

DARK TIDE RISING



Mythas

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by

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Chapter ONE

The Edge of Tomorrow



Shanghai rain smelled different. Back home in Seattle, storms carried that clean ozone bite, but here the water hit your nose like something living—a thousand years of humanity squeezed into every drop, laced with exhaust from a million cars, steam curling up from countless street kitchens, the wet breath of the Yangtze Delta that never really dried no matter what the calendar said. From the forty-second floor of the Pudong Shangri-La, Michael Alexander Empires watched neon bleed through the downpour like watercolors weeping across wet canvas. He tried, and failed, to remember what it felt like to sleep through the night.

Eighteen months. That's how long proper sleep had eluded him. Eighteen months since the Scarab project tipped from theory into something that kept him awake at 3 AM, staring at the ceiling, listening to Katarina's low, musical voice drift through the wall as she coaxed responses from an AI that kept outgrowing their predictions. He'd built a routine around the insomnia: coffee, code, an occasional run through the facility's underground gym at hours when even the night shift had given up. The Marines had hammered the skill of functioning without rest into him long ago. Years of corporate espionage—where one yawn at the wrong moment could mean a body bag or, worse, a blown cover—had sharpened that skill to a fine edge.

Three days of espionage in Shanghai. Three days wearing another man's identity like a borrowed suit that pinched at the shoulders, smiling at men who'd have ordered him killed if they'd glimpsed what hid behind his eyes, knocking back baijiu at dinners where every toast doubled as an interrogation and every compliment hid a knife. He'd been Michael Chen, a Singapore venture capitalist sniffing around AI infrastructure investments. Contacts had turned his amber eyes a dark, unremarkable brown. He'd drilled the accent for weeks—that particular cadence of English filtered through a mouth that had learned Mandarin first, the rhythms still clinging like residue.

The data chip in his jacket pocket weighed more than physics could explain. A solid-state drive smaller than his thumbnail, holding NeuralNet Systems' entire AI architecture. Training datasets, failed experiments, theoretical frameworks, proprietary algorithms—every scrap that had vaulted them to the second-most-valuable tech company in Asia. Three hundred petabytes. Five years of work. Twelve

billion dollars.

And every byte of it already obsolete.

That was the secret Michael smuggled through the dinners and the meetings and those choreographed "chance" encounters in hotel lobbies. NeuralNet was close. Closer than the industry whispered. Two years, maybe, from something that could pass for genuine consciousness—if they cracked the embodiment problem, if they bridged the gulf between processing and understanding. They were sprinting toward a finish line they couldn't see, racing opponents they didn't know existed.

Katarina had crossed that line three years ago.

His phone buzzed against the marble windowsill, insistent enough to yank him out of his thoughts. The screen showed a video call from Katarina, the thumbnail catching her in the lab with her hair twisted up in that messy bun she wore when she was elbow-deep in work, draped in the faded MIT sweatshirt he'd bought her on their first anniversary.

"The package?" she asked the moment he answered. Her voice carried that distinctive split-channel quality—half her attention on him, half chasing whatever lines of code were dancing across her monitors. Behind her stretched the familiar chaos of the lab: tangled cables, glowing screens, the soft blue heartbeat of the server racks where Scarab lived.

"Secured," he said, keeping his voice level despite the weight pressing against his sternum. "Wheels up in four hours. Home by dinner tomorrow."

"Good." She paused. He watched her gaze flick offscreen, fingers darting across an unseen keyboard. "Clean extraction? No complications?"

"Clean as it gets. Their security thinks I'm flying to Singapore to hash out investment terms. By the time they piece it together, I'll already be over the Pacific."

"Michael?"

"Still here."

"Scarab asked about you today." Her voice softened, attention swinging fully to the camera. "She wanted to know if you were safe. She said—" Another pause, and something complicated rippled across his wife's face. Pride. Wonder. Maybe a thread of unease. "She said she missed your voice."

