

REGRESSION  
BOOK I: COPTIC SPRING

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**Regression**  
**Book I: Coptic Spring**

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.





## ONE

**A**lthough the heat is stifling, it is the patchwork of puke and broken beer bottles carpeting the concrete path that signals summer's approach. The heat and humidity sap my energy, and even the dog wearies of the night air's thickness. He pants and protests and drags on the leash, but I coax him into trudging on. A reward lies ahead.

The park is as exhausted as the metropolis choking it. Yet grass and shrubs and trees somehow eke out a living among the dirt and dust and debris. The trees are gnarled and anaemic, and many nurse manmade wounds and carvings. But they cling to life, for this is their gift and curse.

No rains have fallen for several weeks, and dirt islands have erupted from the scorched earth. The remains of a desiccated worm crown one of the islands—the soil having offered no sustenance. But, between the islands, life marches on: an ant colony toils. For this pheromone-based sterile sisterhood, the night poses no barriers, and it is work as usual. An ant strays from her colony and stumbles on an invisible yet gluey tripwire. She is trespassing on private property; she is trapped in an alien system. Her struggles vibrate throughout the web infrastructure, and within seconds the owner, a tactile-based recluse, glides over the silk threads of his home to claim the entangled intruder as payment. The web glistens with the moisture collected from the muggy air and trembles with the settlement of nature's contract.

Near this exchange a weed also grapples with life, but this battle is being fought between two concrete slabs. The weed's roots are exposed; its leaves wilted. Life-and-death struggles abound.

Chirping mole crickets haunt the night air. And though it is a coastal park, the air smells acrid and smoky from recent fires that incinerated an inner-city slum and many of its residents. A noxious film now coats everything in the metropolis, adding another layer of charcoal to the already bleak landscape. Yet the inferno's cause remains unknown, and everyone suspects everyone. The people are frightened; the State is perishing.

A startled flying fox launches from a tree branch and fades into the dark. Darkness reigns except for a faint glow rising from the city's heart in the west; from this vantage, it resembles an ember in a dying campfire. Scarcely any streetlights work. The majority—abused and neglected for years—offers no light, whereas the functioning minority emits a muted glow. They flicker and splutter in protest, yet no one fixes them. Their days are numbered; then, the darkness will be endless. Even the clouds are conspiring to keep this place shrouded in black: the night is starless and moonless.

But the dysfunctional streetlights serve another purpose. Many are coupled with black hives: security cameras, shielded by thick black domes. An imprint on each hive says, "Proudly made by Worldwide Industries & Finance Co. at the request of the Occidental Union." And although a few hives can be heard buzzing with activity as the cameras focus on their targets, the majority are lifeless. The all-seeing State is almost blind, and no beast, no matter its strength, can survive for long without its eyes.

Apart from the hived streetlights, ragged signs also blight the landscape. They declare many objects and pastimes to be "forbidden" or "not permitted" or "carrying severe penalties", yet few people heed the warnings. The countless rules cannot be enforced all the time, and the rulers rarely try—these days.

State-owned apartment complexes skirt the park. Many of these crumbling eyesores host signs declaring them to be "condemned" or "scheduled for destruction" or "restricted to the public", and many have worn these signs for years, possibly decades. Yet few people care.

Swarms of vagrants call them home and, through the cracked windows, the squatters' fires can be seen dancing from the buildings' depths—a last flicker of life from the decaying behemoths.

The dog jolts me from the fires' trance. He has stopped to sniff a bird's corpse, and I tug on the leash just before he reaches his prize. And, yes, it *is* a prize, for no waste exists in nature. Even a decomposing system gives birth to something else, and new life emerges from old. A tangle of maggots devours the oozing rot, while scavenger beetles tear at the firmer flesh. And although this is nature's cycle, the stench of death overwhelms me and I rush the dog forwards.

Farther down the park path, I spot a group of youths nestled in a graffitied gazebo. Smashed beer bottles mark their territory, while their shouts and screams warn intruders to avoid trespassing on it. So I respect the ancient law and steer a detour through the shrubs and bushes. It is this acceptance of the unchangeable laws of nature—a minority still calls them the unchangeable laws of God—that has helped me survive for so long. And as we pass the group the screams become more frenzied, vindicating my natural instincts. Are they cries of joy or pain? It does not matter, not anymore.

