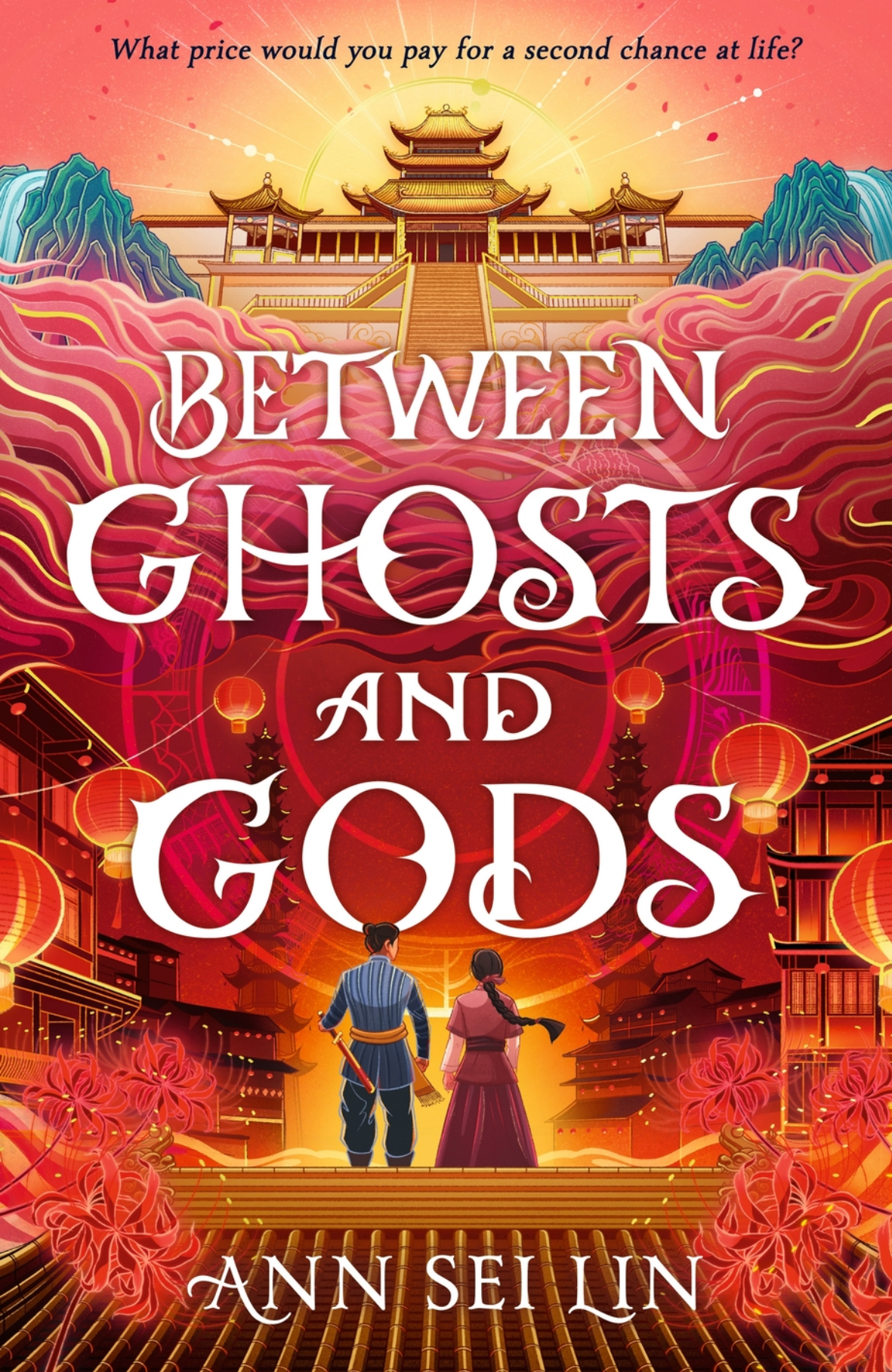
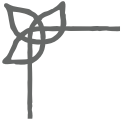


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BETWEEN GHOSTS AND GODS

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GHOSTS
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*I died and was most upset to discover that
this did not solve any of my problems.*



