

Minerva Wakes

[By Holly Lisle](#)

CHAPTER 1

“No! Please don’t shoot!” The hospital’s data processing director groveled in the aisle. “I’ll never do it again, I promise! Just let me live!” Mrs. Mindley was on her knees, begging and sobbing. Minerva had waited a long time to see her like that.

“Too late, you inconsiderate cow – you’ve blocked the aisle one time too many. Now you die!” The machine gun in Minerva’s hands jumped and snarled, and Minerva gleefully splattered bits of Mrs. Mindley over the entire soup section.

Minerva Kiakra’s lips curled into a tight smile as she imagined that scene. It beat reality. Reality was that Mrs. Mindley’s shopping cart angled across most of the Soup/Sauce/Pasta aisle, allowing no passage, while Mrs. Mindley’s wide-load rear end blocked the rest. The woman bent over the display of Tomato and Rice soup, carefully choosing cans – Minerva was unable to determine the method the other woman was using to establish can ripeness, but three out of every four of the little suckers were obviously failing some sort of test.

The Chicken and Noodle soup was tantalizingly within view, and completely out of reach.

“***Chicken and Noodle soup – 6 cans!!!” Darryl had marked on the shopping list.

Minerva stared at the list, and gritted her teeth, and waited. But patience wasn’t going to work. Minerva suspected malice in Mrs. Mindley’s glacial slowness. She was going to have to be direct. Toughness was what the situation called for, she decided.

She cleared her throat. "Excuse me, Mrs. Mindley, but I'm in a hurry."

The woman didn't even look up. She just waved her hand in one of those dismissive wait a minute gestures that meant she'd move when she was damned good and ready, and not before.

Minerva raised her voice a notch. "Mrs. Mindley, I need to get past you."

Her voice sounded contemptible and pleading in her own ears. She could imagine how it sounded to Mrs. Mindley – and sure enough, the woman continued to ignore her.

Minerva watched her knuckles whiten on the cart handle. "My baby-sitter needs to get home, and she can't leave until I get there."

The other woman glared up at her and, with a vicious snort, moved her cart just enough that Minerva could squeeze by if she dragged her left shoulder along the shelves on the opposite side. Naturally, doing that meant all the boxes of macaroni and spaghetti stacked on those shelves toppled to the floor. They rattled loudly behind her, and Minerva cringed – but the baby-sitter really was in a hurry, and the weather was building toward a North Carolina ice storm that was going to lock everyone in for a week or better. She was miserably short of time. So, feeling guilty, she left the boxes on the floor, and, as she'd expected, she heard the old bat snort again.

"The nerve of some people."

Minerva's imagination created a fantasy shopping cart for her that featured twin-mounted submachine guns on the front end and a flamethrower at ankle height, and pleased herself by mentally frying Mrs. Mindley to a cinder after gunning her down. That would teach the old harridan to block the aisle. Or to drop a stack of reports on Minerva's desk and demand that she handle them because they dealt with data problems in the Administrative, not Data Processing, Department.

Feeling better, Minerva returned to shopping. "Six cans of Chicken Noodle, some Chicken and Stars for the kids, and some asparagus soup for me..." she muttered. Then she checked the price on the asparagus soup and put it back. It was a luxury

that would have to wait until another time. She'd have Chicken and Stars with the kids.

She snarled and grumbled her way down the aisles, checking off Darryl's special items with an extra dash of venom; Darryl was going on his biennial health kick, which Minerva knew from experience would last exactly five days and would drive the rest of the family nuts in the process. She also knew from experience that it was easier to give in to his nonsensical demands than to fight them.

"Wheat germ. Ri-i-i-i-ight. He's going to sprinkle it on a huge serving of ice cream and claim it's a health treat. And I'll end up sneaking it into casseroles and homemade cookies for a year to get rid of it." Nevertheless, she did find some wheat germ and tossed it into the cart.

"Sunflower seeds." She just rolled her eyes and sighed.