The park path ends, and the beach path begins. My mood lightens instantly, as I hear the roar of the crashing waves and breathe in the refreshing salt breeze. The oceanic atmosphere fills a man with hope and reminds him that nature, on occasions, can be good. Yet the darkness lurks here, too, and the ocean appears inky in the moonless night. Despite this sea of nothingness, the surf's sound and smell arouse ancient images, and I see a blue ocean quivering at the sun's touch: a memory from a visit to one of the Free Islands, a place lost in a vast ocean and forgotten by the world. So long ago yet still so vivid—I can even smell and taste the island air. But the fantasy soon fades, as a movement on the beach snuffs out the illusion and returns the skies and ocean to their true sooty hue.

Small fires dot the beach, and the aroma of charred food mingles with the air. A few humans scurry across the sand, scavenging what they can from unprotected campfires. Many of these drifters will wallow on the beach for the entire spring and summer—a free summer-vacation home. Peace officers will occasionally pester them to

return to their assigned lodgings, but the threats, as usual these days, are empty. Although the State's networks have infiltrated every aspect of life, the government is effete and bankrupt. It lacks the strength and will to govern. And the peace officers, an arm of the state, are also weak. In any event, peace officers have more serious problems to confront than removing drifters.

Sporadic bouts of yelling and shrieking arise from the beach and park; though, the metropolis to the west is eerily silent. Once bustling, thriving, simmering; now hushed, thinned, sapped.

A teen waif emerges silently from the shadows and surprises me. He is shirtless, revealing a tattooed torso glistening with a mixture of sweat and grime. Underneath this coating, angry-red boils cover his body. Several swellings have burst and are weeping—or, at least, they are trying to weep through the accumulated filth. The boils are probably the result of infected bedbug bites, a common scourge occurring every spring and summer. This spring, though, the bedbugs have been swarming every inch of the metropolis in staggering numbers, and every warm-blooded creature has been suffering frenzied attacks every night. It is a brutal, bloody, and unstoppable feast—unstoppable because the bedbugs now resist every insecticide. Making matters worse, many persons have died from the infected bites and the untreatable multidrug-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria brewing within the boils. There have even been deaths from the bedbugs themselves, as weaker persons, unable to tolerate the numerous nightly assaults, succumb to the suckers. I have stumbled across bodies drained of every last drop of blood, with a few late-coming bedbugs trying to squeeze out an extra couple of droplets from the still-warm body.

Besides the boils, the waif sports a slight hunch exaggerated by his forward-jutting shoulders. His shaved black hair is not level, and a few patches claim dominance over the rest. Sunken amorphous eyes blacken his pasty face, and a reek clings to the air surrounding him. It is the unmistakable reek of a festering human, which few other animals share. It is the reek of vulgarity. Assaulting my nostrils, penetrating my lungs, swamping all my senses—I want to escape the reek but I cannot. I have to confront him and avoid exposing my back, because even

though the waif is tiny and alone, he is still dangerous. They all are. One can become many within seconds. And what good are my height and strength and the dog, a powerful Dobermann in his prime, against an armed mob?

The waif says, "Oi, mate, gotta smoke?" He snorts and spits out a phlegm wad that splashes near my foot.

"Sorry, kid, I don't smoke," I reply. "It's illegal and—"

"Illegal? Ha! Nothin's illegal. It's all good. And don't tell me nothin', mate. No one tells me what to do. I do what I want, when I want. Got it?"

"Hmm, kid, I think you'd better—"

"That's a big ugly dog ya got there," he interrupts, while scratching furiously at several boils on his neck. "A really ugly dog. What is it?"

"*It?* *He* is not an *it*. *He* is not an object, like a rock. *He* lives and feels and thinks, just like you and me. *He* is a—"

"Whateva. Evil lookin' too. What's *its* name?"

The dog, sensing the hostility, growls and inches towards the waif. "Calm down, Anup," I say to the dog, while patting his luxurious fur. "Good boy, Anup. Good boy. Come on, let's go." We turn to leave.

"Hey, ya prick!" shouts the waif. "I jus' wanna smoke. Jus' one!"

