

Departure

By Clare

The end of Thundera - those four words echoed constantly in my mind as the spacecraft took off from the surface of our stricken planet. Through the telescreen, I could see what had once been a beautiful fertile world entering what I can only describe as its death throes. We had all known this moment was coming for weeks, had been given direct instructions to prepare for mass evacuation, but I had tried not to dwell on it too much. Doing so would not alter the fate of our world . . .

But the events of the previous day had brought it home to me more sharply than any weapon could have. Thundera was breaking apart; scientists had been telling us so for months, but they had never been able to isolate the cause and now time had run out for our planet. If our human/feline race was to survive, we would have to leave.

The first indication I had that this was *the* day came when my father woke me up at around six o'clock in the morning and ordered me to pack my things immediately. "Wh - what's going on?" I demanded, confused by the urgent tone in his voice and less than pleased at being woken so early. I looked at the face that had always seemed so strong with its thick red beard that I like to feel tickling me when I was younger, but there was no fatherly comfort there, just that same strained look he had worn for a long time.

"Lynelle," my father repeated, "get dressed quickly - we don't have much time!" Then, as I rummaged round for my favourite yellow tunic and grey trousers, he hurried through to my parents' room and woke my mother. From what I heard, she too didn't seem to be pleased to be woken up so early and it was a few moments before I heard my father's voice again. "Get Willow up and let's get out of here," he said in an urgent whisper as footsteps on the landing told me my mother was on her way to Willow's room.

Willow, I should explain at this point, is my younger sister. She was just four years old then, a pretty child with brown hair in a short bob. Brown hair is an unusual colour for Lion Thunderians like my family; most Lions have flaming red hair - as do both my parents and I - and the odd blond is born from time to time. As is often the case with small children, she could be a pest at times, but I would never let anything happen to her . . .

Anyway, Mother soon emerged onto the landing with Willow sitting astride her hip and clutching the rag doll she carried everywhere. She looked half-asleep and totally bewildered by what was going on - and I understood how she must be feeling. I had known for a while that Thundera was doomed, as had everyone else, but it had never occurred to me when I went to bed the previous night that it might be my last night on the planet. And, even though there could be no doubt about it now, a part of me still didn't want to believe it.

"Mother," I asked anxiously, "what's going on?"

She looked at me with the same expression my father had used. "I'm afraid this is it, Lynelle," she told me as gently as she could. "Your father had just got back off the night shift when the order came through from Cats' Lair . . ."

"What order?" I asked next, even though I had a good idea what the answer would be. I also knew what she meant by my father "getting back off the night shift"; ever since the Crisis began, able-bodied Thunderians had organised themselves into patrols to help maintain some semblance of order on our dying planet. Father had spent the previous night on the watch for looters, not that he ever caught any because, as if by mutual understanding, no-one ventured out much then and the streets were practically deserted day *and* night.

"The order to evacuate Thundera," Father said grimly as he heaved two holdalls filled with spare clothes downstairs and carried them out to where our multi-passenger hoverbike was parked. As Mother, Willow and I joined him in the garden that had once been Mother's pride and joy, I saw for myself just how unstable Thundera had become in the last few hours. Plant life had been all but extinct for weeks, thanks to rising temperatures, the increasing frequency and severity of earthquakes and the gasses which spewed from cracks that had opened in the ground - only in a handful of reinforced greenhouses had cultivation been able to continue, but even that could not last forever. Not least because it seemed to be almost permanently dark lately . . .

"We have only a few hours to get clear of this planet before it blows," he added as he secured the holdalls to the hoverbike and we all climbed onto it. Willow, clutching her doll tightly to her chest cried softly as we took a last look at our old neighbourhood, a place we all knew we would never see again.

I reached out a comforting hand. "It'll be all right," I whispered in a voice that tried to sound encouraging for her benefit if not for mine. "We'll all go up in spaceships and find new planets to live on."