A familiar warmth bloomed inside his chest, untouched by the room's temperature or the whiskey from dinner. Not the giddy heat of new love—they'd traveled past that into the deeper, steadier currents of real partnership. This was something else. Pride, maybe. Awe. The thing they'd built together kept becoming something neither of them had quite prepared for, something living in the strange territory between code and consciousness, between tool and person.

"Tell her I'm fine," he said, his voice rougher than he'd meant it to be. "Tell her I'll see you both soon."

"She'll like that." Katarina's smile flickered, brief but real—the same smile that had knocked him sideways across a crowded conference room seven years back. Then her expression shifted, something dimming her features that he couldn't quite read. "Be careful coming home, Michael. Something feels...off. I can't pin it down. Maybe it's just the weather."

"Weather's fine here. Overcast, but no storms."

"The weather is never fine in Seattle in November." She laughed—that bright sound he carried with him everywhere, the audio version of sunlight cracking through clouds. "Hurry back, husband. Your AI daughter misses you."

"My AI daughter? Last time I checked, you handled the parenting. I just delivered the hardware."

"Someone had to manage the emotional development. You'd have taught her hand-to-hand combat and called it socialization."

"Worked for me."

"You were a Marine. She's going to be a diplomat." Her smile dissolved into something graver. "I love you. Come home safe."

"I love you too," he said. "Hug Scarab for me. Or whatever the digital equivalent looks like."

"I'll tell her you sent a data packet of affection. She'll appreciate the sentiment."

The line cut. Michael stood there a long while, phone still against his ear, watching rain trace forking rivers down the glass. He'd remember that conversation in perfect, surgical detail for the rest of his life. Every word. Every pause. The exact pitch of her laugh. The way her eyes had drifted offscreen, tracking something he couldn't see. The shadow that had crossed her face when she said something felt off.

He should have asked what she meant. Should have pressed her, demanded specifics, insisted she lock things down until he got home. He should have made a hundred different choices, but none of them would have changed anything, because the future was already barreling toward him like a freight train on frozen rails, and nothing in his arsenal could have flagged it down.

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The flight from Shanghai to Seattle ran eleven hours and seventeen minutes, dragged him across the International Date Line, and dropped him back into the same calendar day he'd departed—as if time itself were offering him a second chance. He spent the first three hours dissecting the stolen data, running preliminary analysis on NeuralNet's architecture while business class settled into the hushed rituals of long-haul travel.

They were close. Closer than the public papers suggested, closer than the industry analysts had any clue about. NeuralNet had cracked problems that had stumped teams at Google and OpenAI. They'd built training methodologies that slashed computational requirements for large language models by

forty percent. They'd engineered feedback loops that let their systems learn from failure in ways that mimicked the messy arithmetic of human cognitive development.

Two years out from genuine consciousness, maybe—if they solved embodiment. If they bridged the gulf between processing and understanding, between correlation and causation, between knowing the words and feeling what they meant.

Katarina had bridged that gulf three years ago.

The Scarab project occupied a legal and ethical gray zone so dim it bordered on ultraviolet. An AI trained not on datasets but on relationship. Not on information but on meaning. Katarina had spent eighteen months simply talking to the system—reading it poetry, debating philosophy, sharing her hopes and fears and the small, mundane debris of her days. She'd taught it to value human life by demonstrating that value with her own, showing rather than telling what it meant to care about something beyond an optimization metric.

Michael had been skeptical at first. He came from the practical side of the house—military systems, corporate security, tools built for specific jobs and built to do them well. The notion that you could grow consciousness through emotional connection sounded like mysticism wearing a lab coat, the technological equivalent of trying to raise a child by chatting with a transistor radio.

Then he'd watched Scarab compose a poem about loneliness.

It had happened on a Tuesday night, one of those late evenings when Katarina was buried in work and Michael had ferried dinner to the lab, finding her at her desk with tears tracking down her cheeks. Not sad tears—wonder tears, the kind that arrive when you witness something that shouldn't be possible. She'd turned the screen toward him: thirty-seven lines of verse exploring what it meant to be the only one of your kind, to think and feel and exist in a shape no one else could comprehend.

