

The Stars Are Tears

by Robin Wayne Bailey

The last time we were with Dismas and Gestus in Sanctuary, better known as Thieves World, was in late 1989. Since then I have often wondered what happened to Lady Chenaya's two exceptional gladiators. Here, they are - as usual - in a bit of trouble, except that this time their love for and trust in each other may not be enough to get them through. (Note: I have known Robin Bailey for a decade or so, if he ever asks you if you want a "personalized" autograph, answer "yes" at your own risk.)

~ Stephen Pagel

"If the last star falls from the heavens tonight, I won't fear the darkness with you beside me."

Dismas didn't respond. Stretched out on a low hillock just above the point where the Red Foal River flowed into the sea, he dismissed Gestus' romantic clap-trap, and watched a dazzling star shoot across the night sky. An instant later, another star streaked after the first, slicing the blackness, trailing smoke. With a small gasp of appreciation, he sat up, thrust his hand out, pointing, and followed it with his gaze right down to the watery horizon.

For three nights the stars above ancient Sanctuary had plunged from their orbits, creating a spectacular - and to some, a frightening - show. Behind the high city walls, priests shivered and prayed in their temples, and astrologers sweated feverishly over their charts to determine what it all meant, while Sanctuary's citizens watched nervously from the privacy of their rooftops or in awed throngs from the wharves.

Far beyond those walls, well outside the city itself, Dismas lay back again, watchfully alert for the next fireball or smoker.

Gestus turned his head, his gaze trailing slowly down the sky to take in Dismas' profile. "Is this the end of us?" he whispered. His roughened fingers brushed gently against Dismas' hand.

Dismas frowned. "It's just a few shooting stars," he answered. Pulling his hand away, he folded his arms to cushion his head. A blue-white ball flared above and winked out. Afterward, the sky appeared still for a few moments. Dismas watched and waited with quiet anticipation.

Yet in those few moments, his thoughts returned to Gestus. *Is this the end of us?* He pursed his lips and tried not to think, yet the words echoed in his head. His lover's softly spoken question hadn't referred to the apparent collapse of the heavens.

I don't know, he admitted to himself. He didn't want to deal with such questions now. He wanted only to lie in the grass in the warm darkness, to stare into the unfathomable depths of night and count the falling of the stars. Still, he slipped one hand from under his head and reached down for Gestus' hand on the grass between them.

Neither of them spoke again for some time. The shower of stars continued. The river purred gently into the sea, the surf sighed with a constant weariness, and a salty breeze blew with a subtle susurrus. Far beyond the beach, a lost gull cried.

Dismas thought it the loneliest sound he'd ever heard.

*

The faint light of a rising half-moon shone on Gestus when he rose and stretched. Bits of grass clung to his bare, powerful shoulders; he brushed them away and rubbed the back of his neck. The wind stirred the folds of the brief white chiton he wore. "We're due on the training machines at dawn," he said. Bending, he recovered a broad leather belt and a scabbarded short sword from the grass.

Dismas fought his way up from a half-dream state. With a sigh, he sat forward and reached for his own belt and sword. Far over the sea a bright orange star streaked earthward. As it perished, he extended a hand and let Gestus pull him to his feet.

Just beyond the shore, the moonlight fell on something pale that bobbed in the silvery water. For an instant it vanished as the surf swept over it, then it reappeared again.

"What's that?" Dismas asked curiously, catching Gestus' arm.

It might have been a jellyfish or a man-o-war the way it appeared to spread upon the sea, but it seemed to glow with an eerie luminescence. The waves washed over it again, submerging it, and again it rose.

"A piece of sail blown loose from some passing ship," Gestus said. So it might have been, and the fading luminance some chance trick of the moonlight. Still, Dismas stared, his brow furrowing.

Yet again the white-capped surf curled over it, and the sea tried to suck the mystery back into its watery maw. A grasping hand thrust up through the foam.

"It's a man!" Dismas shouted. "He's drowning!"

"Your eyes are dazzled from too much stargazing," Gestus said.