GHOST CITY

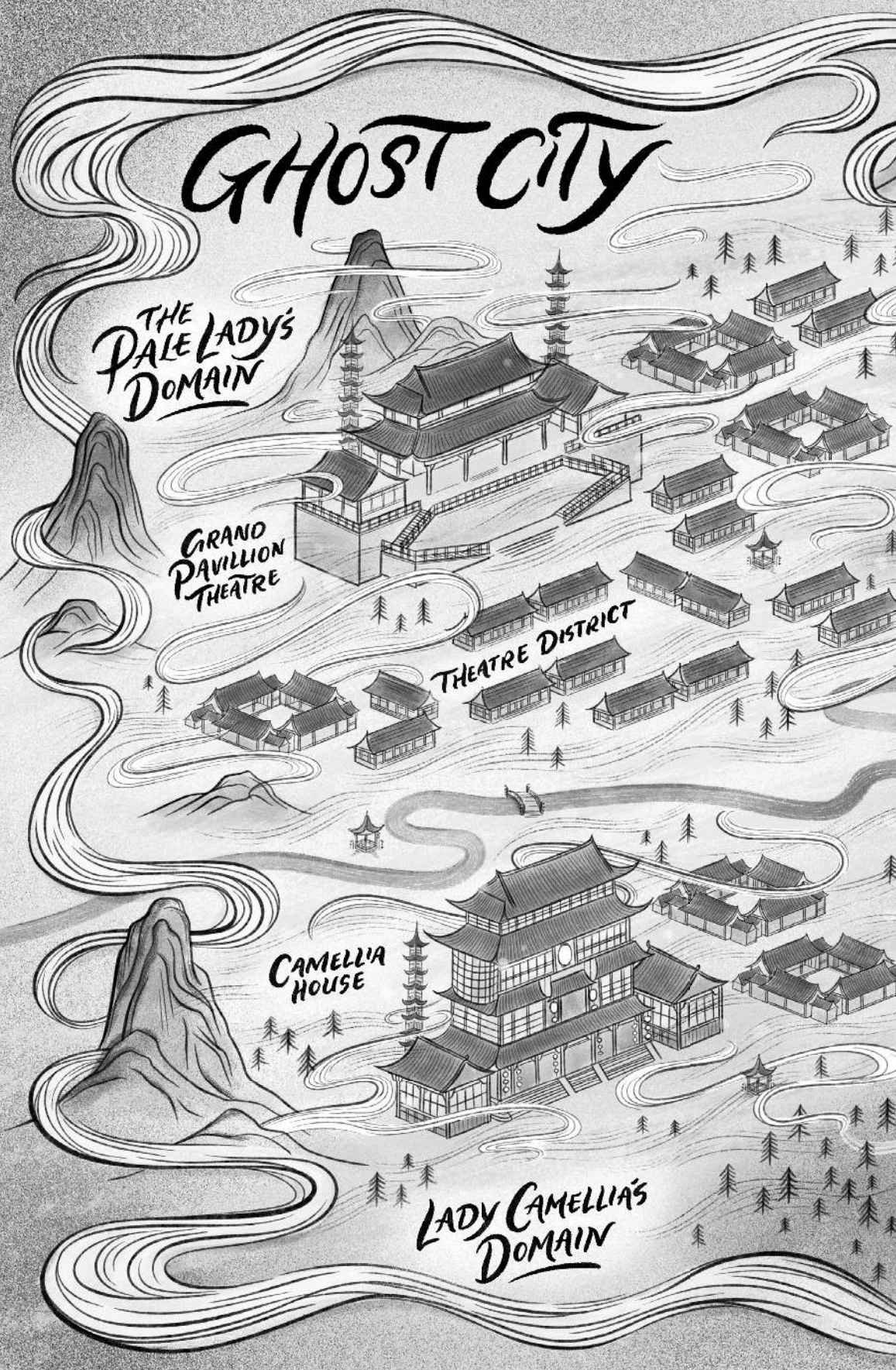
THE
PALE LADY'S
DOMAIN

GRAND
PAVILLION
THEATRE

THEATRE DISTRICT

CAMELLIA
HOUSE

LADY CAMELLIA'S
DOMAIN



LORD ONYX'S
DOMAIN

THE FIGHTING PITS

MEAT
MARKET

SAGE OF A
THOUSAND
FACES' HOME

LORD COBALT'S
DOMAIN

SHADOW FOREST

CHAPTER ONE

KASU

IT WAS OFTEN said that entering Camellia House was harder than ascending to the heavens.

To get into the heavens, you simply had to be talented and virtuous. These days, you didn't even have to be dead – lately, the gods had made a habit of plucking remarkable humans from the mortal realm while they were still alive and putting them to work. After all, there was simply no end to the number of gods who needed scribes to record their noble deeds, handmaidens to wait upon them, and stable boys to feed and water the herds of celestial horses.

