

# Small-Minded Giants

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*Random House Children's Publishers UK*

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## About the Book

***Sol. You're in danger. Steer clear of the police, they can't be trusted.***

***I'll come back for you soon. Gregor.***

Beyond the huge domed roof of Ash Harbour, deadly storms and Arctic temperatures have stripped the Earth bare. Resources are limited and access to power is all-important for the aggressive industry giants.

When sixteen-year-old Solomon Wheat's father goes missing and is accused of murder, he's desperate to uncover the truth. Searching through the under-city's skeletal maze, Sol's every move is watched by the menacing Clockworkers and the mysterious Dark-Day Fatalists as he tries desperately to find his father.

Even more sinister secrets are exposed when it becomes clear that the Machine which keeps the fragile city alive is running out of power. All of a sudden, the future of Ash Harbour rests on the shoulders of one young man and his unlikely accomplices. Can Sol take on the city's underworld and survive?

# SMALL-MINDED GIANTS

OISÍN MCGANN

**RHCP DIGITAL**

***For my giant little brother,  
Darius ~ a mind apart***

## Section 1/24: Accident



THE EIGHT TEENAGERS waited excitedly for their chance to be dangled from the giant's arm. Solomon Wheat stood apart from his classmates, his face hidden by the hood of his black tracksuit top, his gaze lost in the latticed shapes of the gantries silhouetted against the white light of the dome above them. It was to be their turn next; they could see the arm of the tower crane swinging towards them, the glass and denceramic carriage starting to descend. Except for a single figure, it was empty, the rest of their class having already been deposited on the far side of the complex.

Despite his withdrawn posture, Sol was as excited as the rest of his classmates. He had never been up in a crane car, and this was a luxury model, normally only used by the big-noise industrialists and planners. As a school tour, this was going to be hard to top. The carriage was being lowered towards its cradle. Large enough for ten people to sit around its richly upholstered seats, its smooth, classic, graphite-coloured curves spoke of sheer class. This was how the other half travelled – archaic, but majestic. The figure inside was Vincent Schaeffer, the main man, head of the Third Quadrant, responsible for the very air they breathed. The whole thing was a blatant PR stunt, an attempt to show how

the company was 'in touch' with young people. But as long as he got a ride on the crane, Sol wasn't going to complain.

The carriage's cradle, a steel-framed platform, rose to meet the carriage on hydraulic arms as it was lowered the last few metres, magnets activating to pull the swinging load into line and control its touchdown with impressive accuracy. The five girls and three boys surged forward, each of them eager to be the first on board and grab the best seats.

'Hold on!' Ms Kiroa, their teacher, called them back. 'Wait until Mr Schaeffer says it's all right. That includes *you*, Faisal Twomey.'

Ana Kiroa was young, and pretty in a strict, teacher kind of way, but her voice already had the tone of authority, and the students reacted, stumbling to a reluctant halt. They waited, slowly edging closer to the door, while trying to look as stationary as possible. Sol hung back near the teacher. He would try and sit near her if he could, but not so close as to be obvious.

Schaeffer opened the door and waved them aboard, stepping aside to avoid being knocked over in the rush. Ms Kiroa smiled an apology, shrugging helplessly as the students poured up the platform's steps and through the door. Sol shifted the strap of his bag onto his shoulder, stuck his hands deeper into his pockets and nodded to Schaeffer as he passed him. There were three seats left together, and he took the middle one, relishing the knowledge that Ms Kiroa would have to sit beside him. He stuck his bag on the floor and twisted to look out of the window behind him.

They were surrounded by the Ventilation Complex, which made up the centre of the Third Quadrant. Most of the girls hated the complex - they thought it ugly and cold - but to Sol it was interesting, an insight into how the city worked. A stacked maze of metal shafts, ducts, filtration systems, tall dispersal fans and many other unidentifiable constructions served to feed air into the city from the frozen world



outside. Beyond, the tops of the poorest apartment blocks in the quadrant could be seen; their windows looking out on this industrial spread.

‘Welcome to the Schaeffer Corporation. Unfortunately, at this early stage, I’m going to be leaving you,’ Schaeffer told the class, interrupting Sol’s thoughts. ‘I have a few things to attend to, but I’ll meet you on the other side. I’m sure Ms Kiroa can talk you through the trip. Just a few safety messages – sorry, I have to, you know what these safety people are like!’

