

Locked and Loaded

by R Brent Smith

The creature is getting closer. I can track its movement by the snapping of tree branches as it moves slowly, inexorably through the thick steamy jungle. Flight is impossible, the jungle vegetation is too dense. I have hunkered down in a crevice in a rocky wall, ready for our last stand. My rifle, with its single remaining round is at the ready. With only one shot left, I must make sure it is a killing shot.

As I wait, my mind reflects on how I got myself into this situation. I am terrified and filled with regret. Regret that I have unthinkingly used my weapon to cut a swath of carnage from here back to my wrecked spaceship. Armed, leaving the capsule to look for food and water, I felt protected and invincible. My rifle would keep me safe. I left the wreckage in complete confidence, sure in my superiority of mind and weaponry. I just had to survive until the rescue arrived. But now, the gun is one shot away from being forever useless. I have lost my bravado, my superiority. Now, I am a small, frightened being, alone on an alien world and about to become dinner for this fiend that is crashing through the jungle in front of me. I look at the rifle and frown. "It was you. You did this." Yes, I am talking to my rifle, blaming it for our situation. But it is true. This weapon, bursting with devastating power and a promise of invincibility has misled me, controlled my decisions and actions. Like a powerful drug, its use elicits adrenalin high, an enthusiasm too strong to resist. It has led me into this situation against my own will and logic.

After leaving the capsule, I imagined that I was about to live every adventurous child's dream, a space explorer on a strange, alien planet. What wonders and horrors would I find? I was poised to be the heroic spaceman, surviving against the odds in a hostile alien environment. It was not long before I encountered my first alien monstrosity. Entering a small clearing in the

thick jungle, I heard a hideous screech from the jungle beyond. The thing came crashing through the underbrush, straight for me. I stepped back and tripped on a root. On my back, I had no time to regain my feet. Looking like a gigantic centipede, the shiny black monster was on me just as I raised the rifle. A burst of shells unzipped its head just as its fangs, dripping with venom, were closing in on me. The black goo that was its brain poured over me, filling my eyes and mouth. I rolled onto my knees, vomiting out the acidic liquid. My eyes burned from the stuff. Eventually, feeling more myself, I crawled out from under the thing. I pause to take in my first kill. It was a full ten meters long, a meter wide - a true monster. Although the thing was clearly dead, in victory, I sprayed bullets down its length, bits of its exoskeleton and globs of guts flying out. I let out a howl of victory.

I was pumped. My first victory; spaceman 1, alien monsters 0. As the adrenalin receded, I took stock of my situation. I was enclosed by dense jungle on all sides, probably hiding more of the same and different fiendish creatures. I looked around for a break in the green wall surrounding me. The trees were thick and tall. The undergrowth was choking. Thick vines hung from the trees. These were draped with moss and other leafy vines. As I looked around, my enthusiasm faded. This would be no easy going. A dozen men with razor sharp machetes would have trouble penetrating this verdant tangle. I listened to the sounds of the world around me. The forest carried the sounds of countless unknown beasts to me. Howls, screeches, chirps and tweets filled the air. Within this cacophony of unfamiliar sounds, I heard something familiar, the sound of running water. A smirk came to my face. This spaceman had just found his first need, fresh water. I headed off in the direction of that wonderful sound.

Moving through the jungle proved to be less difficult than I had anticipated. Near the ground were dirt ditches that travelled under the vegetation. Perhaps trails created by that giant

centipede. I followed a trail that seemed to be moving in the right direction. Monstrous centipedes need to drink too. Before long I came to a crossing trail. I crossed this and continued on toward the sound of the water. Suddenly, out of the cross trail came a skittering sound. It was the sound of something rushing along the trail. I spun around in time to see a white creature, all teeth and eyes rushing up the trail toward me. With a mighty yell, I blasted the thing with round after round. Like Rambo in a fire fight, I scorched the air with bullets. I stop firing only when the clip runs out of rounds. The thing was dead before it could take another slithering step toward me. Its face torn and shredded by my fusillade; it lay immobile, white liquid seeping from its wounds. A small trickle of the stuff winds its way through the dirt toward me. Spaceman 2, monsters 0. I whoop with joy and shake my rifle at the dead thing. "Come meet your new master, you alien demons!" I dug into my knapsack for another magazine and slammed this into my weapon. Locked and loaded once again. I shouldered my weapon and proceeded down the trail, a confident energy in my step. I stopped to pee, in my mind, marking my territory as if I were the king of this jungle.

