

# The Terror of Braemar



*A story by John Bonthron For  
Fraser Stuart and his Grandparents*

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## The Terror of Braemar

### *Braemar at last!*

'Gramps,' said Frastu, 'how much longer until we reach Braemar?'

'About two hours, laddie; are you feeling hungry?' replied Eoghan the Healer.

'No but we need to get the tents up before it gets dark, don't we? And we've to feed the horses and check their feet for stones. Then I have to comb them and be sure they don't have any rubbing sores and after that I have to get firewood and fetch water. There won't be enough time to go fishing with Choni before it gets dark.'

'Oh Frastu, you worry too much,' said Audra his Gran, moving her horse alongside his pony. 'Look at the sun and tell me how long until it goes down.'

Frastu was a tall slim brown-haired Pictish boy who was nearly nine years old. Over the past year he had become a very good rider. He turned his pony around to face the sun using only his knees, and brought her to a halt with a click of his tongue, rather than tugging on the cord which hung loosely around her muzzle. Trogga was almost seven now and at the height of her powers, very fit and sure-footed. She had cost a lot but they were happy to provide her for their grandson.

The boy gazed back down the valley and holding his left arm straight and level with the horizon, he looked along his outstretched right arm and raised it slowly until it was pointing right at the centre of the glowing disc that hung high in the sky. He kept his eyes squinted almost shut so they would not hurt. The sky was still cloudy but a watery sun was just visible.

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It had rained for many days but now it felt as if good weather was on the way at last.

Holding both arms stationary he checked the angle that they made with each other. 'Yes Gran, you're right again as usual, we have ages until it gets dark. About five hours, I think. Is that right?'

'Good lad', said Gramps who checked the long sand-timer that hung from his saddle. 'Yes just over five hours till sundown, and even then it won't be fully dark for about an hour after that. After all, it's just after mid-summer.'

'OK. But Gramps, can I ride on ahead and check if the old campsite is still there and if Choni is back?'

'No, not yet Frastu, wait a bit longer until we can see smoke, then you can go ahead. Just in case of 'you know who!'

'Oh Gramps, not again! Everyone knows that the Old Grey Man of Ben Macdhuie is only a story for wee children. Choni told me all about it last year. There is no 'Old Grey Man', it's just echoing footsteps when you're walking or else there is a real someone walking near you that you can't see. Gramps, come on, he's not a ghost or anything!'

'Oh well I hope you're right, but we'd better be safe than sorry, so, let's wait until we get nearer and, when it gets flatter, we'll all trot in the last part together. How would that do?'

'OK, but please try to keep up with me. You are both so slow.'

Eoghan and Audra smiled secretly to each other. They were proud of Frastu and of his pony-man-ship and watched as

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he leaned forward to whisper in Trogga's ear. He had learned the ways of kindness well.

'Gramps, look! Flecco has spotted something.'

The large hairy, black, white and tan dog was standing stock-still, peering ahead at a point high on the hill above them. Using his hand to shade his eyes, Frastu followed the dog's gaze.

'Roe deer, three females with three fawns.'

His grandparents stared hard where the boy was pointing but could see nothing. Frastu had truly remarkable eyesight, just one of his special gifts.

'OK, laddie, if you say so, if you say so. Well done. This is deer country up here in the mountains, but they're mostly 'reds' although there are plenty 'roes' about too. Maybe we'll have a chance of venison stew tonight, if the hunters are back in camp.'

The boy and his grandparents were always welcome at Braemar; indeed folk were happy to see them everywhere they went because the elderly white-haired man and his wife were both healers.

Eoghan used a variety of ways to heal people; sometimes with herbs added to food; sometimes with oils rubbed on a sore leg or arm; or sometimes with special powders made from coloured lichens scraped from rocks, mixed together and used in warm water to bathe and disinfect wounds or sore eyes. He might mix all sorts of herbs and crushed leaves with milk from sheep or goats, to make different coloured pastes that encouraged the person's body to heal itself.

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Audra also healed using herbs and natural medicines, but she had another gift as well. By quietly chanting soft 'droning' words, words hard to make out, which helped people to relax and overcome pain. This was often used when someone had a broken bone that needed setting, or had a painful wound which needed deep-cleansing or teeth that needed pulled out or repaired. At other times, she used a small musical pipe into which she blew softly, playing strange melodies. Often, she placed a tiny drop of aromatic oil inside the tip of the pipe, so that sweet smells wafted towards the person, intermingled with the music. These natural healing methods could be very powerful in helping people. (This was an ancient form of medical hypnotism, but that definition had not been invented in the year 112 A.D.)