Dismas ran across the grass, his gaze locked on the struggling unfortunate. Grass turned to sand, which crunched under his sandaled feet and slowed his speed. The surf pushed the man down yet again. Dismas marked the spot. Casting his sword aside, he dove into the water and swam.

The moonlight glimmered on the waves. Pausing, treading water, Dismas brushed droplets from his eyes and desperately looked around. Far the horizon another star fell, but he barely noticed. "Where are you?" he called, twisting in the water. "Cry out so I'll know where you are!"

No answer, nor any sight of the man.

Dismas dived. With wide eyes he tried to penetrate the stygian depths, hoping for any hint of whiteness, a hand or face or bit of garment in the impenetrable gloom. A powerful current resisted him, then seized him. He fought free. Gasping for air, he broke the surface to find himself facing the shore.

"Dismas!"

He started at the sound of his name, but could not tell from where it came.

Something closed about his ankle. A cry of fearful surprise bubbled from his lips as he felt himself pulled under. Water filled his mouth. Heart hammering, he kicked, kicked again, and surged upward. Glorious air rushed into his lungs.

"Dismas!" He heard his name again, and this time recognized the sound of Gestus' voice. It came not from the shore, but from some distance to his left. Before he could answer, a cold and slimy grip closed about his ankle and pulled him under once again.

This time, with sufficient breath in his body, he reached down to grasp whatever grasped him, and when he stared through the inky water, lambent eyes stared back. A chill shivered up his spine as he encountered that strange, nearly lifeless gaze, and a sense of horror and panic filled him.

Yet he fought down his fear. With a determined effort, he felt for the hand that gripped his ankle and pried loose icy, viselike fingers. His own fingers locked around a wrist. Those eyes floated nearer. In the murky wavers, Dismas could barely make out a bloated face, a roundly gaping, lipless mouth.

His lungs began to burn. With a powerful kick, dragging the drowning man with him, he strove upward toward fresh air. The weight of the other held him down. He struggled for a better grip on the limp form. Slipping his arm about a narrow chest, he battled to the surface.

Sputtering, gasping, he cradled a dark-haired head on his shoulder. Dimly, he heard Gestus calling his name, but for the moment he lacked the strength and breath to answer. He paddled his feet furiously, attempting to tread water for two. A wave washed mercilessly over his head. With eyes full of water, he

looked for the shore. For a heart-stopping instant he failed to spot it. Adrift in a tossing, white-foamed ocean, he couldn't find the land!

A form cleaved suddenly through the water, swimming with grace and speed. Before Dismas could react yet another wave swept over him, filling his mouth and nose. A powerful current threatened to push him deeper; it tried to tear the unconscious burden from his arms, but he clung tighter and managed once more to win the surface.

Strong hands closed about his shoulders, buoying him up. Coughing, spitting, he strained to speak. "Gestus!" he sputtered.

His grim-faced lover said nothing, though his eyes flamed with worry. With anguished and unyielding strength, he fraught the sea, towing them all through wave after glittering wave toward the shore.

At last Dismas felt sand under his feet. He grasped one of the stranger's arms, and Gestus grabbed the other. Together they dragged the man onto the beach and collapsed beside him. The stranger coughed weakly; one hand twitched, brushing Dismas' thigh.

Overhead, the stars continued to fall.

*

The lamps burned low in the halls of the great estate called Land's End. The Lady Chenaya slipped quietly through the doorway of a small second-floor guest room. Her blond hair flowed loosely about her shoulders, and the white linen robe she wore stirred in the draft from the open window. Dismas and Gestus both turned as she entered.

Chenaya ignored them. Frowning, she bent over the bedside where the stranger lay half-covered by a white sheet. An older man in nightclothes sat on the edge of the mattress. An array of tiny vials containing scented oils stood arranged on a small table close by, and the pungent odor of cinnamon hung in the air. "How is he, Rashan?"

"Very lucky, I'd say," the old priest/physician answered. "He's swallowed a lot of water, and he's suffering from exposure. No telling how long he was adrift."

Dismas drew near to the bed. "He looks starved," he said, noting how the stranger's ribs showed through the pale, almost translucent skin. There was an odd beauty there, too - a delicateness in the finely boned face, the shell-like ears, the shock of ebon hair that curled over one closed eye. He was young, almost boyish. Cleaned up and dressed properly, he would be quite handsome.