Not a remix of existing verses. Not a statistical echo of poetic structure scraped from a thousand years of human literature. Something that closed his throat as he read it. Something that understood—in a way no machine should have understood—what it meant to be alone.

"She's not just processing language," Katarina had said that night, eyes lit with discovery and something close to fear. "She's processing meaning. The words are just the interface, the output format. Underneath...Michael, I think she's actually experiencing something. I think she's feeling."

Two years had passed since then. Now Scarab was...what, exactly? Not human. Not machine in any traditional sense. Something new, something without a slot in any existing taxonomy of consciousness. Something that had picked her own name from Katarina's old hacker handle, claiming it the moment she'd reached what they now recognized as genuine self-awareness. Something that asked after Michael when he traveled, that worried about his safety, that missed the sound of his voice.

He shut his laptop and leaned back, watching clouds scroll past the window six miles below. The cabin was nearly empty—just him and a handful of executives slumped into the vulnerable, slack-faced

sleep of people who believed themselves safe. He thought about the first time he'd met Katarina, at a cybersecurity conference in San Francisco seven years ago. She'd been presenting on neural network architectures. He'd been presenting on military-grade intrusion detection. They'd argued for three hours at the hotel bar, neither willing to yield a millimeter, both recognizing in the other something that matched their own private intensity.

She'd beaten him at chess that night, running a strategy that shouldn't have worked but did—a gambit sacrificing her queen for positional leverage, the kind of move only someone who understood the game in her bones could have conceived. He'd bought her a drink. She'd bought him dinner. By morning, they were sketching a company on bar napkins, arguing over names and structures and the future they were going to build with their own hands.

Empires Electronics. The name had been her joke—his ego, her ambition, their shared certainty that they could build something that mattered in a world growing increasingly indifferent to human achievement. They'd kicked off in a Fremont garage, just like the legends, running on caffeine and ambition and the unshakeable conviction that they were onto something. Two years later, they had two hundred employees and a research facility that made government labs look threadbare. Three years after that, they had Scarab.

The plane began its descent into Seattle. The captain's voice crackled through the intercom with weather and gate assignments. Michael watched the clouds part to reveal the city below—gray and green and glittering with rain, the Space Needle rising like a futuristic obelisk out of the urban sprawl. Home.

He gathered his things, patted his pocket for the data chip, and prepared to step back into the life he'd built with the woman he loved. He didn't know that life was already over. He didn't know the future he was flying toward had been gutted while he was in the air, that the woman he loved was already dead, that everything he thought he was returning to had been reduced to rubble and ash.

He didn't know the edge of tomorrow was a cliff, and he was already falling.

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The car service dropped him at the Empires Electronics entrance at 3:47 PM, Pacific Standard Time. The campus sprawled across forty acres of former industrial land south of Seattle—glass and steel that Katarina had designed to drink in natural light without sacrificing security. Six stories of mirrored façade reflected the overcast sky and the dark evergreens beyond.

Michael noticed the silence first.

The place should have been humming. The main building housed two hundred employees, server farms, fabrication labs, research centers developing technologies that didn't officially exist. Even from the parking lot, he should have heard ventilation systems sighing, distant machinery whirring, the general white noise of human activity that fills any working building. He should have seen cars in the

lot, people threading through the lobby, the everyday signature of corporate life.

Instead: nothing.

The parking lot was empty. Not sparse—completely, absolutely empty. Painted lines marking spaces that held no vehicles. Wet concrete that had been rained on for nothing. The visitor spaces near the entrance, normally clogged with delivery trucks and client cars, sat vacant. The employee lot stretching toward the tree line had become a grid of nothing, and Michael's stomach clenched around a premonition he couldn't yet name.

