



# GODS OF THE FALL

---

## BREATH OF GOD

BY BRUCE R. CORDELL



**BREATH OF GOD**

**by Bruce R. Cordell**



## CREDITS

### **Writer**

Bruce R. Cordell

### **Editor**

Susan Morris

### **Proofreader**

Dennis Detwiller

### **Cover Artist**

Lie Setiawan

### **Graphic Designer**

Bear Weiter



© 2016 Monte Cook Games, LLC

CYPHER SYSTEM and its logo are trademarks of Monte Cook Games, LLC in the U.S.A. and other countries.

All Monte Cook Games characters and character names, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are trademarks of Monte Cook Games, LLC.



## BREATH OF GOD

By Bruce R. Cordell

He trudged along in the dust, pausing occasionally and adjusting the straps holding a massive book that rode his back like some mute ungainly infant. The road was deserted and bone-cold under the moon's dreaming face. Dim light from the pearly glow surrounding the moon's disk revealed dead trees, tumbled structures, and the ruins of a failed civilization in all directions except ahead, along the road.

Indignant trumpeting came from somewhere behind him. He looked around. An elephant was catching up to him, but was still far back along the dim track. The swaying lanterns on the carriage fixed to the beast's back jolted with each step.

He shuffled to the road's edge and took out his pipe. Red light flared as he set matchstick to tobacco brick. Smooth smoke gave him a moment's peace from the tome's weight as he watched the plodding beast advance.

When the elephant finally drew even, it stopped with a jingle of reins.

A craggy female face peered down at him from the sedan chair surmounting the carriage. "Need a ride, padi?"

"Padi? I'm no teacher. Call me Sabien."

"My apologies. The book you bear . . ."

Sabien adjusted the straps, which were cutting into his shoulders. "No. I do not instruct. But I'll take that ride."

"Two stars," said the elephant driver. "For that, I will carry you all the way to Corso. Four stars, and you can ride in the carriage. It's warmer." The driver's smile was ingratiating.

Sabien knocked the ashes from the bowl with a tap on his boot heel. "No carriage. I'll ride with you." The carriage driver let down a rope ladder, and Sabien joined the woman on the sedan chair. He counted out two gold coins into the driver's gloved palm.

The driver pocketed her payment and twitched the reins. The elephant heaved into motion. He unbuckled the straps securing his burden, shrugged it around with a relieved sigh, and took the book's weight in his lap. He leaned his head back against the cracked headrest, closing his eyes. The elephant's dry, faintly sweet odor somehow made the chill air less biting.

"I'm Bolaz," came the driver's voice.

Sabien grunted, his eyes still closed. He hoped she would recognize his desire for silence—

"Lone travelers on the road between Corso and Somorrah are rare. Are you a trader?"

Sabien counted to three, then opened his eyes. "I have an appointment that is long overdue."

"Oh?" Bolaz's attention flickered from Sabien to his book.

*How many stars to buy your indifference?* Sabien wondered. But he grunted in acknowledgment.

"What's it about? If you don't mind my asking. It looks important." The driver's eyes lingered again on the weighty tome. It was bound between two sheets of blank, yellowish iron. Bolaz presumably couldn't see the faint nimbus surrounding the book, a nimbus Sabien had only learned to see himself a year ago. The secret silver glow took the form of a single floating symbol: a gust of wind inscribed in silver that never tarnished. For all its beauty, the thing was heavy as guilt.

He rested one hand on the metallic cover. "Important? Yes. But also dangerous." He guessed that Bolaz was nearing sixty. She'd known the gods before the Fall. Maybe she fondly recalled the magnificent time that Sabien, only eighteen, had never known. If so, perhaps she wouldn't turn him over to the first Reconciliator they saw in Corso if he told her the truth.

Because, more than anything else, Sabien wanted to tell his story. He felt so alone. Explaining what he was about might relieve a portion of his regret, even if just for a few hours. Maybe the driver would commiserate with him. But more likely she'd condemn him for getting his best friend killed, then stealing the book, as he condemned himself every day.

So when the driver asked him why the book was dangerous, he didn't explain that it was a banned book written by a god who'd died in the Fall with all the others. He lied and told her it was cursed.

She scooted to the far side of the sedan seat and scowled.