One of the reasons Frastu and his grandparents had come to this high mountain area was to collect fresh supplies of the herbs and lichens that only grew here, and to help any locals who had problems. People travelled many miles to see Eoghan the Healer and his wife Audra, knowing they would come to the Braemar campsite at the first 'no-moon' after midsummer.

Eoghan's little band travelled on down the steep mountainside to the flatter ground. Soon they could smell the smoke of the campfires. When Frastu saw his friend Choni running down from Big Peak towards the campsite, he shouted over his shoulder, 'OK Gramps - here we go!' then whispered into the pony's ear, 'Oats, oats! Let's go Trogga! Let's get some oats!' At this, the little pony set off at a brisk trot.

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Flecco was in the lead as usual, but he didn't bark like other dogs might have. He only barked when it was useful for hunting, herding or to give a warning. Eoghan had trained him well. The powerful dog also had another job to do; he was Frastu's 'protector' and went everywhere with the boy, never letting him out of his sight. There were many dangerous animals about in those days.

Eoghan trotted after the boy on Heltor, his tall dark brown-stallion, side by side with Audra on Keekat, her smaller silver mare. Even their sturdy pack horses Proota and Treska joined in the fun, realising that their long hard journey was almost over; soon, they would be able to rest at the Braemar campsite for the next week or so.

This was Frastu's second visit to Braemar, but his first time riding all the way on Trogga. He was looking forward to meeting his friend Choni. They would go fishing at Two Rivers' Junction. Maybe this year they would catch a salmon.

### *The Challenge*

That night Frastu was allowed to sit up late around the campfire with Choni, listening to stories old and new. He was not a bit tired now, it was all so exciting.

Eoghan, Audra and their grandson had been warmly welcomed and people gladly helped them erect their large family tent and then their two smaller 'healing' tents, which were placed close to the small river so, that it gave a supply of clean, running water. The healing tents were always remote from all the other tents to ensure privacy for those seeking help. In those days some people who got sick felt ashamed,

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thinking it was a punishment, thinking they must have done something wrong.

After a quick meal Frastu's grandparents were busy attending to the urgent cases of people needing healing. Normally the younger boy would have been sent to bed at this late hour, not like Choni who seemed to be able to roam about night and day; his family were not as strict as Frastu's.

Frastu had asked Choni to go fishing with him but the older boy had refused. There was an urgent matter to be discussed by the clan and Choni wanted to stay at the campfire. The head of the clan was an ancient man called Henkert, who now held up his hand; every one stopped talking at once to hear him speak. His voice was thin and piercing.

'The bad stag Madjiaak must be killed soon or someone will get badly hurt or even killed. But all the men are away to hunt the deer in the high tops. The mystery is why Madjiaak keeps coming here to terrorise us? What did we do to make him hate us? And he is cunning; he comes from nowhere on dark nights like this and attacks our tents. He has killed two dogs and three sheep. And he has scared away the ducks which we will seek to harvest for winter food, when their chicks are fully grown. This cannot be allowed to continue. Our older boys and any of the elderly men who are still able to hunt must do this. Madjiaak cannot be allowed to terrorise us like this.'

Immediately Choni stood up, walked to the centre of the fire-ring and spoke in a loud voice.

'Grandfather, with your blessing, may I speak?'

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This grandson of his was a brave boy and strong; Henkert was proud of him. The old man nodded and closed his eyes.

'I, Choni, will lead the hunt to kill Madjiaak, the Terror of Braemar. And our friend Frastu will come too. He is fit and strong; he has a pony and a powerful hunting dog.'

Everyone was looking hard at Frastu but he kept silent and stared ahead at the glowing embers of the fire. He had not known that Choni would say these words but he knew to stay silent. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see some people shaking their heads and could hear them muttering in dissent. They thought he was too young and too soft. They did not know him as well as Choni did.

Choni sensed this too and spoke again.

'We all know that Frastu has special gifts; his eyes are keener than Hookbeeka who soars above us; he can see in the dark as Tytonidda, the white ghost bird; his ears are like Plecotoo the bat, who can hear the moth fly through the night; and he can run faster than Lepus, the blue hare of the hill.' Henkert kept silent but his head was nodding his approval, which everyone could see.

