

EDGE OF DARK

Also by Brenda Cooper

The Creative Fire

The Diamond Deep

EDGE OF DARK

THE GLITTERING EDGE, BOOK ONE

BRENDA COOPER



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*Dedicated to:
Linda Gero Merkens
Gisele Peterson*

*This book is partly about friendship,
and these two women have been my friends for a very long time.*

PART ONE

A PLANETARY DANGER

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLIE

Charlie Windar stood on his skimmer, knees slightly bent to absorb the small shocks of his speed. The pilot's seat acted like a brace. The engine fed silently on stored sunlight and pushed the craft so fast that the wind chapped Charlie's cheeks and stung water from his eyes. The forests of Goland went on and on below him, the first new leaves of spring opening out and shining bright yellow-green. Morning sun warmed his back and made diamond patterns on thin ribbons of water that tumbled over rocks and fell down the faces of cliffs.

A band on his wrist vibrated.

He slapped his arm, effectively turning on a whole universe of communication. "What is it?"

"Distress call."

He sat down and flipped the skimmer to autopilot. "Give it to me."

"Hold onto your anger." Jean Paul Rosseau's familiar voice conveyed both worry and sarcasm in equal measures. "A family seems to have misplaced their teenagers."

"Runaways?"

"Hard to tell. The parents smell like smugglers to me."

Charlie pursed his lips, reflecting on the idiots who often ran through the way-too-loose planetary security on Lym to prove themselves against tooth and claw or hunt for treasure in some long-dead city. It did make him angry—it always made him angry. But Jean Paul was right. "Where are they?"

"The scared parents? About ten clicks from you. At the top of the Blue Canyons."

"What do you know about the kids?"

"Three boys, red haired, all healthy. Twelve, fifteen, and sixteen."

The worst ages of young male stupidity. "Used to gravity?"

"They say so." Jean Paul sounded doubtful.

Charlie stood again and surveyed the trees below him, as if the kids would just pop up there and wave at him. "How long have they been missing?"

“A day and a half.”

“Shit.”

“Good luck. Be careful.”

“I’ll let you know when I find the kids.” Sometimes he never even found bodies.

“I’ll make myself a cup of stim,” Jean Paul promised. “Be right here for you, no matter how long it takes.”

“Thanks.” Charlie told the skimmer to fly lower and set up a search pattern. It would show him everything that was both breathing and bigger than a bird and even help him identify a human signature. Of course if the boys actually *had* died, it wouldn’t help.

Raptors circled on rising columns of warming air. Two flocks of bright orange startles rose up just ahead of him. Charlie cursed when the skimmer hit one of the tiny birds, sending its body tumbling back into the thin canopy. Grazing angle-hops moved together, the big-eared herd looking up as the arrow-shaped shadow of the skimmer touched their clearing.

The computer showed him the bright heat of mammals and birds below the forest canopy as lights on his screen, color coded for species and movement. Tags embedded in larger animals declared that two were marsupials and one was a hunting cat stretched out on a tree-trunk as long as Charlie was tall. He catalogued the cat as interesting but kept his focus on looking for untagged humans.

The forest gave way to stony ground filled with short scrub trees and spiny grasses, a place where life depended on deep roots thrust into meager soil. The day heated, and life hid under rocks and roots. Sweat stuck his shirt to his back. The skimmer’s trajectory turned again, still over the rocky plain. He admired the stark interplay of gray and black, shadow and rock, the occasional punctuation of pale green. Pale yellow flowers bloomed in the shade of rocks.

Twelve heat signatures blossomed onto the screen in front of him.

He drew his gun, started the familiar, fluid motion of his safety checks.

An audible beep signaled a living human. Then another. He listened for the third.

Nothing.

That left ten tongats: four-legged pack predators half the height of a man. He was close enough to see details. The hair on their spines stood up and their

ears pricked forward and back. Most crouched low, shoulders hunched, ready to spring. The biggest and blackest of the beasts circled the pack at a lope. The pack surrounded a small hill of jumbled rocks just clear of a scraggly tree line.

One boy knelt on top of the highest rock. He held a gun pointed at the closest tongat, but he wasn't firing. A second boy stood behind him, scanning the horizon. Jean Paul hadn't been kidding about the red hair—they might as well have worn fire for hats.

Only two.

Charlie glanced down and verified that his gun was fully charged: four lights blinking green for ready. His right foot signaled the skimmer to pick up speed. He stood again, searching for the third teen.

