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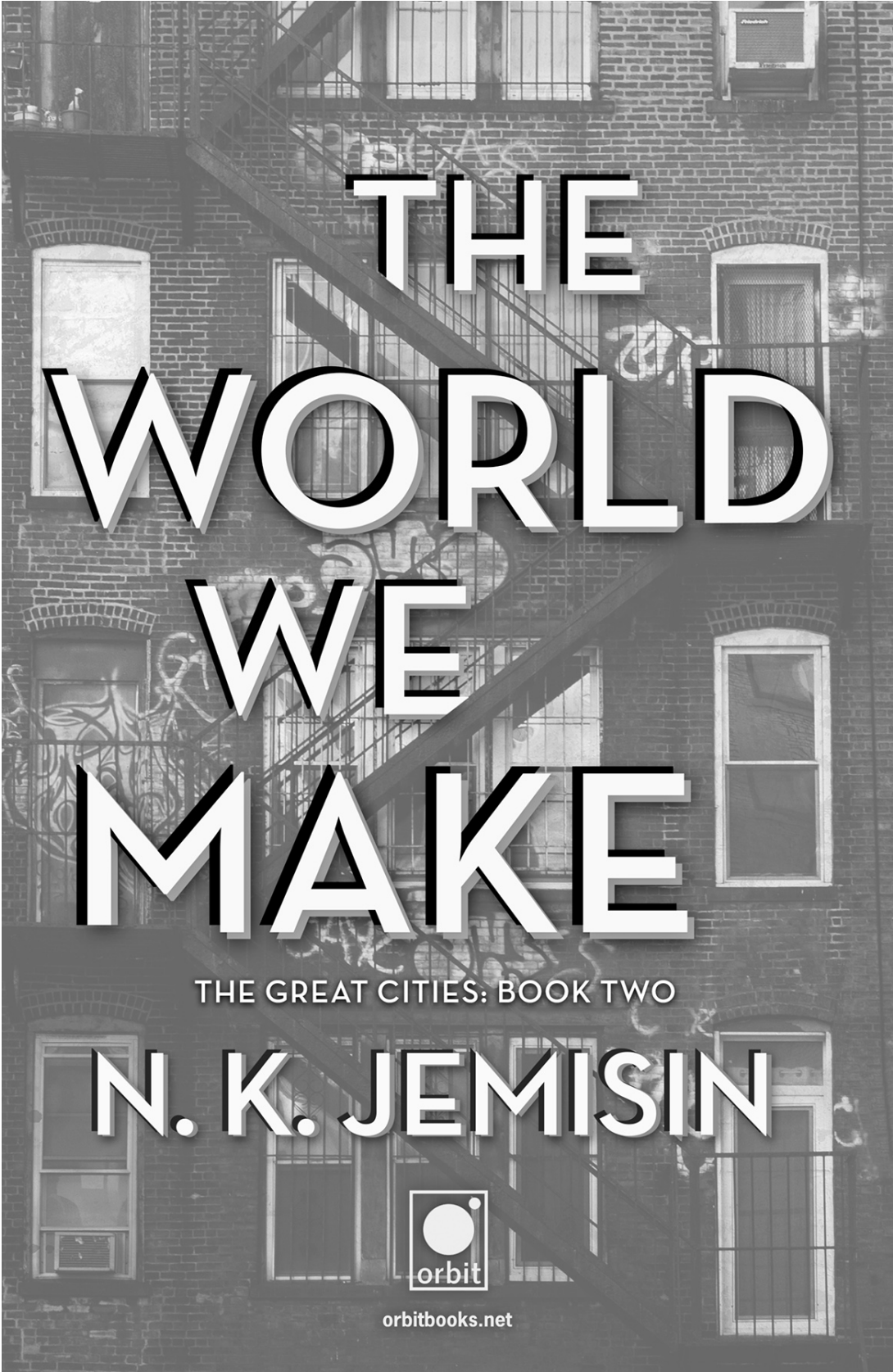
THE WORLD WE MAKE

*"The most celebrated science fiction
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N. K. JEMISIN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AND FOUR-TIME HUGO AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



THE WORLD WE MAKE

THE GREAT CITIES: BOOK TWO

N. K. JEMISIN



orbitbooks.net

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One: Living Just Enough in the City](#)

[Chapter Two: It's a Hell of a Town](#)