He was a short man, in a slightly rumpled suit, with a potbelly, long white sideburns and a chubby face. He didn’t look like a big-shot businessman, Sol thought, and he was obviously ill-at-ease around young people. Knowing the young people around him, Sol couldn’t blame him.

‘There is a safety lock on the door that operates while the carriage is in motion, but don’t touch the door anyway. Keep your weight distributed evenly for a steady ride; don’t all crowd over one side of the carriage – it won’t lean, but it could increase the amount of swing. If you feel sick, there are bags provided under the seats. Please use them. Oh, and no eating or drinking in the carriage.’ His face expressed boredom at the tiresome rules. ‘Right, that’s my duty done. Enjoy the ride, and I’ll see you over the other side!’

Some of the students started talking softly under their breath as Schaeffer finished. Sol didn’t join in. It was funny how people lowered their voices when they were excited. Ms Kiroa sat down beside him, and he pulled his hood further up over his face, feeling suddenly tense.

Schaeffer stepped out of the carriage and closed the door firmly behind him. Sol turned to watch him; the man waved at them as if they were children, and then turned to walk towards another carriage on the far side of the yard. Sol turned back as the seat shuddered underneath him, and he pressed his feet against the floor in reflex.

‘This is such a rush!’ Cleo, one of the girls across from him, muttered to a friend. ‘Feel my arm; I’m all goose-bumps!’

She was an odd-looking girl – cute enough, with her oriental eyes and blonde hair. Cleo and Sol had been friends when they were younger. But now she was just another loud-mouth teenage ditz, a singer for some wannabe band. Sol looked away: he had no taste for girls his own age; they were all so flighty. The carriage jerked slightly, creaked, and then he felt his stomach lurch as they were lifted from the ground. There were a few whoops and squeals, and suddenly everybody was standing up and looking out of the windows.

‘Sit down, please!’ Ms Kiroa called, but it was half hearted, and she stood up herself to make the most of the view. Sol positioned himself at her shoulder; he was taller than her and, with her head by his nose, he could smell her hair. He breathed in the scent, then moved away slightly, suddenly embarrassed by how close she was.

The city fell away around them, and they rose high over the quadrant, above the Ventilation Complex below, above the surrounding buildings, until they could see clear across the city. Above them, the tower crane’s jib began to turn, swinging them out and round, heading towards the Second Quadrant, where they would connect with a gantry crane and be carried over into the Food Production Complex. Between the tops of the four looming tower cranes – one in the centre of each quadrant – and the domed roof of the city, there was only the gantry grid. Each with four arms, the tower cranes’ resemblance to a force of protective metal giants was now a permanent part of their image.

‘We must be over a hundred metres up,’ Cleo said, a tremor in her voice. ‘It’s like we’re flying.’

The city of Ash Harbour looked spectacular. Built inside a hollowed-out mountain five kilometres across, its top roofed with a massive dome to keep out the ferocious elements,

this was their whole world. Beyond those walls, deadly storms and freezing temperatures had stripped the planet bare. Sol gazed out at the city, and realized for the first time just how small their world was. His window was facing towards the body of the crane, and his eyes followed it down to the bottom, a long, long way below. The crane's perspective heightened the feeling of being hung out in the sky and he experienced a moment of dizziness.

He caught sight of the carriage that Schaeffer had boarded. It was hanging from another arm of the crane. It was going to pass inside the path of the school's carriage, overtaking it as the students took the scenic route. It was moving jerkily, as if something was wrong.

Sol leaned harder against the glass. He could see two figures inside. One was on the nearside of the carriage, looking anxiously towards the ceiling. He was a young man, dressed in the suit of a businessman or industrialist. Sol couldn't see the other person very well, but knew it must be Schaeffer. Ms Kiroa saw what he was looking at, and leaned in closer beside him, her shoulder touching his.

'Why is it shaking like that?' she wondered aloud.

'Maybe just worn bearings,' he replied, wanting to sound knowledgeable. His gaze was locked on the scene before him.

'They should lower it down. It doesn't look safe.' The obvious alarm in her voice carried around the carriage.

