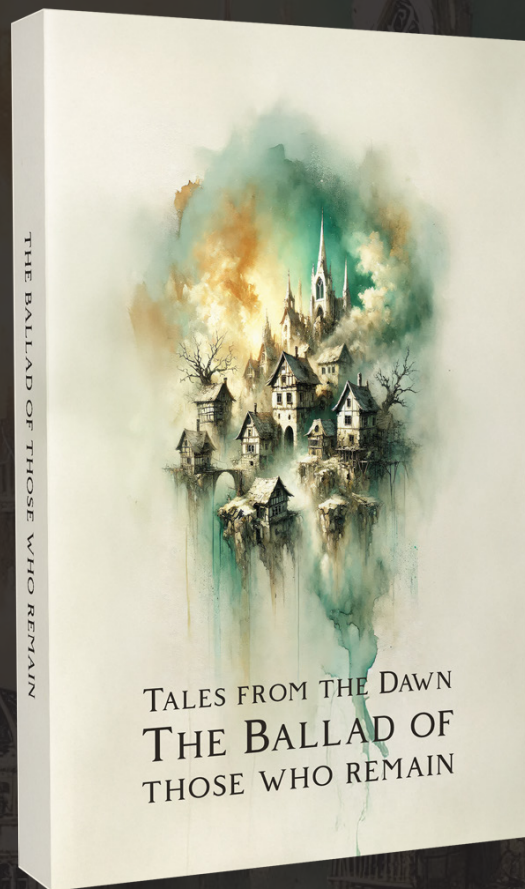




Tales from the Dawn: The Ballad of Those Who Remain is the narrative core of [Fall Dawn](#), the story that shaped its world, its tone, and its conflicts.

Parts of the game, including [exclusive GIFT content](#), are directly inspired by the novel, giving you access to fragments of a deeper story that extends beyond the table... and will continue to grow over time.

To thank you for your incredible support, we have decided to share an entire chapter of our official novel with you.

Dive into the lore and discover what awaits you in the shadows...

Chapter 12

Marek had left the house with a simple plan. Trade some Alaxite with the farmer, get two horses, and with a bit of luck and a generous offer come back with a wheel of aged cheese and some dried meat. If the man still had any.

Before crossing the threshold, though, he'd spent a good while pacing the room, trying to find the right tone. Chest out, belly in, scowl set. But every time he opened his mouth he sounded wrong. Too high. Too thin. Not the voice of a man who could close a deal. When he dropped it to a murmur it worked better. That was it, then. Speak low. Speak like you mean it.

When he finally felt ready he stepped out with a firm stride. Naili was busy in the kitchen and didn't take notice. It was only after he'd left the farmstead that he found himself fingering at the Alaxite pouch. A mistake. Of course he couldn't leave it in the house, Naili missed nothing. But he should have separated what he meant to offer from the rest. Couldn't let them know he had more. And he certainly couldn't be seen standing in the street rummaging through a case like that.

He went back inside and climbed the stairs. Idiot. He wouldn't make a blunder like that again. Back in his room, he opened the Alaxite pouch. He counted out a small amount, what he meant to offer the farmer, and slipped it into his pocket. The rest went back into the pouch, which he tucked under his shirt.

This time, on the way out, he caught his daughter's eye. She'd turned toward him, clearly puzzled by all this unusual activity. He ignored her and left. He ran the line under his breath as he walked: 'I have a proposition for you. Two horses.' That was the opening. He was so fixed on his loose script that he never noticed how the air had changed: somehow thinner, more absent, still as the air between temple walls, and filled with the stale smell of old dust. Like a tomb.

He wasn't even halfway there when the sky above him roared. The sound of an entire mountain range coming down on the city. Terrifying. Wrong. He spun around. To the East the sky had gone pale and something was moving inside it, a thick shroud smothering everything, growing denser by the moment, milky-white. It was its own light source, and it threw shadows black as oil slicks. He looked down at his own shadow. It lay across the cobblestones like a crack with no bottom, and something in its outline was moving, restless, as if swarming with tiny things. He had the feeling that if he listened hard enough he'd hear them. At the second rumble he turned again. No way to tell where the sounds were coming from, vast and dreadful, somewhere beyond the fog, echoing through the whole sky. White

haze was already creeping over the rooftops, sliding slow down the alleyways of Quadalum.

