

## Oscar and the Giant

Toward the end of my junior year, things got really bad. I mean, it was tough enough living in the projects, in one of the Section-8 apartments across the street from the Pharr Community Center, standing in for an absent dad with my little brother Fernando. Mom was working two jobs, my girlfriend had dumped me because I didn't have money to take her out, and the cheap guitar my cousin gave me had a warped neck. I thought life sucked about as bad as it could.

But then I went and insulted Bernard.

I was standing with some friends on the steps to the auditorium at PSJA High School one morning, the bus having dropped us off at an ungodly hour, like usual. A random assortment of cholos, preps and nerds made fun of my long hair and torn jeans as they passed. As usual. I was wearing these turquoise Converse high-tops that my mom had saved up to buy me, and that really got them going.

"Freak!" some of them jeered. "¡Pinche mariposón!" And those are some of the nicer epithets, believe me. I would normally just brush such insults off, but I don't know. Maybe because Diana had broken up with me, I just wasn't in the mood to be stepped on anymore.

So when Bernard Ayala came trouncing up the steps and muttered, "Out of the way, girlfriend," I snapped and yelled at the freshman.

"Hey, Bernard!"

He turned around, an eyebrow arched. "Yes, O Freaky One?"

"Nothing wrong with being gay," I told him despite the tightening in my stomach. I had been trying to ignore my own increasing attraction to boys for a couple of years. Still, I knew

there was something particularly gross about confronting Bernard this way. “But do you have to be such a drama queen? It’s really obnoxious.”

Javi and Luis, my two best friends, looked at me like I had lost my mind.

Bernard’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, Oscar Casas. You idiot.”

And then he walked off.

“Oscar,” Luis muttered, “you just insulted Simón Ayala’s little brother, man.”

I swallowed hard. Simón Ayala was the head of the Tri-City Bombers, the notorious street gang that managed petty crime in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo area. He was in prison, but all the little wannabes at PSJA High School did his bidding, obeying whatever commands he sent through his lieutenants.

“I know.” My voice trembled. “*Pero me vale.*”

My bravery didn’t last too long. The following day, there were no more insults. Instead, I was tripped, repeatedly, in the hallways. After that, I got my head slammed into a locker, twice. My Converse were stolen during PE, and I had to borrow Javi’s extra shoes, a pair of Payless canvas slip-ons. Damián and Elías, a couple of 19-year-old sophomores, started following me everywhere. They had a host of new nicknames for me, including my favorite, güero cacahuatero. I would step out of class, and there they’d be, right behind me.

“¿Qué onda, güerito?” Damián would say. “Got any clever remarks today, ese?”

“Yeah.” Elías was a big brute who could only repeat his buddy’s words. “What up, ese? We want to hear your clever remarks.”

I knew better than to address them. They'd shove me from behind, or trip me, or slam me into a locker, but I kept my mouth shut. And I *damn* sure didn't go near a bathroom. That would have been suicidal. *Grin and bear it*, I told myself. *You've been through worse*.

Javi and Luis did what they could to help me. They convinced a lot of the wanksters to back off, that I wasn't worth the trouble. Luis was in JROTC, and he and his military-loving classmates intervened a couple of times, kept me from getting too hurt. But my friends couldn't always be around. We had different classes, and just when the attacks would seem to stop, out of nowhere Damián or Elías would appear to torture me some more.

*If I can just make it through one last six weeks*, I told myself. *Summer will start, and I'll be free of them*.

Finally, though, I saw Damián talking to Diana, his arm around her, right beneath the mesquite tree where I had asked her to be my chick. The flunky saw me looking and smiled like a happy predator.

I flipped him off.

When his face twisted in rage, I knew I had really screwed up. They would have probably gotten bored and forgotten about me, but now it was about Damián's *honor* and not just brown-nosing the boss-man. I almost skipped the rest of the day, but when I got close to the fence, Officer Limón yelled for me to get my butt back to class. So I did, and the hours dragged on in miserable anticipation.

After school I didn't see either of the goons. Looking back and forth to make sure, I made a beeline to the bus and slumped into my accustomed seat. Luis was at a JROTC fieldtrip and Javi was home sick, so I was alone today, able to stretch my legs out and relax for the ridiculously long bus ride home. As I got comfortable, I glanced at the back of the bus.