'I will use my father's old spear which is still sharp and strong,' continued Choni, 'and Frastu has a good hunting knife.'

The other people were nodding now, following Henkert's lead.

'I will lead this hunt and I will kill Madjiaak the Terror of Braemar.

I, Choni, will do this for our Clan, with your blessing.'



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The small crowd of old men and women murmured their agreement but no one stood up to join the tall boy. The younger boys were too afraid to do anything and kept their eyes looking down at the ground in front of themselves and remained sitting, beside their mothers.

Henkert opened his eyes and spoke again.

'What do others say? Who will go with them?'

No one spoke a single word. Everyone turned away from his dark searching eyes which glittered in the firelight as they scanned around each face in turn. They all waited in silence until the old man spoke again, his heart filled with pride. Next year his grandson would be a man. This was the boy's chance to prove his worth to the clan. Maybe in the future he would become their Leader, follow in his footsteps.

'You have my blessing Choni. But I cannot speak for Frastu. You must ask Eoghan; only he can allow the boy to go with you.'

'Henkert, with your blessing, we will go and ask him now. Then we will go to hunt the Terror of Braemar and kill him. When I return we shall eat a great feast to celebrate. I, Choni, do promise this.'

Choni signalled to Frastu to follow and both boys left the fire-ring and disappeared into the darkness. Flecco followed at their heels but his hackles were raised, making him look bigger and even more fearsome than normal. The dog had sensed that there was danger ahead; he would not leave Frastu's side until it had passed.

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*The hunt begins*

'Choni, you know that my Gramps will say 'no', don't you?' whispered Frastu. 'And Gran would go mad at the idea.'

'No Frastu, he will say yes; they will both say yes, just leave it to me, OK? Or are you too scared to come with me?'

'Of course I'm not scared. I do want to come to hunt Madjiaak, the Terror of Braemar. Then we will both be famous, forever.'

'OK, OK. So, you go and get your hunting knife and anything else you think we might need. Bring Trogga and Flecco. Meet me at Big Pine. OK? And do it as quietly as you can.' 'But

I should come with you to speak to Gramps.'

Suddenly Choni turned and put his face right into Frastu's.

'NO! I will ask them. You must do as I say. I have twelve summers and you have only eight. Obey or stay! If you stay I will hunt Madjiaak alone.' Flecco emitted a low, warning growl, showing his teeth at the tall red-haired boy who stepped quickly backwards.

It was not true that Choni had twelve summers. He only had eleven summers. With twelve summers he would be a man and would be with the deer-hunters in the mountains. Frastu knew this but did not say anything.

'I choose to obey. I'll see you at Big Pine,' said Frastu, and ran softly into the darkness with the powerful dog at his side. It was windless, warm and cloudy hiding the stars. There were midges everywhere but the youngster was protected from bites, using the special oil which Eoghan had given him to rub on his skin.

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Choni headed off towards the larger healing tent. Outside there was a small group waiting but Choni, as the grandson of Henkert, was important and so he walked past them to the tent and listened at the entrance. Inside a small child was crying loudly and it's mother was sobbing as she tried to comfort it.

The boy took a deep breath then spoke with authority, as he had heard his father do many times in the past.

'Eoghan, do you hear me? It is I, Choni, who speaks to you. I have the blessing of Henkert to ask for the help of Frastu to go with me, on a mission of great importance, for all of us here. He says you must agree to this. Do you give your blessing?'

'Choni, I hear you but I cannot consider this now. I am doing something very important here. It is delicate. You must wait until I come out to see you.'

Choni said nothing. He crossed the clearing to the tent of Audra, passing the group that sat by a small fire waiting to see her. He held his ear to the tent and could hear that she was playing her pipe. He knew enough of what she did to know he must not disturb her.

Choni made his decision. Time was pressing. Madjiaak could charge into the camp again at any moment. A child or an older person could get killed or maimed. He, Choni, had been given the responsibility. He must act now. Without the young boy with his special talents he would never find the rogue stag on this dark moonless night. He must tell his friend a white lie. It was necessary for the safety of everyone that Madjiaak be hunted and killed.

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He turned and ran off to collect his father's old spear.

At Big Pine, Frastu was sitting astride his pony, playing the little pipe he always wore on a cord around his neck. He wore a leather sack over his shoulder. The hunting knife was in its sheath hanging from a harness around the pony's neck. He also had a little bone knife, which was very sharp, in another wooden sheath that hung from his waist. He heard Choni stumbling up the hill and then he arrived, panting, carrying the old spear at the ready, which was a very dangerous thing to do in the dark.