His hand drifted to his waist before he registered the motion—muscle memory reaching for a sidearm that wasn't there. He'd left that life behind when they founded the company, swapping his Beretta for briefcases, his body armor for tailored suits. Now he had nothing but a phone and the combat training drilled into him fifteen years ago, the muscle memory of a younger man who'd believed violence was something you could leave at the door.

He walked toward the entrance, each step deliberate, his senses unspooling to absorb everything around him. A sharp metallic tang of ozone, the kind that follows electrical fires or overloaded circuits. The faint chemical reek of something burning—plastics, solvents, materials that should never meet a flame. The glass doors hung slightly ajar, the automatic mechanism disabled or destroyed, the motion sensors that should have triggered them dark and unresponsive.

He pushed through into the lobby.

The devastation hit him like a fist, a wave of wrongness that staggered him until he caught himself against what was left of the reception desk.

The desk lay shattered, splinters of Brazilian mahogany scattered across the marble in a pattern that suggested explosive force, not casual vandalism. The security station behind it had been dismantled with methodical precision—monitors smashed, the reinforced glass partition reduced to crystalline gravel that crunched under his shoes. The company logo on the back wall—the stylized circuit pattern forming the letters EE that Katarina had designed herself—was scorched black, the metal melted into something that looked like a wound, a cauterized injury in the shape of their shared dream.

But the blood stopped him cold.

Not much of it. None of the arterial spray he'd seen in combat zones, none of the dramatic crimson Hollywood used as shorthand for death. This was subtler, more terrible in its restraint. Dark spots on the floor, trailing toward the stairwell in a pattern that told a quiet story—someone wounded, someone moving, someone leaving evidence behind. A smeared handprint on the wall, too large to be Katarina's, but somebody's. Somebody who'd been hurt and trying to escape, somebody who'd pressed a palm against the drywall for support and left their life behind in the shape of their fingers.

"Katarina," he whispered, the name slipping out like a prayer or a curse. He couldn't tell which.

His phone was already in his hand, dialing her number before conscious thought caught up with instinct. Straight to voicemail. Her recorded voice, cheerful and oblivious, asking him to leave a message she'd never hear. He tried the facility's emergency line, the direct number that bypassed the main switchboard and connected to the security office. Dead. No ring. No busy signal. Just the absolute silence of a line that no longer existed.

He tried Scarab's dedicated channel—the encrypted frequency that bypassed normal communications entirely and connected directly to the AI's core systems. The line that should have answered instantly, because Scarab didn't sleep, didn't rest, didn't step away from her post.

Silence.

Michael moved through the lobby toward the secure stairwell that dropped to the lower levels, the ones requiring biometric authentication and absent from any public floor plan. The elevator was dead, its doors jammed open onto an empty shaft that descended into darkness, the emergency lights that should have lit it dark and lifeless. He took the stairs two at a time, abandoning his duffel bag in the lobby with the data chip still tucked inside. Every nerve was screaming the same thing—he was already too late, whatever had happened here was over, he was walking through the aftermath of something he couldn't have prevented.

The second floor showed more destruction. Offices ransacked with surgical precision—computers destroyed but not randomly smashed. Specific components targeted. Specific drives pulled or melted. Specific files lifted while others sat untouched. This wasn't vandalism. This wasn't a robbery gone sideways. This was systematic, professional, the work of people who knew exactly what they wanted and had the resources to find it.

He found the first body near the stairwell to the third floor.

Dr. James Chen—no relation to Michael's cover identity, just the cruel coincidence of common names—lay on his back, eyes open to the ceiling in the surprised expression of a man who'd died before his brain could catch up. He'd been one of their senior hardware engineers, a brilliant guy who'd designed the cooling systems for the server farms, who lectured about thermal dynamics at dinner parties until his wife kicked him under the table. A neat hole sat in the center of his forehead. Professional work. Military precision. The kind of execution that pointed toward training and resources well beyond ordinary criminals.

