

Boy of the Painted Cave

by Justin Denzel



ABOUT THE READING In a world that existed 18,000 years ago, a fourteen-year-old boy, Tao, is forced to hunt. All he has ever wanted to do is to paint images of bears and deer in the caves. Because Tao is not a Chosen One, he is forbidden to paint. As this excerpt begins, Tao and his wolf dog have stumbled across a stranger while hunting.

VOCABULARY

shaman a priest or medicine man who can influence good or evil spirits

loon a type of bird

Slough a swamp or marsh



As you read the passage below, pay attention to how Tao defends himself.

Tao gasped. He felt a mixture of dismay and awe. The stranger standing before him was Graybeard, the Cave Painter, the **shaman** of all the clans. Never did he think he would meet such a great one.

“I also know you hunt on forbidden land,” said Graybeard.

The boy winced and shifted from one foot to the other. “It is forbidden only because of the demons and evil spirits,” he said, his voice cracking.

“And you are not afraid of demons?”

“I have heard the wailing screams and the wild howls, but they are the cries of the eagle-owl and the **loons**. If there are other demons I have never seen one.” . . .

For a moment Tao was quiet. Then he swallowed hard and said, “The people of my clan are starving. The **Slough** is full of game. With the wolf dog I bring them much food.”

Graybeard nodded. “You are not afraid of demons, you do not believe in evil spirits

Why do you think Tao feels both dismay and awe at meeting Graybeard?

What does Tao think of the demons?

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and, for you, taboos melt away like the winter snows.”

“I am sorry,” said Tao “but I do not believe these things are bad. The animal, the birds, the trees give us food and clothing. Yet our leaders see only evil.”

Graybeard nodded. Tao was sure he saw a glint of understanding in the old man’s eye.

“And you know better than the leaders?” said Graybeard.

“No,” said Tao. “I only know that the Slough is a place of many good things. Here I find food. I watch the animals and birds . . . I feel good here.”

“The herds are coming back,” said the old man, nodding. “They will be here when the fields are green with new grass. I have come from the other camps with the news. Now I will paint images of the great beasts in the secret caverns to bring good hunting.”

. . . “Will you come and share food with us?” asked Tao. “We have a small cave on the other side of the valley.”

Graybeard leaned against the trunk of a birch tree. His spear rested on the crook of his arm as he rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. “Yes,” he said, “it will be good to rest.”

Underline the words or sentence which indicates Graybeard believes he has special powers.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

1. Main Idea What is Graybeard’s attitude toward Tao? How can you tell?

2. Critical Thinking: Making Predictions Do you think Tao will ever be permitted to paint like Graybeard? Why or why not?
