

**1500 Word Short Story – Mercenaries**

Commander Travis mounted his modified pulse rifle on its tripod and aimed it down the slope. This type of God-forsaken jungle felt like a second home to him. The berries and indigenous animals provided a never-ending larder. From the weasel sized Ardron up to the wolf sized Krento. Unfortunately, what they lacked in size they more than made up for in attitude and teeth.

The drizzle falling on the leaves surrounding his position was a constant companion. The droplets pooled like quicksilver, waiting for gravity to regain its pull. The leaves still held firmly by the trees and shrubs smelled fresh, while the fallen ones under him released a rotting odour. His rifle stretched out before him, hidden behind a veil of moss and fallen debris to mask the cold metal. The faint smell of oil from his primary weapon filtered through. The poisonous frogs croaked longer and louder this time of year while the various insects chirped, buzzed and clicked as background to the frog chorus. The evening light came from the two half-moons and the floating pinpricks exuding from the firefly's backsides.

His target was unaware of his presence, as all his previous engagements had been. At approximately seven feet tall, he resembled an upright armour-plated warthog. His yellowing eight-inch tusks protruding from his bottom jaw framed his pierced snout nose. Even with the minimal back-lit courtyard, Travis could see him. He was showering spittle across a twenty-foot radius, as he lambasted one of his lieutenants for something. His lieutenant had a four-fingered clawed hand across his midriff where his heart was, and his head bowed in submissive salute. The lieutenant held the same pulse rifle as Travis over his shoulder, albeit a standard-issue limited range one.

His quarry was over three kilometres point to point, further than any recorded shot, yet, he had achieved a shot of this magnitude time after time over the last twelve

years. Each time, the ballistics had been inconclusive, and no one believed a shot possible over this distance, so dismissed any evidence before their eyes. It had been three years since his discharge from the militia. Since then, he had enhanced his skills close to perfection. His talents and disconnected nature made him an ideal choice for this kind of assignment. Next to impossible to track, and even if they managed that, he was a deniable and expendable human asset.

He squeezed his neck mike and murmured, "Target acquired. Awaiting orders."

His earpiece hissed momentarily with static before "Message received Oscar-Bravo-One. Standby." The code-name brought a wry smile to Travis's face. He had chosen it as a joke.

The war with the cartel had been ongoing for five years, though his services had only been requested three years into the conflict. This planet was not the usual territory the cartel used, but it was far enough outside the Empire's extensive range to provide what they thought was a safe-haven.

The solar winds from the east were picking up. Travis adjusted his sights to compensate and continued to wait.

"Confirm numbers, Oscar-Bravo-One," came the command over his earpiece.

He switched on his wrist-mounted Perimeter Radar Unit (affectionately known as 'Pru') and peered through his scope to scan the compound, confirming the data Pru had given him.

"Eight targets in the compound, including primary. Four groups of three roaming the immediate perimeter. Two further groups of three at two-kilometre mark hidden by trees but Pru confirms. Copy?" he replied.

"Copy that Oscar-Bravo-One. Standby," sounded the disembodied voice.

Twenty-six opponents. Only one being his focus for now, then twenty-five whose primary target would be him - if they could find him. Travis smiled at this thought. He was good at executing objectives, but even better at disappearing in the aftermath.

A low growl from the undergrowth to his left told him another potential opponent was approaching. It sounded like a Gargun, one of Planet Antea's native carnivores. One hundred and ten pounds of hair, claws, and teeth. A cross between a sabre-tooth tiger from old earth and a grizzly bear, but only the size of a husky. Whatever it was, he wasn't concerned and kept his sight on his target. He was safe, surrounded by a set of electronic perimeter protection pods. On their own, the devices colloquially known as Triple-P's would give a minor shock sufficient to stun an animal of that size, but combined they had the potential to kill. Although he was all but invisible thanks to his gillie suit, he couldn't mask his scent. It was closer now, but had shifted to his rear.