She brushed her bangs out of her face and surveyed the list critically. Thank God she was almost done. The cart would give a junk-food junkie nightmares – it was full of whole-wheat crackers and bean sprouts, exotic vegetables and strange fruits, and chicken and fish and expensive lean ground beef. And this mess, most of which she and the kids would eat after Darryl got bored playing fitness expert, was going to cost twice the usual weekly amount.

She cruised into the cereal aisle in a foul temper.

***WHEATIES!!! – BIG BOX!!! the list demanded.

That was the last of her beloved spouse's special items.

Wheaties, for chrissakes, she thought. Ugh! Not even I like them.

She marched the entire length of the aisle, looking for Wheaties. There weren't any.

"Oh, damn," she muttered. Darryl would throw a royal tantrum. She turned around and looked back the way she had come. There, at the very opposite end of the row, on the very top shelf, a single box of Wheaties sat in lonely splendor.

She sighed and backtracked, carefully not looking at the box. If she looked at it, some other shopper was sure to notice the direction of her glance and decide to beat her to it. Grocery

shopping was a vicious, competitive event even in good weather. Right before an ice storm, when "Snowbound Panic" took over, it became truly bloodthirsty.

However, this time her strategy worked. The box was still there when she shoved her cart in front of it and reached up. Her reflexes were a little off. It had been an awful day, which was segueing into an awful evening. Edgy as she was, her reach for the Wheaties was more of a desperate grab. The box was hers – until she fumbled it away with one clumsy move... and saw it grabbed in midair by another shopper.

Like a wild thing, she faced the devious thief, teeth bared, warning growl readied in the back of her throat–
The growl stopped, strangled, halfway to delivery.

A dragon stared back at her out of serene amber eyes.

It looks real, Minerva thought. What sort of promotion is the supermarket having that uses a dragon? Dragon Days? They're going to give some old lady a heart attack, with that thing. Or me. They may give me a heart attack.

The vertical slits in the dragon's amber eyes dilated, and it cocked its head to one side, staring at her as if it found her as peculiar-looking as she found it.

It had a bony, oversized snout full of curved ivory teeth the size of ten-penny nails. Its delicately scaled blue hide shimmered with rainbow iridescence. The pale, glossy wings of flesh around its face and down its neck flexed and spread with a slow, steady rhythm; its long, thick tail trailed around the corner, while two membranous pale blue wings unfurled slightly as she glared at it.

That's real, she thought with growing wonder. No one makes costumes that perfect.

Other shoppers hurried past. They pushed their carts by without paying attention to either the dragon or Minerva, but Minerva noticed that they detoured around the space the dragon occupied and kept their eyes averted.

There is something standing there. It isn't just a figment of my imagination. Could it, perhaps, be a woman – and I'm just seeing a dragon?

That's it. I'm hallucinating. I've cracked up. I'm about to get into a fight with Mrs. Mindley over Darryl's fucking Wheaties, and my mind has turned her into a dragon.

The dragon clutched the box against its belly scales with one wickedly taloned hand and grinned at Minerva, exposing even more teeth. It definitely had a Mrs. Mindley-ish smile. Then the dragon dropped the box into its own shopping cart.

A vision of Darryl deprived of Wheaties danced in front of Minerva's eyes. Darryl's voice, whining, "Is it such a problem for you if I ask you to get me a few simple things? Can't you even take the time to do a little favor for me, when you know I'm trying to take care of myself?" droned through her memory.

"NO!" Minerva yelled, willing to face down a woman who made her job hell, or even a real dragon, to avoid that self-pitying whine. She grabbed at the cereal box.

Opalescent blue-green fingers gripped viselike around her wrist, and a sub-bass voice rumbled in her ear, "MINE."

As abruptly as that, she found herself sitting on a bruised rump on the cold tile floor, staring up at the dragon's receding sapphire-blue back as it strolled casually down the aisle.

That, lady, is one hell of a muscular hallucination, she told herself.

The dragon and its shopping cart made two stops. It's getting Pop Tarts and Instant Breakfast, Minerva noted, bemused. Then it turned the corner, and disappeared.

Taking the Wheaties with it.

"Darryl, there was this dragon in the supermarket today, and it snatched the only box of Wheaties out of my hand, and wouldn't give it back," Minerva imagined herself saying. Right. Darryl will love that. I could save myself a lot of time by going to the Emergency Room and telling them the same thing. They could check me into a padded room in a hurry.