I snap around and face him, wanting this to escalate. Though I know I should avoid any confrontation, especially with the State's Spawn, his smugness and disrespectful behaviour infuriate me. "*Prick?* Nice manners you've got there, you runt. The State must be proud of the way it brought you up. Brilliant job! But, as I've told you already, I haven't got any cigarettes. Now, get lost before you really make me and my dog mad." On cue, Anup snarls and tugs on the leash, bursting to attack.

But the waif fails to grasp my threat and says, "Yah? Well, then, then, why ya lookin' so well off? Ha? It's not fair—ya gotta share. Ya know, like they teach us. Okay? So whaddya got in ya pockets?"

"*It's not fair—you've got to share?*" I repeat while sniggering. "You're joking, right? Is that the latest slogan the State's got you parroting? Is that the garbage they teach you nowadays?"

"C'mon, mate. I'm hungry. Anythin' at all!"

"Then get the State to feed you," I answer. "It raises you and it gives

you handouts, rations, and all the beer you can drink—and you know this perfectly well. So go wait in line at the Temple of the People, like everyone else. Got it?"

"So ya got nothin' for me?"

"That's right—nothing."

"Nothin' at all?"

"Nothing."

"Come on—*one* smoke!" he says before a coughing spasm consumes him.

He spits out another phlegm wad. This time, though, it splatters under a working streetlight, and I see blood in the sputum. Because of my background, I know what this probably means: tuberculosis, an ancient plague that humanity almost conquered. But now the bacteria are multidrug resistant, reverting the disease to its prior incurable-worldwide-killer status. And although it is unlikely to infect a healthy adult like me, I take no chances and step back from the boy.

"Look, kid," I say feeling sympathy for the dying teenager, "I've already told you that I don't smoke and that it's illegal. So how can I have a cigarette? And if you don't believe me, then have a look." I empty my pockets and show him that I have nothing—absolutely nothing. No cigarettes, no anything. "Okay? Now, I've emptied my pockets and shown you I have nothing in them. So I have nothing at all with me. *Nothing*. I'm like you—I have nothing. Nothing."

Eavesdropping on the exchange, another teen waif emerges from the shadows. Her reek is even more disgusting than the boy's. It is an overpowering presence.

"Hey, Mo, let's go," she says to him. "This arsehole ain't got nothin'. Better pickins on the beach. C'mon."

And, with that, the waifs steal away towards the beach, the reek trailing them. I relax and breathe freely now that the stench is gone, but the meeting has left me unsettled, and I am drenched in sweat from the heat, humidity, and excitement. Even though roaming the streets at night is a gamble, I refuse to surrender my final freedom. If it is too hot to walk during the day, as it was today, then I will risk walking at night. I have sacrificed enough freedoms.

Anup and I continue walking. We reach the end of the beach path

and find a tween–teen group loitering at the exit. But this time we have no choice: if we want to continue walking on the coastal path, we must pass this group. Yet it is safer to risk an encounter with them, than deviate from the path, head inland, and tempt the inhabitants of the shadowy side streets. As I ponder what to do, a quarrel flares up between one of the boys and one of the girls. The girl screeches and swears and then clenches a bottle and strikes the boy's head. He teeters backwards but regains his balance and lunges at his comrade-turned-assailant. And before the girl can pick up another beer bottle, the now-bloodied boy is upon her. Their friends watch. No one interferes.

I stare at the ground and recall a proverb: "He that pries into every cloud, may be stricken with a thunderbolt." Having no wish to be stricken with anything, I decide to end the walk early. So we turn around and hurry home.

We are at the end of the beach path, about to enter the park and head for home, when we bump into two Occidental Union Peace Officers. Their badges announce Constable Dewey and Constable Wilson.

"Officers, please! I say. "There's a bloody fight at the other end of the beach!"

"Yes, we know," answers Constable Wilson. "It's been logged into the system. I am now going to scan you and your dog for identification purposes."

Constable Wilson pulls out a tablet computer from her police duty belt and points the tablet in my direction. It emits a beep, as the information from the microchip implanted in the back of my neck is transmitted to the tablet. She reads the tablet's screen for a few seconds and then points the gadget in Anup's direction. It beeps again.

"Okay, you and your dog are clear. All is in order, your certificates are up to date, and you have no outstanding fines or payments," she says while staring at the tablet's screen. "By the way, do you know that new regulations will be enforced next year, and that your dog will be required to wear a State-compliant muzzle? Heavy fines apply for noncompliance."