"I don't like strangers in my house," Chenaya said, snapping him out of his reverie. "Tensions are too high between Sanctuary and the Rankan Empire. Spies lurk behind every bush and tree. . . ."

Dismas dared to interrupt. "He was drowning, my lady. I hardly think. . . ."

Chenaya's eyes flashed as she cut him off. "Heed me, gladiator," she said. "Get him well and on his feet. Then get him out of here."

The stranger stirred suddenly on the bed. His eyes remained closed, yet as if with some unerring sense, he reached out a thin arm and caught Dismas' hand. Startled, Dismas glanced down, observing a softening around the stranger's mouth, almost a smile.

"If it will allay my lady's concern," he said, "I'll watch him every minute." Gestus spoke up. "We have training duty in the morning," he said with a note of irritation. "Net and trident techniques."

Chenaya fixed Dismas with a stern glare. "Your mind hasn't been on your assignments lately," she said. "Change that. Rashan can keep an eye on him for now. The two of you get to bed."

Gestus bowed and moved toward the door, but the stranger's grip on Dismas' hand tightened. Carefully, even tenderly, Dismas pried the fingers loose. That the boy, even in sleep, wished him to stay, lit a quiet fire of pleasure in his heart. Bowing to Chenaya, he bid Rashan goodnight and followed Gestus out.

As a reward for longtime service to Chenaya, they shared a room on the estate's lower level instead of billeting in the barracks with most of the gladiators and recruits at Land's End. With scant hours remaining before dawn, they shed their still-damp clothes and climbed into bed. Gestus curled around Dismas, and the two settled into the familiar depressions their bodies had long ago made in the mattress.

But sleep eluded Dismas. He lay in his lover's arms, listening to the soft whispers of their breathing. His thoughts, though, were mostly on the room upstairs.

"You want him," Gestus murmured suddenly with only a hint of weary accusation. "I saw it in your eyes when you looked at him."

Dismas shifted uneasily beneath the sheets, drawing his body a little apart from Gestus. "What do you want me to say?" he said finally.

Gestus' hand brushed lightly through Dismas' hair. "Nothing," he answered in the barest whisper. "I've felt you drawing away from me for some time." His hand trailed down over Dismas' shoulder, then pulled back. No other word passed between them. Gestus turned over and withdrew to the farthest edge of the bed. Eventually, he slept.

Dismas lay trembling, alone and frightened, his mind in turmoil. He and Gestus had been together for years, since their first master had purchased them, little more than boys, from a Bhaktar prison and entered them in the arena as a matched pair. Virtually twins, they resembled each other same height and musculature, same blue eyes and sandy hair. They wore close beards similarly. Frequently they dressed alike. They even fought alike.

A tear rolled silently from the corner of his eye as he remembered. He felt his past, all that he held secure, slipping through his fingers like grains of salt, and he didn't know why.

After a restless time, he rose. For a long while he stood naked beside the bed, staring at Gestus, wanting to touch him, but not daring to do so. Guilt gnawed at him, because he kept thinking of the handsome youth he had pulled from the sea.

Though he fought to deny it, the seed of a dark passion grew within him. Slipping a cloak around his shoulders, he crept into the hallway and upstairs.

Rashan had retired with his oils to his own rooms. The boy reclined unconscious on the bed. The sheet lay about his hips. His bare chest rose and fell softly, and the amber lamplight gleaming on his skin highlighted the dark, tantalizing circles of his nipples.

Drawing his cloak closer about himself, Dismas sat on the edge of the bed and studied the sleeping face. "I'm here," he whispered, touching a pale cheek. Once he had thought that mouth almost lipless, but in the faint light it proved full and red.

Once again, the sleeper reached out and grasped his hand. Lids fluttered tremulously open to reveal dark, moist eyes. The lips parted. "Uloi," he breathed, and though Dismas couldn't explain how, he knew it was a name. The eyes closed again.