A padded room seemed like a nice idea. It would be a quiet room, with people to take care of her, round-the-clock tranquilizers, no responsibilities, no hassles, no chores. It was obviously something she needed, something she'd been

building up for.

Well, fighting with a dragon in the supermarket over a box of cereal no one in my house likes is definitely stupid. And probably crazy. So is sitting in the aisle, waiting to get run over by a crazed shopper.

She got up, dusted off the back of her slacks, and began shoving the cart toward the dairy section.

But, delightful as a stay in a sanitarium would probably be... we don't have the time or the money for me to lose my mind this month.

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

You're going to have to be okay, Minerva, she told herself. You don't have any choice.

The checkout lines stretched endlessly. The weather service was calling for four inches of snow and freezing rain by morning. They might be wrong; they were often enough, after all. But everyone in town was stocking up on staples, just in case. Checkout line camaraderie was high. Neighbors and strangers alike chatted about the impending storm, about their snow tires or newly bought tire chains, about their kids and their kids' sleds that would probably only get one use this winter. Minerva submerged herself in the chatter and felt better.

Outside, pushing the cart across the parking lot, freezing as the wet, cold wind bit through her ski jacket and gabardine slacks, Minerva managed to put the dragon incident out of her mind

Jamie is having a spelling test tomorrow – fifty words. Did we have fifty words at a time in fourth grade? I can't remember.

She shoved paper bags into the back of the station wagon, wedging them in against each other so they wouldn't tip and dump groceries all over the car.

And work is going to be hell tomorrow. The visit by the Joint Commission means a ton of extra paperwork. God, but I hate JCAH visits. I'll have to start on revisions of the organization charts and Mr. Asher's presentation for the trustees first thing in the morning, or I'll be buried in

paper by next week.

She slammed down the hatch, and pulled her keys out of her ski jacket. There was a shrill squeal of tires on cold pavement from across the parking lot, and she glanced over.

A red sports car. Mazda Miata? Yeah, a Miata. Even owning one of those things, and red at that, is begging for killer insurance premiums – and then to drive the way that idiot is driving– She shook her head, bewildered.

There had been a time in her life when she'd dreamt of red sports cars. It was hard to remember what that was like, wanting a racy, sexy little convertible two-seater to show off in – and to hell with the practicality. Remembering that was almost like trying to remember fourth grade. She'd been a different person both times.

She stared at her white LTD wagon with loathing. For just a second, she could almost reach into her past to touch the Minerva who'd wanted that red two-seater – but reality reminded her that a cute little car wouldn't carry her own three kids and several of their closest friends, or all the groceries, or half the PTA moms. A Mazda Miata was not a mommy car.

Reality reminded Minerva that she was a mommy.

She backed out of her parking space, wormed her way into the solid block of cars trying to get out of the lot, and inched forward.

There was another screech of tires, and the sleek red Miata skidded over the grass to the right of the drive, and nosed back in, right in front of her.

She stared at the license plate, which read FLAMER.

I'll remember that all right, she thought.

The bumper-sticker was even worse. I ♥ VIRGINS, it declared. The most obnoxious thing about the little red car was the yellow diamond stuck to the darkly tinted rear window, though. That told the world ***Living Legend On Board.***

"What an asshole," she muttered.

As if the little convertible's driver had heard her, the dark-tinted window on its driver's side rolled down.

The blue dragon leaned its head out of the window and grinned its cocky grin at her. Then, as the line of traffic surged forward, the dragon gunned the engine and roared out into the river of cars.

Minerva floored her own gas pedal and shot after it in desperate pursuit.

Thirty-five miles per hour through here, Minerva, her reality-based self growled. A ticket will raise your insurance.

Goddamned dragon driving a goddamned Mazda Miata at fifty, and I'm going to catch it and find out why! the rest of her growled back. Or die trying.

There were, surprisingly, no police cars in sight. She and the dragon made it through the center of town without injury, and headed toward suburban streets, and her house. The dragon kept to the main highway. Minerva stuck to the dragon. The LTD's speedometer crept to the eighty-miles-per-hour mark, and then past it. Minerva didn't care.