"I'm delivering it to bibliomancers in Corso so that they may dispose of it safely."

“How responsible of you.” Her tone implied something different.

Sabien let his eyes fall shut once more, trying to lose himself in the elephant’s rolling gait. He wondered how the massive creature had been tamed to accept the carriage. Probably in the usual, brutal way where babies were separated from mothers, then beaten into submission. Once upon a time, he’d never considered the plight of others, let alone beasts. Now he couldn’t avoid feeling the ancient pain and fear etched into the creature’s bones. One more cruelty in a world littered with wrongs.

He managed a brief nap, despite the relentless creaking of the leather harnesses holding the chair and carriage to the elephant’s back. As he often did, Sabien dreamed of flying free of the Nightland. Of gliding on a red kite into the smoldering south, across the Sea of Shadows where sunlight yet warmed distant lands, where gods—old and new—never roamed. On wings of taut fabric, he flew free.

The book’s oppressive weight biting into Sabien’s thighs woke him. He’d slept through their arrival in Corso. The moon of Nod was low in the west, partly obscured by jutting towers of the city skyline. He rubbed sleep from his eyes and shrugged back into the straps that held the tome on his back. The driver persevered in silence as she let down the rope ladder.

Pausing halfway down, Sabien hung on the rope. Leaning close, he breathed into the elephant’s twitching ear. “Be reborn in the now; forget the pain. It doesn’t define you. Leave it behind. Be at peace, great one.”

The creature shuddered. “What are you doing?” demanded Bolaz. “Don’t pester the beast!”

Sabien patted the elephant's shoulder. Its trunk curled as it regarded him. The dawning relief evident in its gaze made Sabien feel somehow lighter, as if he could fly in truth.

Then the weight of the tome on his back shifted, pulling him back down with a brutal tug. Grunting at the burden, he disembarked. His boot heels clicked on the cobbled street as he walked away.

Corso's high lamps, burning red as blood, threw his shadow across the ebony sculptures of nameless avatars lining the raised streets of High Corso. He blended into a crowd dressed in fine coats, hats like stovepipes, and streaming scarves dyed scarlet, sapphire, and gold. Servants in gray followed after their masters, obedient with downcast eyes.

He set his feet toward the inn called the Fat Seraph. No one remarked on his tome. That was partly because most people kept their eyes averted. Meeting the eyes of a stranger in Corso could be construed as a challenge. In this city, it was easy to be lonely in a crowd of thousands. Even so, carrying the book openly was a risk, should anyone inquire too deeply. But this was his homecoming! He'd returned to make things right. Not as a thief, as when he'd fled Corso. Not as a deserter, when he'd left Tarisa to her grief. . .

The straps sawed at his flesh, forcing him to readjust them yet again.

When he reached the Fat Seraph, he paused. Loose red bricks lay about the base of the building like shoaling fish, darting for cover among layered corals of alley garbage. Two lanterns hung above the inn's placard. One was out. The other illuminated the weathered, extended wings of a seraph.



Seeing the place, despite its oddly rundown exterior, was like tasting hope. He'd spent the only happy years of his life under the tiled eaves of the inn. If only—

Sabien flinched at the clap of shattering glass inside the inn. A woman screamed. Wood splintered, and the door shuddered in its frame. He jerked forward and banged the door open.

It wasn't a bar fight, as he'd guessed. It was far worse.

Five people wearing the insignia of the Kasmandar Slave Company were inside. One brandished a pale document with red letters. An indulgence, Sabien realized with a sick feeling in his stomach. They were slavers. They'd targeted the patrons of the Fat Seraph. The document being flashed presumably claimed everyone on the premises as slaves. Good establishments paid protection money—indulgence insurance—to prevent this sort of thing. The Fat Seraph did. Or used to, before Sabien ran away . . .

He counted seven patrons, some standing tensely, one cradling a broken hand, and another lying unconscious or dead on the floor. But his eyes kept scanning until they found Tarisa.

All the strength seemed to go out of his knees. She stood in the stock room entrance, her eyes wide and mouth an O of surprise. Tarisa, the Fat Seraph's proprietor and the closest thing Sabien had ever known to a mother.

"Bad timing, pissdrinker," snarled a slaver with one ear and a drawn sword now pointed at Sabien's chest. "You're ours, now."

