



## THE LINSHA TRILOGY

*City of the Lost*

*Flight of the Fallen*  
(2004)

*Return of the Exile*  
(2005)



THE LINSHA TRILOGY

# CITY OF THE LOST



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## Arrow in the Dark

**S**

ometimes the only thing separating life from death is timing, that split second on the threshold of mortality when the rock is only a foot above your head, the horse's hoof is inches away from your face, the sword blade is swinging toward your torso, or the runaway wagon full of ale barrels is only a single rotation of the wheels away from your body. In that fraction of a moment, life and death become as one, and only luck, instinct, or perhaps fate will decide your next state of being.

Linsha pondered this as she studied the large tear in her old blue shirt. Really, this dependency on timing was becoming all too familiar to her. On their own accord, her eyes followed the line of the tear across her left breast to the fletched tail of a crossbow bolt protruding from the rotting masonry of the old wall beside her left shoulder. A tatter of blue fabric clung to the shaft. One step more, one fraction of a second faster, and she would have been—

Hooves clattered over the rubble, and an adolescent male head peered cautiously around another crumbling wall about twenty feet away. Linsha heard him gasp.

“What have you done now?” More hooves clashed on the ruined paved road and a large male centaur trotted into Linsha’s view. The horseman was big, muscled from years of fighting, and colored such a dark bay he looked almost black. He took a single look at the woman pinned by her shirt to the wall and his face suffused with anger.

“Leonidas!” he bellowed, rounding on someone behind the wall. “How many times have I told you not to loose a bolt until you are certain of your quarry?” He sprang forward and wrenched the offending crossbow out of the hands of the hapless shooter.

Linsha closed her eyes to the gloom around her and her ears to the voice of the annoyed centaur. She concentrated her attention inward to the wild pulse of her heart and the jangled rush of relief, delayed fear, and outrage. Focusing her mind on her body’s instinctive reactions, she calmed her racing heart, restored her breathing to normal, and sent her emotions spiraling into a calm repose. It was a technique she had learned from her mother who had to use it often when dealing with her father, Palin.

She opened her eyes, extracted the bolt from her shirt and the wall, and walked over to the large centaur who was still berating a smaller one. Two others had joined them and stood silently at a respectful distance. All four horsemen were heavily armed and wore war harnesses decorated with the brass emblem of the Dragonlord Iyesta, ruler of the Missing City.

Linsha tapped the bolt against the lead stallion’s burly arm to get his attention. “I’m all right,” she said lightly. “Really. Nice of you to ask.”

Leonidas, she now saw, was a young male, a buckskin with dark legs and mane and a coat the color of sand. He was still in the gangly stage between colt and

stallion, all legs and knees and elbows. A wisp of a pale beard attempted to age his youthful face.

The lead centaur turned, the irritation still plain beneath his thick black beard. “Lady Linsha, I do apologize. We did not know you were out here. But that is no excuse—,” he twisted back to Leonidas. “You do not shoot until you see your target! Do you want to explain to Lord Commander Morrec how you shot his officer in broad daylight?”

The young centaur blanched. Lord Barron uth Morrec, Senior Commander of the Circle of the Knights of Solamnia in the Missing City was well known for his temper and his dedication to his officers.

“No, Caphiathus,” he mumbled. He shot a nervous glance at Linsha. “I’m sorry, Lady Knight.” He hesitated and jerked a hand at the darkening ruins around them. “I am not accustomed to this. It still unnerves me.”

Caphiathus snorted a hearty sound that was not entirely contemptuous. “Then the next time we bring you, weanling, we will be certain you leave your weapons behind, so none of us find a bolt in our hindquarters.”

Linsha decided to take pity on the young centaur. “Broad daylight” was a rather optimistic description of the settling twilight around them—and the bolt had missed after all. She could still remember the odd feelings and sensations of unease she felt the first few months she had spent in the Missing City. It took some time to get used to this place.

“At least he said ‘the next time,’ ” she told the buckskin.

“Lady Knight, why are you out here alone?” Caphiathus said. “It is hardly safe for us, let alone a person unattended.”

For an answer Linsha strode back to the crumbling

remains of the building she had been standing beside when the ill-aimed bolt almost ruined her day. Squatting on the bare ground, she pointed to a faint foot track that passed by the ruin before disappearing in the windblown dirt and gravel of open ground. All four centaurs bent over for a look.

“I saw someone in the market this morning. A stocky man I’ve never seen before. He loitered around the booths, but he talked to no one and he bought nothing. He spent a great deal of time looking at the city walls, the gates, and the city patrols. I didn’t like the looks of him, so when he left this evening, I followed him.” She studied the footprints then glanced up at the horsemen. “Whoever he is, he does not wish to be found. He knew he was being followed, and he lost me.”