One street from her house, the dragon slowed enough to hang a rubber-burning right. Minerva followed suit, then gunned after it, accelerating into the curve and giving the car a little extra gas to cut down the fishtailing as she pulled the car straight and closed on her target.

The dragon dove into another right, with Minerva moving in fast.

Then the Miata slowed way down and turned right again onto an incredibly overgrown dirt road in the middle of what Minerva would have sworn was a vacant lot the last time she looked. She stopped. The little sports car's red taillights flickered down the tunnel-like gloom. She watched them dim, then vanish. She started to swing her car onto the side road – the compulsion to follow that dragon was overwhelming.

But–

But the ice cream in the back of the car would melt, and Carol needed her costume started. But the baby-sitter needed to get home, and Jamie had a test he would need help studying for. But a storm was coming, and it was time for supper, and–

As if to add emphasis to the real world, the first light

flakes of snow drifted through the beams of her headlights and across her windshield. Feeling that adventure was passing her by, she nosed the station wagon onto the dirt road and executed a neat three-point turn.

Home, she told herself. Go home right this minute like the responsible adult you are, and no more dragons in Mazdas. No matter what it might have meant.

Minerva had second thoughts the whole last block and a half to home.

Barney met her at the door, full of four-year-old angst.

"They won't let me play," he wailed. "They said I'm a little boy. I'm not. I'm a big boy, and I can play, too!"

Carol and Jamie looked up from Chutes and Ladders, and Jamie said, "Un-UH! You can't count and you cheat on the chutes!"

Carol added her own five-year-old wisdom. "When you get bigger, you'll be able to play. Right, Mommy?"

Seventeen-year-old Louise had her jacket on, and her books piled in her backpack, and revulsion in her eyes. "You promised you'd get here half an hour ago, Mrs. Kiakra. I'm going to be late for my date."

"Going to be an ice storm tonight, Louise. You might have to cancel. But I'm sorry I'm late. The supermarket was a zoo."

She handed Louise her cash, and watched her babysitter flounce out the door without so much as a "thanks."

"You ought to be used to zoos," she heard the girl mutter.

I love you too, dear, Minerva thought.

The phone rang.

She ran for it. "Kiakra Demolitions," she said. She usually got a kick out of saying that, but this time she just hoped the ritual family greeting would fend off whichever siding salesman, encyclopedia vendor, or purveyor of time-share condos at Myrtle Beach happened to be calling. But it wasn't a member of North Carolina's three great growth industries on the line.

It was Darryl, saying that he was going to be late. Would Minerva mind keeping supper in the oven for him, he'd be there when he could?

Minerva stared at the groceries, sitting in their bags silently thawing, at Carol and Jamie squabbling and pouting over their game, at Barney crashing his cars into the base of the television set, at Murp sharpening his claws on the table leg – and she assured her husband that she wouldn't mind. She tried to ignore the strained quality of her voice as she said it. She hoped she gave him a headache when she slammed the phone down.

“We interrupt your regularly scheduled program to take you live to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Darryl Kiakra, where Mrs. Kiakra has just been led from the house, bound in a straitjacket.

“Inside the house is the scene of recent horrible slaughter. The bodies of Mr. Darryl Kiakra; a young woman identified as Louise Simmons, the Kiakra's baby-sitter; and a large orange tabby have been found – chopped into tiny little pieces.

“Neighbors say that Mrs. Kiakra, who has confessed to slicing up her spouse, the baby-sitter, and the cat with a cheese grater, has always been a fine neighbor. ‘She was always right friendly. Real quiet. Real nice,’ says one source who asks not to be identified. ‘Them's the ones you have to worry about.’

“Mrs. Kiakra's children have been located at a friend's house, where they say their mother only told them she was tired before she sent them off to visit. They all three agree that ‘her eyes were real funny when she looked at us, though.’”

Minerva leaned on the counter and rested her head in her arms. Weird violent fantasies, and images of dragons and fighting kids and Darryl-the-wonder-spouse and her stupid job and her boring life all crowded together, and she scrunched her eyes closed and wished them all away.