Tarisa saw Sabien. When she recognized him, her tired eyes narrowed and speared him. Her fearful expression melted as fury and pain blazed across her face, as if Sabien's crime was minutes past, not years.

The load strapped to his back threatened to pull him to the floorboards.

The slaver with the sword advanced, drawing Sabien's attention from Tarisa. "Get away from the door," the slaver demanded, "or I carve my name in your corpse. Stand here with the others." He motioned with the sword's tip.

Sabien almost smiled. Dealing with these brutes meant not having to face Tarisa's anger, at least not quite yet.

He had no weapons. He didn't need them since he'd awakened to grace. So instead of running away or acquiescing, as he would've done before, he concentrated on the innocent laughter of children, the sensation of falling without fear of ever landing, and the satisfaction of fresh starts after hard knocks. He manifested his nimbus.

Three points of brilliant, silver light touched the air over his head, runes of wind, breath, and new beginnings. The light touched everyone in the public room, painting their skin, clothing, and hair with the illumination of the divine spark Sabien had discovered inside himself a year ago. Concentrating, he bolstered his aura so that bewilderment turned to alarm, and alarm to terror. He put the fear of the gods into them.

The building shuddered and lurched to one side. Bottles fell from shelves and smashed on the floor. Slavers and patrons fled the vision of Sabien's revealed aura like fleas from a burning blanket.

Eventually, some of them would tell the Reconciliators what they'd seen. Which meant Sabien had, at most, a few hours before the god catchers started hunting him. That should be more than enough time for what he planned.

Only Tarisa remained. The narrowness had never left her eyes.

He let the nimbus drop. In the yellow glow of the tavern lanterns, Tarisa's gray hair was uncombed. Old food stains marred her clothing. Frown lines spread from her mouth and eyes like scars.

Little remained of the vital woman who'd taken him in as a child. When he was ten and starving, he'd come up from Low Corso. Down below the raised streets, people lived barefoot and ragged, getting by from day to day however they could manage in the aftermath of the disaster that scrubbed their faces of hope, wonder, or even despair.

Young Sabien had snuck into High Corso, evaded the watch, and hid behind the Fat Seraph. He'd tried to steal a plucked chicken from the stock room.

When Tarisa caught him, she didn't call the watch or the slavers. No, she fed him, then let him work off the debt by cleaning out the fireplace and scrubbing it down. It was the kindest thing anyone had ever done for him.

He stayed on, working for food and board. He and Tarisa's son Mherl became fast friends. Mherl with his long hair, freckled face, and infectious laugh.

It'd been Mherl who'd shown Sabien the wonder of kites. One day out of every ten, the boys would take Mherl's kite up to the inn's roof and fly it. Seeing that red, lantern-lit kite dart and flit through the heavens, pulling back and letting up on and the connecting cord to control it, and feeling the wind in his hair as they stood on the roof, had been magic for Sabien. His dreams of flying started then. Whenever he saw a kite, which were fashionable in Somorrah where he'd spent the last couple years, he thought of Mherl and how they'd once flown.

"You," accused Tarisa, breaking his recollection.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

“You came into my house a thief, and left it as one. Get out.” Her tone brooked no compromise.

“I’m returning what I took,” he said, loosening the leather straps. He displayed the book to the innkeeper.

Tarisa studied it, then lifted her gaze back to Sabien. Her eyes were pools of sadness, extending into depths of remorse and pain beyond what he’d been prepared for. She said, “Mherl is dead because you couldn’t keep your Low Corso hands to yourself! He’s dead and gone these six years. And you ran! Ran away, and left me alone, to rot and grieve.”

On Sabien’s dare, Mherl had stolen his mother’s skeleton key. Using it, they’d snuck into a traveler’s room whose name Sabien had never learned. The traveler wore two swords on his belt and talked of prospecting in the Ruinscape, where monsters and treasures were buried. More impressively, he’d also given the two boys sugary treats as he spun his tales in the public room.

The taste had been magic. Sabien wanted more, and convinced Mherl to help him gain access to the motherlode, as it were. The concept of wrongdoing had certainly occurred to them. And the danger—the stranger had swords, after all. But Sabien had dismissed Mherl’s concerns, and his own. The dark sweetness on his tongue had driven him mad in a way he couldn’t explain.

