

LORNA HOPKINS KEITH

# CITYFALL





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LORNA KEITH

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

# 1

**D**EEP IN THE HEART OF CITY, Sam expected it to be just another day in her inquiry agent office ... until she logged on to her screen and saw the message.

This is to inform Samanda Lar that if she wishes to reproduce, she must do so in the next six months. At that time, her birth control will become permanent.

“What?” Sam exclaimed. She couldn’t be that old, could she? All women’s birth control became permanent at thirty — a form of population control.

Something inside her awoke. *What had she done so far in her life? Not much, just solving other people’s problem and puzzles.* After her disaster of a marriage, a husband was no longer an option, and she’d never even considered children.

*I don’t want to end up like old Mrs. Jones who couldn’t find her comm hanging around her neck.*

Sam glanced around her tiny gray office. Her gray worktable with the screen on the beige wall behind it; two gray chairs, with

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shelves behind the padded one; and the toilet room and storage cubicle, filled the room.

*Was this going to be my life for however long I survived?*

*NO.*

*But how do I get out of this rut? What can I do?*

Sam shook her head, unease roiling up inside her. It came to her that something was missing in her life — something necessary to her survival. *But what? How could I get out of this rut?*

A request popped up on her screen. A schoolchild wanted answers to a math puzzle. Sam chose to respond. Children should do their own research, she thought, but she needed something to do. With her eidetic memory, she found it simpler to pull up the answer in her head than to key through several menus to reach the information on her screen.

After signing off, Sam stared at the picture of trees on the beige wall above her screen. Everything in City was gray or beige, except for the pictures on the screen or the walls. Outside the vast gray block of City there were trees, she knew. Was this what she needed? Trees and other plants and grass, waiting for her? If she could just get out.

Around her, City, a pile of two-level gray cubes made of the indestructible Volen material, hummed its own song. Layers upon layers of cubes of apartments and shops along dim gray streets, City was her life. A life that no longer satisfied her.

Her screen comm beeped. Sam answered, hoping it was her twin, Brad. He was supposed to be coming home on leave soon. Her heart sank when she found it was a young man who wanted answers to a list of questions. She pulled them out of her head as fast as he asked.

*Another three credits. Whoopee.*

Sam wanted to scream but didn't dare. She didn't want to upset Max, her alien brother.

Another call.

"Samanda Lar, Inquiry Agent. How can I help you?" she said automatically.

"This is James Fleetwood from Spaceport Management. A female of the Ambaak species who has just arrived on the Jarry liner is in distress and requires an investigator."

"I'm not an investigator, I'm an inquiry agent. Why an investigator, anyway? What kind of distress?"

"The female has had a loss she refuses to specify. She wants a female investigator. You are the only one we could locate. Are you able to come to Spaceport?"

*Spaceport*, Sam thought, tingling with excitement. *Finally, a chance to go to Spaceport.* The space station hung in a fixed orbit above the planet. Brad had told her about the shops. Not that she had any credits to shop with. It didn't matter what the job was; just to go there was enough. Someplace new, someplace other than here.

"Yes, I can come up." She had to preserve her outward professionalism, despite the excitement roiling inside. She would figure out how to get there later.

"You are to go to room 666 at five hours tomorrow morning. The female will have finished her sleep period then. Turn right from shuttle exit, turn left into first main hall. Room will be on right. You will be reimbursed for cost of shuttle fare."

"Do you have any idea what this is about?" Sam's business side took over.

"No. Companion wouldn't say."

"Do you have any idea how long this will take?"

"No. Be prepared to stay overnight."

"Very well." Sam looked at the picture of trees. "I'll be there. I require fifty credits plus expenses."

"Agreed." Fleetwood clicked off.

"Whee!" Sam jumped up and did a two-step in place.

"Happy, Sam?" Max, her alien brother, poked his head out of his cubicle.

"Yes. I have a job at Spaceport tomorrow."

"Go, I?" Max, a grey-furred teddy bear about her size, had been brought to the xenolab as an infant of an unknown species. Del Lar had adopted Max and raised him as a little brother to Sam and Brad. Max had turned out to be a shapeshifter, with his own version of their language, Standard.

"Oh. I'll have to think about it."

His face sagged.

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Sam smiled at him. "I have to talk to Todd first."

"Okee." Max disappeared back into his cubicle.

Sam jumped up, put her mug back into its little cupboard, paced a few times, and then told Max she was going out to run. She couldn't call Todd until he went to lunch at noon. She wasn't made to just sit and stare at the screen until then.

After a two-block run in the narrow, dim street, she felt more relaxed and called Todd as soon as she could. "Todd, guess what? I have a job at Spaceport tomorrow."

"Wow." Todd, Brad's and her legal expert, was also their best friend. "Are you sure it's legit?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" That it might not be had never occurred to her.

"What was the name of the caller?" Todd asked.

"James Fleetwood. He sounded very businesslike."

"I'll look him up." After a pause, Todd reported, "Okay, he is what he says he is, and a ship did arrive last night. I think it's safe, but I'm going with you."

"He said it might be overnight. Do you think it's all right to leave Max that long?"

"Do you have any food?" Todd sounded concerned.

"Not much."

"Bring him as Brad. I have a duplicate ID."

"Okay."

"At five hours there won't be any traffic, so we should be able to catch the four-and-a-half-hour's shuttle, so I'll pick you up at four hours."