'You are so noisy Choni. You sound like twenty people having a wrestling match when you run like that. Do try to walk more quietly.'

Last year he had tried to teach Choni the special way of quiet walking that Eoghan had taught him but it had not worked; Choni was still as noisy as ever.

'What did you say, speak up boy!' said Choni.

'No, Choni, speak down. Just whisper, you know, like this. We are supposed to be on a hunt, remember, silly!'

'OK, OK. Look I should take the hunting knife, OK? You know you're hopeless with it.'

'OK, if you want. But please, please don't lose it or break it. After Trogga it's the most precious thing I have.'

Choni stabbed the spear into the ground, unhitched the knife and its harness from Trogga and put it over his shoulder. He immediately withdrew the knife from its sheath and started to swish it around in front of himself and then stabbed out into the dark a few times with great lunges. He re-

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sheathed the knife. The whole thing took less than a minute. He was indeed an expert with knives.

Choni wanted one just like this. It was stupid that it was Frastu's. The boy would never use it to kill an animal. He only ever wanted to heal them or eat them once someone else had killed them; except fish, of course - Frastu was very keen on hunting fish.

'Look Frastu, I know all about hunting knives. Not like you. You are really lucky to have this one, it's very good. Maybe one day you'll get one for me, eh? Or a new one for my Dad and I could have his old one, eh?'

'Well, I'll see what I can do, but Gramps says they are very hard to come by. He says it's a part of my legacy from my ancestors.'

'Yeah, OK. Look I know all that stuff, OK? You're always going on about your ancestors. Come on! We should go looking for Madjjaak. We need to seek him out. Come on!'

'Actually you are quite wrong Choni; this is a very good place to look for the Terror of Braemar.'

'Here? But it's so far from the camp. He could be there now. Look, we should never have left the camping grounds. That's where Madjjaak will be. It was a mistake to come here. Come on, let's go! Now, come on!'

'Choni, you are talking too loudly. Shhhh! We must talk quietly. And I say we must stay at Big Pine because I can see over the whole of the valley from here, just like the white ghost bird who sits on that smaller pine over there.'

'Where? I can't see it. Is it really there?'

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Choni was whispering now as Frastu had suggested and, as if in answer to his question, the large white bird flew off its perch and swooped low over the ground to pounce on its prey. 'Stand still and wait, Choni. Close your eyes and listen. I have an idea.'

Although the Choni was itching to 'do something', he remembered times like this last year with this boy, times when strange things had happened; reluctantly did as he was asked, closed his eyes and listened.

Sounds carried well through the dark, humid night. Standing with his eyes closed, Choni began to hear rustlings, squeaks and the sudden high-pitched squeals of small animals as they were caught and killed, marking the end of each successful hunt. Often this was followed by the soft bark of a fox or the sharp high-pitched cry of a wildcat, as they called their young to the share in the kill. By being still and quiet, the older boy could also hear the high-pitched calls of bats feeding overhead on the clouds of midges and moths. He thought he could also hear the faintest flutter of wings, as the white ghost bird returned to her hunting perch. Choni began to enjoy this soundscape experience - this 'seeing through his ears' as Frastu called it. He sat now with his back against Big Pine, closed his eyes again, reached out his hand to the dog and stroked its head gently.

Frastu began to play a quiet little tune on his pipe. It was one of many such tunes that his Gran had taught him, like those she used to tame wild horses.

One of Audra's many skills was to call and train horses and ponies from the wild; she never used the harsh methods

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of chasing, lassoing and hobbling that others used. She just 'called' them to her with her pipe then tamed them with kindness and gentleness until she had their trust. If she had a pony or a horse to barter she would always choose the new owner carefully to make sure the animal went to a kind and gentle person. Often she would gift it to someone who really needed it. But calling and taming horses in this gentle way was very time consuming; it was an extra thing she did; healing was her main work.

Choni could feel his eyes closing. It had been a long day; he had been up at Big Peak from early morning, searching the valley for signs of Frastu and his family. He would never tell the younger boy how much he looked forward to his return; Frastu was just a boy; he, Choni, was nearly a man. But although Choni always tried to act grown up, he still enjoyed being with this unusual boy who was so different from all the other children he knew.

