

A woman in a red dress is shown floating in space, her body oriented upside down. The background is a dark, starry field. The title 'THE EDGE' is written in large, bold, yellow letters across the center of the image.

THE EDGE

JAMES SMYTHE

THE EDGE

Book Three of The Anomaly Quartet

James Smythe



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I walk the station, and I go to see Snipes; and he is in pain. He is in such pain, and that has been so clear from the start. A person who wasn't made for this; who wanted to be so much more. *An experimental pilot*, he said the night we met, the night he came up here; a joke we made about his job. I'm an engineer. Just an engineer. His hand on my arm. Maybe we could be something; in another life, maybe.

He paces his room, frantic. He says, 'I didn't want you to see me like this,' but I tell him that I don't mind, that I just want to help.

It's early in the morning, or late at night. The same state, really. Just different perceptions; we set the clock ourselves. And he says, a variant on the last: 'I didn't want to have to see you, not right now.'

'Please,' I say to him, but he doesn't listen. He doesn't, because he's made a choice.

He leaves his room, and he climbs down the ladder to the main section of the station, and he heads around it as if he's already late.

I chase him. I message the others, to tell them what's happening, that I might need help. He stops, shouts at me. 'Please, Ali,' he says, 'let me do this.'

Then he's into the changing rooms, and the airlock.

'Please help,' I ask the others, 'please help,' but nobody comes in this moment, and there's nobody coming at all; so I think, I'll pull the alarm, but Snipes is too fast, too driven.

He's got permissions; he can do what he likes to the systems.

We didn't have anything between us; we nearly did, that's all. But neither of us was in a place to begin anything—

He starts the airlock cycle. One door opening, and he steps inside.

Another door opening, and he's gone.

His hand lingers on the internal window, for just a moment. It holds, blocking my view, as if he's reaching for me—

Outside, I see Earth. That's where we are in this part of our rotation.
Facing away from the Anomaly.

His trajectory: home.

I feel my heart leap, or sink, or crush or be pulled apart; I watch him go.
It's so cold—

I feel myself pulled along in his wake. I would be—

The others get here, finally, and they rush and crowd, and desperately try
to fix this.

Mon helps me away, ushers me to my room, where she quiets me. Shhh,
she says. Hand on my head, brushing my hair back, comforting me;
restraining me.

Go to sleep, she says. This'll help you, sleep now.

A sleep. A chance to reset myself, and to feel better, and to move on.

PART ONE

*It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence.*

T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets

1

Theo, my son, is five years old, or a little over; the exact number of days gets looser when you pass the easily definable. Until they're two, of course, you count them by months; or even weeks, when they're younger.

Then they cross a boundary, and suddenly: it's thereabouts. Two and a half; nearly four; five, until they're six.

My connection with Theo is purely digital. Screen to screen. The comms link with Earth is terrible, but usually it's enough for a picture, even if it's low res. To see his smile, hear his voice, that's everything to me. That tells me that there is a reason for my doing this.

After I have asked him about his day, about his life, and told him about mine, I tell him that I love him, and he says the same to me – he isn't yet old enough to really understand what it means, but he knows that there's a call and response to these things, and he says it the same way, every single time, as if it's rehearsed; even though I can tell he feels it, I can see it in his eyes – and then we say goodbye. Sometimes our conversation runs its course; sometimes it's halted because of the connection being tenuous up here; sometimes he's late for school, or his father has decided to take him out at the exact moment that he knows I'll be calling. But at least we speak, and have spoken nearly every day since I came up here; even if our conversations are only brief.

I think, on those days, that I work better. I am more efficient. I am focused, and I channel my feelings into my understanding that, more than anything else in the world, I want to get off this godforsaken station.

Last night one of my only real friends up here killed himself. His name was Snipes, and I hadn't known him for long. It feels stupid to get caught up in it, in missing him, or feeling the pain of his being gone; the burn of it. And already, his face is fading a little. As if it's not quite been impressed hard enough. The short time that I knew him, that wasn't enough to make it permanent.

But still, he ended it. He was sent up here to die, anyway. His death was inevitable.

He just wanted to control it, I suppose.

We buried him. Except, here it's not a burial. It's a send-off. So much less important-sounding, so much less gravitas.

This morning, more than any other day since I've been up here, I want to speak to my son. This morning, still hungover from the sadness of last night, I need Theo's voice, his gaze. I need that moment of connection; of clarity.

I get a connection straight away. Sometimes we don't get to speak, because the comms are out, or because our cycles don't overlap. Sometimes I call, but there's no answer. Those days, it's impossible to not fear the worst. In any situation where you truly feel for somebody, it's natural to worry when you cannot make contact with them; and when they're your child that feeling is amplified. But today, the connection works. There's static on the picture, and that's fine. Better than nothing. Xavier answers, and he smiles at me. He wears a very different smile than he wore when we were actually together. It looks the same, because that's his face, but God knows that whatever is happening in the space behind it is a very different thing.

'Allanah,' he says. He's the only person who still uses my full name. I've been Ali for as long as I can remember. Xavier uses my full name because he thinks it gives him the upper hand, or power. This unbearably petty aggression, this absolute smugness. Arrogance that was there before this, long before the upper hand he felt he held; that he is Down There and I am not.

Because, as he reminds me, to hurt me, I left, and Xavier remained.

As soon as he sees me he hoists Theo up into the air in front of him, holding him out to the camera, pushed forward. 'Can you see?' he asks. Theo has one of the knots on a necklace around his neck, like a cross, at first glance; a cross mixed with an ampersand, to make this tied-off symbol, looped and knotted together. 'He picked this one out himself,' Xavier says.

'No he didn't,' I say. 'He doesn't know what that even means. He's too young.'

'I don't think you can ever be too young to have faith, Allanah. He's got faith, just like I do. You wouldn't believe what it's like down here, now.'