Using the key, they’d entered the traveler’s room while he was out. They found the book in a chest under the bed. With its yellow cover like gold, it was a treasure straight out of legends from the time before the Fall. Sabien forgot the candy and snatched up the heavy tome.

The traveler discovered them, two shadowed shapes burgling his room. He buried one of his swords in Mherl’s stomach all the way to the hilt. Sabien escaped a similar

fate only because he'd been holding the book clasped to his chest. The traveler's second sword sparked off as if Sabien clutched an iron shield.

Mherl dropped, his life bleeding out. That's when the traveler recognized the thieves in his room as the boys he'd entertained with stories and treats a few hours earlier. At least, Sabien presumed that's why the man didn't press his attack, but instead dropped his swords and tried to staunch the wound in Mherl's gut.

Sabien had seen that kind of wound before, in Low Corso. There was no coming back from it. Just as there was no coming back for him, once the truth of what happened was learned by Tarisa.

He fled with the book as his friend died.

Blinking away the shameful memory, Sabien said, "I'm sorry for what happened Tarisa. I—"

"You don't get to be sorry! You can't take it back. Mherl is dead. Do you think bringing me this . . . this *object*"—she jabbed a shaking finger at the book in Sabien's hands—"will make it all better? You killed my son. I'll never forgive you."

"I don't expect forgiveness. I'm here to atone for what I've done. Returning the book is the prelude to—"

"Bastard!" Tears broke from her eyes and streamed down her face. Her gaze strayed to the mantle. On it, a funeral urn sat. Mherl's name was inscribed on it. "You shitting, Low Corso bastard," she repeated in a whisper.

He swallowed. His voice hoarse, he said, "I made a terrible mistake. There's no coming back from that. But I learned to read." Telling her about how he'd been enslaved for two years after he fled, about how he finally escaped, and his rediscovery of the book wasn't relevant, so he skipped it.

He continued, "And I read this book. It's an artifact of divine grace, of the gods as they once were. I found hope in its pages."

She rubbed tears from her cheek. "A book of the dead gods, you say. So you want me to read passages in book banned by the Empress of the Nightland? How will that help anything? The gods are dead."

He imagined that she wished that *he* was dead, too. But he said, "This tome has a secret title," he said. "It's called *Breath of the Gods*."

He slung the book behind him again and reached for her hand. She pulled away. Even without touching her, he could feel her pain. So instead of telling her about the spark he'd awakened, he showed her.

And this time, she saw his nimbus. The deep furrows of sorrow in her face briefly lifted to surprise, perhaps even wonder.

She reached for him, touched his cheek. The contact was something he thought he'd never feel again. She'd fed him, sheltered him, saved him from the street; she'd loved him. And he'd loved her, like a mother.

"What have you become?" she finally asked, her voice shaking.

"I don't know. Something new. Or something old, reborn? I'm still me. But I'm also . . . something more. A divine flame burns inside me."

Tarisa's eyes glimmered with his reflected aura. "Others have claimed the same. I thought they were just mad people. Anyone who truly possesses anything of the dead gods, or even claims to do so . . ." Her eyes grew wide. "The Reconciliators will come for you. You must leave!"

"After I make atonement." He moved three paces, and took up Mherl's funerary urn. It was cool and smooth in his fingers.

"I can return Mherl to you, reborn. Would you like that?"

"What? You . . . you can bring him back?"

"Yes. Though not as he was when he died. As he was when he first drew breath." He didn't tell her that granting her what he'd promised would cost him the very spark he'd spent the last year awakening. But her knowing the cost wasn't relevant. It was a sacrifice he'd steeled himself to—

"No." Tarisa blinked. She stepped back from Sabien, shaking her head. She brushed a hand across her face as if to wipe away cobwebs. "Why would I want that? You're offering me, what, a baby without my son's memories? Without anything that makes Mherl *Mherl*?"

"But it's a chance for a fresh start . . ."

"No," she repeated, her voice low. "That's not what I need. You don't get off that easy. Now get out. *Get out!*"

He fumbled the urn back to the mantle. His nimbus sputtering out, Sabien stumbled out of the Fat Seraph. He fled into the arms of the everlasting night.



He trudged along Corso's cobbled streets for hours, adjusting the straps holding the unbearable weight of the damned book. The red lanterns made every stranger's face a demon's mask. Thoughts crashed around his head like broken glass.

