

EN LA COMPAÑÍA DE LOS SANTOS

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The drum pounds and the gaiteiros start up their bagpipes, and I hear clapping in time from balconies above me. A red and purple mulberry tree made of humans sways just a bit as I climb up it. What a bizarre thing, staring a burly man in the face and stepping on his knee. Can I put my hand on this shoulder, step on this head? I feel like I could get locked up for this, but that's what makes my eyes widen and my fingers reach for the next person's waist and crawl up him. Gripping the strong shoulders of a small man, I pull myself up and try to balance myself, and then I'm at the top. Turning my head, I realize that I'm now looking down on those balconies, the people on the street down below. My lungs fill up and I can't help but laugh a bit. To become branches, my arms stick straight out, and I glance over to the top of a second tree to see another enxaneta, or rider, like me but a girl. Something about her hits me, and I flash my eyes away, down to the crowd. But I peek again. Her dark eyebrows and determined expression... She ignores me, refusing to break her concentration, but I can't help glancing back. The cheering comes to a climax and I lift my arms higher, drinking it in before climbing down to find a motorcade waiting for me, and the commotion of the spectators fades.

'Get in the carriage, little brother,' Alejandro commands me, and the driver holds open the door emblazoned with the stupid crest of Xunta Suprema del Reino de Galicia. I slink in and am taken to the Pazo de Raxoi for scolding. 'It was your first time and it will be your last,' my brother sneers as we jostle along the bumpy road, as if I wouldn't hear the same from my father. Propriety needs to be upheld during this critical time for Galicia, I'm told, and associating with proletarians would disgrace the local administration, even for nobility not destined for inheritance... meaning me. But the whole time my father yells at me, I simply stare at the white marble floor thinking of the enxaneta girl.

Some sort of obsession is coursing through me, and it seems to be not just for the enxaneta and her dark serious eyes, but for something else, something unidentifiable. With a lamp in the dusk, I navigate through the tunnel-vaulted corridors to see my other brother, Sergi, a year younger than Alejandro. 'Take me to *El Sí de las Niñas*.' This drama premieres tonight and I've seen the posters around town—there are girls on them.

Although I'm supposed to be forbidden to leave the palace as punishment, Sergi has been willing to bend the rules before. A couple years ago he snuck me out to see the ocean, which I'd only seen from a ways off or else from within a boat. The gigantic waves smashed against the coast and a strange combination of awe and dread took hold of me. Sergi charged straight in like a fool, telling me to come on, and our tiny bodies approached the wall of thrashing water. He turned into an arrow and shot under the rolling wave, which was on the verge of crushing me until I also shot underwater in a panic. When I surfaced again, the water was much calmer and there was Sergi, grinning at me.

Now Sergi's eyes look glassy in the light of my lantern. 'Wait a few days,' he says, 'then we'll see.'

This is a 'dangerous time' for Galicia, as even I know. Six years ago, the townspeople rioted after the Xunta de Galicia decided not to support Charles IV's son anymore. I'm not sure how we ended up switching sides, but later a revolt against Joseph Bonaparte broke out and our province was marked as traitorous. It's all so confusing, like when I try to see outside through the distorted glass in my windows. But I want to do... something. I've even wished I could fight in the rebellion. Four years ago, back when I was nine, the enemy was kicked out of Coruña and everyone was so excited—if only I could do *something!* In the shadow of Saint James the Great's resting place, I slip away from the palace into the twilight. I can't wait for Sergi any longer.

In the theatre, the audience is mesmerized by Francisca, whose mother is demanding she gets married to don Diego, and her sadness is like a spell on me. Of course there's also her beauty. A wave of discomfort moves through me as I remember the enxaneta girl—as if either one would notice me. Francisca's defiant love for Félix radiates across the audience and I wish I was him. A hand then grabs my shoulder, jolting me out of my stupor, and spins me to face a dark-eyed stranger with a narrow face framed by a flowing mane of grey-black.

Pressing me against the stone wall, he hisses, 'What's this?' His big nose comes so close to mine that I can see its pockmarks even in the dark. 'Can you present a scene? Come with me.'

He pulls me into a room and says, 'You're about the same size as Rafael who played the role of Calamocha,' and tosses me a costume. 'Here, learn these lines, and if you can't remember them, put yourself in the mind of the character and talk.'

Thrust in front of the spectators—a hundred pairs of eyes at least—I ask Simon why don Diego has come to Alcalá and Simon asks me the same of Félix. Each of us is forbidden by our masters to reveal their intentions for Francisca. My lungs feel like they're being squeezed at first, but then there's some sort of energy, like breathing for the first time. And being so close to Francisca definitely makes me feel kind of drunk.

'You took to the stage well,' the stranger beams as I return the props afterward.

This comment sends an anchor down in me, like part of me is diseased. 'I shouldn't be here.'

'I know who you are, who your father is,' the man says, tying his hair back. 'Don't be worried. No one else noticed thanks to your attire.' The man eyes me for a moment. 'My name is Leandro Fernández de Moratín. You know, you could come with us and perform.'

