

THE  
**PROCESSION**  
OF  
**DUST**

*L.A. DUNCAN*

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Book Cover by L.A. Duncan

**For Amber:** the model of patience, understanding, feedback, and support. The best partner anyone could ask for.

Special thanks to Jesse for reading an early draft.

L.A. Duncan

## The Procession of Dust

### ***EXCERPT FROM THE TECHNOMAGE CHRONOCHRON***

In the beginning there was The Timeless.

Nothing was real.

Everything was possible.

Reality awoke.

Order emerged.

Eons passed.

We evolved.

We developed technology.

We earned immortality.

Information was power.

Energy was currency.

Awakening was near.

L.A. Duncan

# **PART 1**

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## CHAPTER 1

### THOTH'S LAMENT

CUBE DISTRICT 12: NEW LA: JAN 2099: CHRONO -0.304

*And then, the lone haunt of desolation as the pinhole cradle of night lost  
its battle with The Great Star.*

- FROM THE VEDAS OF DUST

What is the Demiurge? The obsession with this question tugged relentlessly at Gabe's attention. Persistent as ever this evening. Had the word been turning up more frequently, or was it an artifact of awareness? Three times in the last info mining session. Twice the session before. What is the damn Demiurge? Sometimes the thought of the word would repeat, rhythmically like a heartbeat, or a countdown.

Being tethered to this tiny home was better than the alternative, preferable to the virtual sensory isolation that had threatened him into indenture, but claustrophobia fueled anxious rumination. The cursed word tapped at the front of the skull. Demiurge. Demiurge. Looking for a distraction, he forced attention to take a hard right toward another fixation. He pulled the prized vinyl record from its special display shelf.

This cubical was as modest as any other, but an entire wall was allocated to this one prized possession. He ran fingers along the sealed perimeter, cherished the smooth edge and noticed the subtle aged cellophane odor. Reflecting on easier times, thought *maybe I'll finally open it today*. A sepia toned vision glowed dimly in mind, brightened into the one frequently imagined. He visualized carefully placing the album on its proper antique turntable stage. Imagined it spinning there, performing in all its analog glory. *I'll turn it up so loud the neighbors will finally be distracted from their VR dropout sessions to summon corpo security*.

He held the record close, admiring the cover, adorned with four identical hieroglyphs of the Egyptian god Thoth. He retrieved the special razor acquired specifically to split the cellophane wrapper, then readying the blade with nauseous anticipation, moved to birth it from its crypt. But the album tilted and caught the dim mood lighting in just the right way to reveal little ghosts holographically waving on the surface- fingerprints. Memories, relentless and robotic, pushed their way in. The day Uncle Phil had given him the record. Shortly after, the blood. So much blood. Pressure swelled Gabe's face, skin seared, tendons tightened. Inhaling heavily, he placed the record back on the shelf as throat filled with tongue. Attention turned to the razor, now with a different purpose. He held out a densely muscled forearm, palm up, visually traced the peaks and valleys of veins. Freedom? The moment gathered mass, then fell from mind with a shutter, leaving only a scarred echo. With reverence, he returned the blade, lazily at first, then pushed it firmly into its cubby, as if to stop it from calling out again. He often played this game, on nights when he poured a long bourbon, nights when memories could not be quelled. That was most nights these days.

The unwelcome word returned, counted time again on the periphery of perception as Gabe pawed a drunk hand into the bar, retrieving a random bottle. He evaluated the label. *So, it's the last of the quality stuff tonight*. Pouring three fingers should be enough to

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displace the memories, dull the obsessions. The trip to the old southeast, where he acquired this bottle, was a lantern in memory as he placed glass to lips. Sniffing deeply, he invited a gentle measure of the nutty vanilla to roll across the tongue. A hint of peat tickled the pallet as he sighed out through nose and mouth. He rubbed fingers up and down an increasingly bearded chin, then, shrugging shoulders, topped off the glass and drank himself into oblivion.

A patter on the window briefly drew Gabe's attention. Outside, rain drew lines through the fog to the street. Each cutting drop merged into puddles filling spaces and tracing rivulets, coating the cityscape in glass, if only briefly. Gabe used to find meaning in rain, secrets. *Rain carries light for those who seek it*, he thought. A remnant of a long-ago conversation.