"Officers, there's a boy bleeding badly and a girl being bashed right now!"

"Yes, we heard you the first time, sir. It's been logged, and we are waiting for backup," replies Constable Dewey, who seems apathetic—almost drowsy. He pulls out his tablet and, in a droning voice, reads aloud the message on its screen: "State-compliant muzzles may be purchased from your local Temple of the People. If you cannot afford a state-compliant muzzle, you may apply for funding assistance at your local Temple of the People. However, first, you will need to fill out a DMR0002212 form at Occidental Union Central, along with providing the relevant documentation. You will need to procure this documentation from your CommunityAssist caseworker, who may require you to provide signed documents from other authorised personnel, such as a CommunityAssist-licensed general practitioner or a CommunityAssist-licensed social worker, in order to facilitate the process. If you need further assistance, please visit the YourOccident website or call or visit your local Temple of the People."

I snigger. People are killing each other and these officers are lecturing me about a State-compliant muzzle. What else can I do but play along with their tired and ridiculous system? Though the State's decline has been long and slow, the end feels tantalisingly near—and yet the end has felt tantalisingly near for the last couple of decades. Always tantalisingly near, but never here. Perhaps, this is part of the State's game, its illusion: to keep the people mired in perpetual crises, while all the time being in control. Previous governments have always used crises—the war on this, the war on that—to silence democratic discussions and enhance government power. This State has probably mastered the art of crafting crises.

How I long for the entire system to fail. How I yearn for the old mess to be expunged: the stupid regulations that expand on equally stupid yet older regulations, the layer upon layer of absurdity and inefficiency, the accumulated idiocy. I ache for a fresh start, like a fire that sweeps through a spent forest, clearing the debris and old unproductive growth and giving new saplings—fresh ideas and fertile beings—a chance to sprout in a rejuvenated system. The State's end will come; this is nature's universal guarantee. So why cling to the farcical and artificially prolong the pain? Let nature complete the deed.

"Well, thank you for the information, officer," I say addressing

Constable Dewey, "but the entire process of getting a State-compliant muzzle sounds like it will take more than one year to complete—if I'm lucky. And there's less than one year before the new muzzling regulation is enforced. How does this work?"

"The government gave you plenty of warning through various media channels and official announcements," replies Constable Wilson on behalf of a bored Constable Dewey, who is gazing at a faraway movement, a radiance approaching from the west. She continues, "You should have made your arrangements by now. *Ignorantia legis neminem excusat*. And just in case you don't know what that means, it's Latin for *ignorance of the law excuses no one*."

It is, perhaps, the dead language that rouses Constable Dewey, because he springs to life and says, "Besides, you can always purchase a State-compliant muzzle from a private business. That can be done immediately and online." He then glances at his tablet and adds, "You can purchase a State-compliant muzzle from Worldwide Industries & Finance Co."

"Sorry, officer, was that Worldwide Industries & Finance Co.?"

"Yes, Worldwide Industries & Finance."

"Fancy that!" I say. "Just in case you forgot, officer, there is no other legal private business to buy any goods from. The only choice is Worldwide Industries & Finance. So why even bother mentioning it?"

A crowd carrying torches appears in the distance, to the west. They are marching this way. Constable Dewey glances at the distant throng and alerts his partner, who mumbles something into her radio. He then answers my question, "*So why even bother mentioning it?* Are you trying to be clever with me?"

"No," I reply, "I just want to know if the government gets its muzzles from Worldwide Industries & Finance?"

Constable Dewey looks annoyed. "Yes, I guess that's correct. I'm not entirely sure, but it makes sense that if you can buy a muzzle only from Worldwide Industries & Finance, and if Worldwide is the only legal business, then Worldwide is also the business supplying the government."

"Sounds like a good business model—a good monopoly for the company *and* the government. Plenty of freedom of choice for me, the

consumer." Both officers seem confused, their tablet computers unable to help them respond to my sarcasm.

"Excuse me? What *exactly* do you mean by your comment, sir?" asks Constable Wilson, pursing her lips.

"Nothing, just, just thinking aloud—that's all," I answer. "Forget it. Anyway, officer, what's the purpose of all this?"

"Public interest criteria. It's about safety, security, and the public interest: to protect *you* and *your* interests," she replies, regurgitating a platitude drummed into every public servant.