When she reopened them, hoping for a miracle, nothing had changed.

She sighed, screamed at the kids to quit fighting, hissed at

Murp – and began unloading groceries.

Barney quit playing with his cars and wandered over. He hugged Minerva's leg.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi, yourself."

She stopped what she was doing for a moment and picked him up and squeezed him tightly.

"I love you, Mommy," he told her.

She sighed, and smiled. "I love you, too, punkin."

She put him down. He watched her a moment longer, an intent expression on his little face. "I will miss you when you're gone," he informed her.

She nodded, a bit puzzled. Of all her kids, Barney was the one who spent the most time out in left field. He was famous for his cryptic remarks. He probably just meant he missed her when she went shopping or somesuch – but she wasn't about to ask. Barney's answers to questions tended to be even weirder than his out-of-the-air comments.

She gave him a tired smile. "Go play, sweetheart, and let me get done here."

He nodded and wandered back out to the living room.

* * *

Darryl Kiakra scrunched lower in the folding chair and tried to block out Geoff Forest's nasal voice. Geoff stood at the podium in front of the creative development staff, exhorting them to greater deeds– Same shit, different day, Darryl thought.

The girl in the chair in front of him had pretty hair. It was long and thick and wavy – glossy chestnut-brown with bright red-and-gold highlights that didn't come out of a bottle. He imagined what all that hair would feel like, then extended his daydream to include the entire girl. She also, he noted, had

superior legs. She crossed them and uncrossed them and wriggled impatiently in her seat in a way that Darryl found quite entertaining. Considerably more entertaining than the next installment in Geoff's endless series of pointless meetings.

Everyone stood. A beat behind them, Darryl stood too.

The stand-up, sit-down crap was part of Geoff's show-me-you're-with-me style of management, and Darryl detested the whole process. He had, however, learned that if he bucked the flow, he got singled out as a purveyor of low morale and earned a "non-team player" label.

"That's great," Geoff said, and granted his thralls a long look at his horsy smile. "Now, everyone who thinks we can meet the next quarter goals for new accounts – sit back down."

Everyone sat. The girl in front of Darryl covertly flipped the boss the bird.

Darryl decided he liked her.

There were a few more gosh-gee-whiz questions from the kiss-up contingent, and Geoff outlined his idea of reasonable goals for the next week – Darryl decided the man must have been doing drugs to come up with such off-the-wall projections. Then the meeting came to an end. Darryl thought if he hurried, he might make it home in time to eat supper before the food got so dried out it lost all taste.

But the girl with the nice legs and the nice hair came up to him and smiled. She had a nice smile, too.

"You're Darryl Kiakra, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"You were on the team that developed the new HearthHome campaign, weren't you? The one that's up for a Cleo?" Her eyes were full of admiration.

Pretty eyes, he thought. Bright green. Contact lenses? Probably. He smiled. "I was. Junior member of the team, but certainly on it. Why do you ask?"

She looked down at her feet, then back up at him. "I'm new. I thought maybe you could tell me how you did it – how you came up with such a terrific campaign." Her voice implied that,

junior member or not, she knew he was the idea man – that HearthHome was his success.

He could go home right then, he thought. Home to Minerva, who bitched about the kids and her job; who didn't look at him with admiration in her eyes anymore, but instead with something approaching disgust. He could go home and listen to her tell him that he had a fulfilling, creative job, while she was being stifled by all her responsibilities – as if his sixty-hour weeks that paid for most of the house and most of the food and most of everything else were totally divorced from responsibility; as if writing commercials for dog food and dishwasher detergent and the detestable HearthHome cookies was the same as selling his plays would have been.

Yeah, he could go home, where he was the thirty-one-year-old producer of paychecks, the person whose thrillingly creative career didn't pay enough to free Minerva from the drudgery of her own job. He could listen to her talk about painting, and he could see in her face the certainty that if he were a better provider, she would be a professional artist by now.

