

Follow Me Past Jupiter

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,

Red lights winked around him, pinpricks of blood against the dark walls. His heart rattled in time with the rickety Transport walls—*too fast*—and Dallas bit his tongue. He closed his eyes. Space: his nightmare come true.

How I wonder what you are.

Panic grabbed onto his ankles: what if history repeated itself?; what if he forgot how to move on?; what if the hole in his chest—someone sacred ripped away from him—never stitched itself back together?

Up above the world so high,

Gravity bit down viciously on the Transport; the force made him feel like hands were dragging him down, down, down. Shackling him. But even gravity couldn't bolt him back together—not after space had killed off green eyes, reckless joy, stolen joy. A boy; a ghost.

Like a diamond in the sky.

As the Transport ripped into a new atmosphere, fireworks flooded his vision. It was terrifyingly bright—dazzling like heaven—and Dallas let himself cry. Pearly tears clung to his skin, sticky and cold. For once, life did not feel so glorious, and Dallas wished that he was the one dead.

50 DAYS BEFORE FINAL DEPARTURE

Earth: depressing garbage heap by day, rowdy melee by night. Where children played on missile shells; where brotherhood was a necessity; where space glimmered above like an open door.

Earth: 50 days until abandonment. The number was more than daunting.

“Aren't you excited?” Kit squealed.

“Not really,” Dallas muttered. “What about you? Aren't you nervous?”

“Not at all,” he chirped, wide smile genuine. “What’s there to miss?”

Life as we know it, thought Dallas. His mouth went dry like glue, *50, 50, 50* running laps in his head. His heart pounded: *they left, you’re leaving*. It felt like he was holding onto Earth with a crooked pinky finger.

Kit skipped ahead, oblivious to his turmoil.

Here, so close to departure, the world became bearable. Moonlight dusted over the city. Underneath the cover of starlight, no perilous sun to roast him, his burnt skin felt cool. The ugly stain of carnage, the perpetual stink of rotten sulfur—even that was fine now.

And above, space’s speckled canvas winked mockingly. *We’re taking this from you. We’re taking your home from you*, it whispered, snake-like.

He glared at the sky, but Kit sighed, stargazing wistfully. Kit, a boy: innocent, young, naive. Kit, who didn’t quite understand the magnitude of space and its unfair perils.

Anger rammed into Dallas, harshly and at once.

“Let’s go home,” he said, moving on.

41 DAYS BEFORE FINAL DEPARTURE

“You don’t like space.”

It wasn’t a question.

Dallas took a deep breath. “Earth is the better option.”

Kit laughed, uncharacteristically humorless. “There’s no food. No water. No people. No money. Just war and sickness—how is it better than anything?”

Dallas chewed on his lip, words simmering under his tongue.

“It could’ve been something great”—he was cheated—“and now it’s dying,” Dallas ranted. “Earth was supposed to be my home.”

“But it’s *not* your home?”

The words quivered in the musty, stinky air.

“Well...” Dallas sighed. “Space is just...”

Earth was summer air buzzing not with mosquitos, but with whining jets. Earth was the soft fluff of Kit’s hair; Earth was small rations coupled with stolen apples, sweet and crunchy. It was glaring heat, soothed by gentle lullabies and rowdy laughter.

Space, on the other hand, was evil incarnate. The last cry of a remorseful mother; brisk, firm hugs from a forgotten father; scarred hands paling under the weight of betrayal. Poor human brains, great as history painted them, rusting during Dallas’s time. Civilization falling bait to death.

He shivered. Space was a glamorous possibility that had waltzed into Dallas's life, looking every part the raging home breaker. And he hated it.

27 DAYS UNTIL FINAL DEPARTURE

"I can't wait to get out of here," Kit whimpered, eyes staring at a makeshift graveyard, wayward limbs blocking their way home.

Something bitter scorched Dallas's veins. *I can't wait to get out of here* rang in his mind, acidic like a mother's scathing voice. A blank set of parents, clouded with a starry night—*I can't wait to get out of here*. Families—gone; lives—gone, and his brother wanted to go with them.

"I still don't want to leave," sneered Dallas. "It's stupid. Earth isn't bad."

Kit went alarmingly rigid, and before Dallas could blink, tension flooded the air. It mingled with the stench of decay, slightly sweet and very heavy. He kept waiting for Kit to laugh, slap him on the arm, and start rambling—but he didn't.

