

The Stolen Captain

“Give me your hand, I’ll pull you up.”

I peered up at Rueben, who was straddling the 12-or-so-foot stone wall we were scaling. The slivered moon provided us little light, but bringing our glowdars or any other artificial light device would have given us away.

After briefly peering down at the ground over my right shoulder, I obeyed orders, placing all of my weight into my right foot and lurching towards Rueben's extended arm. He too delivered, clasping my forearm with his own, and pulling me up to share the ledge with him.

The fog-filled air hid what stood ahead in the distance, but from the map we’ve so carefully been studying the past several months, we knew we were facing it.

Reuben wasted no time before carefully beginning his descent down the other side of the wall. I took a deep breath, then followed his route as he silently provided beta for foot and hand placements. From his silent motioning to where I should step — sometimes physically grabbing my foot and setting it onto the ping-pong-ball-sized extrusions of rock — I made my way down the face. I half-expected to be shot down by a hover pilot sniper, but I assured myself that private land monitoring was not at the top of their priorities. Still, the government’s *zero-tolerance policy* stood at the forefront of my brain, and festered as an aching nausea in my stomach.

When we reached the ground, we inspected the map, placing our clear compass in the center. Old school, just as we had been instructed. No satellite, no getting tracked. We headed off SW at 226°.

My pack had seemingly grown heavier over the past 3 days; I’d been performing routine checks to ensure Reuben had not secretly stashed rocks in it while I wasn’t looking. To my advantage, this classic practical joke we’ve been playing on each other since we were kids, had no place on this journey. Even though my back ached, part of me wished that it did. Seeing the most foolish, nonchalant human I knew, not daring to do a single thing that could further compromise our safety, scared me.

It’d been eight days since we’d left Middles, nicknamed the “BCA” after it’s pre-war boundaries on the border of what had been called British Columbia and Alberta. Sneaking onto a train car heading south, we caught a ride with sacks of seed bank contents headed to the southern greenhouses. I had been in charge of studying the trainlines, and was satisfied with my confidence in navigating our route. Between three cargo trains, we slept very little over our journey south, but we managed not to get caught.

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The Alpine air felt crisp, and for a moment, I was transported home. The harsh colds of the winter resembled comfort to me, far more so than the harsh hots of summer. We stopped every 100 paces, setting down the map in the dirt, to reassess our position. This measure was necessary as the fog that had consumed the valley mimicked a whiteout, leaving us with very little visibility. Each time we would inspect our map, we would slightly correct our trajectory, heading towards the hand-drawn star near the bottom left corner. I measured the distance between us and the star with my index and thumb, and proudly displayed my fingers, showing the half-inch between them. Reuben smiled.

This map stood as more than a critical navigational device on our journey, it was the reason we were here. Reuben had dug up the historical relic in his attic a little over a year ago in a trunk filled with all sorts of our grandparents' crap from the 2030s. Locked and tucked away by his parents, Reuben had enlisted me to steal a laser chain cutter from the hovercraft body shop my father works at. After slinking into my father's shop, I met Reuben on the day of his request and performed the duty.

We now slung on our backs many of the other contents from the trunk, including a 70-meter rope, and many metal climbing devices we knew were called camelots and stoppers from journal entries and guidebooks, also found in the trunk.

After another hour or so of walking, the fog cleared slowly, and then all at once.

“There it is.” Reuben whispered.

Before us, in all its glory, stood a 3000-foot granite monolith: El Capitan. I promised myself I wouldn't, but I began to cry.

My feet were blistered from the 60 miles we'd walked over the past two days, my mind foggier than the Yosemite air from lack of sleep, and the nauseous feeling in my stomach had only heightened as we trespassed on. I wish I could blame my tears on this conglomeration of physical and mental pains, but I had already dissociated from each of them.

I cried, for I was, for the first time, witnessing a piece of the natural world the government had once deemed 'worth protecting.'

Before the war on public land in the mid-40s, nearly anyone could come here. Now only the 2's — who we called the “rufflers” — were permitted entrance. I cried for all the BCA folk who

would never see this; for all of the other 98% who never would. I cried because Rueben and I's grandparents stood here in the sunshined peirced meadow almost 80 years ago, thinking one day we'd be able to do the same.

Without saying anything, we synchronously began running towards the great rock, our packs smacking our hips with each leap. We knew we didn't have much time.