Freeing his hand, Dismas left the bed and drew a chair close. The lamp's wick sputtered nervously, causing the shadows in the room to quiver and stir. Dismas paid no attention. He watched the boy, fascinated, until sleep finally stole his senses.

*

Deep in the chasm of his dreams vaguely perceived shadows performed plays with themes beyond his comprehension. Voices speaking no known language whispered lines with poetic rhythms that, for all their lyric beauty, filled him with an apprehensive dread. Some figure at the bottom of that chasm beckoned.

He heard his name.

His eyes snapped open. The Lady Chenaya stood in the doorway, hands on her hips, eyes flashing with anger. Gone were the soft garments of a woman. She wore the accoutrements of a gladiator - the manica on her left arm, greaves on her legs, a short-bladed sword strapped around her waist.

"The sun is long up, and you're not on the field." She made a gesture of imperious scorn. "What am I to make of this?"

Dismas blushed at her scolding, but more so to discover that Uloi had slipped from his bed sometime in the night to curl upon the floor at Dismas' feet. He lay there now, a tangle of sheets covering his frail loins, one hand hanging lightly upon his rescuer's thigh.

Dismas pushed the hand away and stood up. Uloi stirred sleepily, then noting Chenaya's presence, roused himself, gathered the sheet closer, and struggled to sit up.

"I only came to check on him," Dismas said, sounding unconvincing even to himself. "I fell asleep in the chair...."

"No excuses, gladiator," Chenaya interrupted. Her stony gaze turned to Uloi. "Are you strong enough to get back in bed?"

Without thinking, Dismas bent to help the young man rise. Gently, he placed him on the mattress, eased Uloi's thin legs into a comfortable position, and smoothed the sheet. "Rest," he murmured. "I'll return later." Then, avoiding his mistress' withering stare, he headed for the door to take up his duties.

Chenaya caught his arm with an unladylike strength. "I'm disappointed in you, my friend," she said, lowering her voice. "I'm not blind. I know something's been troubling you lately. But don't let this sick puppy-dog come between you and Gestus."

Refusing to compound his shame with weak-sounding protestations, or worse, lies, Dismas kept an embarrassed silence.

Chenaya shrugged. She looked back toward Uloi, who watched them wordlessly from the pillow. Odd, she whispered, half to herself. Last night in the lamplight I thought his hair was black."

"It is," Dismas said, but he turned also, and a puzzled frown turned down the corners of his mouth. Uloi's hair was sandy blond. And though Chenaya failed to notice, he spied another difference. Those eyes, seemingly dark before, were blue. "I must have been mistaken," he said.

"Well, I'm not mistaken about this," Chenaya answered. "You're overdue on the field. I'll have Rashan bring some food for this one, but you've forfeited breakfast. Move out."

The day crawled from hour to excruciating hour. The Rankan sun burned hotter than usual. Sweat streamed from Dismas' pores, and his sleep-deprived body ached. Throughout the morning he worked with a group of twelve green fighters, but he found it difficult to concentrate on the drills. Uloi filled his thoughts, and Gestus distracted him endlessly with wounded glances. For the rest of the afternoon, though it pained him, he worked carefully and deliberately to avoid his lover, unable to endure those looks, yet unable to apologize when he saw nothing for which an apology was needed.

By sundown, however, his mood had softened. After the evening meal, when they were alone in the room they shared, he touched Gestus' shoulder. "Are we going down to the Red Foal to watch the starfall again tonight?"

Gestus' eyes reflected a poignant sadness. "I promised Chenaya I'd escort her into Sanctuary. She wants to pray at the Temple of Sabellia."

"The Moon Goddess?" he said, arching an eyebrow in surprise. Chenaya worshipped the sun.

Gestus squeezed his lips into a fine line and looked away. He let go a sigh before he spoke again. "Do you know that some people at this end of the empire believe the stars are Sabellia's tears? They wonder these last few nights why She's weeping."

Without another word, his twin and lover picked up a cloak and walked away, leaving Dismas to stare at the empty doorway in hurt confusion. Finally, he sank down on the bed. Picking up a volume of IIsig poetry from a bedside table, he found his place marker and tried to lose himself in its pages.

