

# 1. Running Like Blazes, Timor, February 1942 AD

Just as Freddy O'Toole thought that things could not get any worse, the poison dart thumped into his backpack. *Blazes*, he thought.

'Run, Little Boss,' yelled his crusty manservant, Gruntenguile—not that he needed to.

'Good thinking! I would never have thought of that!' cried Freddy, glaring back and down at his little companion. They had been together for almost as long as Freddy could remember, but he still felt something like a no-returns punch to his heart every time he looked at Gruntenguile. He was a short, fuzzy-looking fellow with a grizzled beard like a badger's backside. He farted almost as often as he breathed and was, Freddy believed, the grossest and most useless manservant ever.

This opinion was actually quite unfair. Gruntenguile's work contract—scribbled in charcoal on a Gorgonopsian skull<sup>1</sup>—had only three words—'Keep Freddy alive'—and at that point of Gregorian time, Freddy had made it to sixteen and was still very much alive.

What's more, he was keen for it to stay that way, so he turned and ran.

Sweat sliding down the small of his back like a wet snake, he raced along the flooded trail they had been following for the past few weeks. Slashing his machete at groping vines to clear a path. His heart pounded in his chest. His lungs sucked the hot, sticky air in short, tight gasps. His leg muscles burned.

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<sup>1</sup>In the unlikely event of ever meeting a Gorgonopsian—RUN. FAST!

Swoosh ...

Thud ...

Twang ...

More poison darts, like back to front kamikaze mosquitoes, swooshed through the sticky air miraculously missing them.

‘Don’t look back, Little Boss. Just run!’ cried Gruntenguile.

*Really? I thought we might stop for a cup of tea,* flashed through Freddy’s mind but he was too short of breath to say it.

Thinking of smart Alec comments while running for your life is usually not a good idea. In the situation Freddy found himself, however, it was better than thinking about the things that might happen if the Snapahuti got hold of him. Things like having his head chopped off with a not-so-sharp axe and being enslaved in the afterlife—for all eternity—to the person who chopped it off!<sup>2</sup>

Up ahead was a fork in the trail. Which way? Left or right? Blazes! They could not afford to get lost now. If they did, it would not matter if they escaped the Snapahuti. They could not survive for long, alone in the jungle with hardly any supplies. The only food in his backpack was a block of Cadburys Ration Chocolate kept cool in a bio-freeze bag. It had been given to him by Professor Dupler as he was about to leave on the expedition. An expedition about which the Professor had told him nothing except that it was best that he knew nothing. An expedition that seemed more pointless with each passing day. Still, in Freddy’s heart, it carried a quiet hope that he dared not think, let alone say out loud.

<sup>2</sup> There are many reasons for headhunting, from just plain bad manners through to a genuine interest in macabre collectibles, but this was the one most common in the East Indies at that time.

He pulled a map from his trouser pocket and tried to read it, but he was running too fast. The dots and lines and words bobbed up and down in the opposite direction to his eyes. Frightened that he might lose it, he shoved it back.

‘Gruntenguile, which way?’ he gasped.

No reply.

He looked back.

Gruntenguile was gone.

Had he run too fast for Gruntenguile’s stumpy legs to keep up? Or had one of the Snapahuti darts found its mark?

There was no way of knowing.

The only thing he knew for certain was that there was no going back.

He reached the fork. Left. A very short distance ahead, another fork. Turn right. No reason. Just instinct now. No time to think.

A branch ripped his army surplus shorts and cut into the pale skin beneath. Blood trickled down his skinny leg, making a slimy snaking trail in his muddy sweat.

All the while, the ferocious cries of the Snapahuties grew louder. Only the bends and forks of the jungle path, and his agility, kept him safe. Or so he thought.

Swooooshhhh!

A dart pierced his hat, pushing it forward. He grabbed at the hat and pricked his finger—luckily, not on the dart, but on the needle of a weird-eye hatpin that the Professor had given to him as he was leaving on the expedition. ‘Blazes,’ he cried, sucking the blood from his finger, and pulling the dart from his hat. He hurled the dart into the jungle, flipped his hat back on his head, and ran with an enthusiasm that only those who have been chased by a tribe of Snapahuti headhunters can fully appreciate.

He held his machete in front of him to stop the slap of low hanging branches. The sweat stinging his eyes blurred the way ahead to a jumping jumble of green. Every slender leaf seemed like a dangling viper. His legs felt like they were already being barbecued.

Another fork in the trail jumped out at him and this time his instincts told him to turn left.

Nosy gibbons with pointy white beards and sharp black eyes looked down from the treetops at Freddy. *Humans are so stupid*, they must have thought.

Even so, they chattered encouragement as he passed.<sup>3</sup>

Freddy would have happily given up a million years of evolution and sprouted a prehensile tail to join them up there. He no sooner thought this however, when he noticed a change in the world of noise beating about him. He stopped to listen. Clutching a dangling vine to steady himself, he held his breath. Cupping his hand to his ear, he turned around, thinking he could hear the beating of drums. Then he realised it was his heartbeat. The wet snake still slithered down the crook of his back.

Incurious insects scraped and scurried in the stinking leaf litter at his feet.

Outside that, it was silent. His pursuers must have stopped. Maybe they were regrouping and straining to hear him splashing ahead. Unsure of which path he had taken. Maybe discussing whether he would be best roasted or gently broiled.

His hand fumbled in his pocket and once more pulled out the map. It made no sense, as all he could see of his surroundings was the spot where he was standing and the trees towering above him and there was still no sign of Gruntenguile.

Freddy was about to give up when—somewhere ahead—he heard something.

<sup>3</sup> As much as the gibbons may have felt an affinity with Freddy, it should be noted that they are not, in fact, Hominids. They belong instead to the closely related Hylobatidae family.

## 2. Discovery

It was the sound of running water, and, if his ears were not playing tricks on him, it meant that the map Freddy was clutching so tightly was starting to make some sense.

As he bounded over a large buttress root, the forest suddenly opened up into a clearing of dappled light and ancient green rocks. Here the two great powers of the rainforest—sun and water—met and held each other in a clinging, choking embrace.

He knew he had to act quickly, but he also knew he had no time for mistakes. Breathing a great gasp of air into his lungs to calm his nerves, he looked around.

Taking the map from his pocket, he squinted to read it in the speckled light. His heart leapt from his chest and punched the dank air when he saw that there was a river right there in front of him just like the one running past the X on his map.

On the far side of the stream, a pile of boulders like giant steps ran up the side of the slope from which they had fallen. Checking his map once more, he noticed a cluster of over-lapping circles that he guessed were the formation of boulders before him. Scrawled in faded and smeared ink alongside the circles were the words—*Os Passos a Inferno*. Although he did not understand a word of Portuguese, Freddy did not like the sound of it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Timor was colonised by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Although they mainly stuck to the coast, Freddy's map and the broken remnants of ten-gallon demijohns later found near this site suggest that at least one party of Portuguese ventured inland and quite possibly stumbled on the discovery that was now within Freddy's grasp.