All of a sudden the entire class was pushing in around them, staring out at the shuddering crane car, which was coming ever closer.

'Maybe it's going to fall!' Faisal Twomey said, from behind Sol.

'Shut up, you grit!' Cleo snapped.

'Quiet, all of you,' Ms Kiroa said calmly.

Sol felt queasy. Seeing the unstable carriage dangling so high above the ground made him all the more conscious of their own situation. His eyes locked on the face of the man

who was less than fifty metres away. This was a man who presumably travelled in these carriages all the time. Sol was close enough to see the barely suppressed panic on his face. Something was badly wrong. Above and beyond the other crane car, beneath the arm that held it, he could see the cabin where the controller sat. He must notice that there was a problem. The carriage was only twenty metres away, but it had stopped swinging past them now and, glancing up at the trolley beneath the arm, Sol could see that the winch had started up – it was beginning to lower the car.

There was a jerk in the doubled cables, and the carriage dropped slightly, shaking back and forth. Sol looked back up at the arm.

‘Jesus,’ Cleo gasped. ‘Look . . . The thing . . . The trolley’s come off!’

The trolley holding the winch was hanging off at one end. As they watched, another of its wheels gave way, and now the entire weight of the crane car was suspended from only one corner of the trolley’s welded steel frame. The rail holding the wheel was already buckling.

One of the girls started crying. Somebody else joined in.

‘Get a grip, for God’s sake!’ Cleo exclaimed.

With everyone on one side of their car, it was unbalanced, and swinging ever so slightly. Ana had her hand over her mouth; she was holding her breath. Sol spared her a glance, but quickly brought his eyes back to the man in the other carriage. The young man was clutching a rail beside the window, holding onto it for all he was worth, as if that would help support the dangling carriage. Sol felt the floor under his feet tremble, and he looked down in alarm. But it was a normal movement. Their carriage was starting to creep in along its jib to reach the other car.

‘What the hell’s goin’ on?’ Faisal growled. ‘What’s he doing?’

‘We’re going to get them out of there,’ Cleo told him. ‘But we’re going too *slowly*.’

‘Vibrations,’ Sol hissed through tense jaws. ‘He doesn’t want to knock the other car loose.’

The man could see them approaching. He looked out at them, shouting something. Letting go of the rail, he pressed both hands against the window. Growing more frantic, he started hammering his fists against the glass. On the other side, Schaeffer was still looking towards the two control cabs. The dangling carriage jerked again, the trolley’s rail pulling bolts free from the crane’s arm. The young man behind the glass was talking again, pleading, urging them on. They were very close now. Sol thought he could have jumped the gap, if he’d been able to take a run at it. They were almost within reach.

Sol looked up at the trolley and saw it give, feeling it part from the arm with a jolt like a physical blow. The carriage dropped away, almost seeming to suck them after it in its wake. He saw the young man for an instant before the carriage turned into a tumble, saw him open his mouth in a silent scream behind the glass as he fell. The moment was perfectly silent, and then the cable, snaking past them, smacked the broken trolley against the side of their carriage and everyone screamed.

Their carriage swung from side to side, and the other car was suddenly forgotten. They all clutched at the rails on the walls over the seats; those who missed were thrown onto the floor. Sol had a firm hold on a rail, his eyes shut tight. Ana had seized his arm and was squeezing so hard it hurt, her fingernails digging into his flesh. The swinging subsided, but it was difficult to tell – his head was all over the place, and his stomach was trying to climb out of his mouth. He smelled the sharp, rank scent of urine and knew somebody had wet themselves. Everybody was gasping and sobbing.

‘Get us down!’ Amanda Yan shrieked. ‘Get us down from here! I want to get down!’

They were dropping towards the ground . . . slowly. Ana let go of his arm, struggling to regain her composure. Around

the carriage, everyone was sitting down, some trembling and crying, some silent, scared and embarrassed. Sol was surprised to find himself shivering, his heart pounding fit to burst. Steeling himself, he looked out of the window.

His stomach had a hard time dealing with the height, but it was the sight of the other carriage that finally did it. The car lay, crumpled and shattered, about fifty metres from where they were going to come down. He could see the bodies of the two men. Reaching under his seat, he barely got the sick bag out in time.