There they sat. Damián with a psychopathic grin on his face, Elías almost drooling in his Neanderthal idiocy. I quickly looked away, but I could feel their eyes on me during the whole roundabout journey, down 281 to Las Milpas, then a right on Dicker, stopping what seemed every ten feet to drop someone off, then another right to head north on Jackson. Finally the bus turned onto Kelly and hissed to a stop not far from the housing complex where I lived. We were the last ones on the bus. I got off and started walking as fast as I could without flat-out running. Even cowardly rockers have their pride.

“Where you going?” a voice crooned just over my shoulder, and one of the punks shoved on my books, sending them flying. I let them fall, beginning to run in earnest now. *Forget pride, I thought. I don't want the crap beat out of me!*

My feet pounded the asphalt of our parking lot. I made it to the stairs that led up to the second-floor apartment and dashed up to the landing, where I turned around and saw them looking up at me, laughing. All the crap that had happened to me over the past four years, all the rage I had pushed down deep in order to survive... all of it came bubbling to the surface, squeezing my chest and making my vision go hazy. The flunkies' jeers were like goads to a bull. Without thinking, I struck out. I wanted to erase those smiles from their faces *so badly*.

I was outmatched physically, so I opened up my big, smart mouth and let them have it. “Ah, qué pobres mentos, los dos. You guys think you're so freaking bad, pushing me around at school, chasing me down, knocking my books out of my hands...it's pathetic. Son unos pinches perdedores. You're what...19? And still sophomores? Why do you even bother? Yeah, maybe I live in the barrio and stuff, but do you really think I'm going to stay here? Have you seen my GPA? My ACT scores? I've got a life ahead of me. I'll go to college, get a good job, marry a beautiful girl. My life is going to be freaking awesome. ¿Pero ustedes? What are you going to

do, huh? Keep collecting welfare? Knock up some desperate 14-year-old? Get a job digging ditches?” My hands were trembling, my mouth dry, my heart pounding. I felt dirty, but I went on. “You realize, right, that no one would miss you if you disappeared today? That your lives don’t make a freaking *difference* to anything or anyone? Why don’t you just kill yourselves now, get it over with? It’s like you don’t even exist.”

Something horrible happened to Damián’s face, as if every blood vessel in his forehead and temples was about to burst. Then he started coming up the stairs, crouched like a hungry predator. Luis circled around and came up the other stairwell, the two of them converging on the landing. I thought about heading to the apartment, but if Fernando wasn’t there, I’d have to fish my key out of my pocket, and there just wasn’t enough time. So I swung over the railing and dropped to the asphalt, backing away. They came back down, and Damián pulled a switchblade from his pocket.

“Pinche loco jodido,” he spat. “Nobody talks to me like that.”

I spun and ran like I had never done in my life, sprinting down Kelly and across the crazy late-afternoon traffic on Jackson. I risked a glance over my shoulder, but they were coming like hellhounds, closer and closer. I crossed a weedy field, heading toward the construction site near the expressway. *Got to find something to defend myself with*, I vaguely thought. My lungs were burning, and the muscles in my legs screamed at me to stop. Slipping under the perfunctory fence they’d put up, ignoring the danger signs, I jogged past back-hoes and cranes, scurried over piles of lumber, edged along mountains of dirt and cement block.

And then the ground went out from beneath me, and I fell.

I rolled over in the dust, trying to get my wind back. I had stepped too close to the excavations they’d made for the foundation of whatever building was going up at the site. As I

got to my knees, looking around at the five-foot walls that surrounded the huge space, I noticed a strange outline in the dirt before me. It seemed as if I was crouching on the chest of some enormous buried statue. Forgetting about my pursuers, I leaned forward and brushed red dust from what looked like its face: a broad forehead, a nose the size of my fist, a jutting chin.

When I drew my hand away, *its eyes opened.*

Startled, I scabbled backward, moving away as quickly as I could in a crab-like scuttle. As my back hit the wall of dirt behind me, Elías and Damián leapt into the pit, chests heaving. They moved in. I was cornered.

“Ahora vas a ver.” Damián gestured with his knife. “See if you still think you’re all that with a couple holes in your chest, güey.”

