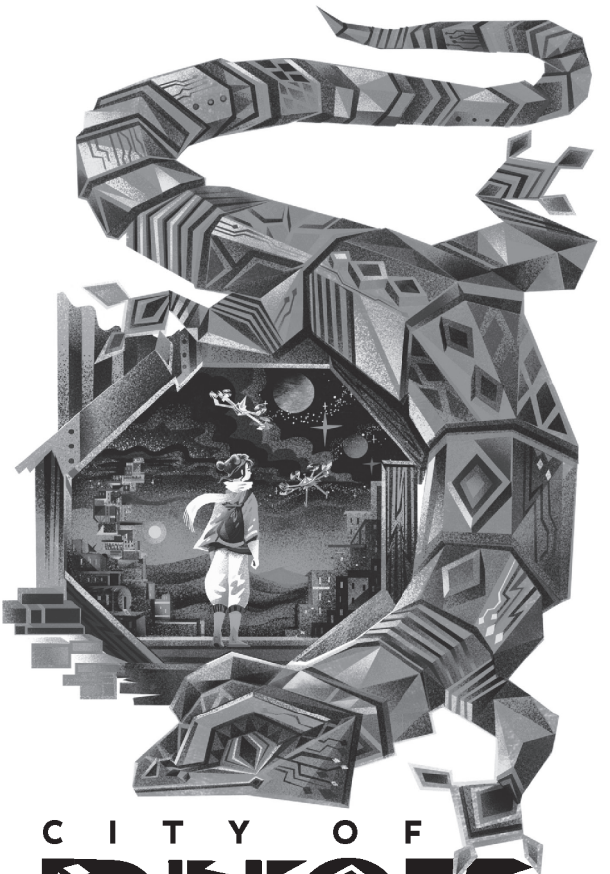
GEMMA FOWLER



CITY OF RUST

Chicken House

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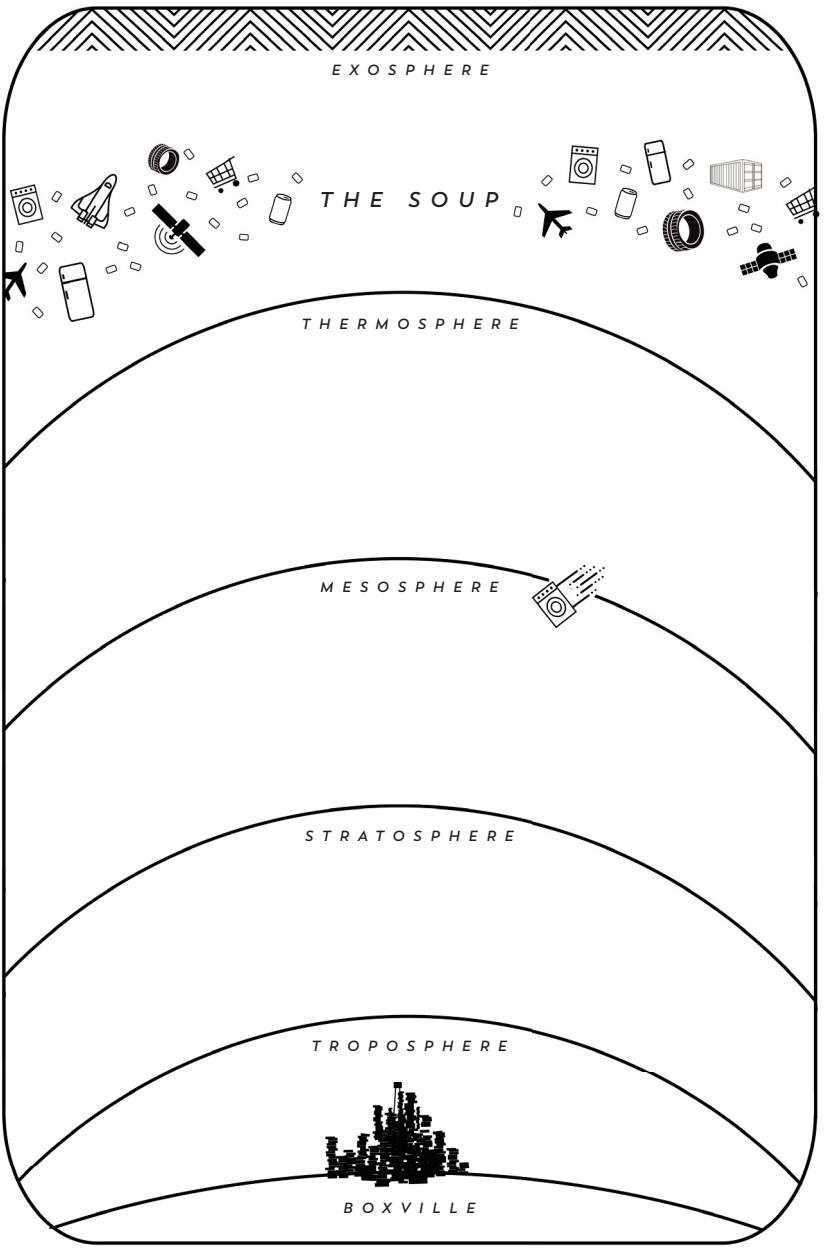
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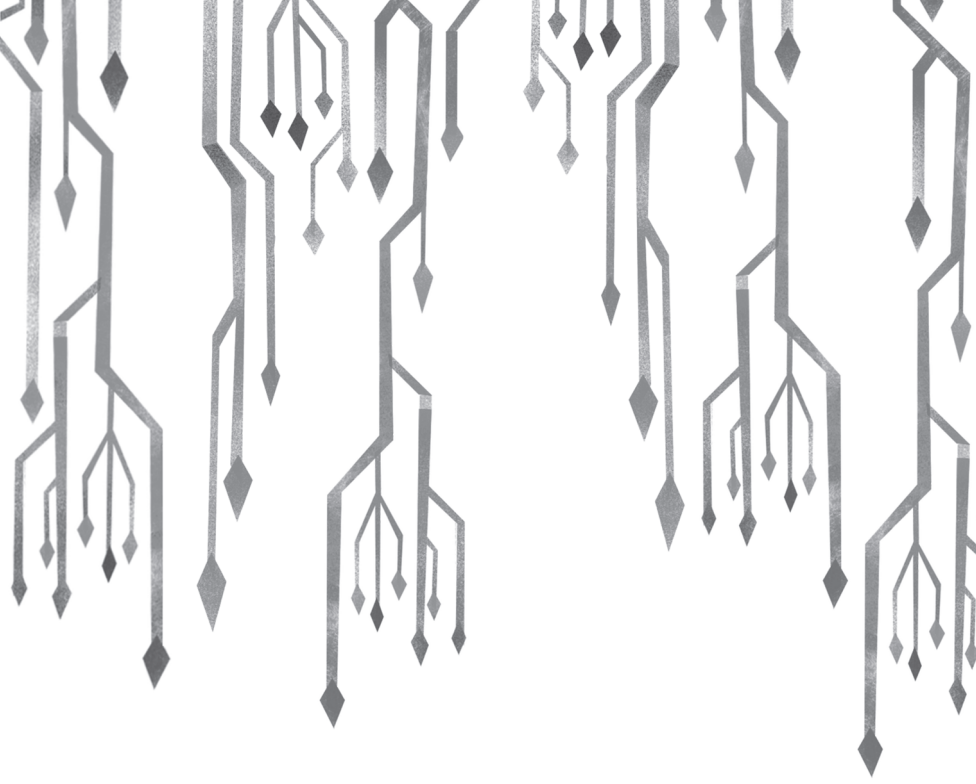
To Frank,
for all the adventures ahead.

Also by Gemma Fowler

Moondust

THE SPHERES


EXOSPHERE
THE SOUP
THERMOSPHERE
MESOSPHERE
STRATOSPHERE
TROPOSPHERE
BOXVILLE



BOXVILLE

In the shadows by the vending machines, Railey peered out of the gap between her jacket collar and her fringe.

Night had finally cast its shadow over the great container city of Boxville, bringing it back to life after the heat of the day.