And Frastu always seemed to know where to find fish. Last year they had only caught many trout - not a single salmon. They would go to Two Rivers' Junction soon and catch some big salmon. Frastu had said earlier that 'no-moon nights' were a good time for salmon, and the boy was almost always right. Choni, dreaming of their salmon hunt, was smiling now, fast asleep; just like the Flecco.

Frastu grinned. Now he could find Madjjaak alone. He knew exactly where the big stag was and was almost sure he knew what was making him so mad. Slipping quietly off Trogga's back he whispered softly into her ear.

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'Stay here girl. Have a nice sleep. I'll be back in good time. He breathed into her nostrils. The pony closed her eyes, crooked a back leg so that her hoof was almost off the ground, and was immediately asleep.'

### *The Terror is tamed*

When Frastu had first arrived at Big Pine he had sat quietly on Trogga scanning the valley floor with his keen eyesight, listening to all the sounds of the night. It had taken only a short time to locate Madjiaak. Although he could not see him, he knew that the stag was in the small copse of trees close to the small river, only ten minutes' walk upstream from the camp. Frastu had heard him snuffle and snort and occasionally give out a tiny bleat of pain. The boy had understood at once that Madjiaak was in distress.

The boy had healed many animals over the past few years using the oils, potions and pastes his Gramps had allowed him. As needed, he also used his Gran's chants and tunes from his little pipe. Some day he hoped to be able to heal people too.

Before setting off he adjusted his sack of clay pots and bottles of pastes and oils. Everything was wrapped in bits of cloth so they would not make a sound. He drifted down the hill as silently as the white ghost bird and was soon standing near the little wood. Now that Frastu was near he could smell the stag, taste its fear and pain on his tongue. He could only see a very faint outline; the stag had excellent camouflage.

'Hello Madjiaak man, don't worry, I'm here to help you.'

'HHAARROOHAA!' the stag called out in return, stamping hard on the ground, shaking his head. When his



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antlers caught in the low branches, he let out a sharp bleat of pain.

Frastu knew that this was a display of 'fear aggression' used by animals when afraid. All deer have a very keen sense of smell. If he allowed himself to be afraid too, he would give out his own fear smell, which would heighten the animal's fear. He started to chant quietly as his Gran had taught him. It took some time but eventually he could sense that Madjiaak was calmer; now the next stage could begin.

He coated the tip of his little pipe with oil made from sweet-smelling herbs. Deer love herbs of all kinds and this was a mixture of their favourites. The boy closed his eyes to help himself concentrate and started to play his Gran's 'calling' tune. He played it softly over and over again. Eventually the big stag moved slowly forwards, coming out of the woods, into the clearing where Frastu waited.

Frastu opened his eyes slightly; Madjiaak was enormous. His magnificent head towered high, displaying the fourteen points which made him a 'Monarch' stag. It was important to keep playing these same notes at exactly the same speed and loudness. He closed his eyes again to concentrate. This was the most dangerous time of all for the boy. One sweep of these great antlers and he would be maimed for life or even killed. But Frastu kept control; playing the tune again and again.

But the big stag was resisting, shaking his head and stamping hard with a foot, as if to say 'No!'

The huge antlers swished to and fro right in front of the boy but he kept playing, keeping his rhythm, holding the

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tune and playing even more quietly until the big stag lowered his head and held it still in front of the boy's face.

Still playing Frastu opened his eyes again. Now he could see the problem more clearly. The animal's head was wrapped in 'ropes' of bramble stalks and his left eyelid was closed with thorns sticking into it. Madjiaak was in great pain.

Frastu moved the end of the pipe close the stag's nostrils which flared open as it sniffed in the smell. If the stag became aggressive now the boy would almost certainly die. Frastu changed now to one of his Gran's 'healing' tunes. Gradually the animal began to lower himself to the ground. The boy followed him down, keeping the pipe near to the animal's nostrils, keeping the rhythm steady, making the notes softer and softer.

Madjiaak's big right eye was now dulled; he was now in a complete trance. The injured animal could no longer feel the torment of the pain he had been suffering. Now Frastu could do his work as a healer.

He stopped playing and took time to study the stalks of brambles which had become wound tightly around the stag's head. Its thorns had been biting deeper each time the animal had tried to shake or rub them off.

