

# CHALLENGER DEEP

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First Edition



## 1 Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum

There are two things you know. One: You were there. Two: You couldn't have been there.

Holding these two incompatible truths together takes skill at juggling. Of course juggling requires a third ball to keep the rhythm smooth. That third ball is time—which bounces much more wildly than any of us would like to believe.

The time is 5 a.m. You know this, because there's a battery-powered clock on your bedroom wall that ticks so loudly you sometimes have to smother it with a pillow. And yet, while it's five in the morning here, it's also five in the evening somewhere in China—proving that incompatible truths make perfect sense when seen with global perspective. You've learned, however, that sending your thoughts to China is not always a good thing.

Your sister sleeps in the next room, and in the room beyond that, your parents. Your dad is snoring. Soon your mom will nudge him enough to make him roll over and the snoring will cease, maybe until dawn. All of this is normal, and there's great comfort in that.

Across the street a neighbor's sprinklers come on, hissing loud enough to drown out the ticking of the clock. You can smell the sprinkler mist through the open window—mildly chlorinated, heavily fluoridated. Isn't it nice to know that the neighborhood

lawns will have healthy teeth?

The hiss of the sprinklers is not the sound of snakes.

And the painted dolphins on your sister's wall cannot plot deadly schemes.

And a scarecrow's eyes do not see.

Even so, there are nights where you can't sleep, because these things you juggle take all of your concentration. You fear that one ball might drop, and then what? You don't dare imagine beyond that moment. Because waiting in that moment is the Captain. He's patient. And he waits. Always.

Even before there was a ship, there was the Captain.

This journey began with him, you suspect it will end with him, and everything between is the powdery meal of windmills that might be giants grinding bones to make their bread.

Tread lightly, or you'll wake them.

## 2 Forever Down There

"There's no telling how far down it goes," the captain says, the left side of his mustache twitching like the tail of a rat. "Fall into that unknowable abyss, and you'll be counting the days before you reach bottom."

"But the trench has been measured," I dare to point out. "People have been down there before. I happen to know that it's 6.8 miles deep."

“Know?” he mocks. “How can a shivering, malnourished pup such as you know anything beyond the wetness of his own nose?” Then he laughs at his own assessment of me. The captain is full of weatherworn wrinkles from a lifetime at sea—although his dark, tangled beard hides many of them. When he laughs, the wrinkles stretch tight, and you can see the muscles and sinews of his neck. “Aye, it be true that those who have ventured the waters of the trench speak of having seen the bottom, but they lie. They lie like a rug, and get beat twice as often—but just so it scares the dust out of ’em.”

I’ve stopped trying to decipher the things the captain says, but they still weigh on me. As if maybe I’m missing something. Something important and deceptively obvious that I’ll only understand when it’s too late to matter.

“It’s forever down there,” the captain says. “Let no one tell you any different.”

### 3 Better for This

I have this dream. I am lying on a table in an overlit kitchen where all the appliances are sparkling white. Not so much new, as pretending to be new. Plastic with chrome accents, but mostly plastic.

I cannot move. Or I don’t want to move. Or I’m afraid to move. Each time I have the dream, it’s a little bit different. There are people around me, only they aren’t people, they’re monsters in

disguise. They have gone into my mind and have ripped images from it, turning the images into masks that look like people I love—but I know it's just a lie.

They laugh and speak of things that mean nothing to me, and I am frozen there among all the false faces, at the very center of attention. They admire me, but only in the way you admire something you know will soon be gone.

"I think you took it out too soon," says a monster wearing my mother's face. "It hasn't been in long enough."

"Only one way to find out," says the monster disguised as my father. I sense laughter all around—not from their mouths, because the mouths of their masks don't move. The laughter is in their thoughts, which they project at me like poison-tipped darts shot from their cutout eyes.

"You'll be better for this," says one of the other monsters. Then their stomachs rumble as loud as a crumbling mountain as they reach toward me and tear their main course to bits with their claws.

## 4 How They Get You

I can't remember when this journey began. It's like I've always been here, except that I couldn't have been, because there was a before, just last week or last month or last year. I'm pretty certain that I'm still fifteen, though. Even if I've been on board this wooden relic of a ship for years, I'm still fifteen. Time is different here. It doesn't

move forward; it sort of moves sideways, like a crab.