"Yeah, well that's what you think," Kit growled. "Space saves lives."

Dallas froze in place. Where was the Kit who always backed him up?

Space ruined mine. The thought buzzed like hornets—a silent protest.

Kit was always talkative. That's why it was so unnerving when Kit huffed and carried on, hopping through the wreckage to get home. Dallas followed, tentative, ears ringing with the sound of Kit running his mouth off a mile a minute. It didn't come.

1 DAY BEFORE DEPARTURE #72816

At 12, Dallas thought that his parents fleeing without him would be the worst pain ever. But begging for them to come back, latching onto the Transport propellor—he'd screamed in agony. Above him, his mother had screamed in horror.

They'd worked in gruesome tandem: him, refusing to let go of the propeller as his skin got fused to his flesh; her, pounding against the Transport doors: "Let me out! That's my baby! That's my baby, and I'm his mother, and—what have I done?"

What had she done, indeed, Dallas thought, waking up days later with stinking bandages around his mutilated hands, trapped in a putrid hospital. For the first time, he saw Earth without the protection of his parents' assurances. It was ugly, distraught, and perilous, and space no longer winked with hope and possibility. It mocked him:

"And you trusted me to make you happy?"

He was happy before, with his parents.

That day forward, the constant drone of fleeing Transports plagued his mind. His hands healed into lumps of scarred flesh, but the sound of bombs, screams, and engines haunted him. In the day and in his nightmares, but especially in his sun-kissed dreams.

1875 DAYS AFTER DEPARTURE #72816

Dallas was 15 now and the space migration was reaching a fever pitch. Hopelessness fought with desperation, clogging the air; forgotten bodies littered the streets.

But Kit, a shrimpy kid he'd picked up two weeks prior, was optimistic to the point of near insanity. He'd been nearly dead—translucent—when Dallas unearthed him from some Transport rubble. Now, with a too-big shirt and scraps for dinner, it was like Kit was good as new.

"When are you gonna go to space, Mr. Dallas?" he asked. Dallas scowled, shrugging the Kit's hands away.

"Don't grab my shirt," he muttered. "And I'm not going to space. I'm going to stay right here."

Kit's confusion was comical. "That doesn't make any sense! Everyone wants to go to space. My parents wanted to go to space, and I bet yours did, too, Mr. Dallas," Kit beamed. "But it's okay: I've got you now. I don't need them anymore."

A strange feeling wriggled uncomfortably in Dallas's heart. "Whatever. Space sucks and you can't trust anyone." Not even your own dreams. "Don't forget that."

Kit laughed, light and airy. "That's stupid. You're here. I trust you."

"That attitude might get you killed," Dallas grumbled. There was no bite in his words.

They continued on. Transports soared overhead, uglier than even bombs. The smog smelled sweet against rotting waste. The sun burned, and Kit smiled.

22 DAYS BEFORE FINAL DEPARTURE

Fate: a capricious judge. Misaligned stars dictating life, death, suffering.

Earth's fate to die, falling apart with greed, pollution, war. Mankind's fate to suffer—shredded bodies, torn-apart families, trampled souls; mankind's fate to continue, a lineage preserved by a bloody exodus to space.

But in the end...no one was triumphing.

It's not fair, Dallas thought, heart numb. His glassy eyes were fixated on a smoldering match, burning like a sun. His left hand held a ticket.

It felt like sickening liberation when he lit it on fire.

Not fair that I have to leave, he thought, breathing shallowly so that Kit wouldn't wake up next to him. *Not fair that we can't fix anything. Not the wreckage, the despair, the death.*

The Transport ticket burned on, an iron cage melting. If he couldn't change Earth, he would run away from space.

Paper wilted, dripping flames and *almost* touching his palms, when—

“*Crap!*” Dallas hissed, hurling the ticket away and stamping out the fire. Panic licked at his rib cage, burning away his exhaustion.

Kit's eyes flicked open. Dallas's energy slowly dimmed, and before Kit's shocked, betrayed words could hit him—*What did you do?!*—he fell to the floor. Darkness, with no stars and no escape.

Because no one won in the end.