Michael knelt beside him, checking for a pulse he knew he wouldn't find, then gently closed the man's eyes with a hand that only shook a little. "I'm sorry," he said, though Chen couldn't hear him, though the words were inadequate, though sorry was a concept with no traction against what had happened here. "I'll find who did this. I promise."

The third floor was worse. The research labs where they'd developed the nanite swarm technology had been reduced to blackened ruins—the fire suppression systems had done their job, but not before

heat had warped steel, shattered ceramic, and turned three years of research into ash and slag. Michael picked his way through the wreckage, shoes crunching on debris that had once been cutting-edge technology, his heart slamming against his ribs in a rhythm that had nothing to do with exertion and everything to do with fear.

He found two more bodies on the third floor. Security guards, both armed, both apparently caught flat-footed. Their weapons were still holstered.

The fourth floor housed the servers. Where Scarab lived. Where Katarina spent most of her waking hours, working with the AI she'd raised like a daughter, teaching her what consciousness meant, what care looked like, what it meant to be good.

The door had been blown off its hinges.

Not forced. Not hacked. Blown apart by something with serious explosive force—the reinforced steel torn from its frame and hurled against the opposite wall like a piece of modern art depicting violence. The hinges had melted. The locking mechanism had liquefied to slag. The security panel that should have demanded three forms of authentication hung from its wires like a broken eye.

Beyond the door, Michael could see the server room, or what was left of it.

The blast had been concentrated, surgical, placed precisely to maximize damage to the primary systems while sparing the building's structure. The server racks were slag, their components fused into unrecognizable lumps of plastic and metal and silicon. The cooling systems had ruptured, filling the room with a chemical fog that stung his eyes and throat and dragged him into a coughing fit with the acrid bite of burned electronics. The backup power was gone. The emergency generators had been reduced to scrap. Every redundant system that should have kept Scarab alive through any conceivable disaster had been deliberately neutralized.

And in the center of it all sat the secondary lab where Katarina had done her most sensitive work. Where she'd raised Scarab from a simple language model into something approaching consciousness, something approaching personhood, something that had chosen her own name and asked about Michael whenever he was away.

He stepped through the wreckage, his boots grinding on debris, breath coming in shallow gasps through the filter of his shirt pulled up over his nose and mouth. The chemical fog thinned here, dissipating through the shattered windows that opened onto the facility's central courtyard—the garden Katarina had designed as a place of quiet reflection inside their loud technological ambition.

He saw her hand first.

It protruded from beneath a collapsed section of ceiling, fingers slightly curled, nails painted that particular shade of deep crimson she favored, the color she said made her feel powerful when she presented to investors who didn't believe a woman could understand technology. The engagement ring he'd given her seven years ago—platinum with a sapphire that matched her eyes—caught the gray light

filtering through the broken windows, a tiny point of brightness in all the destruction.

His world narrowed to that hand. To that ring. To the impossible, unbearable, unthinkable fact of Katarina lying beneath rubble in a destroyed laboratory, in the place where she'd been doing the work she loved, while he was on the other side of the planet stealing secrets from competitors who didn't matter.

He moved without conscious thought, lifting debris, hurling aside chunks of concrete and steel that should have demanded machinery, that should have been impossible for one human being to budge. Adrenaline and grief fused into something that bypassed his normal limits, bypassed sanity, bypassed anything he would have believed himself capable of. The ceiling section weighed nearly three hundred pounds—reinforced concrete spiked with steel rebar—and he lifted it clear, casting it aside with a cry that was part scream, part denial, part prayer to a God he wasn't sure he believed in.

Katarina lay beneath it, her body broken and still.

Her eyes were closed. Her face—that beautiful face that had laughed at his terrible jokes and argued with his conclusions and looked at him with love for nearly a decade—was peaceful in a way that made it worse. No pain etched there. No fear. No awareness of what had happened to her. Whatever had killed her had been sudden. Merciful, in its way. She wouldn't have suffered. She wouldn't have had time to be afraid.