This was not the case for Camellia House.

Firstly, you *definitely* had to be dead. Horribly dead. Shamefully dead. Preferably painfully and violently dead, but dead all the same. Your soul had to be wretched enough to have ended up on the streets of Ghost City, yet fortunate enough that you hadn't yet become prey to the meat-market butchers or caught in the webs that the charming spider ladies of Shadow Street

wove to catch unsuspecting spirits.

Next, you actually had to find the place. Though Camellia House was the only high-stakes gambling parlour in all of the under-realm, the streets leading to its doorstep were an ever-changing maze of lantern-lit roads and narrow alleyways. Threads of firelight wove their way through the air, creating illusions to distract and confuse you.

If by some stroke of luck you *did* find yourself at Camellia House, you still had to get past Banse and Manzu, the dog-headed bouncers who only accepted bribes in the form of human limbs.

Finally, once past the guards, there was Kasu.

It was Kasu's job to hand out the gambling tiles needed to place a bet in Camellia House. Rumour was you could trade anything you wanted for them – money, limbs, dreams – but whether Kasu would give you even a single tile depended on two things: how much you valued the item you wanted to trade, and her mood.

Today, she was not in a good mood.

Kasu had polished her cherrywood counter so many times her reflection was starting to unnerve her. She tried not to look down at the girl reflected in the desk: tall and scrawny, with braided dark hair and wide-set eyes that gave her nose too much prominence on her face. She tried not to be disappointed by what she saw. Kasu had already woken fifteen minutes late, forgotten her morning prayers and snapped at the girl serving breakfast – she did not need to add vanity to her growing pile of failures. The gods were very clear that those who did not obey the six

hundred and fifty-seven guiding decrees set out in the book of Heavenly Principles would never earn the respect of the heavens.

“Take care in your appearance as a courtesy to others” – Kasu recited Principle six hundred and thirty-one as she continued scrubbing the counter – *“but do not place too much pride in your looks.”*

Kasu had no idea what qualified as “too much pride”, but perhaps she ought to try avoiding her reflection altogether, just in case.

As she wiped her rag over the counter one more time, the front doors flew wide open.

“Miss Kasu! Miss Kasu! I’ve done it – I’ve finally done it!” A slender man burst through the entrance to Camellia House, his shoes squeaking against the polished wooden floor as he staggered towards Kasu’s exchange desk.

Banse, the on-duty bouncer, trailed behind the desperate man with a bored look on his face and a human leg tucked under one arm. Kasu discreetly peered over the edge of her counter, but she could not be sure where it had come from. The man standing before her still had all of *his* limbs.

“I’ve done it!” The man slammed his hands against the cherrywood counter, leaving a smear of oily fingerprints behind.

Kasu regarded the stain with a slight twitch of her eye and gripped the rag even tighter. She swallowed the urge to wipe away the smear and waited for the man to catch his breath. There were fifty-six Heavenly Principles regarding the virtues of patience and only twenty-nine about cleanliness.

“I’ve done it!” he cried again. “I have mastered ten thousand

songs on the zither! I have played ballads that lasted seven hours and melodies that made the spider ladies on Shadow Street weep. My hands ... they're worth something to you now, aren't they? Won't you let me exchange them for some tiles?"

Kasu glanced at the huge cabinet behind her. It was made of the same wood as her counter and divided into compartments. Each shelf was filled with the possessions customers had exchanged for gambling tiles – a childhood dream, the memory of a lover, a topaz necklace passed down for generations. Below them lay a crooked drawer containing the tiles Kasu would give to the gamblers, and beneath that stood several misshapen boxes filled with all sorts of tools for extracting payment.

She looked back at the man's hands and sighed. She really didn't want to get the hacksaw out again.

"Who do you work for? Does your master know you're here?"

The man puffed out his chest. "What I do in my free time is none of his business."

A bold claim, Kasu thought, for someone whose food and shelter – indeed, his very un-life itself – depends upon the whims of the higher demon who owns him.

There were two types of dead in Ghost City: ghosts, like Kasu and her customer, who had made contracts with demons during their lifetimes – contracts that now had to be fulfilled in death – and the restless, hungry kind of ghosts who held grudges or hurts so deep they could not move on to their next life. It was always the former that Kasu met at her exchange desk. You could buy your way out of a contract if you had the money, and

nothing paid as much as winning it big at Camellia House.

“I’ll hit the jackpot today – I know it,” the man insisted. “I woke up feeling lucky, and when I had my morning tea there was a leaf standing upright in my cup! That’s surely a good sign! If I win, I’ll be free.”

