

An excerpt from

# Blind Copy

By  
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*{The Model :: Mission In-Brief Communication  
:: Sent from The World Throne}*

Regressor Vice. Regressor Nice.

The Model has need of regression.

An unknown quantity of units have deviated from The Model in the city of Restoration at the edge of the craterlands. Aggravated robbery, assault, theft of a daemon...these are only a few of the deviances. The units were last seen traveling by foot on a northwest vector towards the city limits. Aerial transport outside the city is unfeasible due to beta radiation; ones will have to pursue on foot if unable to regress the units before crossing the atmo-shield.

Additionally, the deviants have some skill with obfuscation — satellite and subdermal trackers are providing no data. Ones will have to rely on visual methods.

Good hunting, Regressors.

We are that we are.

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*{Regressor Vice :: Response Communication  
:: Sent from Aerial Vehicle mid-transit}*

We are that we are.

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*{Regressor Nice :: A Memory  
:: craterlands, 50 miles northwest of Restoration}*

We sat at the crest of a hill that looked over the landscape; Vice had a bottle of some low-brand whiskey in hand. Sun had just set. Deviants shook us almost a week ago in a makeshift bar-town at the edge of Restoration. The units crossed the atmo-shield just as a front of beta radiation touched down from on high. The two of us had to wait 'til the storm calmed down some, and even then, it was rough going. Rad-rain plagued us while on the trail; the lightning was frequent and severe, even for a beta storm.

Vice was the better tracker, due to an instinct honed by age and experience. Several of the craters were still too irradiated to safely cross. Was inclined to go around, following the ridgelines, but Vice had a feeling that the units we were tracking hadn't bothered to rip a rad-meter from any of the knocked over storefronts. We set straight out across the craters — we sprinted as often as we could, hoping to get through with minimal exposure so the filter-docs could straighten us out once we were done with the job.

Sure enough, once the rain had cleared up, we found tracks nearly perfectly in line with the trail Vice had picked out. We'd been gaining for the past four days, and Vice felt that we would catch up tomorrow afternoon. Bet on the morning, twenty dollars. It was a standard bet. A cold wind hollowed up from the next crater-valley, and new clouds, heavy, swifted in close behind.

Vice was in a mood, the kind that Vice would get into from time to time. Usually when drinking. Vice'd get real sullen, stop talking, which was an easy giveaway that Vice had been knocking the bottle back because Vice loved to talk. Then out'd come the gun that Vice always kept belt-tucked, backside, underneath Vice's cloak. Don't know why never thought to ask about it before.

"Vice," said, "what the hell is that? One's always carrying it around, but it doesn't look like a useful weapon."

And it really didn't; small pistol, single shot, breach loaded...one'd be able to pop off a round, then get immediately killed. Vice shook out of the reverie for a moment.

"This?" Vice said, waving the gun. "Technically speaking, it's not a weapon. But that doesn't make it useless. Disuseful? Useless."

"Well, out with it then. What is it?"

"This is a flare gun."

"How the fuck does a gun shoot style?"

"Ha, no." Vice stood up, hobbled a couple steps over towards the edge of a small cliff near where we were camped.

"Units don't get lost these days," Vice said. "Unless one tries really hard. Like these ones we're after. Even then, odds against. Model keeps track of it all. Bang," Vice gestured wildly into the air with the gun, "satellites. Bang, bang. Subdermal trackers, statistical algorithms. Bang bang bang," now Vice gestured at the two of us, "Regressors and The Model its own. Damn difficult to get lost. Not much cause for this, now."

The bottle slipped out of Vice's other hand. Vice left it where it was, cradled the gun with both hands.

"This was standard equipment on a helicopter. A *helicopter*. Older than The Model is, this. From before all this...knowing."

"Tch, that's a deviation from the curve," said.

"One can regress own later."

"Not when one's about to owe twenty bucks."

Night was settling in, but there was still enough light to make out the blue-blackish silhouette of the ridge-line hills on the other side of the valley. In the dark space between, somewhere in the wide crater down below, among the new growth and the stagnant rad-rain lakes, there was an orange dot. Could see it flicker, just slightly. Pointed with eyes and a tilt of the head.

"Seen it," Vice said. "Campfire, fairly close. Sure one doesn't want to change the bet?"

"At the edge of a win? Not a chance."