[Chapter Three: You Might Be Fooled If You Come from Out of Town](#)

[Interruption: Tokyo](#)

[Chapter Four: These Vagabond Blues](#)

[Chapter Five: Tentacles Rule Everything Around Me](#)

[Interruption: Istanbul](#)

[Chapter Six: Have Your People Zoom Our People](#)

[Chapter Seven: Manny Manhattan and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Fuck-You Day](#)

[Interruption: Elsewhere](#)

[Chapter Eight: The Sixth Boroughs](#)

[Chapter Nine: Mind the Crap](#)

[Interruption: London](#)

[Chapter Ten: You Can't Make It Here, You Can't Make It Anywhere](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Doink Doink Boom](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Bagels, Meet Baguettes](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: The Pizza of Existential Despair](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Brooklyn's Get Me Bodied Shop](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Run Up, Cities Get Done Up](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: We Are New York?](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: These Streets Will Make You Be Brand-New](#)

[Coda](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

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~~NEW ORLEANS~~
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LONG ISLAND
 HERE →
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 do or die
 Crown Heights
 stand up
 Flatbush's
 represent!

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 COLLEGE OF S.I.
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QUEENS
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 ASTORIA
 L.I.C.
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THE BRONX
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 RIVERS
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MANHATTAN
 FDR DRIVE
 CITY HALL
 MANHATTAN BRIDGE
 BELLEVUE BRIDGE
 WILMINGTON BRIDGE
 ASTORIA

HOBOKEN
 almsat
 JERSEY CITY

YONKERS
 next?
 WESTCHESTER

PROLOGUE

Call me Neek.

No, I'm not hunting no fucking whale. Giant squid, maybe. Got some homoerotic shit going on, too, yo. Maybe I should write a book. Instead of *Moby-Dick* I'll call it *Suck My Interdimensional Dick*—a thriller, or maybe a horror, with some comedy and romance and tragedy. Little for everybody. It's gonna be a hit 'cause I got publishing and Madison Avenue all up in me, plus like a million hustlers and grifters and corner boys who all can sell you your own kidneys before lunch. *All of whom*. Guess I should talk proper when I'm slinging shit about literature.

Pssh, fuck it. Point.

Neek. New York City. NYC, only pronounce the *Y* like “ee,” not “why.” I know why. It's not the name my mama gave me, but she claim I'm not her son anymore anyway, so fuck it. Been time for changes.

New York always changes. We who become cities are evolving, dynamic entities, constantly adjusting to the needs of our citizens, endlessly pushed and pulled by state politics and international economies. Lately we gotta deal with multiversal politics, too, but whatever. We can take it. We're New York.

Been three months since the city came to life. Three months since the Williamsburg Bridge got smashed by a giant tentacle from beyond; three months since millions of citizens got partially infected by a multibodied, mind-influencing alien consciousness and walked around looking like goddamn Sasquatches 'til we fixed it; three months since a whole-ass extradimensional city started trying for squatters' air rights over Staten Island. Most New Yorkers can't see or hear all this shit. Lucky. But ever since New York became the newest and loudest member of an international resistance against the encroachment of hostile quantum possibility collapse, we been dealing with more than the usual day-to-day fuckshit.

Por exemplo:

Periodically R'lyeh sends forth a hollow, tooth-aching, atonal song that echoes across the whole city. The song's a problem; listen to it for more than a few minutes and you start thinking Mexicans and birth control are what's really wrong with the world, and maybe a nice mass shooting would solve both problems. But then, like, mad numbers of New Yorkers feel the sudden urge to turn up their bike-handle speakers so the whole neighborhood can hear them blasting Lady Gaga, or they throw a house party that bumps 'til dawn despite a million complaints to 311, or they start walking around their apartment in heels knowing it's gonna piss off their downstairs neighbor, or they start loudly complaining about all the other motherfuckers being loud. All of this drowns out the song. So, thanks to so much of New York being *so damn New York*, we okay.

Also been three months since six of us became something more than human, closer to eldritch abominations ourselves—or gods, or living symbols, or hairs on a dog's back that occasionally steer its teeth. I carry within myself the hopes and hatreds of almost nine million people. I'm also just me. Still human in all the ways that matter: I bleed, I sneeze, I scratch my ass when mosquitoes bite—and they still bite, little evil-ass zebra-striped motherfuckers as resistant to pest control as the rats and pigeons. I still sleep, though only when I want to now. Went a whole week without once, just to see, and it was fine. But I spent too many years not getting enough sleep when I was on the street, so these days I like doing it whenever I can.