The meditative rhythm of rain calmed the breath, teased relief. He laid his head on the sill and stared blankly into the night. Finally, the healing cradle of sleep brought flight to uneasy dreams, the invasive word still silently moving lips. Demiurge.

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Morning often brought fresh perspective- temporary reprieve from the horror of the night. Logic was a razor and it slashed through emotional dread when willpower was fueled by sunbeams. The emptiness was born of loneliness, in turn caused by withdrawal. This prescribed connection. Today would be different. A flickering ray of optimism shined through.

He pinged Tommy. Time and status could not displace the deep bond they had formed in childhood, even given recent events. Time together would be good for both of them. But, as usual, he didn't respond. *It's my fault*. He logged on to one of the public VR servers Tommy frequented. *If I could erase this entire idea from history, I would do it, even if it led to human extinction*. In the early days of the project, he left a backdoor. He used that now to take a godview and

scour the entire server for Tommy's signature. Being on the server backend offered sugared bites of memory. He longed for the pride he used to have for the project. Was it still there, somewhere beneath the guilt? No. It couldn't be. Not when half the Earth's remaining population had ruined their lives connecting their minds to these servers. Over a billion people. *They may have been better off dying in the pandemic*, he thought. Sugar turned to salt. He tried on a few more servers, but no luck. Closing eyes and breathing deeply helped to ease into the idea of going outside. He would check on Tommy at his cube.

The autobus to District 17 was uneventful. Keeping augment off, doomed the cityscape to a numbing gray blur. He should have logged a session en route, but instead spent the time daydreaming and wondering *how long can I get away with this?* A rigged mindwire was part of the contract. When he was gone from the cube, it buzzed, gently at first, but with more intensity as time passed. And if he was gone too long, it would fry him where he stood. Gabe had considered on occasion, *would it be so bad if it did?* Thirty years of indenture was long, nearly unbearable. But when optimism facilitated the internal debate, it was clear that thirty years was nothing to an indeterminant lifespan. With the right resources, perpetual life was possible. But the heart sinking rebuttal was that The Angel Corp would never simply let him run out the thirty years. This wasn't pessimism. It was realism. Perpetual indenture was also possible. Thus, the decision of indenture over death was provisional. But how long was too long to be away before the decision would be made *for* him? Standing outside the cube for hours until the buzz became unbearable was only a moderately useful experiment. He had done it many times though. Careful tracking had revealed that there was some randomness to it. Nothing in the contract outlined the condition clearly and finding rare occasion to ask drew suspicion, so he let it go. In addition to this deterrent, they were surely tracking him. Was there a supervisor monitoring him at this very moment? Watching a little red blip travel down the road on a virtual

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map? Worse, could they ride along through his mindwire, see through his eyes? *No*, he concluded. Otherwise, they would have already figured out what he had been up to.

Indenture required long hours of mining subnet for technology and information. But The Angel Corp had always underestimated his abilities, even after he delivered the Colony Project- the very same technology that buzzed and tracked him, and that sent Tommy down a spiral. He flexed against these thoughts, but the guilt always won. *Sorry Tommy.*

He spent the last two years developing work efficiencies, accelerating the output rate. So much so that he was now ahead by two months. He didn't deliver projects ahead of schedule, though. He stockpiled, so that he could sit on them until just the right time to make it look like he was producing at the normal rate. Maybe he could even push the deadlines back a little and extend those two months into ten weeks. The relaxation would be worth it even if he couldn't travel like he used to when entitled to sabbaticals. But if they noticed him running around the city, or if his subnet logins dropped, there would be questions. This pressure brought the word again, and it peppered him for the rest of the ride. Demiurge.

He entered Tommy's building. On the way to his cube, he tried calling. Nothing. As he approached the door, skin prickled, as if the body sensed something but hid it from the mind. At the door he turned on augment. It didn't indicate if Tommy was home or away. He ignored the bell and knocked but there was no response, so he tried the secret passcode he and Tommy had always kept since they were kids.