Sol wandered back and forth by the landed carriage, feeling horribly numb. They could see the crash site, but there were already men swarming over it. Blue-uniformed policemen were cordoning off the scene. He had a blanket over his shoulders, but had no idea how it had got there. An ambulance passed him by, its electric motor whining as it sped towards the wrecked carriage. The two men would not need it.

‘Are you all right, son?’ a voice said to him.

Sol turned and felt his stomach lurch again. Vincent Schaeffer was standing before him, flanked by two other men.

‘I thought you were dead.’ Sol frowned, staring in open confusion at the middle-aged man. He had the strangest feeling that none of this was real.

‘I almost was, son. I almost was.’ Schaeffer was pale, and looked badly shaken. ‘It was only pure, blind luck I was called back before the car lifted off.’

He turned to one of the other men, his voice now steady, in command.

‘Get these young people to a hospital. They’re all in shock. See that they’re given the best of care. I want to know how this happened – and I want to know soon.’

They started to walk away, and Sol watched them with dazed interest.

'Arrange meetings with Falyadi and Walden's families,' Schaeffer continued. 'I want to deliver my condolences in person . . .'

An accident, Sol thought. His father had talked about the accidents that had been happening. He had a theory about them. Suddenly Sol wanted to go home; he wanted to talk to his dad. Turning in the direction of the West Wall, he started walking.

'Sol? Solomon! Come back here!'

Ana hurried after him and took his arm.

'Everybody's going to the hospital, come on.'

'I'm fine, I just want to go home,' he told her.

'We'll just get you checked out, then we can all go home.'

He liked having her attention, and let her lead him towards one of the waiting ambulances. His classmates were sitting in and around them, their faces drawn, staring into nothing. Cleo had her arms around Amanda, talking quietly to her. Beyond the ambulances, on an overpass that looked down on the Ventilation Complex, he saw a group of six or seven figures clad all in black; thin shapes in trenchcoats, their long hair hanging down over their faces. Dark-Day Fatalists. It hadn't taken them long to show up.

'Vultures,' Ana muttered under her breath.

Sol regarded them with disdain. She was right; they flocked to the scenes of disaster like scavengers. It was as if they thought that every death proved them right.

A long black car pulled up and two more men in suits got out. But these were not businessmen; with them was the mayor, Isabella Haddad. Her face was carefully drawn in official sorrow, her every movement appropriate to the occasion. Solomon's father had plenty to say about her too, but Sol thought the mayor was okay, or at least the best of a bad lot. He had little time for politicians or politics. None of it ever seemed to make a difference.

Still, somebody had to say something at a time like this. Haddad would have the right words. Sol stopped for a

moment, swivelling to look up at the arm of the crane, to where the wrecked carriage had once been attached. The immense machine loomed over them, its image as a protective giant lost in the fall of the ill-fated carriage. Sol realized he was trembling, and wrapped the blanket tighter around his shoulders, turning away from the mechanical tower.



## Section 2/24: Debt



IT WAS LATE afternoon by the time Solomon got back to his apartment complex. Along the maze of narrow corridors and up one flight of steps after another, he made his way through the block of flats to the three small rooms that he and his father called home. He opened the door and checked his father's room. Gregor had not come back the night before; it was Thursday, yesterday had been payday, and he had probably spent the night out with his buddies, playing cards or laying down bets at the ratting dens. He would have gone straight back to work, and would not be home until later. Sol dumped his bag on the sofa-bed and strode into his room, throwing himself down on his own bed.

The room was barely big enough for the narrow bunk and a bedside table. The wall was plastered with posters of late-twentieth-century boxers from the Golden Age of the sport: Ali, Liston, Marciano, Leonard, Tyson, Lewis – great fighters. Every square centimetre of space was taken up with his junk: boxing memorabilia, his gloves, weights, as well as piles of books and his underused bongos.

He stood up again, feeling antsy, restless. The crane accident had left him feeling disturbed, and now he couldn't get the last few moments of the doomed carriage out of his mind. Pacing the living room for a minute or two, he decided

to go out for a run. Gregor could be hours yet, and Sol needed to talk – either that or do something active. He couldn't stand just waiting around. Changing into his running tracksuit, he slipped on his trainers, strapped some small weights around his wrists and left the flat.