I don't know many of the other crewmen. Or maybe I just don't remember them from one moment to the next, because they all have a nameless quality about them. There are the older ones, who seem to have made their lives at sea. These are the ship's officers, if you can call them that. They are Halloween pirates, like the captain, with fake blackened teeth, trick-or-treating on hell's doorstep. I'd laugh at them if I didn't believe with all my heart that they'd gouge my eyes out with their plastic hooks.

Then there are the younger ones like me: kids whose crimes cast them out of warm homes, or cold homes, or no homes, by a parental conspiracy that sees all with unblinking, Big-Brother eyes.

My fellow crewmates, both boys and girls, go about their busy-work and don't speak to me other than to say things like, "You're in my way," or "Keep your hands off my stuff." As if any of us has stuff worth guarding. Sometimes I try to help them with whatever they're doing, but they turn away, or push me away, resentful that I've even offered.

I keep imagining I see my little sister on board, even though I know she's not. Aren't I supposed to be helping her with math? In my mind I see her waiting for me and waiting for me, but I don't know where she is. All I know is that I never show up. How could I do that to her?

Everyone on board is under constant scrutiny by the captain, who is somehow familiar, and somehow not. He seems to know everything about me, although I know nothing about him.

"It's my business to have my fingers curled around the heart of



*your* business,” he told me.

The captain has an eye patch and a parrot. The parrot has an eye patch and a security badge around his neck.

“I shouldn’t be here,” I appeal to the captain, wondering if I’ve told him this before. “I have midterms and papers due and dirty clothes I never picked up from my bedroom floor, and I have friends, lots of friends.”

The captain’s jaw is fixed and he offers no response, but the parrot says, “You’ll have friends, lots of friends here too, here too!”

Then one of the other kids whispers in my ear, “Don’t tell the parrot anything. That’s how they get you.”

## 5 I Am the Compass

The things I feel cannot be put into words, or if they can, the words are in no language anyone can understand. My emotions are talking in tongues. Joy spins into anger spins into fear then into amused irony, like leaping from a plane, arms wide, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that you can fly, then discovering you can’t, and not only don’t you have a parachute, but you don’t have any clothes on, and the people below all have binoculars and are laughing as you plummet to a highly embarrassing doom.

The navigator tells me not to worry about it. He points to the parchment pad on which I often draw to pass the time. “Fix your feelings in line and color,” he tells me. “Color, collar, holler,

dollar—true riches lie in the way your drawings grab me, scream at me, force me to see. My maps show us the path, but your visions show us the *way*. You are the compass, Caden Bosch. You are the compass!”

“If I’m a compass, then I’m a pretty useless one,” I tell him. “I can’t find north.”

“Of course you can,” he says. “It’s just that in these waters, north is constantly chasing its own tail.”

It makes me think of a friend I once had, who thought that north was whatever direction he was facing. Now I think that maybe he was right.

The navigator requested me as a roommate when my old roommate, who I barely even remember, disappeared without explanation. We share a cabin that’s too small for one, much less two. “You are the most decent among the indecents here,” he tells me. “Your heart hasn’t taken on the chill of the sea. Plus, you have talent. Talent, talons, tally, envy—your talent will turn the ship green with envy—mark my words!”

He’s a kid who’s been on many voyages before. And he’s far-sighted. That is to say, when he looks at you he’s not seeing you, but instead sees something behind you in a dimension several times removed from our own. Mostly he doesn’t look at people. He’s too busy creating navigational charts. At least that’s what he calls them. They’re full of numbers and words and arrows and lines that connect the dots of stars into constellations I’ve never seen before.

“The heavens are different out here,” he says. “You have to see fresh patterns in the stars. Patterns, Saturns, Saturday, Sunday,

sundial. It's all about measuring the passing day. Do you get it?"

"No."

"Shore to boat, boat to goat. That's the answer, I'm saying. The goat. It eats everything, digesting the world, making it a part of its own DNA, and spewing it out, claiming its territory. Territory, heredity, heresy, hearsay—hear what I say. The sign of the goat holds the answer to our destination. It all has a purpose. Seek the goat."

The navigator is brilliant. So brilliant that my head hurts just being in his presence.

"Why am I here?" I ask him. "If everything has a purpose, what is my purpose on this ship?"