“It’s here. It’s come.”

The words came out on their own. He started running.

The only east-facing window in the house was in Edall’s room. Naili had left the kitchen at something close to a run. She saw it. She had imagined this moment her whole life. Now that it was here, she had no words for it. That was the Dawn. It had come. No time left.

She looked at Edall. His eyes were wide. His face was painted black and white, and he was smiling.

Naili knew she wouldn’t be afraid to sleep rough, in the woods, in a hollow, among the ruins of a dead village. She knew she could face the raiders. She even believed she could face the monsters. What had terrified her, her whole life, was this day. Because this was the day she would say goodbye to Edall.

“I have something for you,” he said.

Edall. The face of death. She was really seeing it now. She’d only ever heard the stories, his and her mother’s, about where that stage name came from. She might have known that in this moment he would choose to truly wear it. His own fate on his face. And everyone else’s.

“No. No. No. No!” The more she said it the more her voice caught fire. “No! No! No!”

“We have no time, Naili. None left.” Almost a whisper.

“I’m not leaving you. I’m staying.”

Empty words. Wrung from despair. The nightmare was happening right now and Naili was swallowed whole by it.

“It won’t go like that, Naili.”

He weighed each word before he added: “You can’t do this to me.”

The most devious words he could have chosen. The cruelest. Because in truth, he couldn’t have cared less about what she might do to him. He said them only because he knew they would break through to her. He wanted to save her. He had to do it now. And they were enough. She would never disappoint him.

She stopped sobbing, slowly. Edall gave her time. When she lifted her face from his chest it was wet through. Her eyes were cast down, glassy. She was accepting. Already.

From the courtyard someone called Naili’s name. Marek. Coming back.

“Take this. You’ll need it on the road.” He held out the leather roll. She took it without looking. Her gaze was somewhere else entirely.

The door slammed. Marek’s voice and footsteps came spilling up the stairs.

“Go.” Edall smiled again.

She broke. Whatever sound she made didn’t become words. He took her face in both hands and held it, stroked it gently, and looked at her with his faded eyes into her golden ones.

“There’s nothing left to say that we haven’t already said. Remember, my love. Remember.”

The air trembled with those words. Her legs shook. The floor tilted under her.

She didn’t fight when her father grabbed her around the waist and pulled her from the room. As they went she saw him one last time: Edall, still in the doorway of his room, death on his face, and the most beautiful smile the world had ever shown her.

Naili screamed. And screamed again. Then she turned and, still screaming, broke free of her father’s grip, because her own legs had to be the ones to carry her out. Out of the house. Away from uncle Edall.

Toward the horror.

Toward the ruin.

Toward the unknown.

If it had to be done, it had to be done now. With all her will. With all the rage it took.

The courtyard didn’t look like itself. Against that unnatural, ethereal whiteness the physical world looked harder, darker, its shadows black and unsteady.

They came out into the street. Anguished voices everywhere, and among them one found its way through. A melody Naili knew. ‘The Ballad of Those Who Remain.’ Edall was singing. Singing for her, and for her alone. His voice and the lute reached her from the east-facing window, ringing through the poisoned air of Quadalum on the last day of its life. A farewell. A caress carried on the wind.

A few steps and the house was too far, the cries too loud. The lute, the voice, gone. But Naili heard them still.

* * *

They crossed to the main road. Others like them were running, terror on their faces, nothing in their hands. Mostly old men and women. Those who could, had already left Quadalum long ago.

The main road opened onto a square where there had once been flowerbeds and gardens. The geometry of those paths, reduced for years to dry earth and dead growth, was now being trampled by a growing tide of people. But these were not the inhabitants of Quadalum. Refugees, driven here by something desperate. There must have been a breach somewhere. They must have gotten in.

Past the tangle of alleyways, Naili and her father got their first look at the gates. One of the great panels had been wrenched from its frame and people were squeezing through the gap. The doors wouldn't last much longer. Some guards were bracing them; others had their swords out and were cutting down the intruders.

The slaughter had begun.