Vice smirked. A few frigid drops of rain had started falling. Vice was about to sink back into silence, but still hadn't gotten an answer to the question.

"So what is it, then?"

"Well, doesn't really mean the same today if one sees it," Vice continued, turning away towards the cliff and facing the campfire in the distance, "but occasionally helicopters would crash. Maybe it was an attack helicopter, and it got shot down by the enemy. Maybe it was a transport, and high winds had forced a hard landing in the wild. In any case, one would need a

rescue. So one would take this, load in a single flare—that's a bullet—and fire it at the sky." Vice raised the flare gun, pointing it skyward. Rain was coming down a little faster now, enough to wet the land.

"It was a way of saying 'Someone'—," and something hitched in Vice's throat; Vice fired the flaregun. A bright jet of flame and smoke erupted from the gun into the black storm sky, and there was a burning sun under the clouds, refracting all prismatic through the freezing rain, painting the hills, the valley, and the clouds above in red, ghostly light.

"—'Anyone. Save us.'"

*{EOF}*

*{Regressor Nice ::A Memory*

*:: craterlands, 98 miles northwest of Restoration}*

Bright as fuck flare in the middle of the night had spooked the units we were hunting. Half suspected Vice fired the flaregun to get out of the bet Vice had been about to lose. Would have set out after the units right away, but the rain was too heavy, too cold; that, and another beta storm touched down. We huddled in our lead-tents 'til morning. Rain didn't let up for another three days, so we had a devil of a time catching the trail again. And even after the rain stopped, the units being hunted had clearly caught wise that a pair of regressors were hunting. Those units started covering tracks.

Best Vice could figure, the units were headed towards a regional scrapyard. The Model suggested that the proprietor of the yard—and yard is the wrong word; the sprawl of spare parts and junk was about the area of a minor metropolis—had Singularian ties.

We bet on what we thought the units would do. Bet that the units would stick around. Vice took the opposite bet begrudgingly.

"It's not about the owner being Singularian," Vice said. "One sees how big this place is? Of course the units thought to hole up in these mountains of rust."

"It's only twenty bucks. One should stress the small stuff less," told Vice.

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*{Regressor Nice ::A Memory  
:: The Old Rust Scrapyard}*

The proprietor went by Calamity. Fat around the middle from beer, white long-sleeved shirt greased and rust stained from all the junk. Big, knuckled hands; firm handshake. About one generation older than Vice, who was about one generation older than own.

"Come to think of it, " Calamity said, "perimeter daemons were set off a few nights ago. But there's wolves and few wildcats roaming, usually a single zap on the fence is enough to ward the animals off; one didn't give it much pause."

Calamity meant 'one' as in 'Calamity didn't give it much pause'. Have gotten better at letting the Singularian nonsense slide off the back since then, but at the time, Singularians were like bugs — tolerable only if unperceived.

"Wasn't here a few nights ago," said. Hardened the eyes and voice so as not to be misunderstood.

"Ah, yes. Mean 'this unit' was not much concerned by it."

Fucking implicit air quotes around 'this unit'. Looked at Vice, and Vice just shrugged. Fixed Calamity with a harder stare.

"One realizes we're Regressors, right?"

"Regress one if one pleases," Calamity said. "Otherwise, get out of one's way; one has work to do."

Felt a vein bulge somewhere just above the right eye and a minor headache starting to build. Vice placed a hand on the shoulder.

"Nice," Vice said. "Stop it. Model leaves the Singularians be, so do we."

"It's annoying."

"We don't regress units for being annoying."

Technically true. "Fine."

Vice looked at Calamity. "We need the log data and the location for the triggered perimeter daemons."

"Sure thing," Calamity said, and flicked the info over to Vice. Calamity crawled back underneath the road-constructor daemon that Calamity had been working on when we first walked in. We turned to leave.

"Oh, wait." Calamity rolled back out. "One's got several daemons doing fencework, sectioning off different parts of the property. Basically on one's own out here, so one didn't bother setting up the safety protocols. If one wants to avoid getting squished or drilled into or in general becoming part of the fence, watch one's own back in these areas." Calamity flicked a map over to Vice and got back to work on the underside of the machine.

"Thanks for one's time," Vice said.

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"One really doesn't mind when Singularians use 'one' wrong," asked.

"Not really. Clearly bothers one, though. One should maybe stress the small stuff less," Vice replied.