It would take him ten minutes to get out by going downstairs, so he took to the rooftops instead. The sunlight from the dome was already fading, and the city lights were being lit; tall, denceramic posts topped with glass lenses glowing with sewer-gas flames. The roofs of most of the apartment complexes were flat and paved – with no elements to worry about, people used the rooftops as gardens and gathering areas, and there were routes that dropped in blocked steps to the first level of streets. It was easy climbing for an agile young man. Even without descending to the street, he could run for kilometres across the interlocking walkways and clustered rooftops. But he needed noise and life, things to watch to take his mind off the accident. He pulled up the hood of his top, and set off at an easy jog, swinging his weighted arms in gentle punches to warm them up.

Music drifted across from somewhere, and he followed the sound. There was a party going on. There was always a party going on somewhere. Ash Harbour was a crowded place, and often there was little to do but get drunk, or high, and play music and dance. Sol wasn't into it – he liked to keep to himself – but sometimes he wished he could just let loose and go nuts on the weekend like his classmates. Other times, he just thought they were stupid. But then, they did get more girls that way.

There was graffiti everywhere. There were three gangs on this block, but these weren't territorial marks, just the usual scribbling:

CALL HOPHEAD FOR GOOD BOOZE.  
AMANDA YAN GIVES IT UP FOR MONEY.

LIFE'S CRAP, AND THEN YOU DIE.  
STOP THE RIDE, I WANT TO GET OFF.  
TODD WOZ 'ERE '73. WASN'T IMPRESSED.  
WHO ARE THE CLOCKWORKERS?

He gave that last one a second glance, wondering about it, but kept running. The walls around him were coated with the frustrated scrawling of bored kids. Tired of being crammed into this city, with nowhere to go but old age.

The music was louder now, and he slowed down, coming to the edge of a roof that looked out onto a small square lit in moody party colours. Putting his foot up on the low wall while he slowed his breathing, he gazed down at the scene. There was a band playing: two drummers, somebody with an old guitar - a real one - and a few guys on home-made horns. Most instruments were home-made these days. The crowd was in a lively mood, and the music was good, catchy. Solomon toyed with the idea of going down - the gig looked open enough - but he contented himself with watching from up in the darkness for a while.

He recognized the guitarist - it was Cleo. She was pretty handy on those strings, and was leading the singing of some raucous, anarchic anthem. At the centre of the pack, as usual. She was rarely without a boyfriend - there were rumours she'd had a girlfriend once too, but he suspected it was just malicious gossip. Music was such a social thing, he thought. Musicians always seemed to have loads of friends. In boxing, you had your team-mates, the guys you trained with, but it was different. At least for him. To stay sharp, you had to keep training separate from everything else. He turned away from the square and started running again. Climbing over a firewall, he descended some steps, balanced along a jutting wall and then down a ladder to the uppermost street. Watching the world around him from inside his hood, he ran for another half an hour, taking a circuitous route home. The evening light was gone, and the

busy streets were lit only by store windows and the gaslights. He climbed up to the roof again, taking a different path back to his flat, one that led to the single window in the sitting room. He had left it open when he left.

He unstrapped the weights from his wrists as he dropped down to the floor . . . and was immediately aware that there was someone in the darkness with him. Bunching up in a defensive stance, he ducked away from the low light of the window, but it was too late. He felt a blow of something hard and heavy across his left hand, knocking away his guard and sending shooting pain through his wrist. From somewhere there was the scent of an acidic aftershave. Striking out with the weights in his right hand, his knuckles brushed against the fabric of the man's jacket. A foot came down heavily on the back of Sol's knee and he realized he had two opponents. As he fell to his knees, a hand grabbed his hair, pulling his head back, and a fist landed square on his nose. Pain burst across his face. Something hit the back of his neck, and he crumpled to the floor, stunned. He was dimly aware of two men clambering out of the open window, and then there was silence.

He lay there for some time, tenderly clutching his broken nose, his eyes full of tears. As he waited for his head to stop spinning, he took a woozy glance around the room. It had been completely ransacked.

'Dad'sh goin' to go nutsh,' he muttered.

'You've been broken into,' the policeman confirmed. 'Sure as shootin'.'

'I know,' Sol acknowledged sourly.