They'd already turned away, throats tight, ready to run, when the earth lurched. Naili hit the ground. Marek went down beside her.

They looked back and couldn't make sense of what they saw. An enormous mass, grey-white, had come down onto the walls and brought a section crashing down on the left side of the gates. Hard to say what it was. Impossible, and yet what showed through the rubble looked exactly like the bare flank of a colossal body.

A second giant emerged from the fog. The shape moved through dust and whiteness and what it revealed was grey naked flesh towering more than twice the height of the walls.

Its face was visible even at that distance, and there was no rage in it. Only terror. More terror than any of the refugees. More despair than any of the fugitives. It was a woman. When she moved it looked like a lunge but slow, imprecise, the movement of something at the absolute end of its strength. Every step an earthquake. She came down against the walls on the other side of the gate.

The first one was getting up. Grunting. Its jaw was broken, hinged to the skull on one side only. It drooled and bled black.

Naili grabbed her father by the arm and yanked. "We have to go!" They ran. "We need a horse!" Marek shouted. "There are no horses."

It was then that Naili understood she had no idea what she was doing. Blind flight would kill them. They were doing exactly what everyone else was doing, running toward the end. Her eyes started working, snapping left and right, hunting for something.

The ground shook in regular pulses. She turned. The creature was coming, dragging itself on ruined legs, no direction, no purpose, lost in some unbearable pain and smashing down with blind random fury on anyone in reach. Its fists hit like battering rams. People fell. It crushed them. It tore them apart.

If they'd thought fear alone could drive them at a dead sprint, now they knew better. Marek's chest felt about to burst. Naili's legs had gone rigid, wooden.

We'll die with all these people.

When the road curved toward the bridge Marek grabbed her arm and pulled. The bridge was right there, where the main road crossed the river from one end of the city to the other. Old and crooked, blackened in patches, the stonework worn loose and the parapet low and broken in several places, easy to get over.

Marek slowed just a moment, eyes moving left and right. Two heartbeats. Three. Then he went. "This way!" Not as certain as he wanted it to sound. He cleared the railing in a clumsy but workable jump. Naili followed with no idea where they were going.

Down the embankment to the riverbed. The water was low, almost still, and on either bank ran a stone walkway, worn smooth and slippery, patched with moss and debris. Marek had worked here, years before. One of his forgotten jobs, one of many. A couple of summers spent on the crews that cleared the drainage channels and secondary conduits. It hadn't lasted long. The reek of piss and shit saw to that. But he remembered something. A junction. A grate. A way through.

"Follow me. There's a conduit. It leads to the cisterns."

The walkway brought them to a corner deep in shadow. An iron grate blocked an opening cut into the stone. They weren't alone. Four men were already working the lock. Not locals. Unkempt beards, faded tattoos, weapons lashed with leather, armour that didn't match. Hard-looking. Capable. Fighters of some kind, not city guards, not regular soldiers for hire. Men who'd learned to get by without orders and without permission.

One turned when he saw them. "Were you following us?" Hard voice, but strained. He didn't want more people at his back. If the flood came pouring down here too they'd be sealed in like rats.

Another man, bigger, face full of old scars, cracked the mechanism hard. The grate gave with a metallic snap and swung inward.

"Move, inside! Quick, quick!"

Low and narrow beyond the grate, the conduit was lined with dirty wet stone. The air was thick and damp, smelling of moss and stale water. Every step made a wet sound underfoot.

They filed in one at a time. Three of the fighters moved ahead in single file; the last pulled the grate shut behind them. They walked bent double. Marek moved with short rattling breath, shoulders catching the ceiling. Naili came behind him, head down. Somewhere ahead someone carried a lantern that threw a little amber light and a lot of shadow.

The conduit bent right, then left, dropping lower. Single file in ankle-deep water. Hard to say how long they were down there, but long enough for Naili to get her breath back, to slow her heart. Her father's breathing was still laboured. That ragged sound in the dark gave her room to feel something tender for the old man. She hadn't felt that in years. But right then she believed they might make it.

The passage widened ahead. A small circular chamber under a low vault, the walls smoother here, the floor dry. That had to be the collection basin. One of the fighters held up a hand for silence and checked each channel feeding into the cistern. He wedged the lantern into a notch in the rock, took a long breath and rubbed his face.