"It just doesn't seem to be any use. Makes things confusing, actually. Seems like the Singularians are deliberately trying to subvert the Model."

"Probably."

"Then why isn't it our job to regress the Singularians?"

"Model says no. Probably means the Singularians aren't particularly good at subversion. Most just study impractical shit. Dispractical?"

"Impractical."

"Right, impractical shit. Like moral philosophy. Or lexicography."

"Pff."

"Exactly." Vice stood up from examining the perimeter daemon. "It's strange, though..."

"What?"

Vice tapped a few buttons on the daemon to set it back up for monitoring the fenceline. Daemons were set up on every fifth post down the length of the barbed wire fence that encircled the property. "Someone's tampered with this one, interrupted its signal and then set it up to broadcast all-clear. This...how many feet is this? A hundred?" Vice quickly counted the fenceposts.

"Hundred fifty."

"This one hundred and fifty foot length of fencing has been unmonitored & unelectrified for several days."

"That's not so strange. If the units crossed here, would have had to disable the fence and the daemon. The units were blocking our trackers through the valley, so knew how to do it," said.

"What? No. What's strange is that a Singularian owns a junk yard, set-up automated perimeter monitors, and can repair construction daemons. All very...actually practical."

"Think Calamity lied," said.

"Maybe. Maybe."

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"Hold up." Vice stopped us walking back towards the workshop where Calamity was.

"What?"

"This fence doesn't follow Calamity's map."

"So?"

Vice thought in silence for a sec. Vice's face was wrinkled naturally, but there were new ones on Vice's forehead. Normally Nice was the one staring that hard at something undesired; the look on Vice was worrisome.

"Gut feeling." Vice walked towards the fence. Now that Vice had called it out, it was obvious. The space in the fence posts was uneven, and wasn't dug into clear ground; the fence posts were stuck through various pieces of rusted out metal, armor-plating off of old tanks, engine blocks — the posts weren't even aligned vertically; one post was sticking out at a forty-five degree angle from the front windshield of an old world car. The barbed wire twisted dangerously to meet the connections on the next fence post around the corner.

"Look at this," Vice said. Vice was pointing inside the car.

Sitting in the front seat was one of the units we had been hunting. The fencepost was coming out the abdomen like a spear.

"Damn."

"Dead three days."

"So this one sat still while a daemon drilled into its chest?"



"Come on. We'll follow the fence."

Found a unit stuck to the side of an industrial bulldozer, arms and hands still gripping the upper lip of the chassis, like the unit was trying to climb over and away. The fence post was high in the back. We found two units were stuck together, a unit atop the other in an embrace underneath a large piece of sheetmetal. The last unit was laying out in the open, face up, fencepost rising out the skull.

"Well, saves us the bullets at least."

"Nice, check one's attitude. These were units of the Model."

"Units of the Model we were going to regress. We've spent weeks hunting these. What did one expect?"

Vice paused a sec, and this meant Vice was about to give a lecture or a scolding. Probably both.

"Does one know why we call it 'hunting'," Vice said.

"What?"

"Why call it 'hunting'? Model always says 'good hunting, Regressor' at the end of every brief. What does that mean? Is killing good? Why do we regress murderers, then?"

Had never really thought about it before. Thought it was obvious. Really did; had never regressed anyone without death getting involved. Took a beat, then scoffed back.

"Predators," said, gesturing to us both. Then gestured towards the body with a fence in its face. "Prey. 'Good hunting' means 'Get the prey'."

"No. Hunting is a math word," Vice said. "Means 'finding equilibrium'."

"So," asked. Vice crouched next to the body, rubbing own forehead with a hand like Vice was having to prop own head up to think.

"These units didn't have to die. These were college age. Young units are stupid, make mistakes. Probably had just gotten hyped up reading Singularian propaganda. If the units had stood up under questioning, the Model could've been satisfied with another outcome. At worst, there was a single ringleader. Regress the ringleader, the rest could be saved."

"The Model will be satisfied with *this* outcome."

"Damnit, Nice. Not everyone has to die." Vice stood up.

"It's the Model, Vice. We arrive, we are that we are, we die. Every unit of the Model. Death *is* the equilibrium."

"Fuck off." Vice stomped off a few yards, still holding own head in a hand. Gave Vice a sec before calling out.

"We still have to regress Calamity."