As the door opened, he was met with a smell rationalized as kimchi and rancid chicken, but he knew what it was. Violently knotting abdomen muscles bent him over while pushing him back. *Oh no.* He pressed through, turning eyes away to delay what he knew he would find. Tommy's rigid body lay contorted on the floor, face frozen between agony and relief. Gabe's sinuses revolted as if cruel hands had pried the mouth open and forced horseradish. With shaking head and

twitching eyes, he backed away hand out in a reflexive defensive position while the odor scraped at the inside of cheeks and throat. Afraid he would flash burn this scene forever in the senses, he exited as quickly as possible and called for security.

“Why did you come to the deceased’s cube?” The corpo security goon asked Gabe. “Did you suspect something?”

*Is this question about Tommy, or are you wondering why I’m not at work?* Gabe replied, “I hadn’t heard from him in weeks.”

“Were you two involved?”

“Tommy was like a brother. We grew up together.” The mindwire buzz had been growing in intensity and an urge to get home was starting to swell.

“Did he ever mention being part of a club?” The officer’s eyes narrowed. “Or a cult?”

“What? No. Like I said, I hadn’t heard from him, and I came to check on him. I had a code so I...”

“And that’s how you....” The officer held up a finger and turned his head. He nodded a few times, grunting and muttering affirmations then turned back to Gabe. “Thanks Mr. Boyd. You’ll hear from us if we have more questions.”

Gabe recognized passive judgement in the officer’s dismissing demeanor. Tommy was just another zombie leach to him, possibly a cultist. One who had pushed his mindshare up too high. “That’s it? Aren’t you going to investigate any further?” Tommy was a mindshare junkie, but he wasn’t stupid. He wasn’t some lunatic cultist. *Was he?* Gabe rationalized that Tommy had simply gone too far, but the ease at which a friend’s death was dismissed drilled a hole in the gut.

“I said you’ll hear from us if we have more questions.”

“Fucking typical.”

“What did you say?” The man was a tower. Gabe was undeterred.

“You’re just going through the motions. Jesus, we all are, but this is important.” *There was a time you would have feared my station. I*

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*could have pulled strings. You would have been forced into due diligence. Lost your job if I wanted.*

One of the officer's eyes took on the semi-opaque sheen of augment. "Gabriel Boyd." He said it as if he was searching through a list in his HUD. He probably was. "Says here you're indentured. How do you have time to be away from work?"

*Shit.* "I don't. Look. I'm sorry. Tommy was very important to me. He didn't used to be a damn zombie drone. We went through a lot together. He was like family. The only family I had left." The buzz grew a little more.

Something shifted in the officer's posture. "I know this man was important to you. We've all lost family, but I have pryms, terrorists, and mobsters to deal with. Head home Mr. Boyd. Quit wasting my time."

Gabe skipped the autobus and called for a personal transit pod that he couldn't afford. Head blazed as he crawled inside. Rubbing forehead and rocking did nothing for the pain, but it was all he had. He oscillated back and forth as the pod zipped in and out of traffic, taking shortcuts through side streets and tunnels. *Hurry.*

Arriving at his dingy home district, the vehicle slowed. Gabe, wincing in pain, wished to run. Ears related aquatic tunneled echoes, sinking into darkness. Vision blurred. Buzz.

He exited while the pod was still moving. He jammed a finger. Bashed a shin. Scraped an eye. But, ignoring the injuries, ran. A charge appeared in augment, and he waved it away, darted toward the foyer. He requested the elevator. The moment was an eternity. Buzz. He sprinted to the stairs. Dimming vision tricked feet, sending him to the ground just as he reached the floor.

In the hallway, he crawled to the door and managed to enter just as the buzzing intensified again. As head passed the threshold, there was relief. The absurdity of life's fragility juxtaposed on immortality made him laugh, then sour.

Gabe poured a shot. He was tired. Tired of authority. Tired of a long life. Yet, death was more tragic when the life could be eternal. He chased these thoughts away, looked at a carnival reflection in the glass. The man resembled him, but was it, him? *I've been thirty-two years old for what, forty-five years now.* He threw back the shot. *Because of me, millions just ...* Another shot sat across from him, poured for an absent friend. *I'll miss you, Tommy. If there is a heaven, say hello to Phil.* A wave of tension spread up his spine and exited his body in a grave howl as he smacked the glass from the eating surface. A neighbor screamed for him to “shut the fuck up.” *I need to get my mind off things.* He went back to work.