He goes back to his charts, writing words and adding fresh arrows on top of what is already there, layering his thoughts so thick, only he can decipher them. "Purpose, porpoise, dolphin, doorframe, doorway. You are the doorway to the salvation of the world."

"Me? Are you sure?"

"Just as sure as we're on this train."

## 6 So Disruptive

Doorway, doorframe, dolphins dancing on the walls of my sister's room as I stand in her doorway. There are seven dolphins. I know because I painted them for her, each representing one of

Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, since I wanted her to still appreciate them when she's older.

The dolphins glare at me tonight, and although a lack of opposable thumbs makes swordplay unlikely, I find them far more threatening than usual.

My father is tucking Mackenzie into bed. It's late for her, but not for me. I've just turned fifteen; she's about to turn eleven. It will be hours until I sleep. *If* I sleep. I may not. Not tonight.

My mother is on the phone with Grandma downstairs. I hear her talking about weather and termites. Our house is being chewed to bits. "... but tenting is so disruptive," I hear my mom say. "There must be a better way."

Dad kisses Mackenzie good night, then turns and sees me standing there, not quite in, but not quite out of the room.

"What is it, Caden?"

"Nothing, it's just . . . never mind."

He stands up and my sister rolls away to face her wall of dolphins, making it clear she is ready for dreamland. "If something's wrong, you can tell me," Dad says. "You know that, don't you?"

I speak quietly so that Mackenzie can't hear. "Well, it's just that . . . there's this kid at school."

"Yes?"

"Of course I can't be sure . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well . . . I think he wants to kill me."



## 7 Charitable Abyss

There's this donation bucket at the mall. A big yellow funnel collecting for some children's charity that's really unpleasant to think about. "Limbless Children of Foreign Wars," or something like that. You're supposed to put your coin in a slot and let it go. It spins round and round the big yellow funnel for like a minute, making a rhythmic whirring sound that gets tighter and tighter, more intense, more desperate as it spirals closer to the hole. It keeps spinning faster—all that kinetic energy forced down the neck of the funnel until it's blaring like an alarm—then it falls silent as it drops into the black abyss of the funnel.

I'm that coin on its way down, screaming in the neck of the funnel, with nothing but my own kinetic energy and centrifugal force keeping me from dropping into darkness.



## 8 Reality Check

"What do you mean he wants to kill you?" My dad steps out into the upstairs hallway and closes the door to my sister's room. Dim light comes at a cautious angle from the bathroom farther down the hall. "Caden, this is serious. If there's a boy at school threatening you, you have to tell me what's going on."

He stands there waiting, and I wish I hadn't opened my mouth.

Mom is still on the phone downstairs talking to Grandma, and I start to wonder if it really is Grandma, or if Mom is just pretending—talking to someone else, maybe about me, and maybe using code words. But why would she do that? That's nuts. No, she's just talking to Grandma. About termites.

"Have you reported this kid to your teachers?"

"No."

"What has he done? Has he openly threatened you?"

"No."

Dad takes a deep breath. "Okay, then if he hasn't actually come out and threatened you, maybe it's not as bad as you think. Does this kid bring some sort of weapon to school?"

"No. Well, maybe. Yeah—yeah, I think he maybe has a knife."

"You've seen it?"

"No, I just know. He's the type of kid who'd have a knife, y'know?"

Dad takes another deep breath and scratches his thinning hair. "Tell me exactly what this boy has said to you. Try to remember everything."

I dig down and try to find the words to explain, but I can't. "It's not what he said, it's what he *hasn't* said."

My dad's an accountant; very left-brained, very linear, so it doesn't surprise me when he says, "I don't follow."

I turn and fiddle with a family picture on the wall, making it crooked. That bothers me, so I quickly make it straight again. "Never mind," I say. "It's not important." I try to escape down the stairs, because I really want to hear the conversation Mom is

having, but Dad gently grabs my arm. It's enough to keep me from leaving.

"Just wait," he says. "Let me get this straight. This kid that's got you all worried—he's in a class with you, and there's something about his behavior that you find threatening."

"Actually, I don't have any classes with him."

"So how do you know him?"

"I don't. But I pass him in the hallway sometimes."