Vice turned back, but said nothing. Single hand on the hip, the other dropping from the head to hang limp at the side, head slightly tilted. Vice's annoyed look.

"These bodies aren't an accident."

Vice thought about it, then sighed.

"No. Not an accident. But one is staying here. Will regress Calamity if have to, but one's trigger finger is too loose."

"Vice, come on."

"Wasn't a request. Catalog the bodies, get started on the death certificates. Be back when it's done." Vice walked off in the direction of the workshop.

Stuck with the bodies, got to work.

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Catalogued the bodies in a couple hours time. The wounds & cause of death were all obvious — all the units were killed while trying to not become part of the fenceline. The first implication was that a daemon went particularly out of its way to make the units part of the fence. The second, by way of the first, was that someone had instructed the daemon to make the units an integral part of the fence's construction. Calamity being the only one out here, Calamity would have to be guilty. All the units we were hunting were accounted for except one. Took the required pictures, filled out the reports. Was easy enough work that left time enough to sit and be pissed off at Vice. 'Hunting is a math word'. 'Equilibrium'. Fucking asshole.

Didn't submit the records to the Model yet. Mad as was at Vice, didn't do any good to submit a report out of sync with own partner. Wasn't *that* mad at Vice. Besides, Vice was probably right. Was probably too quick to draw the gun. Only—choice between own life and a foe—wasn't looking to eat the dirt just yet.

Vice had been out of contact for some time. Long enough to be worried, even considering Vice had walked back to the shed. Shadows got long, and the sun was particularly flare-like on the horizon. It got to be that hour where the light and the dark start to meld together. It took a

second —seated as was atop some aged and decrepit modular housing unit, eyes half-resting, waiting for the cool of night— to see the odd shimmer against the horizon.

It was like a piece of the sun had decided to touch down on the Earth and take a walk. It swayed this way and that. Squinted at it to get a better look. Whatever it was, it was burning. Stood up, something itching in the finger; placed a hand on the weapon. Bad vibrations, whatever was out there. Then something leapt out from the flame, and a shadow arced the sky, parabolic. Did a quick reckoning, and figured whatever it was would land too close for own liking. Leapt from the top of the modular home, hit the ground and rolled to keep from breaking ankles. A second later the shadow touched down, slamming into the very spot where had jumped from. It was some kind of combination auger & industrial screw, and out the top of it was something easy to recognize, having been around kinds like it all day.

It was a fencepost.

Was half-crouched, gun drawn, looking towards the source. It was a fence-erector daemon, inexplicably on fire. It was silhouetted in its own flame and against the sun; the shape of it was like an old fashioned knight on horseback, ready for some kind of joust. But the daemon's horse was its own tank-treads, as many construction daemons tend to use. No shining, noble unit of The Model atop the steed, the daemon was roughly a trapezoidal prism in shape, but there was a very clear arm and lance— instead of armor-plated flesh, the armor housed metallic servos and motors. A new auger-groundscrew was already being brandished. There was a sound, too, in addition to the industrial cacophony one might expect from a daemon made to drill fenceposts into the earth. It was a scream or a yell, a warcry of sorts — it was not a sound a daemon was meant to make.

Then as the daemon got close, it got quiet. It waited there, poised with its lance. The servos in its arm rotated, rotated, the groundscrew slowly turning, the fire which consumed the daemon crackled. Then came the scream again, and the daemon charged.

The daemon closed the distance so quickly that barely had time to throw the body sideways, barely dodging the spinning drill. The ground screw dug into the earth, but the daemon's velocity continued to carry its hull forward. It was lifted off the ground slightly, and its arm detached from the screw, leaving it in the ground as a spear, the daemon half-flinging its own shell.

Fired off a few gunshots, which only bounced off the daemon's metal plating.

A fence post began to rise from the abandoned screw (not vertically, but in line with and out from the screw — some kind of rapid, chemical fabrication from an internal mechanism). When the post had fully formed, barbed wire shot out with a twang from the post in the ground to the post atop the roof of the modular home had been napping on. There was a high-pitched groan as the wire tightened between the posts.

A new groundscrew was beginning to form from a liquified chemical reserve inside the daemon's arm. The servos kept rotating the mixture, and within seconds, the daemon had a new lance at the ready. Really only had time for one thought.

"Fuck."

The daemon charged again.

