

NARCOGENESIS

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L'ATALANTE

NANTES

CHAPTER 2

The thing following the child was not really a predator. Quentin knew exactly what a predator was. He had seen every conceivable documentary about the animals of Africa. His grandmother naively thought he was interested in wildlife.

She dreamed of him becoming a veterinarian and, with him at her side, she probably imagined lisping "My grandson, who is a veterinarian," to all the old goats in the building. She played at being respectable. Maybe that would wash her of what she called her "shame," a drunkard son who'd finished up in a wrecked jalopy, and a daughter-in-law who'd abandoned their boy to chase after another drunkard.

Sometimes, Quentin hated the things she'd say so much that he wanted to hit her. Sometimes she was nice and he felt like being good, obedient and loving.

But for that to become a habit, she would have to stop saying things like "Your slut of a mother," or "that bitch who skipped out on you."

And stop believing he watched the documentaries because he loved to learn things. In fact, what he loved most in animal documentaries was the moment when the lion or other beast jumped at the throat of the gazelle. It would always struggle and try desperately to get back on its long, slender legs.

"Elegant animals," the commentators would say.

Quentin hated commentators.

What's the point of having legs like that if you don't have fangs, the boy thought as he watched, galvanized, the lion gently planting its teeth into the gazelle's throbbing throat.

That was what surprised him the most. Predators did not rip apart their victims. They took the time to eat them alive, still jerking, stretched out in pools of their blood, a kind of delectable gourmet feast.

That was what made Quentin think that the thing following him was not a predator. It moved fast, in spurts. He felt its presence at his back. A predator was much slower and virtually invisible throughout the hunt.

He was a bit frightened, though, so he stuck out his chest as he walked down the deserted alley. He didn't dare to turn and face whatever it was. And he didn't know where to go. For the first time, he wished he weren't alone.

He did not really understand how he'd arrived in this strange city, with its long buildings, their windows without any glass, and its streets that endlessly wound and crossed each other.

Somehow the city looked like it was made of stage scenery, made of paper but paper stronger than stone, concealing only emptiness behind the fronts and sides of its buildings.

Yet all that surrounded him seemed familiar and dramatically real. It had doubtless been standing for a long time.

Quentin came to a crossroads.

He wondered which way he should go. Right or left?

He suddenly shivered. The thing had leaped toward him again. He heard a dull thud, like feet landing heavily on the hard ground of the sidewalk.

Straight? Right, left, straight?

He hesitated an instant then turned left. He had always liked left. And his favorite number was six, he remembered incongruously.

This street resembled all the others. The tapping of his heels ricocheted off the pavement. He came out on a long esplanade, of the same luminous beige color. The sun came out, casting such brilliant white light he could see only black shapes moving around him, making noises. He heard an echoing, monotonous humming of cars a bit farther off.

As the boy's eyes adjusted to the light, the shapes became silhouettes. Details appeared: children playing with a ball, while determined, anonymous passers-by avoided them. On the steps leading to a government building, brighter than the other buildings, women were watching over the children as they played.

On the other side was the street, a long street with several lanes, like you see in big cities. The cars were passing so fast that Quentin could not distinguish their brands. And yet, he knew them all.

He sighed with relief. At least the thing wouldn't dare get too close to him here in a big city square. Plus, the square resembled the one where he liked to meet with his buddies, especially the older ones, which lent him a feeling of importance even if they heckled him a bit.

There was a band of guys on this square, too.

Logical. Every city has a square and every square has its band.

There were four or five older teenagers, almost adults. They all wore brand-name jeans that let their boxers show, and gray or navy-blue sweatshirts. They weren't doing anything in particular. They were a gang.

Quentin moved over to them slowly. One of the young men turned and looked at him, and smiled without saying a word.

Quentin did not like that smile. Like his mother used to say, that was a smile that stinks, a smile that promises the royal palace but brings you only as far as the toilet.