Frastu took his little bone knife and using a leather cloth to protect his left hand like a glove, he worked quickly to cut away the bramble stalks, carefully pulling the thorns from the stag's left eye. He ran to the river and returned with his leather cup filled with clean cold water. Taking handfuls of a special moss from his sack, he dipped them into the water and gently bathed the eye first and then the other wounds. He

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opened a small pot of yellow-green paste and using the tip of his finger rubbed it gently onto the big eyeball. From another pot he used a dark purple-brown paste which smelled very strongly of goat, and rubbed it into the other deep gouges on the animal's head and neck, deep wounds that the stag had caused himself while trying desperately to rid itself of the brambles.

It was delicate work. When he had finished Frastu lay back on the mossy grass, alongside the stag that was still fast asleep, enjoying its first proper rest for many days. Frastu stretched his muscles and let out a little sigh of satisfaction. He closed his eyes to take a nap while the pastes started their healing work. Audra had taught him how to take 'naps' to restore his energy levels. He decided on ten minutes. That should be enough. He did not want Choni or anyone coming along with a spear or sword to kill Madjiaak. The boy and stag lay side by side fast asleep.

Suddenly Frastu was awake, sitting up, staring into the night, scanning quickly. His skin was tingling and his hair standing on end. There was someone nearby. How did they approach without making a sound? Not even his Gramps was that stealthy. He heard a quiet cough and turned towards the woods.

*'You have done well Frastu,' said the deep quiet voice. 'Madjiaak is the Monarch of this glen and it is very important that he is restored to good health to ensure that the strength of the herd is preserved. Thank you.'*

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'Who are you, master?' asked the boy as he peered at the faint grey glow in the shape of a tall slim man standing deep amongst the trees.

*'You already know my name, even though you have said many times, that you do not believe in me.'*

'Are you ...'

*'No! Do not speak it! Just believe.'*

'But Gramps always says ...'

*'Be still, Frastu! You have done your work here, well. Now is the time to go to Two Rivers' Junction. A pod of salmon awaits you and your friend. Go now. This is your reward.'*

'I choose to obey you, master. Thank you.'

But the boy was speaking only to Madjiaak. The hazy grey shape had disappeared as it had come, in silence. But now, far away in the hills above him, he could hear the echo of soft footfalls receding into the distance.

The boy knelt again beside Madjiaak and stroked the long neck and ran his hands over the magnificent antlers. Some velvet was hanging off it now and it fell to the ground under his gentle touch. He gathered it, wrapped it in a spare cloth and put it in his sack. Maybe it would have a use; he would take it to Gramps.

Gradually the stag returned to wakefulness and his eyes became bright again. Abruptly, he reared his enormous head then, clambered up onto his legs. He lifted his head high into the air.

'HOOORHOOOH! HOOORHOOOH!' he roared over and over out into the night, scraping hard with his right hoof, gouging a great mound of turf in the soft ground.

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After a minute or so there were several calls from other stags high up on the mountainside.

Madjiaak turned back and took a final long look at Frastu, nodded his head and stamped hard several times and then turned and trotted off into the dark humid night, off to re-join his fellow stags on the high mountain-tops.

### *Choni to the 'rescue'*

A few minutes later a thunderous noise rushed down the hillside towards Frastu. Flecco was first, followed soon by Trogga and then, quite a bit later, Choni arrived, proving that usually four legs are better than two when it comes to running fast.

Just as he got near, Choni tripped on a large tussock of grass and tumbled to the ground. It was lucky for them all that he did not stab anyone with the spear. Fortunately his face hit the pile of mud that Madjiaak had left, and although he looked silly, he was merely winded. Only his pride was hurt. Frastu saw at once that his precious hunting knife was missing and spoke into Flecco's ear. The dog slipped back into the darkness, following his nose.

'Was that Madjiaak I heard?' he panted, angry now, wiping the mud from his face.

Frastu held his face straight, although he was giggling hard inside at what had happened to his friend. 'Yes, it was Madjiaak. But he's gone.'

'OH NO! OH NO! OH FRASTU! What've you done? You've only gone and spooked him. We'll never catch him now. Why didn't you wake me up? I'd have stabbed him. OH NO!'

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'That's why I didn't wake you up.' said Frastu quietly, but the older boy wasn't listening.

'What happened, Frastu? Are you OK? Did he attack you?'

'Well, if you stop talking for a few minutes I might tell you. Or I might not. It's up to you; but I'll tell you only if you want to listen.'

'OK, OK, OK, no need to be cheeky. Remember I'm the one in charge here, not you.' said Choni, sitting now on the very hummock of grass that he had tripped over.

Frastu jumped easily onto Trogga and told Choni his tale.