Weirdest change is I don't need to eat. When I skip that for a week, I don't get shaky and cold the way I used to, but sometimes I get, like, phantom food in my mouth? Cheesecake dense as concrete, burnt too-salty pretzels, a Coke and a slice. Sometimes it's roasted chestnuts, even with no street vendor around. Sometimes what I pick up is stuff I never had before, but I know what it is because I am New York. Lobster Newburg and red clam chowder and a lot of other weird shit got invented here.

But mostly? I eat, even if I don't need to, because I still get hungry. New York is always hungry.

New living arrangements these days. Manny got us a five-bedroom in Harlem, in an old building that's been gut renovated to make it fancy. Place is nice: three bathrooms, a kitchen that's *not* galley, a loft that the floor plan

calls a “study,” a huge common space that’s big enough for a sectional and a dining table, wraparound balcony, pretty tin ceiling. Roof-deck. Penthouse, even. I like it: fancy as fuck, a little old New York and also some new. Manny don’t like it because he’s the part of New York that wanted a new start from his old life. He wanted ordinary. Shouldn’ta become Manhattan, then.

And since it turns out Manny’s rich as fuck—he paid the whole year’s rent up front—the landlord lets him move in whoever he wants. Breaking the old lease left Manny’s roommate Bel out in the cold, so Manny made an offer: take a payout for Manny’s half and stay at their old Inwood place, or claim an open bedroom in the new apartment for the old rent. Bel picked the latter ’cause usually a place like this would be three times as much. Me and Veneza—Jersey City—got two of the rooms. She’s paying her old rent; I get it free. Fifth room is still open because Manny’s hoping one of the other New Yorks will take it. It don’t really matter if we live together. Easier for Veneza since New Jersey Transit is a pain in the ass, but it ain’t nothing for everybody to get together when we need to do city stuff. City magic’s faster than the subway, and all of us are getting good at using it. We didn’t need this apartment.

I get why Manny did it, though: for me. City picked a little homeless batty boy who didn’t finish high school to be its rep. Manny’s cool with the rest but didn’t like the homeless part, so now I got a permanent address and a roof over my head for whenever I want it. I don’t always. Sometimes I just be... over it. Artist, got other shit on my mind. I *can* walk all night so sometimes I do, for days at a time. I need the sidewalks rising to meet my feet the way bodega cats lift their asses when you knuckle near their tails. I need to slip over the barrier at the edge of the subway platform, past the patches of fermenting piss, to breathe the mingled aromas of rat poison and ozone. I need to crouch down by the East River to poke the slime growing on the rocks, wondering what kinds of chemicals are trying to soak through my skin. People who travel, they talk about how clean other cities are. Not much gum on the sidewalk in Toronto; wild. In Bern, crews empty street garbage cans ten times a day. Nice, I guess? But to be New York, I gotta stay dirty. Even if I shower every day and do laundry every week—with a washer and dryer in the house! living in the lap of luxury—I still gotta know the trash. I gotta *be one with* the trash, owoowoo, ommmm.

Veneza asked if it bothers me to have somebody paying my way, and maybe? A little? The fuck else am I supposed to do, though? This ain't the kind of city where you can start from nothing anymore and have a real chance, and I started with less than nothing. American Dream *been* a sucker bet. I do my part around the apartment. Can't cook for shit but I clean when they let me, oh and also? I keep the whole fucking city from dropping off the face of existence. So there's that.

Anyway. Not the first time I had a sugar daddy. Just the first time I wasn't actually fucking him for my keep.

(Ay yo, I *offered*. I ain't a savage. He said no.)

