath threw her hands up. "Maybe I wanted our sisters to see the wights too! To see for themselves how nice they can be..."

Milena hovered there blinking for a moment, as if she hadn't expected that sort of answer. Her shoulders slumped, and she shut her eyes and let out a sigh. "Wreath... they know how nice wights can be. They know where their offerings come from. Do you think I don't tell them?" She put on a patient smile. "I know you miss me when you're out on your night walk. But I don't want you to think I feel deprived. I *like* being able to help our sisters like this. And I'm happy that the rest of you always come by to share your gifts with us. And at any rate, I have the whole rest of the year to share with the village. Yuletide is not too far away, after all."

"Nnnh... that's true," Wreath groaned, once more bowing her head and gripping at her flannel.

"...Still, I'm happy to hear that you've done this all thinking about others." Milena's ghostly hand brushed against Wreath's cheek, and Wreath shivered slightly from the chill of her touch.

"But you've still done what you were not supposed to do. And don't think I've forgotten about you stealing bites from those cookies that were meant for me, you little piglet!" Milena dug her fingers into Wreath's crown, making her chatter and quake until she pulled away!

The Death Witch turned her attention to the couple. "Much as I would like to tend to my sister properly, right now, I'm afraid that I cannot wake from my trance until daybreak. Samuel, Annalise... would it pain you to tend to her in my stead?"

The couple only had to share a brief glance with each other, before they nodded their heads to her. "It would be our pleasure," said Samuel.

"Lovely," said Milena. She gestured to the serpent draped across her corpse's shoulders. "Pitch will make you a good instrument for the job."

"Not with *Pitch*!" Wreath whined, stamping her feet!

"Hold your tongue, Wreath. Or next I wake I will find you and take a bar of soap to it!"

The black viper slithered down Milena's right arm, and it began to curl itself up in her palm. It wriggled and twisted, and began to fray on one end: within moments, a black martinet sat in Milena's cold hand, waiting to be picked up. Annalise invited Samuel to take it, and she kept watch on Wreath while she unbuttoned her pajamas, huffing and pouting all the while. She pulled her arms from the sleeves, then wiggled down the bottoms along with her bloomers and bent herself over, her torso bare and her nude bottom sticking up!

Samuel stood by her side, and he places his free hand on the small of her back. He gripped the martinet's snakeskin handle firmly, and with movements well practiced over the past year and few months, he swung down and lashed the leather tassels hard across both cheeks!

WHACK! "Thank you for trying to help us, Wreath."

Wreath nodded and swallowed, rubbing the tears from her eyes on her sleeve. She took the flint and tinder from Milena's pockets, and she toddled over to each candle to relight it, pausing only briefly between each one to rub at her aching backside.

Milena parted from the crowd of ghosts and hovered before Sam and Anna. "The rest of my coven will be coming soon, to give their offerings. You are welcome to stay with us a little longer, if you wish. But I ask you this: do not come here on this night again. I will happily come to visit you the day before or after, if it please you."

"Of course!" said Samuel. "We would be delighted to have you."

"We won't disturb your work again," Annalise added. "But please, let us show you our appreciation when you can."

"I will. Thank you." Milena drifted in between the two, and she chilled each of their cheeks with a gentle kiss. "And please, both of you, come visit me at the Tower in six months' time. I promise, I shall be spending St. Walpurgis' Night among the living."

Soon the grave was awash in amber light again, and there was no more need for Milena to keep her wisps flitting about. In a little while, the four of them would see flickers of pumpkin lanterns dancing among the trees, as the rest of the coven came down the trail to pay their respects to witches past. They were surprised to find Samuel and Annalise there, of course, but Milena's specter was able to explain everything — in particular, why Wreath was walking so funny — and they were agreeable about letting the two wights stay and watch for as long as they wished. The witches took turns placing treats from their own hauls into Milena's basket by the gravestone — cookies and candies, apples and prunes, jellies and meringues — and each one burned up in pale blue fire, to be given as a kindness to their departed sisters. Then they sat about in the candlelight and told stories about their revelries, and they sang and joked and teased each other (they especially teased Wreath) and laughed, and Sam and Anna offered songs and stories of their own, while the ghosts of their sisters from days of old watched from above, twirling and swirling and dancing in the candlelight, and even in this place of all places, the dark of night was just that little bit brighter, and the chill of autumn was just that little bit warmer.