Nevertheless, he went up to the group of young guys.

The biggest was always the leader. The others held no interest. The leader had shoulder-length blond hair and was leaning on a stone bench in the most relaxed posture possible. His clothes were the color of dirty chalk. He was holding a girl against his chest whose face Quentin could not see. Her fingernails were painted blood red.

Something about all this is weird, said Quentin to himself.

The leader looked out of date, like the head of an old-time gang. At home, no kid looked that awkward and fusty. Even his clothes, they just weren't right.

Something really weird was going on.

This city did not exist. It wasn't real.

It was a dream. Quentin smiled. He remembered suddenly haven fallen asleep in a white bed and waking up in this city that was not really a city.

And if it wasn't a real city, then that wasn't a real gang, which meant that anything was permitted, including one thing he'd always dreamed of doing.

"Hey, you pathetic losers!" he yelled with delight.

The four characters turned around, while their leader continued to look elsewhere, turning his back on him.

"Did you say that, microbe?" replied one of the guys, who was short and fat, wearing a baseball cap that was too big for his head.

"Yeah. Your city stinks and so do you."

These guys didn't exist. He had invented them. He could destroy them just as easily.

"Get out of here."

The gangsters began to get restless, throwing uneasy glances all around. When they started to edge away from the bench, their leader turned his head slowly back. Quentin saw only the edge of his profile. He was no young man. He was a man whose age was impossible to determine.

"I don't think we'll move," said the man.

He had only murmured but Quentin had clearly understood his words. His voice snaked through the air, wheezing and creaking around the curves. The girl hanging on his neck laughed.

Quentin clenched his lips.

The man turned all the way around. The girl slipped around his body and hid behind him, hooking her fingers with their blood-red nails across his chest.

The man looked at Quentin. The boy froze.

A look from him would paralyze anybody, even someone bigger and older than Quentin. His bony, angular face, his hooked nose and thin lips went perfectly with his black, shining eyes.

"Okay, Quentin," the man said softly. "You want to play with the big boys. You come here, you tell my guys to split. You make fun of them. And me, how am I supposed to feel after all that?"

His tone was the one his math teacher used when he wanted to show he could be generous but firm, though he was obviously holding himself back from nailing some kid to the wall.

"That's right," said the man. "I'm generous but firm, Quentin."

Quentin jumped. Had he said that out loud? He wasn't sure.

"You read minds? That's - "

"Don't change the subject, Quentin," the man said in response. "I don't like the way you talk. I don't like how you lack respect for a woman, Quentin."

"But I haven't done - "

The man silenced him with a gesture. Quentin noticed for the first time the man's hands, which were long and bony, with thick, sharp nails.

Behind the man's back, the girl broke into hysterical laughter. Quentin shuddered. He knew that laugh. In fact, he knew that laugh very well.

"Mama?"

The man just smiled and stepped aside to let his girlfriend come forward. "You know this kid?", he said without departing from his smile, sarcastic now.

"Never seen him," the woman snarled. Quentin stifled an exclamation. Of course, she'd seen him! She was his mother, most certainly his mother, with her purple-streaked bangs, her dark hair cut to stick out everywhere, the carefully-applied makeup matching her blue top and short black skirt. Quentin also recognized the silver bracelet with a heart-shaped pendant she always wore on her left wrist.

"Mama!" he said with a painful grimace. "It's me, it's Quentin."

"I don't know him," replied the woman, calmly. "If I had a kid, you think it would be as ugly as that?"

The man laughed, a sound that froze Quentin's blood.

"This is only a dream. I don't risk anything."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"You think so, kid? A dream, nothing but a dream? Are you mocking me, is that it? You think you're better than me?"

He grabbed Quentin by the neck. His gang crowded in as well, all of them jeering. The man dragged Quentin across the square, the boy's feet scraping the ground. Then he really began to struggle.

"Sorry, kid," said the man. "Next time you'll learn to shut your mouth."