He had an ice pack in each hand, one held to his nose, the other pressed against the back of his neck. His voice sounded as if he had a cold, and every time he moved his head a furry headache rolled around inside it. The officer, who had introduced himself as Carling, had made a cursory examination of the door, the window and the overturned

room before delivering his verdict. He did all the talking, in an official, monotonous manner, as his partner gazed out of the window.

‘Anything missing?’ he asked, his erasable notepad out.

‘Not that I can see.’ Sol looked around. ‘I think I scared them off. Look, aren’t there tests you’re supposed to do? Fingerprints and stuff?’

‘Nah, they’ll have been wearing gloves.’ Carling shook his head. ‘We get called out to break-ins like this every day. Nothing to look for.’

Sol scowled. ‘Thanks for dropping by, anyway.’

‘Not sure I like your tone, son.’

‘Sorry, Officer. I’m sixteen. It’s the only tone I’ve got.’

Carling chuckled drily.

‘Wife an’ I used to live in a place like this, had a window just like that one,’ he mused. ‘Got broke into five times. *Five* times! And me an officer of the law. We moved out, got an internal flat, no windows. Haven’t been broken into since. Place isn’t as nice, no natural light or nothin’, but it’s *safer*, you know what I mean?’

Sol stared at him over the ice pack. ‘So, what you’re saying is: if we moved to a worse flat, if we didn’t have any windows at all, it’d be harder to break into?’

‘You’ve got to have security, son,’ Carling told him.

‘By that reckoning, then, if we didn’t have any doors into the flat either, we’d be completely safe.’

‘That’s being a bit extreme, son.’

‘We had to wait four years to move to a place with a window. We kind o’ like it.’ Sol took the pack away from the back of his neck and looked at it. There was a little bit of blood on the cloth.

‘That bent out of shape?’ Carling nodded towards Sol’s broken nose.

‘I think it’s just the cartilage,’ Sol muttered. ‘I’ll have my coach look at it tomorrow – he sees these a lot.’

'You should think about personal protection, then. The wife and I have a selection of personal-protection measures aside from my regulation weapons. She favours pepper spray - not that I can officially recommend it, you understand, but it's not illegal, you know what I mean?'

Sol was going to point out that he was a pretty handy boxer, but then remembered that he had been floored without getting in a single blow. So much for all his training. He stayed quiet.

'Other things I can't recommend,' Carling continued, 'would include knuckledusters, coshes; small, easily concealed knives; a bag of ball bearings; or even that timeless classic, the rock-in-the-sock. I must urge you not to resort to any of these measures, but if you have to, there is a good range to be had at reasonable prices down on Buccaneer Street. Don't go there after dark.'

'I'll be fine as I am, thanks,' Sol reassured him.

His father had firm ideas about weapons. Like most boys his age, Sol had gone through a stage of playing with knives. Gregor had taken one of the blades and cut up his favourite Muhammad Ali poster with it. Sol didn't want to think about what he'd do with pepper spray. Or a rock-in-a-sock.

'I think we're done here, Jim,' Carling said to his partner. Then, looking one last time at Sol: 'Stay safe, son. There are some real nut-jobs out there.'

'Yes, sir.'

The policemen departed, leaving Sol to survey the bomb-site that was his home. First the accident at the crane, and now this; it had been a hell of a day. The mess was going to take some clearing up, but it would be best to get it done before his dad got home. Gregor would be a pain in the neck as it was, knowing his son had been attacked. Seeing the flat wrecked too would mean an evening of ranting about the state of the world. That, Sol could do without.

He leaned into the tiny open-plan kitchenette, throwing the sodden ice packs into the sink. Heaving a sigh that made his aching head throb, he started straightening up the living room. With the worst of the mess cleared up there, he went into his father's room and pondered on whether to leave it and let Gregor clean it up himself. Sol shrugged - he would tidy up the big stuff. Bending down to right the bedside table, he caught the drawers before they fell out of it, and was pushing them closed when something caught his eye. In the bottom drawer was a stack of betting slips from Cooley's, a ratting den in the Fourth Quadrant.

Sol sat down on the bed.

'Ah, Dad,' he breathed.