He could listen to the kids fight, and hear Minerva complain about how he didn't ever want to talk about their relationship. Darryl hated the word "relationship." When Minerva used it, it meant fun and spontaneity – and sex – were out of the question for the evening. The conversation would be about her growth as a person and his not-growth as a person and how she wished he would read one damned self-improvement book or another and change. After all, she'd changed, hadn't she?

Yes, she has, he thought, and it hasn't been an improvement.

Or he could stay late at work, skip supper, and tell this young girl with the bright green eyes what a clever fellow he was. Hell, with an ice storm coming, maybe he could play his cards really right and spend the whole night with the girl, the two of them huddled in his cubicle of an office for warmth while the weather raged around them. Maybe they could find some creative ways to keep warm.

He'd never cheated on Minerva. He'd never wanted to before.

But she wasn't really Minerva anymore, he thought – not in the important ways. She wasn't the girl he'd married. She was a stranger he didn't understand and didn't like very much.

He gave the gold band on his left hand a momentary glance, twisted it nervously with his thumb, and took a deep breath.

"I have a file in my office on HearthHome," he said. "I can show you some of our sketches and preliminary work, and tell you how we turned those into the final HearthHome campaign. Would that help?"

She looked at him, radiating awe and respect. "Thank you, Darryl. It really would."

"Great then." He glanced at her and frowned just a little. "By the way, what's your name?"

* * *

Barney listened while Mommy finished singing bedtime songs. She tucked in Jamie first, then headed for his bed.

"Mom!" Jamie yelled. "Don't step on Waterloo!"

She looked at the hundreds of tiny plastic soldiers littering the floor around Jamie's bed. "Waterloo?"

"I figured out a way for Napoleon to win it – I think," Jamie said. "But I have to finish trying all the stuff tomorrow."

"Waterloo." Mommy sighed, and stepped carefully around the battlefield. "All right. I won't bump anything."

She sat down on the side of Barney's bed. He smiled at her.

"G'night, punkin. Have sweet dreams."

He hugged her. She smelled nice, he thought. "Seymour got a new fire truck," he told her. Seymour had played with his new truck all day at preschool – and hadn't shared. It was big and red, and it would have sprayed real water if Mrs. Allen had let Seymour fill the tank. But she hadn't. Nevertheless, Barney was in love. "Can I have one, too?"

"You always want what everybody else has – doesn't he, Mom?"

Jamie opened his big mouth. Barney wanted to punch him.

"That's enough, Jamie." Mommy gave his stupid brother a hard look, and he shut up. She looked down at Barney, and shook her

head, and brushed his hair off his forehead with her hand. "We'll talk about the truck later, Barney. Right now, it's time to go to sleep."

"Okay. Will we get to play in the snow tomorrow?"

She nodded. "If there's enough, and it isn't too wet, I'll let you go play in it."

Barney snuggled under the covers, and Mommy handed him Brown Bear. He whispered, "Don't forget to tell the monsters to go away."

She sighed. Mommy always sighed. "What have I told you about the monsters?"

He frowned at her. "You said there aren't any monsters."

Barney added, "But, Mommy, there are. Under the bed. Really."

She looked under his bed. "Nope. No monsters." She kissed him on the forehead, and said, "You only dream them. Just remember – you can make a magic sword in your dreams and chase the monsters with that." She smiled at him. "And once you chase them away, you won't ever be afraid of them again."

Barney nodded solemnly. All the kids in preschool agreed parents were pretty stupid about monsters. But there wasn't much he could do about his mother.

The monsters were another matter.

She blew him and his butthead brother a kiss, and turned out the light. Barney heard her walk across the hall to Carol's room and start to sing again.

"Only sissies are scared of monsters." Jamie propped himself on one elbow and looked over at his brother. "You're such a sissy."

Barney lay in the bed and studied his brother. He could feel the monsters waiting in the darkness around them; could hear them licking their lips and scratching their itches and waiting. Just waiting. Waiting was what monsters were best at. The feel of monster was worse than usual, Barney decided. Closer, and hungrier. He was going to have to do the Turtle Shield. But first he had to take care of his butthead brother.

"That's okay," he told Jamie. "All the monsters are under your bed tonight." He rolled over with his back to his brother and

dug himself deeper beneath the covers.