Gabe put in a marathon mining session. An enhanced body was antifrangible, responding to stress and exhaustion with resilience and stamina, but the mind was another story. He eventually became drained. Augment auto paused as he drifted off to sleep. Gabe's body repaired itself brilliantly while he dozed. The blend of viruses known as Everlife facilitated the process where his own enhanced biology needed help. His brain was no different, except that it did so just slightly more slowly. Detecting sleep, his mindshare wire switched on. A decentralized server borrowed a sliver of his mind's computational ability. Across Earth, a hundred million people went through this process every day. One billion more sold their minds twenty-four seven, and not just a sliver. Many spent most of that time in the red cubes on mindless vices. But most burned away the days in public VR, playing games or otherwise zombying out while their aggregated minds drove automated production equipment, powered intelligent decision systems, even created the very entertainment that distracted them. It was an elegant solution to the AI blockade. Elegant and awful.

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On Sunday morning, a realization occurred. Gabe brought up his tracking system in augment, plugged in the new data from his mindwire experience a few days before. A pattern emerged, *finally*. It was not how long he was away from his cube at any one time that dictated the intensity of the deterrent. It was the average time away from his cube over ten days. Solving this puzzle was something to grasp to. A small raft in a sea of disappointments. He stabilized. But the decompression left room for the tortuous word to return. Demiurge.

Later that day, Gabe's boss pinged him. Gabe popped into virtual. "Mr. Tanaka. What is it sir?"

"I received a report that you were in another district on Tuesday. What were you doing?"

"I had a death in the family." *I used to be your boss' boss you little corpo worm.* "I don't believe I was violating any rules of my indenture contract."

Suddenly Mr. Tanaka holoported into Gabe's cube. "No Mr. Boyd, but it's my business to ensure we receive your deliverables on time." He investigated nosily, even reaching for the bottle on the table as if he could interact with it. "Information is power. Time is joules. There is much to be done."

Gabe stood up and followed him around. "I put in some extra hours last night. I'll have my current deliverable done just under the deadline." *You useless taskmaster.*

"See that you do Mr. Boyd." He popped out.

Gabe decided to spend a few days info mining to eliminate suspicion. The paradox was that he enjoyed this work. He logged onto a session.

In VR he stood before a lofty stone gate- the entrance to SubNet. He conjured a terminal and entered his passcode. The gate opened, revealing shadow cast like light, emerging from behind the widening entrance. His iron heart pumped diesel as he held out his palm. He

performed a sequence of hand movements, producing a small black ball of morphotech through prestidigitation. It spread to coat his hand like a glove. This continued until his whole body was covered. The back and sides of his tongue tasted like metal. He entered and the doors rumbled closed behind him.

In the gloom of SubNet, human senses failed. He willed his heads-up display to appear. It glowed faintly in the murk. Navigating in unexplored regions was useless, so he used logic and heuristics to explore. He knew that humans tended to walk in a circle when they had no landmarks, so every so often he would make a pivot based on the results of a simulated die roll.

When Gabe *had his mind in the murk* he tended to daydream. He considered the two months of upcoming free time with random notes. *I'll have to stay near my cube to avoid detection. Wandering. I should write an automated script to submit the projects just under the due dates. Wandering, check HUD. Is it possible to disconnect my wire so they can't track me? Not likely. Wander, roll die, turn ninety degrees to the left, continue wandering.*

Gabe's HUD alerted him to an object a few dozen meters away. He ventured to it, carefully watching his surroundings. Then coming upon a two-dimensional square, the size of an urn, thought *meh. Basic info vault. Oh well, good warmup.* He examined the object. A simple puzzle. He moved sliding sections of the square until an image appeared- a circle enclosing another, with symbols between them. In the middle were four double sided arrows symmetrically crossing. The symbol glowed brightly until it dissolved into the square, which was now transformed into an info gate. A tiny pebble emerged, then the gate disappeared. Gabe snatched the info packet and stowed it in his suit.