My dad looks down, doing some mental calculations, then looks back up at me again. "Caden . . . if you don't know him, and he's never threatened you, and all he's ever done is pass you in the hallway, what makes you think he wants to hurt you? He probably doesn't even know you."

"Yeah, you're right, I'm just stressed."

"You're probably just overreacting."

"Right, overreacting." Now that I've said it out loud, I can see how silly I've been sounding. I mean, this kid doesn't even know I exist. I don't even know his name.

"High school can be unsettling," Dad says. "A lot of stuff can make you anxious. I'm sorry you've been carrying around something like that. What a thing to be thinking about! But sometimes everyone needs a reality check, right?"

"Right."

"So, you feel better now?"

"Yeah, I feel better. Thanks."

But he keeps studying me as I walk away, like maybe he knows I'm lying. My parents have been noticing how anxious I've been

lately. My dad thinks I should take up a sport to release my nervous energy. My mom thinks I should do yoga.

## 9 You Are Not the First and You Will Not Be the Last

The sea stretches in all directions. Before us, behind us, to starboard, to port, and down, down, down. Our ship is a galleon, weathered from a million voyages going back to ages even darker than this.

“She’s the finest vessel of her kind,” the captain once told me. “Put your faith in her and she won’t steer you wrong.”

Which is good, because there’s never anyone at the tiller.

“Does she have a name?” I once asked the captain.

“To name her is to sink her,” he told me. “That which we name takes greater weight than the sea it displaces. Ask any shipwreck.”

Above the arch of the main hatch is a sign burned in wood that reads *You are not the first and you will not be the last*, and I marvel at how it makes me feel both insignificant and singled out at the same time.

“Does it speak to you?” the parrot asks, perched above the hatch, watching me, always watching me.

“Not really,” I tell him.

“Well, if it does,” instructs the parrot, “write down everything it says.”



## 10 In the Fright Kitchen

I visit the White Plastic Kitchen almost every night. The particulars change each time, just enough that I can't predict the outcome of the dream. If it was the same, at least I would know what to expect—and if I knew, I'd be able to brace myself for the worst of it.

Tonight I'm hiding. Scarce few places to hide in the kitchen. I'm wedged in a state-of-the art refrigerator. I shiver, and I think about the captain. How he called me a shivering pup. Someone opens the door; a mask I don't remember. She shakes her head.

"Poor thing, you must be cold." She pours some coffee from a full carafe, but instead of offering me some, she reaches right through my navel and retrieves the milk from somewhere behind me in the refrigerator.



## 11 Nothing Awful Is without Its Beautiful Side

Beneath the main deck are the crew's quarters. The crew deck is much larger than the ship appears on the outside. Impossibly so. There's a long hallway that goes on and on and never seems to end.

Between the slats of wood that make up the hull and decks of the ship is foul-smelling black pitch to keep the water out. Nowhere is that smell more pungent than down below. It's sharp and organic, as if whatever life-forms that were distilled by time into the tar haven't entirely finished decomposing. It smells of concentrated sweat and body odor, and the stuff that collects beneath your toenails.

"The smell of life," the captain said proudly when I once asked him about the stench. "Life in transformation, perhaps, but life, nonetheless. It's like the briny reek of a tide pool, boy—pungent and putrid but at the same time refreshing. A wave will pound that shore, sending spray up your nostrils, and do you curse it? No! For it reminds you how much you love the sea. That summery smell of beach that brings you to the most serene place in your soul is nothing more than a gentle wafting of marine putrefaction." Then he had taken a deep satisfying breath of it to prove his point. "Indeed, nothing awful is without its beautiful side."

## 12 Spree

When my friends and I were younger and we were at the mall bored out of our minds, we used to play this game. We called it Psycho Shopping Spree. We would single out someone, or a couple, or sometimes a whole family—although for the purposes of the game, it was always better to single out a person shopping alone. We would then make up a story about the chosen shopper's secret purpose. Usually that purpose involved an ax and/or chain saw, and a basement and/or attic. One time we settled on this little old woman hobbling through the mall with such pinch-faced purpose, we decided she was the perfect serial killer of the day. The story was, she would buy all this stuff at the mall—far too much to carry, and she would have it delivered. Then she would capture the delivery man, and kill him with the very object he delivered. She had a whole collection of newly purchased murder weapons and dead UPS men in her basement and/or attic.