So now it's late-ish, close to midnight. I stand on the balcony staring out at Harlem and the Heights and the Upper West Side, not thinking about anything. It's autumn now, getting chilly at night, so after a while I head in 'cause I'm cold. If Veneza's awake, she's not making noise in her room. If Bel's up, his TV is still on, because I see light flickering under his doorsill. My room's on the other side of the house, near Manny's, 'cause that's the room I picked. (In case.) When I pass the bathroom, the door is ajar and I see Manny leaning on the counter, staring at himself in the mirror. I don't really mean to creep, but he's pretty as hell and right now he's wearing satin pajama pants with no shirt, so yeah, I take it in. He's all kinds of cut. (Muscle, I mean. He won't let me see the other part that might be cut.) The muscle don't usually show with the preppy way he dresses. Likes to play harmless. The truth shows now, though: there's a long scar on his lower back that was obviously stitched at some point, and another scar on the shoulder blade, old and keloided, wider at the bottom than at the top. I seen scars like that on dudes who look ten times harder: knife marks. Guns attract too much attention for some kinds of business, see. I'm guessing the long scar is from surgery, because it crosses a smaller, fainter scar. If he got stabbed or shot right around there, he probably lost a kidney. That's my Manhattan: neat and proper on the surface, walking near-death experience underneath.

He's either lost in thought or checking out an ingrown hair real hard. At first I figure he doesn't know I'm there, but then his eyes shift to me in the reflection. That part kind of shuts down the horny, because for once he isn't trying to pretend he's not... whatever he was, before the city claimed him. (My bet's hitman. Veneza's got ten on corporate espionage. Bronca's stuck

on CIA, but she came up in the Sixties and thinks everybody's CIA.) I get why Manny feels like he needs to play nice, but when a Black man puts on a friendly mask like that, it means he thinks less of you. Means you're too chickenshit to handle the real him. I like that for me, he shows all his beauty and all his beast, all the time.

"We're getting complacent," he says. I like that he doesn't waste my time with small talk, either.

I push the door open more and lean against the sill. "Maybe we just taking a break after all that crazy shit last summer."

"The Enemy still floats over Staten Island. Think she's taking a break?"

"Nah. But Squigglebitch ain't human, so—" Whoops. I cut myself off with a little wince.

He smiles thinly and says the obvious. "Human beings get time off, yes. *We* are the city that never sleeps."

"A'ight, fine, I get it, Scarface." I sigh and fold my arms. "Well, you probably got bazooka money. So let's roll up on Staten Island and start shooting up in the air."

He smiles. It's got a tired edge 'cause I know I'm being a pain in the ass. Then he turns to face me, leaning back against the sink edge. Aww, bye booty, but hello to the front, mmm. He catches me looking and *blushes*, which is hilarious. Fine as he is, I know full well Manny been drowning in pussy, bussy, and all the ussy in between, his whole grown life—but with me, sometimes it's like I'm talking to a virgin. Even now he ducks his eyes, bites his lip, spends a second trying to figure out if he should flirt back and what he'll do if I take him up on it... and then he takes a deep breath and decides to act like everything's normal between us. It's not as insulting as if he pretended to be nice. That's mistrust and disrespect; this is something else. Fear, maybe. Wish I could figure out what the hell it is about me that scares a dude like him.

"No bazookas," he drawls, "and I can't think of a construct that could possibly have enough power to even reach R—that city, let alone hurt it." By unspoken agreement, we mostly avoid saying the name of our enemy. It hurts to say, and none of us likes stinking up the conversational air. I don't like saying "NYPD," either.

Manny continues: "But there are things we *can* do. Strategies we should consider—like asking around to find out if other cities have useful intel.

Maybe figuring out which alternate dimension she came from, and dealing with her at the source.”

There’s a big ol’ chunk of knowledge that pops into the heads of baby cities when they get reborn—a lexicon, compiled by the other living cities to give the babies at least a fighting chance. I don’t know how the other cities compiled it or how they make sure new cities get it at birth. It’s missing a lot of important shit, too, which is why they also send the next-youngest city to help out and explain. And the process still got some bugs, because when the others woke up after I went down, only Bronca got the lexicon, out of the boroughs. Bottom line—I got the lexicon and Manny don’t, so I explain: “We already know more than the other cities. None of them ever had to deal with her after birth, and all they ever seen was fucked-up tentacles and shit. She wasn’t even *she*, for them.”

“But now they know there’s more to her. They know she has a name, and that she works through manipulating institutions and systems as much as individuals. If I were a living city who suddenly realized the Enemy was in *real estate*, I would look back on every bit of city planning over the last fifty years with a different eye. Education budgets, policing, zoning, liquor licenses, public transportation, even popular culture—and the signs would be there. She’s been playing the long game, stifling progress and weakening cities to make them easier to destroy, and once you know what to look for, the cancer is everywhere.”

Yeah, but. I sigh. “My daddy died of cancer.”