The kneeling boy fired and one of the tongats yelped. None fell.

The standing boy turned in circles, his attention so completely on the predators that he hadn't yet noticed Charlie. The bottom of his shirt had been torn off, and his exposed skin had brightened to a sunburnt red.

To frightened boys, the attacking beasts would be big and fast and scary, maybe the scariest thing they had ever seen. Other fears would plague them as well. The open sky above them, the horizon. Everything would look wrong. No one born in space came here prepared for a place with almost no walls.

Ships were big flying coffins and the pictures he'd seen of space stations looked like planets turned inside out and robbed of their horizons.

Charlie felt sorry for the boys, if not for the parents. He squeezed the gun handle, his palm print and the pressure of it identifying him to the weapon. He was ready.

He came in close, slowing the skimmer and starting a wide circle around the boy's location.

A few of the tongats looked up, recognizing him as a threat. He fired at the big black one first, grimacing as he hit it. The animal stumbled but kept going. He ignored it for the moment, using a single shot to bring down the one closest to the boys.

It took four slow revolutions of his skimmer before the last tongat fell.

The boy still pointed his weapon at them.

Charlie turned on his loudspeaker. "Put your gun down."

The boy fired. The body of the animal closest to him jerked.

"Now."

The boy glanced up and hesitated, and for a moment it appeared he wouldn't obey. Then he laid his weapon down and stood up. In a delayed reaction, he began to wave his hands above his head in a "look at me" gesture.

Charlie thumbed his line to Jean Paul open. "Found two of them. Apparently they were hunting tongats."

Something in Charlie's voice must have clued in Jean Paul. "Tongats hunting them now, huh?"

"Yeah." Charlie'd seen it happen before. Spacers mystified him.

"Stupidity. Are you safe?"

"Yeah. I'm on my way to talk to them. At least one is armed. Keep your line open so you can hear the conversation."

"Got your back."

"Always." Charlie smiled grimly and toed the skimmer into a careful landing. The closest flat place was half a klick away, so he had to make his way to the boys through the bodies of tongats. It saddened him greatly to see the big beasts so still. He walked close enough to the one the boy had shot to see that the bullet had gone clean through the thick neck, missing both the spine and the jugular vein. A thin trickle of blood stained the animal's black coat with a bright, wet line. Damn.

He stopped at the bottom of the rock pile, looking up at the trespassers. The bigger boy looked wary and the smaller simply shell-shocked. Both had the ultra-white skin of spacers and thin, slightly elongated bodies.

Charlie took a deep breath and tried to calm his anger over the tongats. "I'm a ranger. Charlie Windar. You're trespassing."

The small one managed to stutter out, "Th-thank you. Thank you."

He looked so pathetic that Charlie dredged up a smile he didn't feel. "You're welcome." He started up but stopped halfway. A body lay sprawled on a flat rock below the boys' perch, one leg shattered. White bone protruded from his leg in two places. Blood had pooled and congealed on the rock, and ants crawled through the blood. The dead boy's white face appeared twisted by pain even after death. Probably the middle boy, the fifteen-year-old.

If they'd been anywhere near civilization, he would have lived. The bloody bottom of the smaller boy's shirt tied around the dead one's leg was the only sign of any attempt at medical attention. Another problem with spacers; they lived inches from good medical care.

Charlie closed the dead boy's eyes before he climbed the rest of the way to the top of the rocks and asked the older boy, "What happened?"

"Richard fell." He spoke calmly, although his voice shook. "We were climbing up behind him and suddenly we just couldn't see him. We tried to tell him to wait for the doc, but he couldn't do it."

The younger one said, "It got dark. We stayed here and halfway through the night the big dogs started howling and they kept coming closer. This morning they were here so we couldn't go for help."

"What's your name?" Charlie asked.

"Justin. And this is my big brother, Sam."

Sam looked displeased to have his name revealed so easily. From time to time he glanced at the patch on Charlie's shoulder that proclaimed him an officer of the law.

"Why did you come out here?" Charlie asked him.

"Aren't you going to take us back?"

"Not yet."

The boys exchanged a worried look.

"Why'd you come?" Charlie asked again.

"Dad said we should know what a planet is like."

"Did he tell you to hunt?"

Neither boy answered.

"Did you want to kill a tongat?"

