

High Windows

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For Philip Larkin

Part One: Saturn/Escape

"You're not supposed to be here, kid."

He was old, at least thirty, with the bulky build of someone who'd spent some past time in high-g. His left hand rested on his hip and the nails were bitten, the skin around them inflamed. His index finger was a thing like gold and it made my heart beat faster when I saw it.

"I'd like to purchase passage on your ship. Sir."

The docks were empty. His was the single ship in the bay. Beyond the thick walls the always-present windows showed Saturn, its own rings grander and richer than anything as tawdry as my feeble human-made home. New Akra was like a cheap imitation of Saturn's rings, small and frail and chipped like an old lady's wedding ring. I had had enough of both.

Grey eyes looked me over. Fine wrinkles coalesced around them. "You a runaway?"

He must have seen the answer in my eyes. "I want to leave New Akra."

Home. The word is like an unscratched sore. I thought of my mother, in her hydroponics garden, of all the rotations of the Ring I had lived through so far. There is not much to do on a space Ring with your nearest neighbour being a gas giant. I wanted to see new places. Anywhere would do.

He barked a laugh. "Can't blame you. Still, I can't take you. I'd get into trouble with the House of Justice and my job depends on your people letting me trade here." He scratched an ear. "There're enough freight ships between here and Titan could take my place."

"I can pay," I said, desperately. I had three hundred dinars, printed money, and I pushed them at him.

He didn't move to take the money. His gaze moved over my body again, more thoughtfully this time. "Perhaps you can," he said at last, and waited until I nodded.

"Come with me."

He led me into the ship. It was a dark metallic triangle, blade sharp. Designed to go in and out of Titan's atmosphere and still have near-space capabilities. My first ship. It smelled like old unwashed socks and burnt food left in a small place for too long. Crew quarters were two small rooms enclosed in the belly of the ship. The rest, unseen, was—I imagined—engines and cargo. The forward room was the control room. The other was a small living area with a bed and a kitchenette.

He led me to the bedroom. When he spoke, his voice was very slightly changed, as if someone else was using his voice for a moment. "Stay in there. Don't make a noise until we take off. Don't touch anything."

He closed the door on me. I stayed in place, afraid to move, and waited. A part of me shouted inside, demanding to be let off, to go back home before anyone discovered I was missing. I shifted from foot to foot and tried not to listen to that inner call. I realised I needed to go to the toilets.

Time passed.