Manny blinks, sobers, and doesn’t say anything. I never talked about shit like this with him before. Don’t know why I’m saying it now. “He knew something was wrong, but he also knew he had other shit to worry about, like trying to keep a roof over our head. So he ignored it when stuff hurt, or when he pissed blood. Health insurance was shitty so he didn’t go to the doctor, who was just going to tell him something he didn’t want to hear and push him to start treatments he couldn’t afford. He figured he could leave us a bunch of medical bills, or he could leave us life insurance.” I shrug. It hadn’t even been that much money. Our family still fell apart after he died. But that was the choice he made.

Manny chews on this. “You think the other cities would rather deny the obvious than acknowledge how bad the problem really is.”

“Some of ’em, yeah. Denial’s easy, fixing shit is hard. And what’s the

alternative, putting the city through chemo?” I shrug. “Ain’t everybody up for—”

Before I can finish this thought, something hits me. That’s what it feels like—not a punch but a goddamn truck, smacking me out of nowhere and hitting so hard that for an instant I go blind. It’s not physical, though I grunt and fall to my knees as if it is. It’s sensory, and extra-sensory. It’s here and elsewhere. It’s *screaming*.

den of iniquity

full of ANTIFA fucking terrorists

everybody’s leaving, New York is over, turn it into a for-profit prison and wall up anybody left behind

LIBTARDS LIBTARTS LIBARTS START SREADING THE NEWS FUCK NEW YORK

And more. So much more. I already have eight million voices in my head but this is way, way more than that—so many it almost drowns out the voices that are supposed to be there. But then, some of the eight million start shouting back.

9/11 didn’t happen anywhere near you, STFU

NY and Cali put money into the country and you racist flyover corneaters just suck it out! Suck on this!

SHUT YO BITCH ASS UP

So much. Too much. It hurts, both my physical head and my mind, and it’s not supposed to be like this. A living city blends the will of its citizens with the impressions of outsiders, as filtered through legends and media. We are amalgamated gods sprung whole from the fusion of belief with reality, but usually, the beliefs are pretty steady. People still think New York is a great place to live despite 9/11, nightmare housing prices, and the media making us out to be a combination Mad Max sim and Taco Bell. Meanwhile there have always been people who hate New York without ever setting foot in it—because they hear too much about it and get tired of the hype, because they “lost” a cousin who moved here from TinyRepublicanVille and turned socialist, because they secretly wish they could live here, too, but are too scared to try, whatever. But ’til now all this was constant. Background radiation. What’s hitting me now is a sudden ramp-up of outsider hate like nothing I’ve ever felt before. All these voices from Iowa and Alabama and England and Nigeria echo not our legend but

its opposite—all the shit that people think about New York which not only isn't true, but contradicts what is. Those concepts jam into my mind like shrapnel: crackheads vomiting on every corner, children being kept in Omelasian basements by cannibal pedophiles, sneering intellectuals in kippahs and wild-eyed billionaires in turbans scheming to take over the world, seedy public bathrooms that will turn you trans even though we barely have public bathrooms in the first place.

The reality of New York is being assailed by a thousand other New Yorks that don't exist... but a bunch of people suddenly *want* them to. And, oh God, I can feel their belief actually dragging at me, trying to pull me away from who I actually am.

Hands take my shoulders. Manny, but Veneza too, and those are Bel's "if you can read this I'll take a footrub, thanks" socks. Shit, I'm on the floor. When did that happen? Somebody pulls me up.

"The fuck," I mumble.

"I caught some of that," Manny says. He looks freaked out in a very calm, serious way. "I don't know what it was, though."

"Me neither, *homme*."

"Maybe you have epilepsy?" Bel asks. He knows the scoop about us on account of having almost got ate by tentacles in a park once. Still, he thinks like a normal human being, so he looks first for normal human reasons for things. "Wait, can living embodiments of cities have epilepsy?"

"Sure," I say, though I don't know how I know this. I push myself upright, shaky enough about it that Manny puts a hand on my back for support. I hate that I need it. "Epilepsy ain't what this was, tho. Felt like... I don't know." A blurring of existence. An unmaking.

Veneza looks toward the window—specifically, toward the south-facing window on that side of the apartment. Great view of Manhattan below 125th. It's also where, amid the wispy night clouds, I can just see the ghostly, jagged spires of an alien metropolis hovering like a guillotine over what used to be my fifth borough.