So we followed her for like twenty minutes, thinking this was hilarious . . . until she went into a cutlery store, and we watched her purchase a nice new butcher knife. Then it became even more hilarious.

When she left the store, though, I made eye contact with her—mainly because I dared myself to. I know it was entirely in my imagination, but there was this cruel and malevolent look in her eyes that I will never forget.

Lately I've been seeing her eyes everywhere.

## 13 No Such Thing as Down

I stand in the middle of the living room, curling my toes into our plush but soullessly beige carpet.

“What are you doing?” Mackenzie asks me as she comes home from school, hurling her backpack onto the sofa. “Why are you just standing there?”

“I’m listening,” I tell her.

“Listening to what?”

“Listening for the termites.”

“You can hear termites?” The thought horrifies her.

“Maybe.”

She fiddles nervously with the big blue buttons on her yellow fleece coat, as if she can button out the termites like the cold. Then she tentatively puts her ear to the wall, I suppose figuring it would be easier to hear them that way than by standing in the middle of a silent room. She listens for a few moments, then says, a little uneasily, “I don’t hear anything.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her in my most comforting voice, “termites are just termites.” And although there couldn’t be a more neutral statement, it defuses any insectious worries I might have given her. Satisfied, she goes into the kitchen for a snack.

I don’t move. I can’t hear the termites but I can feel them. The more I think about them, the more I feel, and it’s distracting. I’m very distracted today. Not by the things I can see, but the things that I can’t. The things in the walls, and the many things beneath

my feet, which I have always had a weird fascination for. That fascination has infested me today like the wood-eating bugs that slowly lay waste to our house.

I tell myself that this is a good distraction, because it keeps me from spiraling into thoughts of nasty things that may or may not be happening at school. It's a helpful distraction, so for a while I indulge it.

I close my eyes and feel, pushing my thoughts through the soles of my feet.

My feet are on safe, solid ground, but that's just an illusion. We own our house, right? But not really, because the bank holds the mortgage. So what do we own? The land? Wrong again, because although we have a deed to the land our house sits on, we don't own the mineral rights. And what are minerals? Everything that's in the ground. Basically, if it's valuable, or might be valuable someday, we don't own it. We own it only if it's worthless.

So what is beneath my feet, really, beyond the lie that it belongs to us? When I concentrate, I can feel what's down there. Beneath the carpet is a concrete slab that rests on earth that was compacted twenty years ago by heavy machinery. Beneath that is lost life that no one will ever find. There could be remnants of civilizations destroyed by wars or beasts or immune systems that failed a sudden bacterial pop quiz. I feel the bones and shells of prehistoric creatures. Then I send my thoughts even deeper to the bedrock, where pockets of gas bubble and brew from earth's intestinal distress as it tries to digest its long and often sad history of life. The place where

all God's creatures are eventually distilled through the rock into black gunk that we then suck out of the ground and burn in our cars, turning those once living things into greenhouse gases, which I guess is better than spending eternity as sludge.

Deeper still, I can feel the cold of the earth replaced by heat until there are caverns of red-hot, then white-hot magma, swirling under unthinkable pressure. The outer core, then the inner core, to the very center of gravity, and then gravity reverses. The heat and pressure begin to decrease. Molten rock turns solid again. I push through the granite, the sludge, the bones, the dirt, the worms and the termites, until I'm bursting through into some rice paddy in China, proving that there's no such thing as down, because eventually down is up.

I open my eyes, almost surprised to find myself in my living room, and it occurs to me that there is a perfect plumb line from my home to somewhere in China, and I wonder if pushing my thoughts down that line the way I just did could be a dangerous thing. Could my thoughts be magnified in the heat and pressure of the earth and come out the other side as an earthquake?

And I know it's just a tweaky stray thought, yet the next morning, and the morning after that, and every morning from that moment forward, I check the news in secret terror to see if there was an earthquake in China.

## 14 Can't Get There from Here

Although I have been told by various frightened crewmen not to venture into the unknown corners of the ship, I can't help myself. Something compels me to seek out things that are better left alone. And how can one be on a great galleon and not check it out?

Rather than heading on deck for roll call one morning, I get up early enough to explore. I begin to make my way down the long, dimly lit corridor of the crew deck. I take my parchment pad, and draw quick impressions.