Before he arrived, Sabien had imagined all the ways things might go wrong. He'd worried he wouldn't be able to find Tarisa, about not having enough divine power to actually accomplish what he'd promised her, even that Reconciliators would discover him before he made his sacrifice.

Never once had it occurred to him that Tarisa might reject his offer.

“What should I do?” he asked the stars, or perhaps he begged them. A woman with a yellow scarf glanced at him incuriously, but angled her route to give Sabien a wider berth. Sabien paused to let the woman go around him. His eyes focused on a statue, one of many sculptures scattered through the city.

Carved of onyx, the statue portrayed a slender man in armor holding his shield concave side up, creating the basin of a small fountain. Water streamed from the statue’s eyes, as if crying the grief of ages, filling the shield basin to overflowing.

The statue was like Tarisa, he thought. No, that wasn’t right, because the sculpture would never change. Tarisa, if given time to consider, might realize the gift he offered her was a chance to start over. Maybe it wouldn’t wipe away what he’d done, but it would lessen the burden.

Sabien waited out the remainder of true night, dozing on a bench at the base of the statue, on which the name “LIBERATOR” was stamped.

When he woke, he couldn’t recall any dreams. The moon was in the sky once more, signaling the start of a new day, however dark. The city streets were crowded again. He joined into the throng, retracing his steps. He returned to the Fat Seraph.

Neither lantern flanking the placard was lit, but orange light trickled out of the front window. Someone moved inside. He entered and found Tarisa on her hands and knees scrubbing out a stain on the floor. The room was still in disarray, but at least it was empty of slavers and disabled patrons. She was alone except for the odor of soapy water, the tang of roast sizzling on the spit, and the faint smell of ale.



"Can I help?" he asked.

Tarisa sat up on her calves. "You're back," she observed.

The silence stretched as she looked at him. Rather than face her gaze, he began righting stools and tables. With the tome strapped to his back, bending was an ordeal.

She grunted and returned to her scrubbing. They worked in what Sabien hoped was companionable silence for several minutes, until he was out of furniture to right, and she'd removed as much of the stain as was ever likely to come out.

"Thank you," she said. She dropped her rag in a bucket of water, stood up, and regarded him.

When he couldn't stand the quiet anymore, he said, "Have you thought about what I said?"

Her eyes narrowed. His heart began beating erratically in his chest and throat, fluttering like a trapped bird.

"That's why you're back?" she asked.

"I thought—"

"For all that I loved Mherl, what you offered wouldn't bring him back. It would be like having another, different son. Do you think one child is as good as another?"

He raised his hands as if to stem an onslaught. "No. He's irreplaceable. He was my friend. But I've been carrying the guilt of what happened for years. I need to make it right."

She scowled. "I knew it. You're here for you, not for me. You claim to be a god, but you still see the world like a selfish child."

She raised an accusing finger and continued, "You don't get absolution. You're the same self-centered Low Corso brat I saved from the street eight years ago. You think you can wipe the slate clean by 'reversing' what

you did with your sorcery or divine feats—whatever you want to call it. It doesn't work like that. You left me here alone. That was your second crime, after luring Mherl to his death. You never apologized for that either, you never took responsibility—"

"I'm trying to take responsibility now."

"Gods can't fix everything."

She was right. The realization settled over him with the deliberate uncompromising weight of an elephant's descending foot.

He tottered, the book unbalancing him, and exited the inn. It had all been for nothing. He wondered if—

"You there," came a hard voice. Sabien's eyes came up. Three men stood less than ten yards from the Fat Seraph's entrance. One wore gray plate and held aloft a white banner stamped with the sapphire symbol of a sword hanging over a chalice. The other two pointed crossbows at him.

The Order of Reconciliation had found him.

He glanced around at the Fat Seraph. Tarisa stood in the window, her eyes wide and her hands at her mouth. Then he turned back to face his fate.

"Are you a god?" demanded the one with a banner.

By the set of the Reconciliators' shoulders and the certainty in their eyes, they already knew the answer.