'So, Frastu, are you sure that Madjiaak won't come back, not ever?'

'I'm sure that Madjiaak is no longer the Terror of Braemar.'

'So we can say we've chased him off for good, that we've scared him so much that he'll never come back again. So, now we are all safe? Is that it?'

Frastu did not say anything.

'Yes that's what happened. I remember it all now,' Choni raced on, his words tumbling out faster and faster; the red-haired boy was very good at making up stories like this, stories where he was the one who always did brave things, always did the clever things. Frastu was very used to his boasting and so said nothing.

'Yes, that's what happened. I remember it all now. I chased him away, OK? So you just leave it to me. I'll tell the clan what happened, OK? And Frastu, you mustn't speak in front of Henkert - not ever. It would be disrespectful; you do know that, don't you? After all, you are just a boy and you're

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## The Terror of Braemar

only a summer visitor. I'll do all the talking when we get back, OK?'

'Yes, you do the talking if you want. But let's go and get the pod of salmon now, OK?'

'OK. But who was the old man? Do you think it was 'The Old Gre ...'

'No, Choni - we cannot say it! We cannot speak of him or use his name or the salmon won't be there for us. OK?'

Choni knew that when it came to fishing Frastu had never been wrong; and if they brought back a few salmon for the clan that would be just as good to eat as a stag.

While the older boy had thought about this, Flecco returned with Frastu's sword still safely in its harness. Without making a fuss, Frastu rubbed the dog's ears as thanks and slipped the harness over Trogga's neck. Never again would he lend his precious hunting knife to Choni; or to anyone else. His grandfather had told him many times how important it was. It was part of his legacy.

Choni saw what happened and was shamefaced for a few seconds. But he recovered quickly, back to his old bossy self, now that he had sorted out his story for the clan.

'OK. We shall go now to Two Rivers' Junction and we shall catch our salmon. I will lead the hunt,' said the older boy in his most annoying and pompous voice.

'But did you bring your net, Frastu?'

'Of course, look! That's what I'm sitting on, silly.'

### *Two Rivers' Junction*

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## The Terror of Braemar

The first glimmers of dawn were showing in the sky when they reached Two Rivers Junction, where the small river from the camping ground met the big river from the far-away mountains.

They saw at once that there were many salmon lying in the deep pool in the wider river, just below the junction. They retreated back to the narrower, shallower river and carried the net into the water, stretching it across to the far side and then tying it to a tree at either side before using rocks to hold its foot tightly against the river bed.

They ran to the pool and entered the deep water downstream of the fish. It was icy cold but they did not feel it. They waded out as far as they could then beat hard on the water with sticks to scare the fish ahead of them. Flecco jumped in above the junction and swam down towards the salmon, splashing with his legs back and forth across the wider river to scare the fish and stop them going upstream, passed the junction. Together the two boys and the dog worked round in a circle to drive the salmon up into the small river towards the net.

After a few minutes they left the dog to continue their fish-herding work and stumbled ashore to race back to check the net. It was bulging with fish trapped by their gills.

They hauled the net up onto the bank and as each salmon came onto the shore Choni 'dispatched' it with a sharp blow from a short heavy stick. They did this as quickly as they could so that the salmon did not suffer when they were taken from the water and could no longer breathe. Frastu always made Choni do it this way, just as Eoghan had taught him.



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## The Terror of Braemar

When they reached fifty salmon Frastu called out to Choni, 'Enough! Stop! We must set the remainder free to make sure there will be salmon for future years.'

Reluctantly the older boy agreed and watched as Frastu stood at the water's edge and cut the net so as to release all the other fish. Many more fish were released back to freedom than were taken.

*Behind a tree the grey haired man smiled to himself again. When he started to look for the two boys earlier this was the first place he checked. He had seen the salmon lying in the pool in great numbers, then followed the small river upstream to the campsite to find his grandson standing bravely in front of the angry stag, calmly playing his little pipe. He had seen him do his healing work on Madjjaak. Frastu was indeed a very special boy.*

*Now that he knew they were safely out of the river, Eoghan the Healer slipped away, back to his tent to tell Audra that all was well. The boys did not know he had been keeping a watchful eye on them for the last hour. When Eoghan moved he was even quieter than the white ghost bird.*

### *The Night of the Fifty Salmon*

The boys wrapped the salmon in the net and tied it to Trogga who carried their catch back to the campsite. It was fully light now. Some children saw them approach and ran to greet them. The news of their success spread rapidly through the camp.