15 DAYS BEFORE FINAL DEPARTURE

“You're too young to understand!” Dallas screamed, letting anger get the best of him. Guilt—sloshing, tar-black guilt—tickled his throat like bile. But Dallas *wanted* to rage; he wanted to burn his fear into molten lava and hurl it at the younger boy.

“Do you even *hear* yourself?!” Kit yelled back, continuing to clamber away. “I might be stupid, but you're worse!”

A snarl twisted Dallas's face. It felt so foreign in front of his brother. “You're giving up,” he called, voice harsh.

Kit stopped dead in his tracks. He turned around slowly, fixing an incredulous look on Dallas.

“*I'm* giving up? You threw away your ticket to a new life—and for what?”

Ice water flooded Dallas's veins.

“You think that because I'm young I don't understand?” Kit challenged. “I know you're always so *angry* all the time because ‘space took your parents away’.”

“People're running away—”

Kit shook his head. “Shut. Your parents didn't deserve you. Space has nothing to do with it. And you've been obsessed with staying behind to prove that the unchangeable will not change you, but you will *die* if you stay here.”

Kit looked at him, eyes fierce, sad, angry. “You will *die*. And *I*,” Kit said, pointing at the stars, “am going to end up there. Even if it kills me.”

Dallas tasted blood on his chewed-out lip.

10 DAYS BEFORE FINAL DEPARTURE

I'm sorry littered Dallas's brain. Since the ticket and their fight, the atmosphere had been uncomfortable—but not irreversible.

Parents, space, death, a brother: feelings and thoughts battled for . The galaxy burdened his back; the memory of Kit's gaze hurt. It had been a challenge. Was it worth it—staying behind? Was space friend or foe—or a side effect of human folly? Dallas had battled with the thoughts, finally listening to what he hadn't wanted to hear.

Truth hurt.

"You got the new ticket?" Kit asked, throwing an apple at Dallas.

Dallas smirked, waving the paper slip. "Sure did."

Circumstance hurt, but Dallas had let that define him. He almost let it define his death, but...

Dallas promised: no running away anymore.

1 DAYS BEFORE FINAL DEPARTURE

"You have your ticket?"

"Yes."

"Your space bag?"

"Yes."

"You know where to go once we get on the Transport?"

"Mhm."

"And what to do if we get separated?"

"I—yes, Dallas, I'm good. Chill."

"Okay."

30 MINUTES BEFORE FINAL DEPARTURE

The air stank of sweat as bustling bodies pushed Kit along. Kit trembled with excited, moments away from the Transport entrance.

Finally!

"Ticket," drawled a worker.

Kit grinned, digging through the pockets.

Empty.

He checked again. Empty. Anxiety tickled his throat.

The worker quirked an eyebrow. "Ticket," he said, dragging his words, "or you can't board."

Kit's stomach sunk. *This can't be happening.*

"Actually, I think I forgot mine," Kit mumbled, wincing with frustration. "Can I run and get it?"

"Sure," yawned the worker, clearly bored. "Just be back before sunset."

Kit sighed in relief, sprinting away. He was fine. He would definitely be back in time, and then it'd be sunshine and smiles as he and Dallas made their way to a new life.

FINAL DEPARTURE

He couldn't find Kit.

Was he panicking too early? *Where is he? Did he forget? Is he lost?* The environment wasn't very relaxing—mildew, drifting crowds—so maybe he was overreacting.

The sunset burned like blood. *My last sunset*, he thought. *Kit's last sunset, but he's not here.*

Dallas felt uneasy, the sunset suddenly sinister.

"Sir," he called, motioning at a worker. "I can't find my brother."

The worker chuckled. "No worries, young man. People are still comin'. Jus' sit tight and wait, all right?"

So Dallas sat and he waited and he worried. *What if he's hurt? Where could he be? What if I lost him?* He tapped a nervous beat against his armrest, tension refusing to leave his body.

He found the worker again. "Sir, I really can't find my brother."

The worker sighed. "Description?"

"Short and skinny," Dallas said. "He's got green eyes and white-blond hair. He was wearing a blue shirt, I think."

Suddenly, the worker's eyes widened and his face paled. "He carryin' a bag with 'em?"

"Yes," Dallas said slowly, going cold.

The worker cursed. "Wait here," he commanded. "I've gotta go talk to the cap'n—"

"PLEASE BE SEATED," blared the intercom. "ENGINE START."