"Excuse me," I say to a crew member I haven't seen before, lurking in the shadows of her cabin. She has wide eyes, runny mascara, and wears a pearl choker that looks like it might actually be choking her. "Where does this hallway go?"

She looks at me with suspicion. "It doesn't go anywhere, it stays right here." Then she ducks back in and slams her door. I hold her image in my mind, and on my pad I sketch her face as it looked when she retreated into shadows.

I continue to walk, keeping track of my distance down the unending hallway by counting the ladders. One, two, three. I get to the tenth ladder, but the corridor just continues ahead of me. Finally I give up and climb ladder ten, only to find myself coming out onto the deck through the midship hatch, and I realize that every one of those ladders, regardless of where it is on the crew deck, exits up through that same hatch. I've walked that corridor for twenty minutes, yet have gotten nowhere.

Sitting on the railing above me is the parrot, as if he's been waiting there just to mock me.

"You can't get there from here," he says. "Don't you know? Don't you know?"

## 15 No Passage of Space

My job on the ship is as a "stabilizer." I can't recall when I was assigned this task, but I do remember the captain explaining it to me.

"You shall sense as the ship heels side to side on the sea, and position yourself opposite of the roll, starboard to port, port to starboard," the captain had said.

In other words, just like a vast majority of the crewmen, my job is to run side to side across the deck and back again to counteract the rolling motion of the sea. It's completely pointless.

"How could our weight possibly make a difference on a ship this size?" I once asked him.

He glared at me with his bloodshot eye. "Would you prefer to be ballast then?"

That had shut me up. I'd seen the "ballast." Sailors crammed into the cargo hold like sardines, in order to lower the ship's center of gravity. If there's no task for you on this ship, you become ballast. I should have known better than to complain.

"As we near our destination," the captain once told me, "I will



be selecting a special team for our great mission. Do your job with hearty sweat and vigor, and you may earn your nearly worthless hide a place on that team.”

Although I’m not sure I want that, it may be better than shuffling pointlessly around the deck. I had once asked the captain how far we were from the Marianas Trench, because each day the sea is exactly the same. We seem no closer, and no further from anything.

“Tis the nature of a liquid horizon to feel no passage of space,” the captain said. “But we will know as we near the trench, because there will be signs and dark portents.”

I won’t dare ask the captain what those dark portents might be.

## 16 Swabby

When the sea is calm, and I don’t have to run from side to side, I sometimes hang out on deck with Carlyle. Carlyle is the ship’s swabby—a guy with bright red hair in a short peach fuzz, and a smile friendlier than anyone else’s on the ship. He’s not a kid, he’s older, like the ship’s officers, but he’s not really one of them. He seems to make his own hours and his own rules, with little interference from the captain, and is the only one on the ship who makes any sense.

“I’m a swabby by choice,” he told me once. “I do it because it’s needed. And because you’re all such slob.”

Today I catch sight of rats scurrying away from the water of his

mop, disappearing into dark corners of the deck.

"Blasted things," Carlyle says, dipping his mop into a bucket of cloudy water and washing the deck. "We'll never get rid of them."

"There are always rats on old ships," I tell him.

He raises an eyebrow. "Rats? Is that what you think they are?" Although he doesn't offer me an alternate theory. The truth is, they scuttle so quickly, and hide so deep in shadows, I can't be sure what they are. It makes me nervous, so I change the subject.

"Tell me something about the captain I don't know."

"He's your captain. Anything worth knowing you already must know."

But even the way he says it, I can tell he is an insider in a way that few others are. I figure if I'm going to get any answers, though, I need to be specific with my questions.

"Tell me how he lost his eye."

Carlyle sighs, looks around to make sure we're unobserved, and begins to whisper.

"It is my understanding that the parrot lost his eye before the captain. The way I've heard it told, the parrot sold his eye to a witch to make a magic potion that would turn him into an eagle. But the witch double-crossed him, drank it herself, and flew away. The parrot, who didn't want to be the only one with an eye patch, clawed out the captain's eye as well."

"That's not true," I say with a grin.

Carlyle keeps his expression solemn as he splashes soapy water on the deck. "It's as true as it needs to be." The tar between the planks seems to retreat from his deluge.