A sharp buzz from the Triple-P's behind him followed by a soft but solid thump as a body crumpled to the floor told him all he needed to know about the Gargun. It also meant his evening meal was sorted, which brought another wry smile to his mud-stained face. The mud-covered some of his scars giving his face a crumpled paper look.

The light was fading as the two suns had begun their descent behind the distant mountain range. Travis flicked a switch on the side of his helmet, activating a night scope which dropped from a compartment over his right eye.

Movement in the compound caught his attention, causing him to draw breath. Squeezing his mike, he reported in, "Control. Movement in the compound. I can confirm two additional targets from Rosa cartel and Louis cartel. Copy?"

"Copy that Oscar-Bravo-One. Standby."

Damn, he thought. This complicates things a bit.

A few moments pass before the familiar hiss returned in his earpieces. "Oscar-Bravo-One. Command confirm you are to take the primary target only. Copy?"

"Copy that command. Do we have a green light?"

"Green-light confirmed Oscar-Bravo-One. Execute plan Delta-One."

Peering through the scope, he adjusted the Elevation and Windage dials to realign with current conditions and took aim. He slowed his breathing, which in turn slowed his heart rate. Lining up on his target's midriff, he inhaled and exhaled twice more before slowly squeezing the trigger. He felt the minute pinch point before the full trigger release on his way through the motion. The pull was long, slow and measured against his outward breath. The recoil was minimised due to the position and weight of the weapon. Tight in his shoulder, it lifted slightly before settling back to its steady-state. He watched as the pulse curved through the air, arcing towards his target. 'One Mississippi, Two Mississippi, Three Mississippi. Bulls-eye' he thought as a hole opened up in the target's torso. Behind his target, maroon blood and portions of spine splattered the wall. The compound became a flurry of activity. While some rushed towards the target in an attempt to shield him, some scattered and others started shooting in all directions. Travis remained calm and still. A few shots headed towards him, but with no specific target and limited range for their weapons, he felt safe enough.

He saw a plume of smoke through the scope before hearing the explosion in the trees on his left and feeling the ground shake. A few seconds later, he heard the delayed '*boom*' from a new unseen weapon, then a second plume of smoke chased after the first, followed by another explosion to his right.

"JEEEZUS," he shouted and began gathering his gear, ready to run.

The follow-up '*boom*' reverberated through the surrounding air.

The next explosion ripped up the ground beneath him, lifting both Travis and his gear into the air. He landed near the Triple-P's which gave an audible warning buzz. He attempted to roll back onto his front but found himself unable. The ringing in his ears vibrated harshly. He watched in his heads-up display as his life drained away on each of the medical sensors. As the light faded, a red sheen blurred the edges

punctuated by nine words in stark green mid-view ... "SIMULATION OVER. Press CTRL and R to Restart level".

Travis removed his helmet and slung it to one side.

"WHAT THE HELL, TRENT?"

The jungle scene around him faded to a dull matt green, leaving him standing in his gillie suit, hands spread wide.

"The latest Intel from the planet says they have a new long-range weapon with enhanced sound sensors." came the flat reply.

"AND YOU WERE GOING TO TELL ME THIS, WHEN?"

"We needed to see how they worked in the simulation before the real op next month, and this seemed like perfect timing."

Travis stared at the booth window, which had opened on the wall opposite. "For fuck's sake, Trent. A heads-up ahead of me getting blown to smithereens wouldn't go amiss."

"Sorry. Orders from above were to just programme the parameters in and see how it would go."

"Well." Travis' composure was returning. "You can tell the powers that be that any more surprises like that I'll walk. ARE WE CLEAR?"

"Crystal."

Travis waited for the ringing in his ears to subside.

"OK. Let's go for a reset." He donned his helmet once more, before assuming his prone position on the floor. The walls came alive with jungle sights and sounds as he reset his equipment and settled back into his routine.

1526 Words

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