In the blink of an eye, they were right up next to the road. The cars were speeding by at the same frenetic pace and Quentin heard the noise of their motors as a continuous roar. There was no crosswalk or stoplight. One car after another, streaming past. Even this close up, it was impossible to distinguish their makes or models. Even less their occupants.

The man lifted him up from the sidewalk, so close to the road that Quentin felt the cars were brushing against his cheeks.

"Bye bye, runt."

Then he let go.

Quentin tried to scream. But the cry remained stuck in his throat, and at the same instant he felt like he was being strangled.

Someone had caught the collar of his pajamas and was pulling him backwards.

He struggled weakly. In front of him, the cars kept spinning by, but without a hint of their passing - no whoosh of air on his skin. It was not quite a real street. It was just the menace of a street.

Two large hands gripped Quentin's shoulders and pivoted him around. In the movement, one of the hands grazed his neck, where the skin is particularly sensitive. He shivered. The hand was dry and rough, but still, the touch offered him a gleam of comfort.

When he dared to raise his head and look at his savior, he saw an extremely ugly woman. She had broad shoulders, squeezed into a voluminous, greasy coat the color of fog, and she peered down at the boy with round eyes. Her mouth was round too, which at first glance gave her a bewildered look, until he realized that her lips simply couldn't quite close over her crooked yellow teeth. Her hair lay flattened on her head and it was badly parted. Yet behind all this ugliness, there was something very sweet about her.

She took his hand with a firm grip, and dragged him through the crowd of men. Quentin followed her helplessly, now trembling from fear.

"Wait!" the gang leader shouted.

The woman shook herself, frowned, and taking her time, turned around.

"Don't let him come close," muttered Quentin, scooting behind her back.

It seemed to Quentin that the woman and the head of the band were sizing each other up, with an air of not understanding who the other was or exactly what he was doing there. Their respective presences seemed strange and inappropriate. The moment lasted an eternity; Quentin got the feeling that his life was hanging on the outcome of this silent confrontation.

It was the woman who finally spoke.

"You have no right to be here. I don't know who you are, but you do not belong to this world."

The man replied with a sinister baying sound. In one bound, he was in front of the woman, almost against her.

Quentin suppressed a sob, hiding behind her back.

The man stretched out a hand, skinny and dirty, toward her ugly face.

"I'm very much at home here. And him, he's mine," he added, pointing at Quentin with a yellow nail.

"You're in his territory here, and no one belongs to you. Go away."

The gang leader's eyes widened and he grimaced frightfully. Quentin fell back a step, instinctively. This was no longer a man. It had never been a man. It was a creature, a travesty of a man, whose mind was so horrible that he could not make his disguise work.

"We know each other, don't we?" whispered the creature, carefully observing the woman.

The woman shook her head.

"Oh yes," replied the creature. "You are -" Then surprise gave way to anger on the gang leader's abnormally thin face.

"- One of them! Bitch! Sorceress!"

He grabbed the woman's shoulder with his bony hand. To Quentin, it felt like the creature had actually caught him. He stumbled back.

The woman freed herself with a jerk and took the boy's hand again.

"Get out of this mind," she murmured, without breaking eye contact with her opponent. "I don't know what you are, but I want you out of there, now."

"You don't tell me what to do! I'll destroy you!" The creature was so close that his nose practically touched the woman's nose. "I'm going to destroy you, you hear me? Sorcer -"

He stopped suddenly. The anger vanished from his face and a frightening, malignant look of joy replaced it. His smile was the worst threat of all.

Quentin and the woman began to run.

Soon, they came to a street just like those he had walked earlier: tall buildings of beige stone on either side, and between them, silence and emptiness.

The woman knelt down, gently took Quentin's shoulders in her hands. In a strident but low voice, she said, "Listen to me! In this place, you cannot be fooled by appearances, do you understand? Everything is reversed."