

Recording J1, 10th of July, 2011

It's always the same... When I create a new series of recordings, I make them in a way that each one is something separate, but still consistent. However, I'll stay with this - it's simpler that way. Not necessarily for me, but more for someone who finds them.

Let's begin... I don't use my real name. Not anymore, since I left my family. Now, I use a pseudonym, a nickname... call it whatever you want. I am Balis.

If I said I'm an ordinary stalker, I would be lying. And I don't say I'm extraordinary to boost my ego. This is just a fact. A few words of clarification would be useful here.

First of all... I am blind. I rely mainly on smell, hearing and a few other... useful skills. Although without my knowledge and experience, those traits would not be of much use to me.

Besides... I'm not human. Or at least not entirely. I am a mutant. Partly a human being, and partly a dog. The kind that run around the Zone. They are also blind.

I don't write down my stories for reason you already know. That's why I record what I say and then... it depends. Sometimes, a person will agree to transfer the spoken text to written one. Sometimes I find another way.

And that's enough about me for now. I'm recording this several hours after I received a new assignment. I can't tell when it happened specifically - I can't even see what time of day it is now exactly, though I'm guessing it's before dusk.

I was on a walk in Cordon. I recognize the different locations by smell and listen to the sounds that are characteristic for the places. Unfortunately, there are a lot of newcomers here, who have come from different parts of the world and thus, emit smells that are different from each other. However, they are mostly from the surrounding countries.

They are loners. Free stalkers who don't belong to any faction and that's why they are the hardest for me to identify. Not that it's easier, if I could see, because they like to wear different armor too.

Back to the topic... I was strolling through Cordon. I could smell the faint scent of leaves, the road was slightly bumpy under my feet and I could also hear the quiet buzz of gravitational anomalies. This meant that I was in the northern part of the location. And knowing how this route runs, I guessed that I was going north.

The northern outpost is almost always occupied. Loners, bandits, military... Everyone wants some territory for themselves. It can give shelter, for example. And beyond that... it depends. "Every country, every custom", as they say.

I grabbed a shotgun from my back - Fort-500. I know some people are surprised, because it makes no sense for a blind person to carry a gun. If I were an ordinary blind man, I would agree. However, my skills allow me to function quite normally in the Zone. Even if the Zone isn't normal at all. I am a perfect example of this.

I snuck all the way to the fence of the post. I know from my experience that there are two campfires there. One more in front and the other near the entrance, behind the BTR. I also rely on my memory when it comes to various locations. Helps with knowing what is approximately where.

I recognized their scent. Bandits, no more than five. Depending on the faction, stalkers have different smells. Bandits mostly have smell of vodka and cheap cigarettes. My gun was loaded with buckshot and I know that these thugs rarely have decent armor. Most often they walk around in jackets and coats.

The first shot hit, as I heard the sound of agony. The second also hit, only the sound of pain was quieter. I backed up a bit and hid behind a truck that was a few steps behind me. I wanted to wait for them to come to me. There was a risk that they would hide to prepare an ambush for me, but most bandits prefer to approach things more aggressively. Not necessarily a good approach when it comes to doing anything in the Zone.

The growing sound of footsteps meant that I was right. I knew they were going to come at me from both sides. Eh... it's a pity there wasn't someone like me at the time, because we would have used some trick that would have effectively deterred the attackers.

However, I was alone at the time. A lone wolf. But lone does not necessarily mean someone who is weak. The weak don't go out against adversity and that's exactly what I did. More specifically, I stepped out of one side of the truck, to the bandit's surprise and ended his life. I sensed the second of them and the next shot was also fatal.

I started reloading my gun. Now it's just muscle memory, so I don't have too much trouble doing this action. I can even take this weapon apart, clean it and put it back together so that it still works.

As I started walking toward the building, I smelled a different odor. It was very different from the others. And that could mean that some bandit was more civilized or it wasn't a bandit at all. I decided to take a chance.

"Come out, whoever you are!", I shouted loudly. "We are alone here."

"Don't kill me!", a frightened man spoke.

"Don't hurt me then I won't hurt you either."

"They trapped me."

"I'm on my way."

I hid my Fort and pulled out my CZ-75. I'm still a mutant, so I had to dress in a way that wouldn't show that I'm one. A modified GP-5 mask of a larger size, which has mirrored lenses. Thick gloves that hide my hands. Even shoes resemble human ones. My legs are more dog-like. Because of this, I had to learn to walk in such a way that you can't see it. And the tail went into the trousers. However, this is a small problem.