"They are not!" Jamie whispered.

Barney lay very still and smiled.

"They ARE NOT!" Jamie yelled.

"Jamie! Leave your brother alone and go to sleep!" Mommy yelled from Carol's room.

Barney's smile grew bigger. He could always get Jamie in trouble that way.

"They are not, poopface!" Jamie whispered again.

Jamie gave up when Barney pretended to be asleep. After a while, Barney could hear his brother's steady breathing. He waited a few minutes longer – just to make sure. He didn't want Jamie to catch him.

But finally he was sure his big brother really was asleep. Then he sat up and rummaged under his blankets until he found all four of his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

He put their weapons in their hands, posed them for fighting, then set Michelangelo, holding his nunchuks, on one side of the head of the bed. He liked Michelangelo best.

"Magic, magic Michelangelo," he whispered,

"Keep the monsters all away.

"Ooola-boola-boola-boo!

"Cowabunga!"

He crept down to the foot of the bed and eased the sai-wielding Raphael over the edge to the floor. Barney made magic signs with his fingers at the dark shape and whispered, "Ooola-boola-boola-boo! Cowabunga!"

Next came Leonardo, and then Donatello.

The Turtle Shield was in place. Barney could almost see it glowing in the dark. No ordinary monster would dare cross the Turtle Shield. He could still hear the slimy, scaly, awful creatures rustling around the room, whispering and laughing nasty laughs to each other. He wasn't worried.

If they got hungry, they could eat his brother.

Murp padded into the room and jumped on the bed. "Mrrrrrp?" he asked.

Barney moved over so the cat could have half his pillow. Murp

was big enough he would have covered the whole thing if Barney had been willing to give it up. Barney wasn't, though, and the cat was willing to share.

The two of them snuggled in together. The monsters receded a bit. Monsters were afraid of cats.

With the cat curled next to his cheek and the Turtles keeping watch, Barney drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Murp woke Barney up by standing on his chest and staring into his face. Barney pushed the cat off him and sat up. He could hear the wind howling outside. The storm was scary – but he knew that wasn't the reason Murp was growling with his fur all sticking out.

There was something in the house. Not the usual monsters. This time it was something even worse.

He clutched Murp tightly with one hand and with the other, pulled the blankets up around the two of them.

"Jamie," he whispered.

Jamie didn't move. Mommy always said Jamie slept like a rock – and usually that was fine with Barney, who didn't. But not when there was something big and awful coming to get them.

"Jamie," he whispered louder. He was really, really scared. He could hear hissing outside. There were big monsters hunting through the storm.

The thing in the house was too big for the Turtle Shield, Barney thought. But Batman was in the closet. He lived there when he wasn't beating bad guys. All Barney had to do was get from the bed to the closet without the little monsters getting him, and he'd be safe.

He had to save Jamie, too, though – if he could. He whispered urgently, "Jamie – wake up!" His brother didn't wake up. Barney threw his pillow. It missed and fell onto the floor, into monster territory. No chance of getting that back. Barney took a deep breath, reached down, and grabbed Michelangelo. He threw the Turtle and hit Jamie squarely on the side of the

face.

Jamie grunted and rolled over without waking up.

Barney wanted to cry. His brother was a butthead – but he was also his brother. Clutching the cat, he took a deep breath, then jumped to the floor and ran to Jamie’s bed. Barney climbed onto the mattress as fast as he could and tucked his feet under him to keep them out of the reach of monsters. “Jamie! Jamie! Wake up! Really bad monsters are in the house!” He shook his brother with the hand that wasn’t holding the cat. “Come on! We gotta hide in the closet. Batman will fight the monsters.”

This time Jamie opened his eyes. “Don’t be stupid. I’m not gonna hide in the closet. You hide in the closet if you want to.” He pulled the covers over his head.

“I’m scared.” Barney held Murp tighter.

“Nothing’s going to get you. Go back to sleep.”

Barney eyed the dark expanse of floor between Jamie’s bed and the closet. He was going to have to go alone. He tightened his grip on Murp, who protested by struggling.

One, he thought. Two. Three...

He ran for the closet, as fast as his legs would go.

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