Sabien let his nimbus blaze, just as he'd unleashed it against the slavers. The cobbles cracked at his feet, sending jagged lines in all directions. The silver light illuminated the Reconciliators as brightly as the long-vanished sun might once have done. "Listen to me!" he boomed. "Go back to your—"

The one wearing the gray plate raised the banner higher. The sun-bright light faded as Sabien's nimbus

guttered out, and his booming command choked off to a gasp. He'd wondered how Reconciliators could pose a threat to those who'd awakened as gods. Now he knew. They had somehow walled him off from the very spark that ignited his divinity.

For the moment, at least, Sabien was just a man.

He darted for the brick-strewn alley next to the inn. Voices shouted for him to stop. A crossbow bolt splintered the wall on his left just as something punched him in the back with a clang, but not hard enough to hurt him. As he gained the alley mouth, he realized he'd been shot in the back, but the book had deflected it.

He stumbled forward even though his eyes hadn't yet adjusted to the darkness between the narrow walls. The thud of Reconciliator boots on the pavement and their yells to surrender propelled him forward. Each breath scraped his lungs as if he was breathing sand.

A hand snaked out of the Fat Seraph's side door and jerked him in. Tarisa quietly closed the alley door with one hand and whispered, "Hide, you fool."

He scrambled into the stockroom, hiding under the floor panels that concealed a secret cellar half-filled with ale kegs. It was where he'd hid when he'd first found the Fat Seraph as a ten-year-old starveling. He'd sampled some of the ale then, but waited for a prize he'd seen on the way in: a tasty chicken. Tears leaked from his eyes as he lay in the darkness, remembering all that befell him after that.

An hour later, Tarisa lifted the panel, letting him out. At some point during the wait, he'd regained access to his divine spark. The sensation of potency and purpose that normally thrilled him failed to provide any solace. He was fortunate his abilities hadn't returned sooner, allowing the god catchers to sense him in the cellar.

"I covered for you, when they asked if I'd seen anything," said Tarisa, leading him back to the public room.

"I heard. Thank you."

"Telling them you were in my ale cellar crossed my mind, you know."

"Why didn't you?"

"Bringing Mherl back as a newborn wouldn't change the fact that the son I knew is dead. Nor would letting you die, out of anger."

"Tarisa, I'm—"

She pushed a platter smelling of roast meat and spice into his hands. "Eat something. You look terrible." Fresh tears threatened to streak down his face.

"Why?" he asked. "Why're you being kind to me?" He sat at the bar and ate. The hot food was like salvation.

"Seeing those thugs come for you . . . It was like when I first saw you, so alone and so needy. And I thought, why did I save you then, if I was only going to let the Nightland consume you now?"

She'd delivered him from certain death. Again. And in return, he still hadn't offered her anything she wanted.

He'd been thinking about it all wrong. The mere existence of his awakened spark had prejudiced him, as if those newfound abilities were the answer to all his troubles.

But that misconception was just part of his problem. Tarisa had been right to call him a child. He'd been thinking almost exclusively of himself, of how to relieve his own pain and guilt. What could he offer her?

Sabien pushed the food away. "It was my fault, Tarisa. I dared Mherl to take your key. Then, after what happened, I was scared that you'd blame me for what happened. So

I just ran. I ran, and then lost the opportunity to return, until now. I'm sorry . . . You saved me from the streets as a child, and again today. If there was some way to repay you for that, I would. I miss Mherl as much as I missed you."

"I was so furious," she said, her eyes on the floor. "I lost *both* my sons that day. Mherl, and the boy I took in. Mherl died, and you abandoned me."

It felt like a cavity ruptured open in his chest. The straps holding the book sawed into his shoulders like instruments of torture.

He whispered, "You're right to be furious. I can't erase what I did, leaving you. I'm back now, as long as you want. Or I can go."

"You know," she said, a hint of a smile on her lips as she met his gaze, "That alley is a mess. Someone should clean it. Maybe that someone could be you?"

The Nightland, a realm of slow cataclysm and neglect, was forever cold. But it seemed is if the summer winds that still blew in the torrid south, far across the Sea of Shadows, kissed him.

"Right away," he promised. Sabien unstrapped the book and set it behind the whorled wooden bar. He swept to the alley door, feeling almost weightless.

Before beginning his task between the rainworn walls outside the inn, he glanced upward. Hanging between him and the moon was a lone lamplit stretch of fabric held taut by wire struts.

A kite flew high above Corso's jagged skyline.