There was movement behind him: two massive hands, breaking free of the clay, pressing down on the packed earth, pushing a gigantic torso away from the ground.

“Dude,” I said, pointing over Damián’s shoulder, “You should probably look behind you.”

“I look stupid to you?” Damián turned to Elías. “Agárrame a este pinche vato.”

The figure emerging from the dirt was now sitting, the top of his head extending about a foot above that of Elías. Sand drained in rivulets down the giant’s bare chest. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the scene in front of him.

Elías yanked me to my feet. I was too stunned to even attempt to pull away. Damián’s blade flashed in the afternoon light.

“Think you got a life ahead of you, ese? Think again. A ver quién te extraña a ti, méndigo.”

He swung the knife toward me, but his arm was suddenly jerked back. The giant had reached out and grabbed him, yanking him away from me. With a rumbling grunt, the enormous creature stood, rocks tumbling from what appeared to be leather leggings, stitched from a half-dozen different species of animal. Elías's hands slipped away from my shoulders. His jaw was wide open.

"What the...?" he managed to mutter. Damián struggled in the giant's grasp, looking like a rag doll or something. With his left hand, the strange being scooped up Elías, too, who began to make sobbing noises. After regarding them both for a few seconds, the giant set them on the edge of the excavation.

"Corred," he growled as he released them, and, man, did they run! I'm betting they didn't stop until they reached their homes in San Juan.

The giant then turned and looked down at me. He stood easily nine feet tall, pure brute muscle like carved granite, but his orange eyes were kind beneath a shock of white hair.

"Thank you," I croaked.

"You are welcome." His voice thrummed through the hard-packed earth like the best subwoofer in the Valley. "I could not permit them to attack. You are unarmed."

"You...you speak English."

"I am a *tlacahueyac*. A giant of the First Sun. The Feathered Lord gave my people the gift of languages when the world was young. I am able to converse with all thinking creatures."

The enormity of what was happening began to sink in. *There is a freaking giant standing in front of me!* My knees wobbled a bit.

"How...how long have you been buried in the ground? How can you still be alive? I'm going crazy, right? Those losers knifed me, and I'm hallucinating as I bleed out."

The giant gave a soft, soothing laugh at my sudden panic. “No, human, you are not seeing visions. Nor have you been wounded. Let us begin again. My true name is beyond your ability to pronounce, but other humans once called me *Olontetl*.”

He paused. I realized he was waiting for me to introduce myself. “Oh, I’m Oscar. Oscar Casas.”

“Well met, Oscar. I am pleased you awakened me, if only to ward you from those fools. But I see my slumber has been long and humans are no longer accustomed to the sight of giants. If you will sit and rest for a time, I will briefly tell you my tale.”

I slumped to the ground. He knelt and eased his bulk lower.

“In the First Age of the world, the Feathered Lord, creator and father, formed the white-haired giants. Sturdy as boulders, we went about the earth, taming its wildness and building wondrous works to glorify our maker. But the Lord of Chaos despised our fealty to his younger brother, and so he tempted many giants, transforming them into monstrous jaguars and setting them against their kin.

“It was a dark, dark time. My own father was turned, and he killed most of my family. I escaped with my brother, and we hid in the depths of the mountains for many years. When we emerged, we found our world destroyed; the strongest among us had wielded frightening, apocalyptic magic to defeat the jaguars, but they laid the earth to waste in the process.

“Only twelve of us remained. My brother and I. Ten others. The Feathered Lord drew us to his side and gave us a new commission: to defend his children against destruction. We would sleep for millennia, he told us, but when chaos rose again, we would be awakened.

“And so we passed the ages. I saw the Second ended by the wrath of mighty hurricanes. The Third Age withered, ravaged by storms of angry fire. A flood effaced the world at the end

of the Fourth, heralding the time of humans. We strove, we giants, against the devastation, but one by one we fell. Age after age we dwindled. For a time we would stave off the darkness. Order would be restored. We would sleep long centuries. But we always awakened to even greater chaos and despair. With every new era it has become more difficult to fight.