This was the general pattern of it, the daemon charging, and own rolling out of the way, seconds or fractions of a second from being impaled. The barbed wire would connect each phantom-like fence post with sudden shrieks and knells, and a new area would be impassable for own evasion attempts. The daemon sought to box own into a pen, a place for slaughtering. Could not get close to the daemon due to the fire, could not get far from the daemon due to the daemon's speed and how it threw its groundscrews with uncanny precision.

Could feel lungs begin to hitch and tighten, joints begin to buckle under the strain of leaping and not dying. Sweat stung the eyes, nose closed with dust and smoke, and the daemon continued to burn unphased, new spears slipping from its singular arm, regenerative like a lizard's tail, hazardous and sudden as a serpent's fang.

Caught a limp—body couldn't take the dodging anymore—and then tripped. The last spear throw from the daemon sprung a line of barbed wire that blocked the only path away. Two piles of scrapmetal on either side boxed own in, and the daemon slowly treaded forward, groundscrew ready to pin own into the dirt. Popping sparks exploded inside the daemon's hull as its electronics melted in the fire, but that was not enough to stop it. Couldn't move. Ready to meet own equilibrium, looked towards the daemon—

There, on the horizon, coming over the scrapyards—a shadow. An aerial vehicle of some kind. It was too low, too low, and the daemon's arm was raised for the final blow. It must have noticed own eyes tracking the flying object, and it whirled around to confront it, too late to avoid it, but with enough time to brandish its weapon against the new foe. The vehicle rammed the screw head on, smashed into the daemon, and the resulting collision ripped the upper torso of the

daemon from its tank treads, the various metals of the two objects melding together due to heat and the speed of the crash. The wreck bounced once, a foot from Nice, tore through the barbed-wire fence, and rolled to a stop some distance away.

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Stumbled over to the burning AV; smoke billowed out the engine compartment. Battery fire. Bad enough in its own right, and potentially explosive. The vehicle was definitely not recoverable. One last twang, like overtightened guitar strings, and barbed wire shot out from the AV to the closest fencepost, nearly taking own head with it.

Got as close to the vehicle as was dareable. There, in the driver's seat, was Vice. Covered own face as well as could and rushed in to pull Vice out through the windshield. Vice's left arm and shoulder had been removed by the daemon's groundscrew. Had to leave the torn appendage in the wreck to burn while pulling Vice a good fifty feet away.

"Kid," Vice whispered.

"Shut up, Vice, one's dying."

"Ha—ha ha. No." Vice coughed and wheezed. "No shit."

Sat there, holding Vice in lap, blood everywhere.

"Look," Vice said. Vice tugged on arm. Vice's remaining hand held a data drive.

"Make sure—make damn—read this shit."

"Alright." Took the drive.

"Don't just plug it—obfuscate first. Set up an obfuscator."

"Secret. Understood."

"Ha. One more—last thing. This. This is—what The Model. Is. What—what did one say earlier? Death. Equal—equals—"

"Equilibrium."

"Ha ha ha. Yeah. Asshole."

"Sorry."

"Always had a way with words. But no—it's not it." Damn fool tried to sit up.

"We are. We are—"

"We are that we are?"

"Faster."

"Vice."

"No, Nice. Say it faster."

"We are that we are."

"When too slow—it knows."

Vice died.

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Looked out over the scrapyard, lit in the glow of the still burning wreck of the aerial vehicle, the two halves of the daemon, Vice...Vice's body. Barbed wire was strung everywhere, a monument to the battle, a strange metallic weave threading over and under, across mountains of scrap-metal, twisting out of line when two fence-posts were at bad angles to each other—it was a thorned, dangerous web. Had just barely managed to escape it. Owed Vice everything. Was own friend. Only friend.

Made it all the more maddening, this anger towards Vice in own gut. Had opened the drive that Vice had passed on. It wasn't good. The drive—was trapped now in a different web for having opened it. It was knowledge that couldn't be put back, the kind that The Model would regress a unit for even having touched.

Vice hadn't had time to make an entry. Based on the file, Vice was supposed to. Guess that's why Vice struggled so hard to pass something on.

Looked at the data one last time. Made an entry on Vice's behalf, and switched off the drive.

Stood up with a groan, body all kinds of ache. Couldn't rest. Had to clean the scene, make sure there was nothing that The Model would look twice at. A beta storm was blowing in from the craterlands. All the better—storms are good cover.

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