Caphiathus did not question or even doubt her assessment of the situation. Until three years ago, Linsha Majere had been a member of an ultrasecretive clandestine circle in Sanction, living a life as a petty thief and con-artist on the streets of one of the most diverse and volatile cities in Ansalon. If she said she did not like the looks of someone, she had ample experience to back up her suspicions. The centaurs who patrolled the environs of the Missing City had learned early to trust her.

The big bay straightened and gazed out where the edge of the old city faded into the gathering darkness. “Whoever he is, he’s gone now. But perhaps we know where to look for him. We found evidence of a camp in the Scorpion Wadi that looked fairly recent. We will check it again. In the meantime, if you are finished here, Leonidas can make amends and carry you back to your citadel.”

Linsha recognized a dismissal when she heard one. She nodded and rose to her feet. She had worked with the centaurs long enough to recognize the worry and

tension that edged their leader’s voice. It was a tension they were all feeling these days. There wasn’t much she could do out here now, anyway. The trail was cold, and the night swiftly approaching. She should probably report back to her commander.

When the silence seemed to last longer than it should, Linsha cast a glance at the young centaur, who walked over to her. If nervousness were magic, Leonidas would have been radiating like a mage’s glow light.

She hid a pale smile. Yes, she was third in the chain of command of the Solamnic Knights in the area. Yes, she had something of a reputation as a warrior and a clever gatherer of information, and yes, she was a frequent visitor to the Dragonlord Iyesta’s lair. But she wasn’t *that* fearsome. Wordlessly, she offered the crossbow bolt back to the young stallion.

Taking it between long, nimble fingers he snapped it in half, then in smaller pieces, and then tossed the bits to the ground. The centaur, like an adolescent released from an expected tongue-lashing, relaxed. Bending his gangly legs, he lowered his back so Linsha could easily mount, and when she was astride, he turned and jogged southward to the occupied quarters of the Missing City.

Linsha looked back over her shoulder to Caphiathus and called out, “Let me know what you find!”

His response was muddled in a clatter of hoofbeats as the three centaurs wheeled around and cantered away along the old road.



Beyond the vanishing traces of the ancient city, a low swell of hills rose from the scrubland and looked down on the fading ruins. Early darkness pooled in the

folds and crannies of the hills, hiding rock clusters and clumps of scrub pine and shrubs that clung to the meager shelter of the gullies.

The darkness also hid two men. They crouched in the cover of a thick stand of brush and watched the meeting of the Knight and the centaurs in the rubble of the city a hundred yards away.

"There, that woman," said one man, pointing downward. "She spotted me in the marketplace."

"And followed you here," the second man added. His voice was level and emotionless, but the first man shot him a nervous look.

"I got the information you wanted," he said.

The second man nodded once. He was tall and lean and wore the long, voluminous robes of a plains tribesman. A hood camouflaged his face in shadow and hid the cold expression on his features.

The two men watched from their hiding place without talking as the centaur patrol left the lady Knight and cantered into the hills. The noise of their hooves pounded close by the watchers then dwindled when the horsemen headed north toward the Scorpion Wadi. Moments later the last centaur carried the Knight back toward the city and the ruins were left deserted once more. The darkness closed in.

The robed man rose to his feet and stepped out of the shelter of the copse. "Tell me," he ordered.

The other man followed. "Give me the rest of my fee."

A bag of coins appeared in the tall man's hand, but he held it back in his fist like a trap.

The spy gave him a surly look and casually stuck a hand in his belt near a hidden throwing knife. "There is a caravan from Morning Dew. It's due in about four days. In time for the festival. The spring crops have

been good this year, so the farmers are looking forward to some bartering. The Legion is not expecting reinforcements until autumn."

"What about Elder Joachem? You met with him two days ago to get the date of the shipment of supplies and weapons."

"Had to get rid of him," the spy said with a sneer. "He was getting too greedy."

"Sloppy," snarled the robed man. "That is the third city dweller you have disposed of. I thought I hired a professional. I wanted no deaths to draw unnecessary attention."

"Sloppy!" he hissed. "That old man got nosy. He wanted more coins, more answers. He thought I was part of a smuggling ring and—"

"There are more subtle ways of dealing with the curious," said the tall man in a tone as cold as a glacier. His left hand shot out, snatched the spy's shoulder, and with surprising speed and strength, wrenched the man around and locked his body against his. The spy had no time to retaliate. The man's right hand slid under the spy's jaw, grasped the side of his head in a grip like a vise, and snapped it sideways. A moment later the spy became so much carrion.

He carried the body into the thicket and dumped it under the heavy undergrowth. Perhaps the centaurs would find what was left after the desert scavengers feasted. Perhaps not. It would not matter before long. Settling his hood carefully about his face, he strode down the hill and moved purposefully toward the lights of the city.

"And there are less subtle ways of dealing with the stupid."