He wandered on. *Should I turn my mindshare down at night? Would they notice that?* Walk another few hundred steps, another die roll. *Two months is going to go by fast. Wander. It'll be years before I get ahead enough for another break.* He stopped, grunted. "I need to relax!" Deep breath, check HUD, walk. *Focus.*

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A signal appeared in his HUD. It was some distance away, but the unusual nature of it made the decision easy. He turned toward it. As he approached, he flanked and circled, gathering intel. The threat level was moderate, but he was well equipped for that, so he crept toward it.

The signal grew as he approached, soon clear enough to be sensed by eyes. He wished the HUD away and examined the object. *This is new.* Barely discernible, a hand-sized tetrahedron hung in the shadows. He reached for it but felt a shiver and backed away. Before him was a wispy curl of smoke. *Servitor.*

Gabe knew aggression was dangerous. He spoke formally to the being, intending to persuade it. “The purpose in me greets the purpose in you, guardian.”

The smoke concentrated into a night sphere, head height. A cloak unfurled beneath it, draping a humanoid shape. It writhed in slow motion. A slithering whisper said, “What do you seek?”

“I seek information, lord.”

“Information for, solution.”

*So, it wants to play a riddle.* “Accepted, in gratitude.”

The creature was silent. Gabe thought, *I’ve played these many times. Your head game won’t work.* He scanned the thing while he waited. Fascination had only grown since the first encounter so long ago. But this one was more unusual than most. Gabe activated magnification and discreetly studied the creature’s ethereal fabric. One could conclude that it was formed from the material of subnet itself, as if it were a concentration of the murk. Gabe thought of gravity models in which dense matter collapsed and dragged the fabric of space-time with it. Was he standing in front of a densified sentence of subnet? If so, what did that imply about the fabric of subnet? Was the entire environment computational, emerging in pockets of intelligence that explorers referred to as servitors? Thoughts wandered to the whole of reality now. Was his own mind and experience analogous to this idea?

As he explored these thoughts, the persistent word returned. Gabe sensed a connection between these philosophical questions and the

Demiurge. But why? He was never good at intuition. Logic was his tool, but logic wasn't getting him there.

The creature hissed slyly, bringing Gabe's attention back to the moment. Then a few more minutes of silence. Gabe was unphased. Finally, the riddle. "A position that is not a place. A foundation of thoughts, covered with a veil, like a secret box. One enters blind but leaves it seeing."

*I know this. A position that has no place. That's virtual reality. A foundation of thoughts, covered with a veil, like a secret box. SubNet. One enters blind but leaves it seeing. Yep, that's SubNet.* "I have an answer."

The servitor said nothing.

"Lord, the answer is SubNet."

The shadow laughed violently.

*Shit!* Gabe readied himself. It had been a long time since he had to fend off a servitor. The key was to move erratically until a door could be opened. It was no use to just pop out. The servitors had been known to ignite the dustlink in people who tried this. *I am not ending up a pile of ash. When I go it will be on my own terms.* Gabe conjured his HUD and ran.

After a few moments he realized he was not being chased. Cautiously he slowed. Then he stopped and turned around. *This is unexpected. Should I leave or go back?* Phil's voice came to mind. *Make good decisions Gabe.* He determined the safe thing to do would be to leave, of course. *But I've never encountered a tetrahedron before. Has anyone?* He decided to get close enough to mark its location while not reawakening its guardian. *I'll come back, with a plan.*

The task done, he walked to a location where a gate could be conjured, then quickly exited.

In real, he viewed the contents of the information packet he had retrieved from the first signal. He waved up a terminal from augment. The pebble contained schematics. *Probably for energy mining. Nothing groundbreaking here, but The Angel Group is always happy to*

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*improve their joule production. This may buy me another day or two of leisure.* He skimmed the contents further until he saw something that had become all too familiar in code comments. *The Demiurge.* Assuming the Ancients who created SubNet were human like, he had once concluded this was the handle for a coder or perhaps the architect signing their work. But as he encountered it more frequently, this seemed to make less sense. There were no other supposed signatures. No pattern that would indicate it was a coder. The word appeared in seemingly disconnected places.

Seeking to distract himself before he spiraled into a full-blown obsessive episode again, he retired to the sofa with a bottle for company. *What was in the tetrahedron? What could the answer be if it's not SubNet? It must be.* Then the obsession. *Fuck! And what is the Demiurge?*