"No," Sam said, but Justin nodded. A brief angry look crossed Sam's face, and then he looked accusingly at Charlie. "You killed them. You killed all of them."

"No, I didn't. And that's why we're staying right here. We need to take care of them."

Neither Sam nor Justin appeared to be wearing any technology. Their clothes were nothing much either: ragged ship's jumpsuits and scuffed boots that needed new soles.

Justin retreated to the far edge of the rock, the look on his face so lost and unhappy that Charlie felt the tug of it on his heart. He spoke softly, as if talking to a wild animal. "Don't you fall."

Sam looked him up and down, appearing a little more interested. "Do you eat tongats?"

“No.” He glanced over at the still forms. “No. We protect them. That’s what we’re going to do now. Sit here until they all wake up.”

“They’re not dead?” Justin asked in a high, thin voice.

“No.” Charlie held out his hand. “Sam, give me your gun.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not mine. It’s my dad’s.”

Charlie nodded. “I have something to do, and I’m going to make sure you can’t point that thing at me.”

Charlie stood still, hand out, working hard to keep his face neutral. In the space of about ten breaths, the gun landed in his hand, a little heavier than he expected. “Thank you. Now stay here.”

“What about Richard?” Sam said.

“Richard doesn’t care what happens next. But you two are safe enough. You can watch me from here.” Without waiting to see how the boys reacted, Charlie climbed carefully through the rocks and went back to the injured animal he’d checked on the way in. He pulled a med-kit from his pack and sutured the wound, one hand on the warm, thick neck muscle. His attention roamed back and forth from his work to the beast’s wide mouth, which was full of impressive off-white teeth. Once, he jerked back when the animal shuddered head to tail as if shaking off a fly.

As soon as he finished he stepped back a few steps. “Jean Paul?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll be here another hour or two. Do you know where I should take the boys?”

“The coordinates are in your nav system.”

“Thanks. Parents in custody?”

“Yep. Said the boys ran away but we think they sent them off so they could do a deal with other smugglers.”

“Fits the boy’s story.”

“Sad,” Jean Paul said.

Charlie glanced back up at the boys. They sat side by side, watching him solemnly. He went to the skimmer and opened a cargo compartment, pulling out a pack.

When he got back to the rocks by the boys he settled down comfortably in a middle of the widest, flattest rock near the top.

“I want to go home,” Justin said.

“Did you know there are animals that would eat these tongats if they came across them in this sorry state?”

“They tried to kill us,” Sam said. He was standing, his arms crossed. “I want my gun.”

“Now that there’s no danger?”

Sam looked away, anger and impotence on his face.

Charlie felt like the kind of mean adult he’d hated when he was kid. Still, they’d lost a brother. “I’m sorry about Richard.”

“Can we bring him home?” Justin asked.

“Yes.” He patted the rock next to him.

Neither boy moved.

“We’re going to be waiting a while. You might as well sit down.” He pulled the pack onto his lap and extracted two water pouches, setting one on each side of him.

It took a while but eventually both boys sat down, one on each side, even though Sam stayed as far away as he could without falling off of the rock. To his credit, he sucked on the water slowly, and didn’t finish it all.

The younger boy sat close enough to touch Charlie, and he simply looked sad and tired. Charlie resisted an urge to put an arm around him. “Did either of you sleep last night?”

“No,” Justin said. “I was trying to keep Richard awake talking to him.” He stopped for a moment, blinking back tears and then turning his face away. After a few deep, shuddering breaths, he turned back to Charlie. “He lived until halfway through the night.”

“I’m sorry. You know this place is off-limits to humans.”

“You’re here,” Sam said.

“Good thing for you. But there’s two continents where you’re not allowed to go on Lym. Here on Goland, and do you know the other one?”

“Entare.”

“So you did know better than to come out here.”

“Dad told us to see the wild places before they’re all gone.”

“They’re not going to be gone,” Charlie said. “We’re keeping them for everyone. And Lagara is almost a park. People visit there every year.”

“Rich people,” Sam said.

“There’s some truth in that.”

Sam looked surprised that Charlie agreed with him. “So what were we supposed to do?”

Charlie fell silent, pondering. “Respect the boundaries. The same way I’m respecting the tongats out there. We almost destroyed this place once, and then we almost destroyed it again. This time that’s not going to happen.”

“Are you sure?” Justin asked.

“Yes.” Charlie drank some water himself. He pointed in front of them. “Look. One of the tongats is getting up already.”