Perhaps it was the lush romanticism he found in those verses. Or maybe it was the strangely haunting echoes of refrains half-remembered from his previous night's dream. Uloi stole into his thoughts. He tried to concentrate on his book.

*From the sky or from the sea
She comes in ancient pageantry
With eyes that speak of mystery
And lips that taste of tragedy.*

In every poem some image, emerged to remind him of the boy/man. The words of the IIsig poets rose off the page to take song in a In every poem some detail, chorus of muted shadowy voices. His senses swam, and the hand that held the book trembled. He heard his name and glanced up nervously at the door, but Chenaya wasn't there, nor was Gestus. He turned the page.

*Who would not risk hell's hottest fire
For one night of passion and supreme desire,
To fill the heavens with celestial moans,
For love that sucks the marrow from our bones?*

Dismas closed his book. Perspiration trickled down his face. He burned as with a fever. A sectarius of Bhaktaran wine rested on the surface of a small cabinet across the room. Rising from the bed, he seized the soft-skinned vessel, unstopped it, and squirted a dark red stream into his mouth.

Setting the sectarius aside, he leaned on the cabinet and fought a momentary dizziness as he swallowed the bitterly delicious liquor. He spun toward the door.

Silence greeted him as he stumbled into the corridor. The light of a single cresset, suspended lay a chain from the ceiling, lit the far end of the passage. Everyone, it seemed, had gone to the temple.

He found the stairs that led to the upper level. On the bottom step, he paused, the words of the poets still murmuring in his brain, Uloi's name quivering soundlessly on his moistened lips. Step by step he climbed, and with each footfall Gestus retreated from his memory.

The lamps burned brighter in the upper halls. He paused again, alerted by a quick tread on the stone tiles. Pressing himself into a shadow, he watched Rashan exit Uloi's room and enter his own chamber further down the way. Of course Rashan, a priest of the Sun God, Savankala, would have remained behind.

Dismas moved swiftly, noiselessly, and entered Uloi's room. He stopped on the threshold, his eye caught momentarily by the shimmering trail of a dying star as it fell across the black square of the unshuttered window.

His gaze turned to Uloi. The light of a lone lamp, its wick turned low, fell upon the innocent, peacefully composed features of the face upon the pillow. Dismas moved to the bed and ran the back of one finger lightly over the stubbled beginnings of a blond beard on cheeks that no longer seemed quite so boyish.

The sleeper woke. Lids opened slowly, and blue eyes fired with an unconcealed longing greeted the gladiator. Dismas bent and kissed lips that yielded readily to him. As if moving through a liquid dreamscape, he straightened and pulled away the sheet.

Uloi rose from the bed. In the wan lamplight his limbs no longer seemed puny, nor did his ribs show through his skin. His body appeared well-formed, graced with sculpted muscle. When he moved toward Dismas, there was no weakness in his step.

Dismas extended a hand. "Are we going down to the Red Foal to watch the starfall again tonight?" he whispered.

Uloi nodded as their fingers intertwined.

They walked side by side into the corridor and descended the stairs quickly. Dismas led the way across a common hall, through the peristyle, past the aviary that housed Chenaya's hunting birds. Their footfalls made no sound, though they took no particular care now. Out onto the lawn they strode, and Dismas drew in a deep breath of sweetly scented air.

A high recently built wall surrounded the Land's End estate. In the northeastern corner stood the stables, the practice arenas, and barracks for Chenaya's trainees. Dismas avoided those. Keeping to the shadows, he set a course that followed the southern wall to the River Gate.

Though tensions were mounting between the Rankan Empire and Sanctuary, Chenaya had not yet set permanent guards on her gates. Dismas unbarred the wooden doors. He and Uloi eased quietly out.

*

It was still some slight distance to the river. The grounds of Land's End extended all the way to the Red Foal's banks and southward to the sea, encompassing two great houses that once had been separately owned. Beyond the protecting walls stretched broad, rolling grasslands with isolated patches of woods. The trees along the river swayed and rustled in the salt-tinged breeze. Low on the horizon, barely visible through the leaves, a half-moon floated.