'I can't—'

'Did you understand the play? Did you see beyond the façade of a young woman who can choose for herself between love and a wealthy man of whom she knows nothing? Do you know the difficulty I had gaining administrative permission to perform this tonight? Your father was upset enough that the theme appears to be the woman's right to choose.' The man leans even closer to me to make sure others can't overhear and breathes into my ear, 'Your father initially supported the dethronement of Ferdinand, but then saw him as a puppet. As the battle continues in Vitoria, you need to think about the Kingdom of Galicia, about La Pepa. Those are not Saint James' remains in the cathedral.'

The whole thing with the playwright was weird to say the least. Something's wrong. It's as if some nameless thing is missing from me. I cross a sunlit courtyard lined by arches and wander the streets until I finally come across the muixeranga preparing for another display in the square. A meaningful whine comes from the gaiteiros who will accompany the muixeranga. A weight in my chest makes me beg the captain, who had no clue of my name before, to let me take part again. There's the enxaneta girl, getting ready and ignoring me like before. Inspired by Félix, I sort of sidestep over to her: 'I—I see how focused you are on the aixecador; not only during the demonstration, but as I lie at night and in the morning... You're very pretty.' Then the music flares and saves her from needing to respond to my babbling.

A tower grows, and I scale up over knees, shoulders, and grimacing heads to become the enxaneta. I look back down over the applauding audience.

The other enxaneta, the girl, rises to the tip of another pillar, steadying herself on top of the riser. Far below a royal carriage appears on the edge of the square. A sudden sickness comes over me. My brother's here to fetch me again and this time I know I'll be locked in the palace forever. 'Hey!' comes a voice beneath me. My eyes angle downward to meet those of the little mustachioed man holding me up. He growls, 'You need to be still!' and I try harder not to wobble.

Alejandro steps out of the carriage and appears to shout something that's drowned out by all the bagpipes and cheers. He gestures to one of the Xunta guards behind him. The guard fires a musket straight up in the air, stunning the crowd and throwing the other pillar, the one with the girl on top, off-kilter. The spire of humans sways for an instant and then shrieks ring out as people plummet down to earth into a terrible squirming pile, and my chest disintegrates.

Alejandro roars 'Attention!' over the crowd. My tower disassembles next to where the other collapsed, and I push through the dense crowd, searching for the girl, wriggling passed performers clasping snapped or crushed limbs. A scream comes from a tight cluster of people and I burrow my way in to find the girl lying on the street, unmoving. I drop to the ground next to her, with horrified faces all around me, and stare into her brown eyes.

Another shot echoes to silence the crowd's cries, and Alejandro again bellows, 'Attention!' Through the forest of multicolored legs of performers, I can make out my brother's face scanning the people with irritation. I look at the girl, her head at an odd angle, and then rush away through the crowd. In an alley, I lean against the wall, my cheek against the cold stone. 'By my authority as heir to the Xunta Suprema de Galicia, I am honored to declare our final victory over the French Invasions. Joseph Bonaparte averted our troops, but their Empire has now been expelled from our nation. Before God, reaffirm your allegiance with Ferdinand VII!' I feel my way to a safer spot behind another building. Even though there's no love for the French around here, no cheers come from the crowd, only stifled weeping over the girl.

Those brown resolute eyes are all I can see, going back and forth from bright to empty, but the rest of her face stays the same: she has just one expression. This isn't right—there's no way... I can see her face, staring at me as I blathered like an idiot a few moments ago, and then her cheek like a blunt

object against the stone street. So dumb—I can't believe I was ever fixated on Francisca. After darkness comes, I wander through the streets toward the theatre, to see Moratín. *El Sí de las Niñas* has been cancelled and the building is empty like the enxaneta girl's eyes. Not knowing what else to do, I sit in the back row, staring at the dark nothingness on stage. After a while I see Moratín standing there.

'Perhaps it'll do better in other provinces,' he jokes, wearing in his brown high-collared coat and dark cloak. 'Suddenly the radical populist ideas of the revolution are not so welcome among the aristocracy. Pretty convenient, wouldn't you say?' The man seems to analyze me. 'Hmm, well, I guess you're too young.'

All this about rebellions and politics—I don't get it, and none of it matters. It's all stupid. Those brown resolute eyes are all I can see. My throat is sticky, but I manage to mumble that I want to go with him and act in his plays.

'The new sovereignty isn't going to be "of the people" as promised when Ferdinand reclaims the throne. He'll be under the control of the church and the nobility and he won't uphold La Pepa. Alas, he's no don Diego. I'll likely need to return to Paris, where you would not be welcomed.' Moratín unties his mane of hair and then takes my hand. For an instant, I wonder if he thinks my skin is too soft, courtesy of my so-called noble birth, but I realize I don't care. His dark eyes bore into mine.

Then Moratín disappears into the black innards of the theatre and I sit there for a while, thinking of the enxaneta girl.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Bernard's fiction has appeared in *AntipodeanSF* and *Morpheus Tales*, and his non-fiction has appeared in *The Conversation*, *Natural History*, *History Today*, and *American Forests* among others. As a PhD candidate studying insects, he has also published in scientific journals. Jared's debut literary/speculative fiction novel, *Killing Juggernaut* (<https://www.killingjuggernaut.com>), predicts a dire future in which the fates of an ecologist, a teenager, and an astronomer are linked by humanity's last-ditch effort to save itself from environmental devastation.