"Where's Arlin?"

The shortest of the four. Stocky, all muscle, face hidden behind long tangled hair and beard. The way he'd asked it made clear no answer was going to please him.

"He was late. We couldn't keep waiting..."

"Then what the hell are we still doing here?"

His voice scraped like iron on stone. "Didn't I say we had no time for this shit?" He filled the tunnels with it. "Rennan, what did you find?" Rennan shook his head. "Ludward? You? Connely?"

Connely opened his palm. A small green Alaxite stone caught the light. The short one looked ready to hit him. He grabbed his wrist instead. "For fuck's sake, Connely. For fuck's sake. That wouldn't warm a bucket of water. We're leaving."

He took the torch and went straight into one of the tunnels. They didn't look at Naili or Marek. Everyone moved. Faster now.

The fighters picked up the pace without a word and the rest fell in behind them. Boots in shallow water, rhythm building. Breathing shorter. Nobody talked. The tunnel was narrow, half-blocked in places with stone and soft debris. Marek caught pieces of the voices drifting back:

“Dima’s right. These people have nothing.” “They don’t even know what to do with the crystals.” “We shouldn’t have stopped.” “Tomorrow we’ll all be chewed up and spat out by the Dawn.”

He stumbled now and then but kept moving. Naili heard his breath coming back off the walls, short and loud. The air was dense with sweat and mould. They went on like that for a time that felt longer than it truly was.

Then after a long blind curve the tunnel cut sharp right.

The man at the front slowed.

Light ahead. Real light. Oblique rays coming through foliage, trembling on an angled surface. A metal grate, partially buckled, pushed from its frame. They’d opened it before. The last of the group lifted it clear without effort and stepped out first.

One by one they followed. Marek pushed Naili toward the gap, then came through behind her on all fours.

Outside the air was cool and damp. A path worn through the vegetation ran alongside the walls of Quadalum. Ahead, the western horizon and a red sunset sky. At the edge of the path, tied to stakes driven quickly into the ground, stood four horses. Dirty and skittish, breath rising in clouds against the light. Saddled. Ready.

One of the men checked the tunnel behind them. Another was already mounted. Naili turned east, where the high walls cut off everything but the advancing whiteness of the Dawn eating the sky above their heads.

“It’s not over, sweetheart. Come with me.”

The scarred man gestured for her to mount. She turned and saw one of the others helping her father up. She didn’t know what to call it. Not heroism. Not kindness. But they had no choice, and she got on.

* * *

They rode without speaking. The path wound through sparse scrub and nervous slopes, rising and falling as if it never truly meant to lead anywhere. The horses were skittish and thirsty and laboured at every climb, their hoofbeats broken and uneven. For a time the white sky seemed to be keeping pace with them, seemed to be catching up. But when the city was gone behind them they knew they’d made it. The Dawn wasn’t following.

Only when the sun went behind the hills and the light started going violet did one of the men pull back. A small clearing ahead, covered in scrub and long shadows.

They dismounted one by one. The horses were foaming at the mouth, blowing like they'd gone twice the distance. Marek got down with difficulty and stayed bent over with his hands on his knees, catching his breath. Naili dismounted in silence, her legs shaking, knowing exactly what she'd put them through.

Two of the men set about clearing a rough perimeter, piling the scrub in the centre. The horses were tied. Animal skins were laid on the ground. The others moved through the tree line with blades drawn. Not a word from anyone.

"That was close," said Marek, keeping his voice low to give it more weight.

Silence. They ignored him entirely.

Naili watched them work. They knew what they were doing. Practiced. They matched something Edall had described to her. He called them Erranti: organised groups of warlords, mercenaries, ex-soldiers, anyone with the build and the nerve to carry a weapon and cut west through the wild country. Alaxite hunters running for their lives. Some had started the journey when the Dawn was still only a prophecy. Others had come from the far East and outrun it from the beginning. These men were neither. They had the same white sky at their backs as Naili and her father. Like them, they had built no head start in the flight. The difference was something else: they were solid, strong, armed. And they had surely gotten this far by preying on wretches like her.

