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written by

Terry Deary

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Chapter One
Bullies and Berbers

Castile, Spain, 1099

Cristina hated the feasts at the palace of Valencia.

The knights made a lot of noise and shouted at her. But that wasn't why she hated the feasts.



The cooks in the kitchen made her run and fetch heavy bags of corn, pots big enough for her to bathe in and logs that were larger than her. But that wasn't why she hated the feasts.



The maids poked fun at her tattered, woollen clothes and her bare feet, for she only had shoes for church on Sunday. They bullied her. But that wasn't why she hated the feasts.

The feasts went on deep into the night. By the time Cristina had helped clear the tables, clean the pots and polish the pans, it was dark.

Even in the warm, summer nights, when the stars were like a shower of silver, it was dark in the streets of Valencia when she hurried home. *That* was why she hated the feasts.



Everyone was asleep as Cristina ran home over the stony streets, past snarling dogs, slippery rats and green-eyed cats. And worse.



That first night, she almost lost her way from the palace gates to her home on the hill below. She crashed through the door into the poor, little house and the leather hinges almost snapped.

Cristina's mother gasped in the blackness. "Who's there?"



Cristina panted for breath and creaked like the door. "Mama!"

"Cristina? Are you back?"

"Mama!"

"What on earth is wrong, child?"

"I saw a giant... He tried to catch me, but I ran. And when I ran, all the dogs started to chase me. He had huge arms and he tried to catch me. Oh, Mama! Do I have to go back to the palace?" she sobbed and threw herself on her mother's blanket.

Mama held her trembling young daughter and said, "We are at war, my child. The Berber enemies are at the gates of the city. Your father is in the army. We are alone."



"I know, Mama."

"I can't make enough money to keep you, Cristina. You have to help. You're big enough now. And when you work at the palace, you are fed for free."

"I know... It's not the work ... or the girls who are so cruel to me. It's... It's the *dark*. I hate the dark. Giants get you in the dark."

Mama took her daughter by the hand and pulled her to her feet in the soft darkness of the room. She led her to the door and pulled it open. She looked down the street. "See? No giants."



"On the corner, two streets down from the church," the girl breathed.

"Let's go and look at this giant, shall we?"

"No!" Cristina squeaked.

"Yes, I would like to see him. I was always taught that giants were just monsters from old tales. I would like to meet one."

The woman took her daughter firmly by the hand and led her out into the starlit streets. She pulled the girl up the hill, back towards the palace, past the church.

"Where is the giant?" Mama asked.

Cristina raised a thin finger and pointed towards the groaning, rustling shape ahead of them.

The woman nodded.

"As I thought. It is Master Sancho's windmill. The city needs his flour, so he works all night to feed us."



"No giant arms?" the girl asked.

"Just windmill sails," her mother said. "But if they scare you so much, then on the next feast night, come back across the fields."

"Yes, Mama ... wait for me, Mama!" Cristina cried and ran home.

But on the next night, the girl again ran from the palace and almost fell into the house in her fearful, fainting state.



"I saw a Berber... He tried to catch me, but I ran. I almost ran into him in the dark. I bumped into him and he smelled terrible. It must be a Berber... They've broken into the city."

Mama took her daughter by the hand and pulled her to the door. "Let's take a look at this Berber."

And in the fields, the sour-smelling monster stood, flapping in the wind and grinning at the cloudy sky.



Mama shook her head.

"A scarecrow, Cristina. It's just a scarecrow. You are a *babieca*."

"What's that, Mama?"

"An idiot, Cristina. I'm sorry, but you are an *idiot*."