Gregor normally kept his gambling under control; he was always saying you had to keep a firm grip on your vices, or they'd grip you. But times had been tight recently, and Sol knew how the hope of a big win could push gamblers over the edge just when they could least afford it. There were a lot of slips here, and no way of telling whether they'd been paid off or not. Sol began to wonder if their two recent visitors had been burglars at all. He wondered if they'd been trying to collect on a debt.

'What do you mean, we've been withdrawn?' Cleo demanded. 'We're the main act!'

'I'm sorry, Cleo, but it's at the request of the sponsor.' The school principal, Mr Khaled, held his hands up helplessly. 'They had someone at one of your performances recently, and found some of your lyrics . . . inflammatory. They said that we'd either have to drop your band or lose their sponsorship. What could we do?'

'You could stand up for your students, is what you could do—'

'Now, mind your tone, young lady,' he warned. 'It's the students I'm thinking of - all of them. They've been promised this ball and we're going to give it to them. But we

can't do it without money. Internal Climate is our sponsor, and we have to respect their wishes—'

'You have to kiss their small-minded asses, is more like!' Cleo retorted.

Khaled's pale brown face stiffened, and Cleo saw the beginnings of a storm brewing. She didn't like the man, but he tried hard to win the students' respect. It was his temper that let him down most of the time.

'I have to go and tell the guys,' she said in a softer voice. 'Just out of interest, who's going to headline it now?'

'Iced Breeze,' Khaled supplied.

'Aw, good grease, not those saps—'

'Get to class, Miss Matsumura.' The principal's tone left little room for argument.

Cleo angrily shifted the strap of her bag onto her shoulder and headed for her classroom. Freak Soup, her band, were the most popular group in the school, which was why they'd been the obvious choice to headline the end-of-year gig. It was going to be their biggest-ever audience, and they'd been really keyed up for it. She was nearly crying with frustration as she entered the classroom. They had Ms Kiroa for civics. The teacher took one look at Cleo's face and just waved her to her seat. Everybody knew that she'd been called away by the principal; now everybody could guess why.

Cleo slumped down in her chair with burning cheeks, avoiding the eyes of those around her. The open roof let in the light from the dome, but it was dull and grey, and the electrical lamps had been turned on. Sol Wheat sat across from her, his hood up. He was trying to hide it, but she noticed his nose looked badly swollen, and she wondered if he had banged it somehow in the crane carriage.

'We were about to have a minute's silence for the two men who died yesterday,' Ms Kiroa told her. 'By the way, if any of you feel you need to talk about what happened,



you're welcome to come to me after class. So, if you could all stand . . .'

Cleo stood up with the rest of the class. She breathed in and out slowly, subduing the sobs that wanted to come out. It was so *unfair*. She couldn't believe the nerve of those snides. Those welshing, backstabbing little snides. Well, if they thought her lyrics had been inflammatory before, just wait until she came up with a number about this . . . She'd write stuff that would make their hair stand on end.

'Thank you, you can sit down now,' Ms Kiroa told them. 'Sol, take your hood down, please. You know I don't like you wearing it up in class. So, to recap on last week, why is it necessary for the bulk of us to travel to work or school on the clockwise route, and then complete the circle on the homeward journey?'

Cleo snorted quietly. They'd been learning this since primary school. Right turns to school, and right turns home. Hands went up.

'To generate the kinetic energy for the Heart Engine, miss.' Ubertino Lamont, one of Freak Soup's drummers, spoke up as the teacher pointed to him. 'To keep the flywheels turning.'

'Duh,' Cleo mumbled.

'All right, that was an easy one,' Ms Kiroa said. 'And we know that during the working day and early evening, the flywheels are driven by the tram system, and by the foot stations. Something most of you can look forward to when you leave school. One hour a day every fourth week. Unless you get to fill some vitally important role, such as a . . . oh, a *teacher*, say.'

She struck a glamorous pose, and some of the students smirked.

'But who can tell me this?' she went on. 'In the fourth year of its operation, the generators were already online and feeding the city much of its heat, but most of the works

were still not connected up. That was the year the Heart Engine failed. Can anybody tell me why?’

There was hush in the classroom. Few of them had even heard of the event, over two hundred years ago.

‘Too much fat in its diet?’ Cleo muttered beneath her breath, prompting a chorus of sniggers.