"Nah," I say to Veneza. "It ain't her either. Not this time, anyway."

She looks skeptical. "You sure? I don't put anything past Squigglebitch. Even if it didn't feel like it was coming from her, it's probably something she did."

Manny's and Veneza's phones suddenly bling with several texts all at

once—Brooklyn and Padmini hitting up the group chat, probably, to ask what’s going on. Then Veneza’s phone rings outright: Bronca, who’s old and hates texting. Veneza sighs and steps back to answer the call. My head has started to clear. “Something’s changed,” I say. “Somebody, somewhere, is talking shit about us. *Declaring war* on us. And whoever it is, they got enough people listening and agreeing that I actually felt that shit.”

Bel mutters something to himself along the lines of “Yeah, fuck this nonsense, never want to become a city, migraines are bad enough.” Manny nods at me, his expression grim and strained. They all felt it, I realize, but the boroughs are each one-fifth of New York. I’m the only one who got the full whammy. Veneza’s trying to get Bronca off the phone. “I don’t *know*, Old B, and he doesn’t either. Look, I thought old people didn’t sleep that much anyway— Oooh, nice, you kiss people with that mouth? Yeah, g’night.”

That’s pretty much it after that. Manny helps me up and to my bedroom. Bel herds Veneza and Manny out to give me space, and I guess Manny handles the group chat. I don’t look because I got one of those shitty prepay data plans, so I keep the phone off when I don’t need it. Not sure I want to waste money on seeing what’s got New York trending on social media, or whatever.

In the morning, we understand.

Bel’s got a crush on NY1’s Pat Kiernan, so he watches news every morning on the big TV in the common area. I half listen while I brush my teeth and pretend to shave, even though I only got like twelve chin hairs. Over the sound of Veneza blearily cleaning the coffee pot, Pat says there was a big to-do online the previous night, when a bunch of Republicans started “spontaneously” tweeting about New York City needing to be punished for stuff like trying to defund the NYPD and make sure poor children don’t starve. I guess they hit viral mass or got bots, so for a while #NewYorkIHopeYouDie was trending number one on Twitter. Pat screenshots some of the tweets: surprise, most of the “facts” getting tossed around are made up and most of the charts are wrong. The most popular retweets feature either footage of individual people doing dumb shit, which they claim is proof that the whole city is full of dumb shits, or clips from

different cities altogether. I just roll my eyes and sit down at the kitchen island to eat my cereal, but Veneza gets a weird look on her face and pulls out her laptop. It's wild to watch her hands actually blur as she types and clicks. Then she curses. "*Thought so.*"

The Froot Loops are hittin' today. "What," I ask with my mouth full.

"That hashtag smelled like a marketing campaign, especially seeing how it hit right before the news. Lo and behold."

She turns her laptop around, playing a clip from the PIX11 website—the previous night's news broadcast. Bel's rummaging in the fridge, but he stops at the noise and meanders over, munching on a carrot. Manny, still buttoning his shirt, comes out of his bedroom to see, too. We're all riveted, suddenly, by a sallow-complexioned fiftysomething Italian guy with a bad frontal hairpiece.

"New York needs not only new leadership, but a new soul," the guy says. He's in a room full of people, standing at a podium and grinning while camera flashes go off all around him. "This isn't what New York—America!—is supposed to be like. My ancestors came here legally. They didn't expect handouts. They didn't whine about discrimination when the police gave them a hard time; they *joined* the police and abided by the law. The men were men and the women were women and we didn't have any of that, uh, confusion." He laughs. Bel mutters something. "We gotta fix all that. This is *our* city, not theirs."

Cheers resound in the room. The guy grins, feeding on their excitement, excited himself. He turns to a drape-covered easel that stands nearby, and with a flourish uncovers it to reveal a campaign sign: PANFILO FOR MAYOR in lurid red and black, superimposed over a blue outline of New York's cityscape, love the color symbolism. The guy—Panfilo, apparently—then turns to look dead into the camera, grinning and raising his arms. "We're gonna Make New York Great Again!" More cheering all around him.

The clip stops. Veneza closes her laptop. Manny looks at me, and I remember our conversation from the night before. The doctor just called, it's cancer, and it's about two seconds away from metastasizing. So how *does* a city of eight million people put itself through chemo? Guess we 'bout to find out.