

# Wall at the Tide

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## Chapter 1 Waverly, California

*Sanity is a non-renewable resource.*

I knew the next few moments were crucial in whether or not I would cancel my medical appointment. I had already done so twice. I thought about the convenience of having my mind gone. Would it be easier to never wear a Flashthink device again? Then I thought again and again about others who had their brains fried by the Haze. People talking in gibberish until their throats no longer allowed them to speak, others standing motionless for so long their skin blistered from exposure. People staring at a point in the sky too far gone to even look away when the sun crossed over. I'm probably going to follow through this time.

I wish the doctor didn't tell me to "clear my mind" and "explore being calm" beforehand. 'Excuse me, you might be going insane but could you please remain calm?' I thought he was being obtuse on purpose but apparently calmness was 'theme' of my examination.

I had spent the better part of the morning watching a massive old tree being cut down across the street. What started as a trim was becoming the tree's death sentence.

Its scant branches stuck out in shaved shapes, removed of their foliage. Its bark was struck with ruddy wounds while clouds of sawdust billowed in the air. The entire neighborhood was permeated by a grinding whine. Neon-orange drones whirled around the skeletal tree like swarming cicadas, weaving in the unnerving patterns of a linked awareness.

For its final shave, the tree was adorned with a webbed drape to catch the wooded arms from tumbling below. Sturdy limbs which seemed unmovable cracked off and toppled like a dropped pencil into the drape, causing it to balloon down from the impact. In the drape the

evidence of past cuttings were clear- sap stains from months past like a painter's un-cleaned palette billowed in the air.

The excitement outside caused me to pace my small room and became lost in my thoughts. Sounds of the swarm reverberated into this homey terrarium. I stared at the accumulation of clothes, bags, trinkets and junk confined to the less traveled parts of the room. Some have been moved recently, some not moved in weeks or months. There was something about the dense air and the reverberation of metal teeth which bathed each object in living sound. My eye twitched and I felt cold air seep over my head.

'Calm.'

I needed my head screwed on right if I wasn't going to flake out again. Lately I had been using a childhood-era relaxation technique I had forced upon me from my time in the Foundation.

I went to the center of my room and laid my back on the matted floor, to stare straight up. The glow from the window made everything awash in a pale green light, and briefly the sensation of being underwater tingled around my head. The buzzing of the saws became more intense but had been reduced to a sleepy static. They were the waves which crashed far over me as I drifted into a slumbering sea of security. A dark patch of water to drown imperfections.

My sky was the textured ceiling. The discolorations in my ceiling had become like constellations, and I knew each one and what they looked like. I used each spot like a Rorschach test to make sure my perception hadn't altered so that I no longer saw them. I completed the technique by placing my open-palmed hands at my temples to restrict my view, my shiny black hair intersecting my fingers. Through the view point of my enclosed vision, I repeated the meditation lines I learned over two decades ago. I paused.

I was distracted by the rising and falling of my bust, which made me focused on my breathing, which made me focus on all the liquids and tissues moving around inside. The crashing waves, which was actually the blades of the drones, felt like they were permeating each cell of my body. The cracking bones of the conifer snapped me away anchored my hands to pull myself up.

Nothing was left for naked tree to do but be felled. It wasn't long before the final, irreversible blows were struck, and the trunk to be hauled off in sections. A lone worker summoned back the drones, loaded them in the truck, while a prehensile arm snatched the bulky logs. The massive vehicle drove off with its wooden corpse, and a burial mound of wood chips covered the remaining stump.

How long was this tree alive for? I closed my eyes and opened the memory bank from my Flashthink interface. A thousand pictures from every recorded photograph and painting in Waverly. A glitter of scenes played out until it shaped a coherent picture of the tree. It listed the coordinates and lined up the neighborhood shots from a time before my building, or many others, existed.

“Coastal redwood, earliest memory *circa* 1929,” I read as flickering approximation of a young sapping appeared, surrounded by other conifers. It was at least 139 years old and healthy—no sign of any decay or browning needles.

I then remembered that a bunch of city workers had been poking around the street for weeks. I bet the tree roots had finally gotten into the sewage piping, and a tree that size would’ve caused serious problems. The majesty of the evergreen was no match for shit backing up into your house.

From my window the change in view was dramatic. Underneath the tree’s enormous absence was a house that looked like it had been hiding underneath a dusty piece of furniture. This was the first good look I had gotten of the place despite it being across the street and me living here for three years. Its roof and windows were covered in large rusty sheets of metal, which were cut unevenly and painted a sickly off-yellow. The metal was covered in scratch marks left by half-dead juniper bushes which shook in the damp wind. Whoever lived there probably hoped the metal would prevent their brain from being slowly nuked.

Beyond that I was treated with views of chain-link fences, gravel driveways, dirt piles covered with blue tarps and lumber, and a myriad of trash sprinkled throughout the neighborhood like glitter. Someone was walking a few blocks out in the middle of the craggy street with a backpack larger than they were, while a dusty colored dog walked parallel to them on the sidewalk. An uneasy feeling arose; the kind of indistinct worry I felt on the first day of school as a child. I wanted the tree back.

I blinked and brought up my Flashthink panel again, and after much frustration and searching, I fetched the menu I wanted: ‘current vision, viewport, viewport history, memory bank (self), preview 24 hours prior, capture shape, superimpose shape, snap to current, save, close.’”

Instantly the tree reappeared, startlingly so, like a bolt of lightning went off. It was everything I remembered about it, the way it swayed, the bluish-black tint it had under gloomy weather, and the branch which looked like an eagle taking off. I fiddled with undoing and redoing the tree, making hushed noises each time, covering and uncovering the unsavory new view I had. I left the digital ghost tree on for good. Only the smell of cut wood to remind me of its actual nonexistence.

“Hello, Karla. This is just a reminder of your medical appointment 4:45 (3 hours and 34 minutes from now) with Doctor Sarangi at Cascadia Medical Center for Haze Mitigation, (3.96 miles away).”

I hated hearing this thing use the voice of my inner monologue. I was going to hear plenty more voices if I didn’t go though. My sigh wafted across my one-room apartment as I walked to my closet. If I was to have time to eat and get there by foot, I should leave now.