Around her, dusty traders hung out of the kiosks that ringed the arena, shouting and showing

their wares, trading junk of every type you could imagine from under their tatty awnings.

Above them the containerblocks, towering stacks of jumbled steel containers, reached up into the dark sky, turning the city into a claustrophobic labyrinth of hot metal and glowing tungsten and dust. It was only in these wider streets around the arena that there was space to breathe.

Not for Railey though. Not tonight.

Excitement travelled through the air, lighting up the passers-by like a string of firelights. But Railey's stomach felt like it was full of sandflies.

In the dusty air above her head, a projection was quietly counting down the minutes until the race, washing the arena in its cool green light. Thirty minutes. Where was Atti? If he didn't show up soon, they were going to be late.

A familiar queasy feeling rose in her stomach; she swallowed it back quickly. She didn't have time for nerves tonight. 'Come on,' she whispered to the vending machine.

The ancient mechanisms inside clunked as it finally processed her order. Railey listened,

imagining the old oiled cogs and narrow chutes inside turning a perfect, pre-programmed dance, putting the ingredients together in the same way they had done all day, every day since it had been made. Railey loved the old vendors – they were survivors, like Gran.

Boxville was a city made from the scraps. Everything here had lived a hundred lives before, they had been made, then unmade and then remade again – the buildings, the clothes, the food, even the people. Only the vendors remained unchanged, chugging out the same fizzing drinks that rotted your teeth day in, day out for more years than Railey could imagine.

The vendor clunked one last time and a clear, egg-shaped biocarton bounced into the chute, followed by a surge of fizzing yellow liquid. Railey grabbed the carton and sat down at one of the rotted plastic tables, eyes fixed on the count-down. Twenty-eight minutes. Her stomach flies multiplied.

A bright yellow gecko appeared on the end of the table. It gazed up at her with deep-blue eyes flecked with gold, like sparkling galaxies. The

word 'PROTOTYPE' was stamped across its fat tail.

The gecko pulled the straw of Railey's drink down and took a long draw of the fizzy pop.

'What time do you call this, Atti?' Railey said, pulling the straw out of its mouth. 'And you know you shouldn't do that. If somebody sees you . . . Plus, it's *mine*.'

'I ran into a tiny problem,' the gecko said, holding in a burp.

Railey felt a stab in her guts.

'What kind of problem?'

A cry of anguish echoed down the street.

Atti let the burp out. 'That kind.'

Railey ran as fast as her mouldy trainers would carry her, through the forest of dusty legs towards the source of the cry.

'Quick!' the gecko whispered from inside her collar.

Railey slipped on the dirt as a fat grazing SteelSheep stepped into her path. It eyed her with disinterest for a second, flashing its alloy teeth, then went back to grazing on a rusted

hubcap. Railey leap-frogged over its wire wool hide, and landed with a splash in a puddle of watery grease running from a nearby synth burger kiosk.

A crowd had gathered around the source of the commotion – a hundred or so dusty Boxville street traders, their backpacks and jackets heaving with illegal objects, traded and soon-to-be-traded and instantly forgotten about at the sound of the scream.

Railey could even see the silhouettes of the containerblock residents, peering curiously over their balconies high above.

'This way,' the gecko whispered again, directing her around the back to where the crowd was thinner. 'She's really done it this time.'

Railey pushed through the crowd to get a look. When she did, she felt the blood drain from her face.

An elderly woman was stood in the centre of the crowd shouting at the top of her voice. A huge wrench gleamed in her white-knuckled fist, swaying just above the greasy head of a trader Railey knew from one of the plastics stalls. He

was cowering in the dust at the woman's slippered feet.

'Oh no. Gran, not now.' A burning sensation ran through Railey – a familiar mixture of humiliation and deep, deep love.

Gran's violet boiler suit was grey with dirt and her hair was a matted mess on top of her head, framed by her precious SmartGoggles.

'The skies'll burn thanks ter the likes of you!' Gran was shouting. 'Skies and cities and all and everything! I know you Junkers better'n the others, remember that. I got half your blood!'

The boy held up his arms to protect his face.

'I int no Junker!' he shouted, looking to the crowd for help. He wouldn't find any – Boxville traders minded their own business.