They walked without speaking, heading for the sea. Dismas glanced up at the sky from time to time. The stars seemed to hold their places tonight, he noticed. Perhaps the cosmic show was ending. Yet from the corner of his eye he saw a faint streak slice the darkness.

They stopped on the same low hillock where he and Gestus had lain the night before. He squeezed Uloi's hand. The vast sea undulated, its surface dappled and glittering as it reflected the immense star-spangled canopy of night. Dismas' heart swelled, and the breath caught in his throat.

He felt dwarfed, suddenly insignificant, in the presence of such majesty.

He turned to Uloi. Their chests touched, they stood so close. Their hands joined again. Dismas had never seen anyone so beautiful, never wanted anyone so much.

He leaned his cheek against Uloi's soft beard and lightly kissed the place where ear and neck met. Uloi responded, murmuring softly in his own language, his breath sweet, his words strangely musical.

Dismas thought he had never known such heady joy, and yet he began to cry as, in some dimming corner of his brain, he thought of Gestus - boyhood friends, thieves together, prisoners together, then gladiators, always lovers.

Uloi's kisses turned passionate. They burned Dismas' lips, his mouth, his face.

*Who would not risk hell's hottest fire
For one night of passion and supreme desire...*

Dismas heard the poem somewhere deep in his mind, sung with Uloi's voice, the same voice that had reached up to him from the chasm of his dream. Uloi's touch tingled on his skin, thrilling him in ways he had never experienced, not even with Gestus. He caught Uloi's face in his hands and kissed him.

The moon rose finally above the trees in the east. Its light fell upon Uloi, lending his skin a glow, shining in the fine blond beard and hair, igniting eyes that reminded Dismas of someone else.

He stepped back, freeing himself from Uloi's embrace. "I can't," he said. An overwhelming clarity suddenly filled him. Whatever Uloi offered, it was Gestus he loved with all his heart and soul. He backed another step, trying to catch his breath, trying to master the desire that still propelled him toward the other.

Uloi stared with a hurt expression as he extended a supplicating hand. Dismas stood his ground, and yet a trembling seized him. Was it a trick of the moonlight? He knew that wounded look most intimately. It didn't belong on Uloi's face. Yet it fit there perfectly.

"Who are you?" he asked. "What are you?"

A dark seam appeared in Uloi's body. His chest and belly opened. A squirming mass of unnameable horror spilled out, unfurling, reaching across the brief distance to embrace Dismas. A part of him recoiled, but another part met Uloi's soft gaze, took in the naked, muscled curves of his arms and shoulders, heard the promises in his murmurings.

The chasm of his dream yawned, and the voices that called from it drew him down deeper and deeper into a black abyss of submission. Wet writhings burrowed over his flesh, wormed under his clothing, caressing, penetrating him, stroking with an insidious sensuousness. They filled him with a shuddering, unearthly pleasure.

Through it all he stared into Uloi's eyes. They shone like blue stars, burning with a longing and need and a shadowy love, all beauty and desire written plainly on a face that was not his own, all horror and terror glimmering on scarlet lips. He swayed seductively, sang to Dismas in a voice sweet as flowers, hypnotic and delightful, compelling. He drew Dismas to him.

Dismas shivered with revulsion, senses reeling, flesh crawling with a terrible dark rapture. Wet, warm things slithered over him, within him, unlocking sensations, exploring his lips, his mouth, deeper, knowing him.

The murmuring voices faded from his brain, leaving nothing but a churning black sea of unending arousal. He raised his arms, parting the living sheath of pale worms, to embrace the velvet flesh of Uloi.

From across an immense gulf, he heard his name. Uloi turned, and Dismas slowly turned. A veil seemed to lift from his eyes. Gestus and Chenaya stared in eye-widened horror. A curse broke from Chenaya's lips. Gestus reached for his sword.

The mass of tendrils shifted, stirred. Languidly, Dismas pointed a finger.

"Go away," he said, voice thick. "Leave us alone."

Gestus screamed. His sword flashed from its sheath. Maddened, he struck at Uloi, struck and struck.

