

room, he found himself standing and staring at the strange ghostly girl with long hair. And words came out.

"You asked if I'm a great warrior," he said. "Are you needing me to fight something, then?"

"I don't *think* it will require that," she said. "I don't know, honestly. The spirits will need to be formed, and then asked. They said they're trapped somehow; perhaps you can rescue them?"

"By forming them?" he said, relaxing a little. "Does this require painting?"

"Painting?" she said, cocking her head. "We call them. Through art. Through art."

Right. Okay. That he could do. Maybe even something other than bamboo. Was it true—had he been summoned to an entirely different world simply to . . . to paint? He should probably make sure, he thought. He looked to the girl to explain more, but . . .

She was just so *hopeful*. Emotions flowed inside him like blood from wounds, warm and sharp. How long had it been since he'd felt *needed*, *wanted*? He didn't mean to lie. He wasn't *really* lying, was he? Her spirits had chosen him, brought him here, perhaps to paint them.

In that moment, he wanted so *badly* to be the hero someone needed. To have a chance to make up for the mistakes of his past. To become something. It wasn't arrogance, as some of you might assume. It was more desperation.

Deep down, Painter saw himself as a ruined canvas—the painting spoiled by spilled ink, then tossed into the trash. This was his chance to spread himself out and start a new drawing on the back. He seized that opportunity like a ravenous man at his first bowl of rice in days.

"Lead on," he said, dropping his mysterious loner affectations and