'This is what happens when you don't feel the dirt between yer toes,' Gran continued, 'up there in the Spheres yer can't feel the weight of yer actions . . .'

'I never been off the ground, Gran! It's Krys! Little Krys from the market, I'm the one what trades yer yer tubs and toothbrushes—'

'Enough!' Gran shouted. Her arms shook as

she raised the wrench above her head.

There was a hard nip on Railey's neck. 'What are you waiting for, Railey?' Atti said. 'Stop her before she kills him!'

Railey took a deep breath and stepped out of the crowd.

'Gran?'

Railey ignored the quiet jeers from the traders. She smiled reassuringly as Gran's eyes flicked to hers. 'Time to go home, Gran.'

Gran kept the wrench high above Krys's head.

'Get this mad hoover bag away from me!' Krys shouted to Railey.

'Let's see Gran nobble Krys first though,' a trader shouted.

'Yeah, go on Gran, gi him a good hiding!'

Laughter rippled through the crowd. Gran looked around her, blinking her black pebble eyes. It was a look Railey knew well – the real world was coming back to her.

'That my Railey, is it?' she said softly, then grinned wickedly. 'Got me some good trade in there, girl?' She tapped Railey's pockets with the wrench.

‘Course I have, Gran,’ Railey said, grabbing her arm gently. ‘I’ll show you if you like, but not with all these traders watching.’

Gran winked. ‘Good girl.’

Railey smiled. ‘C’mon then.’ She looked down at her feet, where Krys was still cowering.

‘You can get lost now,’ she said, kicking dust at him.

‘Oh! Hello there, Krys love,’ Gran said, as if he’d just appeared out of nowhere. ‘What you covered in dust for? Yer dad’ll lose his nut ter see you like that on race day.’

Krys opened his mouth to complain, but Railey prodded him. ‘Go.’

Krys dusted down his old sweatshirt. ‘Not without me wrench. Crazier than a dog in the sun, that one. An’ better off keepin’ her on a leash too.’

Railey gently tugged the wrench from her Gran’s hand and threw it at Krys’s feet, aiming to clip one of his toes.

‘Ow!’

‘Get lost.’

The crowd had begun to disperse, only a few

of the older traders remaining – the ones who leant on sticks, who remembered and respected Gran from the days when she ruled the Junk Market with trade from the most dangerous junking clans.

Gran was as good as legend in the market, and famous right from the dusty streets of Boxville to the crystalline towers of Glass City. All because she was half Junker, and her mixed blood meant the clans would give her the best trade – junk picked right out the Soup, the endless band of rubbish that orbited the Earth.

But those days were just memories now. Gran's steel-toe-capped slippers hadn't stepped into the Junk Market in the city's rooftops since the last monsoon.

Railey directed Gran back into the throes of the crowds, keeping her head on her shoulder.

The green glow of the countdown coated the crowds as they walked back towards the arena, turning bodies into black silhouettes and the junk stalls into shadows. Railey's heart clenched.

'Oh no, Atti,' she whispered, 'only fifteen minutes left!'

She clutched her backpack and pulled Gran's arm gently.

'Feels like it's too late,' Gran said with a sob.

Railey and Atti exchanged a glance. Gran was in no fit state to make her own way home . . . so she would just have to come with them.

'We've got time, Gran,' Railey reassured her as they hurried into the arena. 'Just got to go a bit faster.'

Atti popped his head out of Railey's collar and jumped on to Gran's shoulder.

'Two races left, Gran,' he whispered right in her ear. 'It's all to play for!'

Gran giggled. 'Oh Atti! My little pilot. Best thing these old hands ever made.'

Atti grinned. Railey rolled her eyes and tapped her backpack. 'The Fox is the best thing you ever made, Gran,' she said, looking at the gecko, 'mainly because it don't answer back.'

A pounding electronic beat began to thump its way across the ground.

'BOXVILLE,' the Starter's voice echoed all around them, 'THE BETTING KIOSKS ARE NOW CLOSED. THE PENULTIMATE

DRONE RACE OF THE WORLD-FAMOUS BOXVILLE SERIES WILL BEGIN IN TEN MINUTES.'

They were just in time.