Sam groaned.

\* \* \*

Sam set her loudest alarm to wake herself, but awoke before it went off. She had been dreaming about a house on a hill. As Spaceport sparked her mind, she fell into her clothes and ran downstairs to her office.

"Max, time to get up," Sam called.

"Mmm," came from the cubicle.

Sam crawled in and wrestled Max awake. She'd finally gotten him to sit up when Todd arrived. Between them, they got Max on his feet, dressed in a coverall as Brad, with his nutrients in his pouch. The human food didn't have one vital enzyme he needed.

They walked Brad-Max down the street to the up-tube and squeezed on. The platforms only held two large adults, and every corner had an up-tube and down-tube. At Level Fifty, they stepped off and took the stairs up to the shuttle port. By this time, Brad-Max was looking around at everything.

Todd had timed it well. The shuttle hatch opened; they embarked and found seats. Sam grabbed one by a window. She peered out and saw green below. *Were those real trees?* she wondered. *If I could only be down there with them.* She had to pinch herself to make sure this was real. If only Brad were here.

As they approached Spaceport, Sam caught glimpses of a round, gray structure. The three disembarked through a square blue room where a large man glanced at their IDs. She held Brad-Max's hand tightly to keep from floating away. She was actually on Spaceport.

Spaceport was City-world's one connection to other worlds. It had hung here forever. Most of the time when offworlders had business with citizens, the latter came up here to meet with them. The Space Service that Brad was a part of flew out of Spaceport. Knowing this and being here were two different things.

The checker waved them down a long blue hall. As they stepped out into a great open space, Sam and Brad-Max gaped. The area curved away to the side in each direction farther than she could see, wider across than half a street block.

Shops and booths decorated in blues and greens lined either side, selling a variety of goods and food. People, mostly clad in brightly-colored clothing, moved in both directions.

"They have a lot of things we can't get in City," Todd said. "Many people from the upper levels come up here to shop. Come on."

They turned the corner and Sam stopped at a shop with colorful scarves. "I want one of those," she said.

"After your job." Todd tugged at her arm. "When you have the credits."

"Pretty," Brad-Max said.

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They moved on. Sam stopped at each shop, and Todd moved her along. She had never seen anything like this; her home, her job, even Brad had completely left her mind. She wanted to go into every store, look at everything, soak in the colors.

Sam planned that, someday, when she had plenty of credits, she'd come back here and explore these stores. The colors fascinated her and drew a sense of longing.

They came to a place with narrow doors on the outer side of the port with the familiar female and male silhouettes, and several more oddly shaped ones. Opposite them, a hallway led inward.

"This is it," Todd said.

As they turned into the hall, an announcement blared.

A SHIP FROM BARDAK IS ARRIVING AT DOCK  
TWENTY-THREE. REPEAT, A SHIP FROM BARDAK IS  
ARRIVING AT DOCK TWENTY-THREE.

Sam wondered if Brad was on it. Although she wanted to see him, it would be awkward, to say the least, if they ran into each other, with Brad-Max.

At the room, she knocked.

A tall, gray-haired man opened the door. "You are Samantha Lar?"

"Yes. This is my brother, Brad, who won't let me go anywhere alone, and this is Todd, a friend who showed me how to get here."

They all moved into a square brown room with another door at the back. A long seat, small table and chair, and a screen on the wall graced the place.

"You men do not need to stay."

Sam felt Brad-Max stiffen beside her.

"I stay." Brad-Max said.

"I believe I will, too." Todd stood with crossed arms, that suspicious expression on his face.

The rear door opened, and a dark man with beady little eyes close together stuck his head out.

"Is she here yet? Oh, there you are, Miss Samantha."

"Samanda," she said, stressing the 'd'.

"Get rid of the men. Biida only wants to see the woman."

Brad-Max pulled Sam toward the hall door, and Todd moved to her other side.

The dark man stepped out, leaving the door ajar. Sam peeked into the small dim room and saw nothing but a large container.

*Where was Biida?* Sam sensed something wrong and eased back. *What the eff?*

Another, larger man charged out from behind the inner door and grabbed Brad-Max. Sam was too startled to react as the dark man yelled “No”, grabbed her and pulled her into the back room with the other two.

“Hey,” Todd yelled as the door closed in his face.

“Todd!” Sam screamed.

A hand covered her mouth, the room went dark, and she couldn’t breathe.

\* \* \*

World slept.

*After Samanda Lar destroys her ex-husband,  
the Volen hand her the mission of saving the  
people of City and establishing their new home.*

The Volen leave City to dissolve, forcing Sam to deal with her people amid the coming collapse, and the alien colonies on this world.

Sam is aided by her twin, Brad, and her alien brother, Max (who becomes Maxee). Joining them is Todd, whose mother took in the twins when their mother left when they were five, and Arlene, the governor's assistant who actually runs City. Together, they find a new home for the residents of City — but one that comes with its own problems.



Lorna Keith, born in Hollywood, California, with a B.A. in Mathematics, has been writing since her teens. Fascinated by both numbers and words, she is also a musician, photographer, and puzzler. Lorna has self-published a science fiction trilogy, attended many science fiction conventions and writing workshops, and has read science fiction most of her life. She grew up in California, lived in Colorado, and moved to Florida with her physical therapist husband, where they live by a lake with a chatty calico cat.