That night there was a great feast with plenty of salmon to feed the entire clan. The remainder of their bounty was

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## The Terror of Braemar

already being peat-smoked to preserve it for the weeks ahead. The boys had slept all day and now they were full of energy again. They were given pride of place, sitting on the right side of Henkert. Everyone was laughing and joking and calling out to them. Eoghan and Audra were sitting directly across from their grandson, smiling and talking quietly to those around them.

When the feast was over Henkert spoke for the first time that day. He had heard the story from others but now he called Choni to give a full account.

'Choni, with my blessing, you must tell us the story of the *The Night of the Fifty Salmon*.'

Choni stood up, walked to the centre of the fire-ring and told the story that he had already told others many times that morning before falling asleep of exhaustion. In fact, Choni had told this story so many times that now he firmly believed that his version of the story was completely true.

'When I saw Madjiaak, the Terror of Braemar I ran towards him with my spear. He charged at me but I stepped aside and, as he ran past, I stabbed him in the neck and his blood flowed like a river in spring flood. He ran from me never to return. You may have heard him call out in pain.

Madjiaak has learned his lesson and will never return to this campsite. He is no longer the Terror of Braemar. You have the word of Choni, that this is true.'

Frastu had told his Gramps and Gran what had actually happened; but the boy was wise and did not speak now to correct Choni. He just looked across at his grandparents and they too stayed silent. But as he looked at his Gramps he saw

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## The Terror of Braemar

him slowly wink first one eye and then the other. No one else saw this, which is just as well, because in those days that meant you thought the person talking was telling 'tall tales'.

'Then,' Choni continued in his loudest voice, 'I told Frastu that we must go to hunt for salmon instead, so that I could provide a feast for our clan, as I promised. I took him to a secret place I know where the salmon often hide when it is no moon. The boy was of small assistance to me and his pony was useful to carry the heavy load - he is a good boy and very obedient. I give him praise for his part.'

At this, Choni turned and smiled at Frastu who smiled back.

'I, Choni, have rid us of the Terror of Braemar and I have brought you the feast I promised.'

The tall red-haired boy puffed himself up, trying to look even bigger and stronger.

'You, Choni, have done well. We are all proud of you,' said Henkert, his eyes wet with tears of pride.

Everyone called out their thanks.

'Yes Choni! Yes Choni! Yes Choni!'

Flecco gave a low growl and bared his teeth towards the older boy but Frastu shot his hand out quickly and held his muzzle to quieten him.

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After the feast Eoghan, Audra and Frastu talked in quiet voices inside their family tent.

'You have done well Frastu. You have learned to hold your tongue when it is important to do so. This young man Choni will

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## The Terror of Braemar

make a good leader. He did not mean to tell lies. He made a boast that he would kill the angry stag and he did not succeed. He made a boast that he would provide a feast which he did not do without your help. The salmon were provided as a reward to you by 'you know who'. Choni could not bring himself to admit that he was not as important as he wanted to be and of course, unlike us, he has to live with this clan the rest of his life. But Choni is brave and he has been a good friend to you. He ran to help you when he thought you were in danger. You were wise not to contradict him. To do so, would have cost you his friendship and he may well have become an enemy.'

'Yes Gramps. Choni is a nice person. He's just a bit bossy and boastful. I already knew that. It's OK. I'm not worried about it. Not worried at all.'

'Right Frastu, time for bed,' said Audra.

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Later that night the clouds blew away and the stars shone brightly, lighting up the mountains.

Madjaak, the Terror of Braemar, stood on Big Peak and called down to his friend Frastu.

'HHAARROOHH! HHAARROOHH! HHAARROOHH!'

The boy turned in his sleep and smiled.

This is a story about a boy called Frastu who has a pony called Trogga. He also has a good friend called Choni, a Pictish boy who travels around with his tribe hunting and fishing.

Each year Frastu makes a journey from his home near the River Clyde into the far northern mountains of Scotland to a place called Braemar to meet up with Choni and his tribe.

Frastu travels with his Grandparents who are Healers and Frastu is learning to be a Healer too.

When Frastu arrives at the Pictish camp he discovers that it is under attack by a rogue stag.

Choni and Frastu accept the challenge to put an end to this terror.

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DTP and Printing: Susan Gilmour at Purple Edge Graphics Ltd.

Bombus Bontroni Publishing: December 2013.

ISBN: 978-0-9576591-3-1