Sam and Justin were silent as they watched the biggest animal stand up and shake itself, looking one way and then another and then nosing a packmate’s flank. “See,” Charlie said. “They’re a family. They watch out for each other.”

“They tried to kill us.”

“You were invading their home.”

“Will they hurt us now?” Justin shrank closer to Charlie, almost touching him.

Charlie’s glasses pinged for danger and he blinked a few times, adjusting his view, taking in the size of the heat signature behind him. “Charlie?” Jean Paul’s worried whisper vibrated in his ear. “Do you see it?”

Charlie whispered in turn to the boys. “Stay completely still. Don’t make any sound. None.” He checked his gun, stood up and turned slowly. A huge animal stood on its hind legs about twenty meters in front of him, just at the bottom of the rocks. He drew in a sharp breath and his hand tightened on his gun barrel. Being above it might not help very much.

“Boys,” he whispered. “Stand up as slowly as you can and be careful not to fall.”

Justin’s arm slid around Charlie’s waist and Sam let out a tiny moan, then went silent.

The predator cousin of the jumpers he’d flown over earlier stood three times the size of a man, with a long neck and snout and huge haunches. A thick, long tail twitched on the ground. Its neck moved like a snake’s, back and forth, back and forth. Vestigial wings fluttered on its back and the small hands attached to them reached out sideways as if pulling on the air.

Justin whimpered. His braver brother whispered, “A rakul. A real rakul.”

Charlie swallowed. "That's what might have eaten the tongats that might have eaten you."

"What do we do?" Sam whispered back.

"Nothing, unless it comes closer. It's trying to decide what to do."

A howl came up from behind them. The rakul raised its head and looked around. It bounded close enough for Charlie to make out the small fine feathers on its arms and the folds in the leathery skin of its neck. Its teeth were as big as his forearm. A breeze blew the smell of carrion and earth toward them.

Justin buried his face in Charlie's stomach. Charlie's free arm snuck around the kid, patting his back awkwardly. The other hand flexed at the gun, keeping it ready. He'd need a very precise shot to even slow a rakul.

Time slowed. The beast glanced at them directly from time to time. It bent to sniff at a tongat body and then lifted its head again, apparently surprised that the possible dinner in front of it was alive.

Charlie aimed his gun at the rakul. His hand shook. His own rules told him to allow predators to kill, but he had put the tongat in harm's way, and it shouldn't die because he'd stunned it.

Another tongat bayed, then a third.

The rakul glanced around and then cried out. The high-pitched screech drove a smile out of Charlie.

Other than his hand patting Justin's back, he wasn't certain he could move if he had to, even in self-defense. His eye stayed on the beast, drinking details. He'd never been so close to one. "What terrible beauty," he whispered, and Justin clutched him harder.

The tongat closest to the rakul pushed itself up and then raced away, a little unsteady on its feet but obviously driven by fear.

Two more rakuls came up over the rocky ridge, both bigger than the one they stared at. The biggest called sharply. The one close to them turned and jumped away, its thick tail thumping with every leap.

Charlie closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them and double-checked. Nothing. "It's fine, Jean Paul," he whispered. "It's all fine. It's gone. They're gone. There were three of them." He turned and did a three-sixty visual scan of the area. "The tongats are gone, too."

Jean Paul's relieved laugh on the other end broke the spell. "Wouldn't you be gone if you could run fast enough to outpace a rakul?"

“Even the one the boy shot got away.”

“They’re lucky beasties,” Jean Paul said.

“The tongats? You bet. I’m bringing the kids in.”

It took thirty minutes to bundle the body and the two living kids into the skimmer. “I don’t have helmets that fit you,” he told them. “You’ll have to close your eyes when we go fast.”

“Okay.”

Even though they weren’t moving fast yet, Sam had his eyes closed when he said, “The rakuls might be big enough.”

“Big enough for what?” Charlie asked him as he stepped on the gas a little, sending the skimmer lurching lightly forward.

“Big enough to stop the ice pirates.”

Charlie blinked. “Probably not. Hard for flesh to stand up to machines. But the ice pirates can’t get here. We’re way inside the Ring.”

“Pirates have been coming inside the Ring. More than usual.”

Charlie stiffened. “Who told you that?”

“My dad.”

“Was he trying to scare you?”

Sam was quiet for a long time. Eventually he said, “No. I think he was scared.”