*

"It came from the stars," Dismas told Chenaya. He lay under a sheet in his room on his own familiar bed. The Lady of Land's End stood over him as they spoke privately. "Or from the sea. I'm not sure. The voices were indistinct and seemed to use the words interchangeably." He swallowed and hid his face in his hands as he remembered.

Chenaya took a chair next to the bed. Picking up a cup of hot broth from the bedside table, she pulled his hands down and pushed the steaming vessel between his palms. "Wherever it came from," she said, "It's dead now. It won't hurt anyone else."

He sipped the broth, barely aware of taste or temperature, his eyes staring past the foot of the bed, indeed far beyond the confines of that square apartment. "But it didn't hurt me," he answered. "Not exactly. I don't think it meant to hurt anyone." He looked up at her, appealing for understanding, then looked away again. An infinite misery filled his voice. "It wanted me to love it. It needed me to protect it, to be its defender." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "It gave me. . ." he swallowed again and squeezed his eyes shut. ". . . pleasure to win me, to convince me never to leave it." He sipped the broth once more, then set it aside. "It changed itself, its very form, to become my ideal lover."

Chenaya caught his chin, drew his face around, forced him to meet her gaze. She spoke with deliberate care. "It looked just like Gestus. Do you know that?"

He nodded slowly. "I love him."

A hint of exasperation crept into her voice. "Then what have you been moping about these past weeks?"

Dismas struggled not to shout. His words hissed between his teeth. "I can't live this life anymore, Chenaya!" he said. "This senseless fighting and killing in the guise of a game! I've wrestled with it, and on that hill it came to me clear and sharp as crystal. That creature! There was no violence in it, no anger, no hatred, no bloodlust!"

He threw back the sheet suddenly. Rising to his feet, he flung up his hands, then let them fall to his sides. His head drooped. "And there's none left in me. I'm tired of it all, Chenaya, tired of it in my soul."

Chenaya reached past the unfinished cup of broth and picked up a slim book. She turned it over in her hands. "You always were more of a poet."

"But what of Gestus?" he asked, taking the book from her and sitting down again on the edge of the mattress. "If I leave the arena, what will he do?"

Chenaya fixed him with a stern look. "Are you such a fool?" she asked. "He would give you his life."

Dismas pursed his lips and slowly nodded. Yet a sadness and a fear dominated his spirit. "He mustn't know what I've told you," he murmured. "Let him think he killed a monster."

Chenaya sat unmoving, watching him, her brow furrowed. Plainly, she also thought Gestus had killed a monster. She still didn't understand, not completely. Why should she? She hadn't stood in Uloi's embrace.

"There's something you're not telling me," she said.

The room seemed to vanish, and a dark abyss opened before Dismas. He stood poised on its edge looking down, knowing how easy it would be to fall. The whisper of alien voices called up to him. "Uloi stirred things. . .awakened sensations. . .in me." He tried to look across the abyss and saw Chenaya as if at a great distance in a tiny, dim pool of light. "Things that frighten even as they entice me," he continued. With an effort, he forced the darkness away and the abyss to close. He realized Chenaya had once more leaned forward and taken his hand.

She forced an anxious smile, and for long moments they just sat there like that, holding each other's hands. Finally, letting him go, she got up, crossed to the door, and opened it. Seated on a stool in the corridor, Gestus looked up with a worried expression. She beckoned him into the room.

"Let Gestus help you," she said. "You'll work it out."

He held his hand out to his lover as Chenaya left them. Yet as the door softly closed, he wondered if he ever would.

*

"The Stars Are Tears" copyright 1996 by Robin Wayne Bailey, "Thieves World" and "Sanctuary" are copyrighted to and used with permission from Robert Lynn Asprin and Lynn Abbey.

ROBIN WAYNE BAILEY

is the author of eleven novels, most recently *Shadowdance* from White Wolf Publishing and the highly successful *Brothers of the Dragon* series from Roe Books. After earning a Master's degree in Literature, he worked as a teacher, planetarium lecturer, martial arts instructor, and sometime-musician. He's also active in fundraising for various AIDS service organizations; his special fundraising auctions at science fiction conventions in the midwest have become almost legendary. He lives in Kansas City, Missouri.