“At the beginning of this Fifth Age, only three of us remained. As humankind spread across the earth, we each went our separate ways, ever watchful. Many times have I been roused to avert chaos. Now you have called me from my dreamless resting, Oscar. You must lead me toward the wrongs that must be righted.”

It was too much to take in. The story he told me was unbelievable, but there he knelt: an ancient giant, asking me to command him. I had been weak for so long that my mind boggled at the idea of such power. *The Tri-City Bombers, the drug traffickers, the child-abusers and wife-beaters...all the horrible things I've watched for years now...I can make them stop.*

The sun was low in the sky. Fernando was probably worrying. He might even call mom, and she would take off from work at her second job to come looking for me. I needed to get back. But I couldn't take Olontetl with me. He was way too big, and I needed to prepare people first. *Javi's uncle has a ranch in Hidalgo, I remembered. We could put Olontetl there for a while.*

“Okay, I can do that.” I stood and got closer to the giant. His breathing reminded me of gusty spring winds, blowing warmth through the mesquite trees, along the crabgrass. “But, Olontetl, you need to stay here another night, okay? I've to make arrangements, find...allies.”

“Of course,” he rumbled. “I will rest here until you return. Then we will engage the forces of the Lord of Chaos. Perhaps this time will be the last. Or perhaps I will fall, like my brother did at the end of the Third Age. But we fight, Oscar, because we must. Beauty and order,

creation and knowledge...we cannot allow these to be swallowed up by destruction and entropy.”

He placed a massive hand lightly on my head, and then he lay back down in the dirt, blending in so completely that I could only make him out by his bright orange eyes and snow-white hair.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” I promised, and I clambered out of the pit.

When I got home, Fernando was still at Speedy Espericueta’s apartment, watching inappropriate movies on cable. He hadn’t even noticed I wasn’t home. It was Friday night, but I knew Javi and Luis would be home: they weren’t as broke as me, but they didn’t have girlfriends or cars, so it’s not like they had a lot of choice.

“Dude,” I told them both, “meet me outside tomorrow morning at like 8:30. I’ve got to show you something *you are not going to believe.*” They pestered me for more information, but I knew better than to tell them anything else. They wouldn’t believe me without seeing for themselves. No one would.

It was hard going to sleep. I kept imagining Olontetl going up against gangbangers and drug dealers, pimps and coyotes. Maybe even hunting down my dead-beat dad and taking care of him as well. *Justice*, I thought to myself over and over. *Finally, justice.*

Somehow, I fell asleep. The alarm went off at 8:15, and I got dressed and brushed my teeth. Mom was pouring herself a cup a coffee. She made a zombie-like movement to say good morning, and I waved distractedly as I rushed out the door.

Javi and Luis were a little late, like always. “So what’s this top-secret crap you want to show us?” Javi asked, stifling a yawn.

“Just come on. It’s over at the construction site near the expressway.”

I tried to get them to walk faster, but they ambled along casually, making stupid jokes at my expense. As we crossed the field, I heard the beeping sounds of heavy machinery, the barked orders of supervisors directing workers. *Oh, no*, I thought. *Why are they working on Saturday?*

Rushing to the excavation, I felt nausea rising in my gut. Two large cement trucks were pulling away, their rotating mixers visibly empty. As helmeted men yelled at me to stop, I ran to the edge of the pit and dropped to my knees in despair. It had just been filled with concrete, tons and tons of it, gleaming palely in the morning sun. Tubes jutted like gravestones from the vast, gray expanse.

“He’s gone.” A sob wracked my aching chest.

Javi and Luis caught up to me. “What, dude?” Javi demanded. “What are you freaking out about?”

“He’s gone,” I repeated. “And now I’ve got to face it all alone.”

Luis knelt beside me. “Oscar, I don’t know what’s wrong, but you’re not alone, man. Somos cuates, ¿que no? Me and Javi, we got your back, brother. We’ll get those punks to back off, somehow. Now, come on, man. You’re scaring me.”

I stood and tried to casually wipe the tears from my cheeks. I looked at them both: the crazy military brat whose dad died in some foreign land, the scrawny migrant kid who lived half the year in Washington. I thought of my own self, a poor nobody with a brain but not much else. We weren’t giants, the three of us. We probably didn’t stand a chance against the darkness that assailed us.

But we would keep fighting.