This building was a crossing control post. It had strong bars and that's where the stalker was most likely to be tied up. There wasn't much else where they could trap him. Not that it was a problem for me to find him. After all, I could sniff him out. I quickly made my way to the room.

"Untie me", stalker said heavily.

"Okay, just don't wriggle", I replied.

I hid my gun and pulled out a knife. It was a butterfly knife. A souvenir of one of the first stalkers I met. May the Zone be light to him. I quickly cut the ropes and freed the prisoner, who fell to the floor. Probably his legs were very numb.

"Uh...", the man gasped. "Free at last. Thanks, man."

"No problem", I said, as I hid my knife. "What's your name?"

"Zhora Grim. A free stalker, as you can see."

"Right... How did they catch you, loner?"

"They ambushed us, when we were looking for artifacts in an anomalous field near here. I sacrificed myself, so my friend could hide. He is probably waiting nearby. Could you help me find him? I'll pay, of course."

"Then lead the way."

As we were leaving the building, I heard him pick up a gun from one of the corpses. I'm alert all the time, but in situations like this, I'm even more aware. Otherwise, it would have been too late and I would have been shot off by the guy.

I sensed that we had left the outpost area and were heading south. I later learned that we were moving toward the anomalous field, which was located nearby. There, the bandits set up an ambush and caught Zhora.

"You're not a novice", Grim said suddenly.

"I already have some experience", I replied evasively.

"Then why do you dress like a novice?"

"Because this is not an ordinary jacket."

"Wait...", Zhora began to think more intensely, judging from his tone. "So it's anomalous."

"That's right. Some call it "Skinner anomaly", even if the name isn't correct. Protection comparable to Sunrise suit, but it has some interesting, additional properties."

"And it looks quite cool. Especially with those black military pants and the mask over which you pulled the hood."

"Thanks", I replied in a more sympathetic tone.

"No pr... Oh no..."

I heard his walk turning into a run. I learned that he was heading in the direction of his colleague. Or rather what was left of him. My companion in that time lowered himself to the body to check its condition.

"He's dead", Zhora stated coldly.

"I'm sorry", I replied calmly.

"He... I think he died from a shot in the back of the head. Only this caliber... quite unusual in terms of size."

"A rare weapon? I don't like the sight of it."

"Neither do I. Maybe there is some information on the PDA."

I heard Grim searching the body of his companion. He didn't take other things, just looked for the device. Eventually he found it and started looking through the information in it, aiming to track down the killers.

"Strange...", Zhora was puzzled. "He made a recording."

"Play it", I quickly said.

The stalker started the recording. On it, I could hear that his companion wanted to find a way to free Zhora. However, he was hesitant about this, because he also wanted to cash in the artifacts he had found. As he was hiding there, people came to him who had an unusual accent. Then, the recording stopped.

"No clues...", Zhora saddened.

"I wouldn't be so sure", I replied. "I recognize the accent. Characteristic for Caucasian people. And most people from there who are in the Zone are in ranks of mercenaries."

"Mercenaries? Holy shit..."

"Why were they chasing you?"

"I don't know!", stalker shouted. "They're scum, similar to bandits, so they probably wanted to grab the goods."

"It will be difficult to get any information from them."

"I still want to find the sons of bitches who did this. If you help me do that, you will be rewarded."

"How much?", I got right to the point.

"Forty thousands."

"Where did you get so much money?"

"It's not a big deal. Will you help or not?"

"I will help", I nodded. "It will be necessary to find an intermediary. Someone who will talk to the mercenaries and give out information. Even if the mercenaries are a pretty close faction, it has at least several groups that differ from one another and do not trust each other completely."

"I will also try to figure something out."

"Where can I find you later?", I asked. "It's better to avoid contact via PDA."

"I'm heading for Rostok. I've sent you a video, just in case."

"Okay, I'll see you there. And thanks."

I had already started to walk away from him to go in the right direction, but I was quickly stopped.

"Wait!", shouted Zhora. "You didn't say your name."

"Balis", I replied, turning my head towards him for a moment.

I walked back to the northern outpost. Through it, I was to get to Garbage. Then, I had a choice as for the next locations. I had to think carefully about where I wanted to go. And to tell you the truth, I'm still wondering.