‘The construction workers went on strike,’ Ms Kiroa told them, still trying to ignore the aggrieved young upstart in the second row. Cleo was upset, and she was looking to start a fight with her teacher in order to blow off some steam. Ana wasn’t going to fall for it. ‘The workers went on strike and, as a result, the entire city nearly froze to death.’

Most of the rest of the lesson was about all the systems that the Heart Engine supplied energy to, which was pretty much everything in the city. Any major works that didn’t get energy from the generator, supplied power to it. It was engineering stuff, and it tended to put Cleo to sleep. She was surprised Ms Kiroa had any enthusiasm for it, but the teacher seemed as entranced by the city’s works as some of the guys. But then, rumour had it she was going out with someone from Ventilation. Cleo feigned interest, and managed to make it to the end of the class without yawning too much.

The other guys from the band were waiting for her when she came out after the bell rang for break. Flipping her hair over her shoulders, she leaned back against the corridor wall with her hands on her hips, heaved a sigh and looked at each of them in turn. She could see no reason to break it to them gently.

‘We’ve been dumped,’ she said.

‘Why?’ Faisal, their bass-horn player asked.

‘Internal Climate says our lyrics are inflammatory.’

‘What do they mean, “inflammatory”?’ their treble horn, Amanda, said, frowning. ‘They think we’re a fire hazard?’

‘That’s inflammable, Am,’ Cleo explained patiently. ‘Inflammatory means . . . like, we ignite passion. Get a rise

out of people.'

'Isn't that what music's supposed to do?'

'Not according to Internal Climate, it's not.'

'Slimy grits.' Ube Lamont, the drummer, shook his head. 'This is all just part of the corporate monopoly of everyday life. Every day it gets harder to draw a free breath into your lungs; this place is being taken over by the cranks who want to stamp their ownership on the world.'

The others stared silently at him.

'You're sounding more and more like a Dark-Day Fatalist all the time,' Cleo told him. 'You should lay off the smoke, it's making you morbid.'

'I'm not fatalistic, I just object to being a cog in the machine,' Ube replied, looking defensive.

'We *live* in a machine,' Cleo sighed. 'Get used to it.'

'You should be careful how you talk, anyway,' Faisal told him. 'You mess with the machine, and the Clockworkers'll come for you. I know somebody whose uncle disappeared after he said the wrong thing.'

'That's bullology,' Ubertino sneered. 'The "Clockworkers". A myth started by the men in power, a cynical ploy to keep the masses cowering—'

'What the hell have you been reading lately?' Cleo asked, wincing. '"Keep the masses cowering"? Jesus, Ube.'

'I just know what I've heard,' Faisal added vehemently.

'You're a scaremonger, a servant of the rumour-mill.'

'I'm goin' to belt you in a minute . . .'

'Enough!' Cleo placed herself between the two boys, her lips pressed into a thin line. Her nerves had been a bit raw since the crane accident, and she was ready to have a go at the pair of them. 'It's not worth knocking heads over. We all need to chill out.'

She glanced around. They were alone in the corridor.

'Anybody got some stem on them?'

## Section 3/24: Power



COACH ASSAGIOLI - SAGGS, to his boys - pressed Sol's nose gently between his palms, causing a spark of pain that made Sol flinch slightly. Around them, the sounds of a busy boxing club filled the air: grunts, thuds, panting breaths, skipping ropes tapping and whirring, feet gliding back and forth across the floor. But he could no longer get the smells; no liniment, or warm rubber, worn leather or fresh sweat. It was difficult enough to draw breath through his nostrils. The gym was well lit, but the equipment was old and overused, like so many things in Ash Harbour. He still loved it here, his second home, his temple.

'You're lucky,' the coach grunted, nodding to himself. 'They just broke the cartilage. Bridge is fine, nose is even straight - they haven't spoiled your good looks.'

Sol sniffed, then put his hand up to his swollen nose and wiggled it gingerly. He could feel the two edges of the cartilage rub together.

'No sparring for you for a couple of weeks,' Saggs told him. 'Do some work on the bag today, and take it easy. Join in the circuit training if you want.'

Sol tutted. He'd been looking forward to letting off some steam, and the bag just wouldn't do it for him. Gregor had not come home last night, and Sol was starting to get worried. He had phoned the depot, but his dad had not