"*My* interests? *My* safety? *My* security?" I ask.

"Yes, *your* interests, *your* safety, *your* security," she answers. "What part of *public interest criteria* don't you understand? Everything is done for the people's safety and security—to protect you, the public."

I grin at the officer and say, "I see. You don't want me to hurt myself. All these rules and regulations are designed to keep me safe and happy—a happy little Vegemite. So tell me, then, why muzzle this dog? How is muzzling this dog a part of—what was it you said?—the *public interest criteria*? Hmm?"

She begins to answer my question, but I interrupt, "What about those kids killing each other at the end of the beach, officer? Don't you think dealing with them is more in the public interest criteria than muzzling this leashed dog?"

"Look, sir," she says while sighing, "I don't make the laws; I just do as I'm told and enforce the laws. If you've got a problem, complain to your local member of parliament or go to your local council. But I can tell you that this law is for your protection and the public order. It is in the public's interest. There have been plenty of dog attacks recently."

"Yeah, and there have been *many* more attacks by humans—on humans," I say. "In fact, there's one happening right now, at the other end of the beach! If you ask me, it's the people—especially, the *State's Spawn*, the *SS*—who need muzzling, not the dogs. This dog protects me from them! I can't even take a damn walk these days without being threatened. So what are you going to do about that? Huh?"

The crowd of several hundred draws nearer to us, and chants and yelling can now be heard. For the first time tonight, the officers look edgy. Or is that fear in their eyes?

"As we told you earlier, you can visit the YourOccident website or call or visit your local Temple of the People for more information," replies Constable Dewey deciding to focus on me, instead of the advancing mob. "Besides that, I've got nothing more to say to you, except that your tone of voice is threatening and I'm going to give you an official warning that will be recorded against your name." He taps his tablet's screen and continues, "You've now been issued with an official warning for threatening an Occidental Union Peace Officer, and this infringement will appear as a permanent mark on your record."

"*What the—*"

"Don't you dare interrupt me while I'm talking!" he snaps at me. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes, and an associated fine of OW\$10,500,000 (Occidental Worldwide dollars) will be deducted automatically from your next series of Occidental Union paycheques or living allowances. If, for whatever reason, you do not receive Occidental Union paycheques or living allowances, you will be required to complete the equivalent of one thousand and forty hours of community work. Finally, if you require more information in regards to paying this fine, please visit your local Temple of the People or talk to your CommunityAssist caseworker. You can also find more information at the YourOccident website or on your infringement notice, which has just been sent to the e-mail address registered on your microchip."

Constable Wilson gazes at her tablet and takes over from her partner. She says, "You will also be required to undertake an online education course: Empathy and Interpersonal Communication Skills—An Evidence-Based Approach. After completing this course, you will need to attend an interview with a YourEducation Officer and a psychosocial assessment with a YourPsychologist, who may then recommend ongoing treatment with a YourPsychiatrist. She or he or it will then assess whether you require further education and treatment and medication, or not. This is all done for your wellbeing, happiness, and self-actualisation. Again, all this information is included in your infringement notice, which has already been sent to the e-mail address registered on your microchip."

"Are you kidding me?" I answer, stunned at the situation's stupidity. "What *exactly* have I done wrong?"

Anup, always aware of my body language, snarls at the officers, but I do nothing to discourage his style of interpersonal communication.

Looking apprehensively at Anup, Constable Dewey replies, "Sir, I am going to ask you to lower your voice and calm down, or I will be forced to arrest you. Your behaviour *right now* is why you're being re-educated and rehabilitated. Am I being perfectly clear?"

"This is hilarious! *I'm* the bad guy who needs punishing? You've got to be joking."

"Final warning, *sir*," he says.

I decide to stop talking, as the officers face a bigger problem than a man and his unmuzzled pooch. The throng is now only a couple of hundred metres away, and I can hear the people's rallying call: "Hum ho, hum ho, to bonobo discrimination we say no! Ho hum, ho hum, death to bigots and sexist scum!" Yet despite the slogans' melody and rhythm, an underlying rage fuels the chants. This is no friendly protest; this is an angry mob. And, as they approach, I see that many protesters are wearing black masks and carrying torches and metal poles . . .

END OF SAMPLE