The man with the raw voice waited until the two scouts were back. He walked toward Naili and Marek. "Get undressed," he said.

In that exact moment Naili wished she'd been crushed by the giant, trampled by the crowd, chewed apart by the Dawn. Anything would have been better. "What do you want from us?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He looked at her father, then at her, and something shifted in his face. The commander's eyes were gone. What replaced them was the bright, crooked look of a child who's just been given something.

"You going to kill us, you sons of bitches?" Marek shrieked, his voice no longer deep at all. "They're going to kill us, Naili, killers, all of them! They'll take everything and slaughter us like dogs!"

"Cooperate, Father." Flat.

“Cooperate so they can kill me?”

“You’re lucky,” she said, turning to him. “Do what they say. They might let you go or they might kill you. But they won’t rape you all night. Or any night after.”

The raw-voiced man circled her. He unclasped her cloak. Another undid her belt. The other two took Marek. Brutal. Shoving him, yanking at him, tearing the fabric from his back. Marek tried to pull away but his resistance was nothing, small disconnected movements like a man swatting at flies. He’d never learned to fight. It showed. They laughed.

Naili covered herself when they bared her chest. They pushed her hands down. She raised them. They shoved them down again. They pulled down her trousers. Completely exposed. They moved around her like predators at play, taking their time.

“This one’s got something, Dima.”

His clothes partly pulled off, partly torn away, Marek had nothing left but to shield his treasure with his hands. Dima snapped his head around, the commander’s resolve back in his eyes. He crossed to Marek with a hard stride and grabbed at the pouch almost like a slap. Marek wrenched it back and in the same desperate motion pulled the knife from his pocket and threw himself at him. Dima caught the blade fast, twisted his wrist, stripped it from him and drove it straight into his belly. Naili watched her father drop to the ground, dazed, staring at the knife handle jutting from his stomach.

“No,” she screamed, going for him. The scarred man caught her, wrapped himself around her, his hands moving over her, indifferent to everything else. “Father!”

Marek pulled the knife out while the Erranti jeered. Blood came in spurts. He pushed his hand into the Alaxite pouch and came out with a fistful and held it up like it meant something. “Stop!” His voice was different now. Not shrill, not low. Something else.

Silence for a moment. Then they howled. “Full of surprises, friend,” someone said.

Naili’s eyes went wide, the filthy hands violating her forgotten. “Stop!” Marek didn’t know what he was doing. Maybe he hoped the stones would activate on their own, save him somehow. But nothing happened and his senses were leaving him. In a little while he’d be gone and they’d be laughing when he went.

The Ballad of Those Who Remain

came back to her then, lost somewhere in the tunnels of that sewer and found again. Her rage and disgust for those men gave her back the clarity she needed. Edall’s pouch was at her feet, next to her torn clothes. Close enough. She could feel it. The Alaxite inside would answer her will.

“Blow, Father.”

A whisper. Her eyes hunting across the dark for his, cat-sharp. They found him. “Blow, Father!” A scream now, raw and absolute. “Blow!”

Ignoring the pain of filling his lungs was almost certainly the most heroic thing Marek had ever done in his life. In that moment, chest full, he found out he was strong too.

Then he did it. He blew.

Like bellows breathing life into embers, the green light of the Alaxite ignited in his hands and sent sparks into the air. A scorching emerald cone tore through the space in front of him for nearly a hundred paces.

Marek didn’t see the men running toward him. Didn’t see their faces crumple like burning paper, flesh turning to ash, blackened skeletons folding into smoke.

When he opened his eyes there was only dark smoke. Dizzy, going under. The ash-thick air burned in his eyes. He was going to die soon. He knew it. He let his eyelids fall.

No. Where was Naili?

One more moment. He forced it. Something was moving a little way ahead. A body on hands and knees, shaking white embers from itself. Naili got up, coughing, lurching, pushing through drifts of smoke toward where she knew he’d be. Where the soot touched her the thin shield she’d summoned lit blue, trembling, like the surface of still water when an insect lands on it.

She knelt and pressed her hand to his belly. Blood and piss had soaked through his trousers and pooled on the ground beneath him. She looked around with eyes full of tears running black through the ash on her face.