"But it won't be like Thundera . . ." Willow objected tearfully.

"Maybe not," I told her. "But it'll be starting a new life and, as long as we live by the Code of Thundera, everything will be all right." Then, more as an excuse to change the subject, I asked her if she remembered what the Code was.

"Yes, Lynelle," she said, smiling slightly as she recalled being taught the words by our grandmother. "Justice, Truth, Honour . . ."

"And Loyalty!" I finished for her. But the brave front I put up was merely a mask; inside, I too was crying for our doomed world, for the places I would now never see again. I was only eleven years old. It was hard to believe this was happening, even though my parents had explained it to me weeks ago. Thundera was doomed and, as we set off down the street towards the spaceport from which we would depart our stricken world, something happened that brought home to me just how little time we had left.

A sudden and violent tremor shook the street, opening up a huge gaping chasm that spanned the length of the road. Since we were on a hoverbike, we managed to escape it by flying higher, but several of our neighbours (the ones attempting to flee on foot or in land vehicles) weren't so fortunate. I watched in horror as the quake sent them flying like waste paper. I heard their terrified screams as they were all plunged into the chasm, screams of those who know all is lost . . . A couple of Cheetahs tried to outrun the spreading crack, but it was too fast even for their Superspeed.

"Felix, no!" I yelled as I saw a boy I'd started hanging out with only days before the Crisis began hurled into the gaping maw. He was my first boyfriend, the only son of a Tiger mother and a Caracal father, his parents' trait blending in a way that I found rather handsome. His stripes were not as pronounced as they were on pure Tigers, but they were still clearly visible and he had two distinctive tufts in his hair, a relic of his Caracal ancestry. Now I knew he was gone and all the dreams we had shared would remain just that, dreams; Felix would not be coming with us. I sobbed into my sleeve as my father propelled the hoverbike away from the scene . . .

"Nasty business," I heard him say to Mother. "Still, at least *we're* safe."

"But how long will we be safe?" Mother demanded in a tone as close to hysteria as I had ever known her in my eleven years. "Please, Leo, let's just go pick up my mother and get off this planet!"

But, when we got to my grandmother's house, we found that she wasn't even dressed and just stood there in her dressing gown, her once bright auburn hair now faded to grey, clutching something in her hand. "Quickly, Mother - there isn't much time!" my own mother called as we drew level with the solitary figure standing in the eerie twilight of a dying world. But Grandmother shook her head.

"I'm not coming - I decided that weeks ago," she said firmly. "I've lived my life already, but Lynelle and Willow have theirs ahead of them . . ."

"Please come!" I begged as the tears I had been shedding for Felix were joined by tears for the old woman who was giving up, actively giving up, her chance to escape a dying planet. I shifted on the hoverbike to make room for her, but she simply shook her head again.

"No, Lynelle - I'm just an old woman," she said to me. "You children are Thundera's future." Then, she reached up and pressed the thing she had been holding into my hand. "This necklace is for you," she went on. "I've had it since I was your age and I feel you should have it. Why don't you try it on?"

Through my tears, I could just make out a beautiful sapphire pendant on a gold chain. I had seen it before in a photograph of my parents' wedding day; grandmother had worn it then, but she hadn't done so for years although I had seen it in her jewelery box whenever I visited her. And

now she was passing it on to me. I opened the clasp, lifted my hair out of the way and fastened it around my neck, wishing all the while that there was mirror somewhere nearby.

"That looks beautiful, Lynelle," Grandmother told me. "And please don't grieve for me," she added as my tears began to flow afresh. "Just remember all the times we spent together."

Not trusting myself to speak, I nodded mutely and waved her a forlorn farewell as I set off to the spaceport with my parents and sister. I watched her waving her white handkerchief like a little flag until we rounded a corner and she disappeared from sight, a image that, even now, remains etched in my memory. And, as we all stood on the command deck hours later and prepared to watch our world literally torn apart, I prayed that her last thoughts would be of me.