Some distance on, the dirt trail met the bank of a fast-flowing river. The river was wide and looked deep. I found myself on a small, sandy beach. I walked to the river's edge and dipped a hand into the water. It was warm, but cool enough to be refreshing in this jungle heat. I stripped off my clothing and waded into the river, waist deep. The current pulled at me. I bathed, washing the goo from the centipede from my hair and face. I didn't stay long in the water. I had no idea what devilish creatures may lurk in the depths; perhaps leeches the size of anacondas or crayfish the size of an SUV.

Refreshed from my bath I filled my water container and set about my next task – to find some food. This would be a risky endeavor. Considering that most plants on Earth are poisonous

to humans, what were my chances when eating fruit on an alien planet? I had a pocket test kit that could test for common Earth toxins in the juice of a fruit. This may save me from toxins familiar to the test kit but what about those alien toxins? Lost in these thoughts, I failed to notice a faint ripple in the water behind me. A shadow passed over me and I glanced around to see what had cut out the sun. There, hovering not two feet from me was the head of some sort of serpentine creature. It hissed at me as it prepared to pounce. I dropped to the ground and rolled to the spot where my rifle was lying in the sand. As I grasped the rifle in two hands, the creature's jaws closed on me. I fired off a quick burst of shots, not knowing where they were directed. I could feel the vice-like jaws of the creature gripping my hips. As my rounds burst through the creature's upper jaw, it snapped its head up, dropping me to the sand. I rolled into a kneeling position, rifle at the ready. The creature, blood pouring from a wound in its snout, backed away. It blinked at me, confused that its easy snack carried such a vicious sting. I yelled at it, "You want more?" and followed this challenge up with another burst of rounds into its face. The creature dropped dead in front of me. I stood and kicked at it in disdain. "Spaceman 3, monsters 0."

So went my time on this planet. There seemed no end of hungry monsters wanting a spaceman snack. I dispatched these monsters with force, my bravado growing with each kill. I imagined myself sitting upon a rock throne, the king and ruler of these enormous monsters, they doing my bidding for fear of me. Before long, the score stood at Spaceman 14, monsters 0.

My dreams of grandeur took a sudden hit when fishing in my backpack for another clip for the rifle, I found only one clip remaining. The realization hit me. Twenty rounds lay between me then, the master of my domain and me now, a frightened, cowering little spaceman, surrounded by alien titans hungering for my guts.

Fast forward to me hiding in the crevice in the rock, the score is now spaceman 21, monsters 0. But I have only a single round left. I ponder my situation. I was living the dream, expressing the mastery of the hero adventurer over a nightmare realm of gigantic monsters. My bravado and invincibility stoked by the infallible power of the rifle. Now, I am facing the ultimate nightmare. Soon to be defenseless against my nightmares, helpless to prevent the next monster from rending me limb from limb, chewing me into mush in their powerful jaws, injecting me with their toxic sting, causing unimaginable pain as my guts are digested by the venom. There is no bright side to this. Every death I imagine is painful and horrific. Every death is inevitable for without my weapon, I am but an aphid on a leaf, an earthworm in the rain. So falls the fool. My fear and bravado led me here, encouraged by this weapon, controlling my actions. The gun gave me safety and survival but it also gave me a false hope; a foolish idea that I could survive by simply killing any and every threat, doling out punishment to every obstacle. I lost track of my future arc, my survival beyond the gun. A saner man, not consumed by the power of the gun might have planned better, figured out a way to conserve his rounds and survive even after the rounds were all spent. But not this fool. I bathed in the blood of my enemies, drank up the power that the rifle gave me over them. It was like the gun had its own plan for me. It controlled my actions, took over my soul, made me a killer. Such is the power of the gun; seductive, purposeful, powerful, violent, and oh so conclusive. I wonder now who was the real monster?

I never considered myself to be the Rambo type. In fact, until training for this mission, I never touched a firearm. But there is a deep psychosis that is brought on by the possession of a firearm. The bigger and deadlier the weapon, the deeper and more powerful the psychosis. Therein lies the rub. Perhaps if I had a lesser firearm, I would have been more judicious in the

use of my rounds, not wasting them in pumped up bravado. Firing a pistol is an act of violence with each shot; a deliberate attempt the kill with each shot. Firing an automatic weapon is an adrenalin rush; the power to lay down massive destruction with a single pull of the trigger. You want more.

So seduced by the power, here I huddle in my last stand, soon to be defenseless against my all too real nightmares. All those horrible death scenarios come to me, there is no way out. My thoughts are interrupted as the creature stalking me bursts through the bush. It is a spider-like creature, all eyes and fangs. On seeing me it clicks its fangs together in excitement. A dark syrupy venom drips from the ends of those fangs. I ready my rifle; the shot has to be a perfect kill. I fire off my final round.

Space man 21, monsters 1