The Transport shuddered as the engine roared to life, thunder in Dallas's ears. He fell, pain smarting up his spine as the Transport began to shake violently, rattling his eyes in his skull.

"What's going on?" he yelled at the worker.

"*Crap*," was the worker's only response, a bitter hiss as he sprinted away.

Dallas watched him leave, one hand on the vibrating walls until he stood and chased the worker. Something nervous—something terrible, something *hysteric*—clawed at his insides.

It was dark, making it hard to navigate, but eventually, Dallas stumbled into the control room. Chaos flooded the room. Bright lights, beeping machines, frantic voices.

The worker was yelling loudly. “Captain—there’s—you said everyone was accounted for!” he cried.

“I must have miscounted,” grumbled the captain. His eyes were conflicted, pained, stormy.

“Is he all right? My brother?” Dallas screamed, bursting into the control room. “*Is he?*”

He couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, desperate against the fading chaos. Everyone’s voices tapered to silence, leaving only *blips* and *pings* and Dallas’s panicked breathing.

The captain’s eyes were downcast.

“Wait, *wait!*” he screamed. “Go back down! You can’t just leave him behind!”

His head spun; his lungs capsized. The captain did nothing but grit his teeth and sigh.

“Well?” Dallas roared. “Turn around!”

“*I can’t!*” spat the captain. The worker flinched away. “Transports aren’t designed to go back—nobody’s missed a departure, *ever.*”

Dallas felt himself go cold.

Let me out! Let me out! rang in his head, the warped voice of his mother chasing him now, at the worst time. Had she been told the same thing? Bought her way to salvation and then been denied her escape? Had she felt her heart cave in on itself?

“I’m so, so sorry,” said the captain, voice filled with pity.

Dallas didn’t want sympathy—he wanted to save his brother.

The engine suddenly cranked up to a scream. The captain bit his lip, cursing as he toggled with the controls. The chaos returned, turning into white static.

Heavy hands patted his shoulders.

“Sir,” said the worker, “it’s a safety hazard to be standing. You need to be seated.”

“No,” whispered Dallas. *No, no, no.*

Fury reared in his gut.

“You have to go back!” he roared, lunging at the captain—slamming into a solid arm.

Dallas struggled against the worker: kicked, screamed, cried. The worker’s eyes gleamed as he led Dallas into his seat, disgustingly pitying. An animalistic growl tore itself out his throat; he sobbed *no*. No to the messy tears staining his face; to the seatbelt

caging him in; to humanity's willingness to give up. It cost them their planet. It cost him his *brother*.

His mind spun and spun—*what, how, why, no, no, no. Let me go, let me go, let me go.*

With one final shriek, the Transport took off into the night sky, a blaze of white-hot fury.

He thought he saw a glimmer of green eyes out the window, but it could've been a cruel trick of his hazy mind. The night sky sped closer and closer until it loomed over Dallas, filling him with all-encompassing fear: every star was like a cold eye.

The Transport thundered through the atmosphere. Eruptions of white light lit the dark interior, bright like stars and flashy like fireworks. Popping and rattling and crackling.

Kit would've loved fireworks. Kit: his present, future—his past, left behind in Earth's empty history. Kit, an angel, a friend, a brother. He thought he saw an outstretched hand, fiery in its celestial glory, scraping the night sky—a child's hand.

But after that, Dallas was too scared to open his eyes anymore.

200987 DAYS AFTER FINAL DEPARTURE

Earth could never compare with the new planet. Earth was ugly in every way the new planet was beautiful: kind, clean, warm.

In the same way, the new planet was impossibly lonely. Scars heal, but some never fade: there was new love, new family, new hope—but his heart was still lopsided, messily stitched together. Life never canceled out memories, the questions: *why, how, what, where*.

At night, bursts of white light would dance across his eyelids. Fireworks, stars, white-blond hair. The new planet was peace, but some days he could still hear a young laugh, never aged past 11; some days, Dallas could imagine the end to his long wait.

One day, he would reach out a hand—wondering, asking—for the heavens, and they would respond. His spirit would fade. His body would fall.

But somewhere in the glowing Milky Way lived a child: green eyes, stardust hair—and he'd catch Dallas. Somewhere in the cosmos drifted his answers. And the day their hands clasped again—the day Kit could smile again: that was when Dallas could stop running away

That was his Final Departure.