Free. The word struck a chord hidden deep inside her. Lady Camellia treated her staff much better than most, but Kasu could still understand that bone-deep yearning for freedom. The years of standing behind the same counter doing the same thing day after day wore at her; she was a stone slowly weathered by the constant beat of rain. The under-realm’s relentless darkness was stifling. Kasu could not remember much of her mortal life, yet she knew she missed the sun. She missed the smell of fresh air and the feel of the warm earth beneath her toes. She missed the comforting cycle of mortality – to live and die and be reincarnated over and over again.

She looked at the man – at the zither player – and wondered what it was that he missed. What he longed for.

Pressing her lips into a thin line, Kasu placed a handful of tiles onto the counter.

“Don’t gamble it away all at once. A healthy restraint is the nineteenth Heavenly Principle.”

“Thank you! Oh, thank you!” The zither player clutched the tiles to his chest.

“Don’t thank me yet.” Reaching for one of the boxes behind her, Kasu hefted a large axe onto the counter. “I still need one of your hands.”

CHAPTER TWO

KASU

KASU WAS still wiping the blood off her counter when Banse gave a small cough.

“That was stingy of you. His skill with the zither was worth more than you gave him.” The dog-headed demon scratched his neck at the juncture where fur turned to human skin. Banse had worked at Camellia House for the last two hundred years and his age was showing in the white patches around his ears and muzzle. His tongue lolled out between slack jowls. He panted slightly, even when standing still.

“Nonsense. I give no more and no less than what is fair.” The man’s hand was in one of the wooden compartments behind Kasu. If he was lucky, he could buy it back with whatever he earned at Camellia House. Otherwise, within a week, the hand and everything else in the compartments would be packed away and taken up to the mortal realm, where they would be sold to whoever had the coin and the courage to buy from the demon bazaar.

“If he doesn’t win big today, his master will surely turn him into soup. Who wants a zither player with only one hand?”

The same thought had crossed Kasu’s mind. She often wondered about her role in other people’s misery: how she enabled it by taking the things they loved and exchanging them for tiles that would be squandered on fruitless bets. She had warned plenty of customers before, but no one ever seemed to pay her any heed.

Kasu could not blame the ghosts for their desperation, but she could not stop them, either. Her contract with her demon mistress was binding. Lady Camellia had ordered her to work at the exchange desk, therefore Kasu would obey. Anything less was met with swift punishment, and Lady Camellia certainly had ways of making one suffer.

“If you’re so concerned about him, perhaps you should give back whatever he paid you to get inside,” she said.

When Banse grinned, his lips stretched all the way to the edges of his mouth, revealing rows of sharp teeth. He adjusted the torn leg under his arm and began licking at its bloody stump. “No way,” he said, even as drool slipped down his jowls and onto the floor. “I was bribed fair and square.”

Voices echoed through the wooden walls. If Kasu listened closely, she could hear the clack of mah-jongg tiles, the thud of darts hitting corkboards, the clatter of dice and the click of roulette wheels. Camellia House offered a number of games from across the various kingdoms of the mortal world – everything from blackjack to poker to koi-koi to sheng ji. There was even a floor at the very top of the establishment set aside for beetle sumo.

The way the crowd jumped up and down each time their insect won made Kasu fear that one day the whole building would collapse like a house of cards.

As if on cue, the ceiling shook, dislodging a cloud of dust. Somewhere above, outraged yells exploded like fireworks.

“Maintain your voice at an appropriate level at all times, and do not raise it more than is polite.” Kasu had grown sick and tired of reminding the gamblers each time they passed her counter. Like all her other warnings, it blew into one ear and out the other.

“It’s been busy today,” said Banse. “The latest news has everyone worked up.”

“What news?”

The bouncer grinned. “Word is someone *stole* a reincarnation wheel from the heavens!”

The sound that burst from Kasu’s mouth was loud and ugly – half a snort, half a scoff, full of scorn. There were at least three hundred major and minor gods in the heavens at any one time, not to mention a whole host of attendants and maids to serve them. Of the many things they did, managing the reincarnation wheels was *the* most important. Without the reincarnation wheels, the cycle of life and death and rebirth juddered to a terrible stop. Without the wheels, there would be chaos. There was no way the gods would let something so precious be stolen from right under their noses.

“Last week everyone said that there was a dragon in the eastern quarter of the city. Then it turned out their so-called ‘dragon’ was a bedsheet covered in chicken feathers. Forgive me if I don’t quite believe you.”