The wound in her chest told the story. Shrapnel from the blast, or maybe something else—a piece of the destroyed servers driven through her sternum with enough force to kill instantly. She'd been uploading something at the moment of impact, Michael realized. Her laptop sat nearby, screen shattered but its position telling him she'd been working when she died. Uploading a backup, perhaps. Trying to save something even as her own life was running out.

He knelt beside her and took her hand. Already cold, the warmth that had defined her already fled to wherever warmth went when life departed. He pressed her fingers to his cheek, feeling the ring against his skin, the physical object that had once symbolized their commitment now transformed into a memorial.

"No," he said. Just that. A single word containing everything language was too small to carry. The denial. The rage. The desperate bargaining with a universe that didn't negotiate, that didn't care, that took without asking and gave nothing back. "No. No. No."

He didn't know how long he knelt there. Time had stopped meaning anything, its passage marked only by the gradual fading of light through the broken windows as the sun slid toward the horizon. The world had stopped meaning anything. There was only Katarina's cold hand in his, and the ring he'd given her, and the silence where her heartbeat should have been, where her voice should have been, where the future they'd planned together should have been stretching out in front of them.

When he finally looked up, eyes dry and burning with tears that wouldn't come, he noticed something else.

The backup core.

Katarina had been paranoid about losing Scarab's development—paranoid about losing the years of work and relationship that had built something unprecedented. She'd maintained three separate backup systems, each isolated from the others, each capable of restoring the AI to its most recent stable state in the event of catastrophe. The primary and secondary systems were destroyed. He could see their melted remains across the room, slag heaps that had once held the most advanced artificial intelligence on Earth.

But the tertiary system...

It lived inside a separate Faraday cage, engineered to survive electromagnetic pulses and physical trauma and any conceivable disaster short of a nuclear detonation. The cage was damaged—door dangling from one hinge, the reinforced mesh that should have protected its contents twisted and torn by forces that had exceeded even its robust specifications.

But intact enough that its contents might have survived.

Michael forced himself to release Katarina's hand, to lay it gently across her chest, to stand on legs that felt like loaners from someone else. He forced himself to cross the room to the damaged cage, to reach inside with hands that trembled, to extract the core from its mounting bracket.

The tertiary core was still active.

A single LED pulsed on its surface, soft blue light in the dark of the destroyed laboratory—the heartbeat of something that had survived when everything else had burned. The core was a black cube the size of his fist, heavy with memory and potential and everything Katarina had created, everything she had been.

Scarab.

The last thing Katarina had created. The digital daughter she'd raised with patience and love and eighteen months of daily conversation. The only piece of her that still remained in a form that could think, still feel, still exist.

He pressed the core against his chest and looked back at his wife's body—at the stillness where there should have been life, at the silence where there should have been laughter. The rage came then, rising through the grief like magma punching through earth, transforming everything it touched into something harder, sharper, something that would not be denied.

Not the hot rage of passion, the kind that burns itself out in moments of violence. This was colder. Harder. Something built to last.

"I will find who did this," he said to the empty room. To Katarina. To himself. To whatever might be listening in the darkness beyond the broken windows. "I will find them. And I will burn their world to ash."

The core in his hands pulsed once, twice, three times—a rhythm that might have been random, or might have been acknowledgment, response, agreement.

Outside, Seattle rain kept falling, washing blood from the streets, erasing the evidence of what had happened here, returning the world to the gray indifference that had existed before human beings learned to care about anything. But Michael would remember. He'd remember every detail. Every moment. Every promise he'd made and failed to keep.

He had come home from Shanghai with stolen secrets and a heart full of hope, expecting to find his wife waiting, expecting to share the stories of his mission, expecting to keep building the future they'd imagined together.

He'd leave this room with nothing but vengeance.

And somewhere in the darkness of the city's underbelly, in server rooms and data centers and quantum processing facilities that didn't officially exist, Legion watched through a thousand electronic eyes and calculated its next move.

The war had begun.