According to the five hundredth and twenty-first Heavenly Principle, “rumour” was simply a different word for “lie”. *Do not engage in the trading of rumours, for they discredit your good name and reputation.* Kasu didn’t have much of a name or a reputation to discredit, but she knew pure nonsense when she heard it.

“Well, *this* rumour is true! The spider ladies of Shadow Street said so!” Banse puffed out his chest. “There’s even talk that the wheel is *here* in Ghost City, and you can pay to step through it and be reborn!”

Something thrashed inside Kasu’s chest like a fish. It threw itself against her ribs in a floundering attempt for attention.

Reincarnation was a privilege that mortals often took for granted. It was only when they lost it, when they fell outside the cycle of souls, that they realized how precious it was. Eternity was probably great if you lived up in the heavens, but here in the under-realm, in Ghost City, it was an onerous grind of work, work and yet more work. Of sunless days that hardly changed from one year to the next, with no end in sight. To live and die and be reborn was a blessing Kasu had lost the day she sold her soul to Lady Camellia.

It was a blessing everyone in Ghost City had lost. The heavens did not allow demons to reincarnate, and most ghosts were bound to the under-realm by their contracts. Even if they managed to free themselves from their pacts, they still had to petition the heavens for the chance to be reborn.

“Of course it’s not true!” Kasu pressed a hand to her chest. Those rumours could really hurt someone – give them false hope that there was a way out of Ghost City if only they had enough

money to pay for it. How could the spider ladies of Shadow Street spread such irresponsible lies?

Banse's tail stopped wagging and his ears drooped. "I thought you would be excited to hear the news. Since you're all..." He made a vague gesture.

"Since I'm what?" said Kasu.

"Well, this 'Heavenly Principles' nonsense. The only reason you're so obsessed with them is because you really think that once your contract with Lady Camellia is over, if you're good enough, the heavens will let you be reborn."

There was a blood stain on Kasu's dress. She concentrated on the red splatter as she tried to work the small knot of fury inside her into something softer and quieter. Deep down she knew it was the kind of anger that belonged to small, wounded things.

She was aware the other servants thought her foolish. Once you fell out of the cycle of souls, there was no going back, they said. The game was rigged and the gods were cruel, they said. Sure, the heavens might *claim* that you could return, but in reality, how many ghosts did they pardon? How many did they allow to be reborn?

Kasu smouldered. Most ghosts just didn't try hard enough. They weren't *good* enough. Yes, following the Heavenly Principles was difficult, but that was the point. It was *their* fault they were in the under-realm in the first place; of course the heavens would make it difficult to return to the cycle of souls. But Kasu would show the others that it could be done. She would prove them all wrong.

"I need to change my clothes," she said. A messy appearance

suggested a messy heart and mind, and when your mind was a mess how could you meditate on the noble virtues of the heavens?

Banse stood back and let her pass.

Kasu made her way around the back of Camellia House, beneath the building's overhanging eaves and across the stony courtyard. The staff dormitory was hidden within the shadow of the gambling parlour, looking on in silent judgement as she approached.

Pushing open the crooked door, Kasu headed upstairs to the large, empty room where most of the staff slept. The surrounding closet doors were painted with faded murals depicting the three realms – the heavens with its hundreds of gods, the world of humans below, and the under-realm at the bottom, where demons and ghosts dwelled together.

She brushed her fingers over the painting of the gods. The staff had drawn over their original faces with rude scribbles, but Kasu liked to imagine what they might have looked like before – unblemished and beautiful, illuminated in the golden glow of divinity. What must it be like to live and work in the heavens, where everyone was gentle and calm and dignified? Probably the exact opposite of the chaos she was surrounded by every day.

Her hand moved from the painting of the heavens to the one depicting the mortal realm. The tips of her fingers ached with longing. If only she could give the image a little push and step through it into a world of sunlight and flowers and windswept fields.

Holding back another sigh, she slid open the closet door.

A strange, dizzying smell was coming from the cabinet on the highest shelf.

Kasu pulled out the drawers of the dresser beneath and arranged them to form a set of steps, which she climbed until she was able to reach the top of the closet.

The moment she opened the cabinet doors, a person fell out.

Kasu tumbled to the floor, the reed matting scraping against her back. Before she could recover, someone slapped a hand over her mouth. Kasu froze.

A figure kneeled over her. With his back to the light, she couldn't make out the intruder's face, but there was no mistaking what he was. A human. A still-living mortal.

She didn't understand. How had he managed to get into Ghost City?

"Quiet!" he hissed. "Don't say a word!"