











hering to it. Then he simply held it in his hand for a moment, thinking.

Eventually he went over to the bed and sat down again, next to Blake. He looked into the other man's face, a strange, searching look which made Blake frown.

"What's that?" he asked Avon, nodding at the vial.

"I believe it's a derivative of one of the phyloxygen compounds, vaporous hydroxide most likely," Avon answered him, precise as ever, adding: "But you might know it under another name. Have you heard of Rapture, Blake?"

"No—yes," Blake said, recalling. A drug beloved of pleasure palaces, of (particularly) homosexual dives, which fact he knew only because habitual use had been the centre of a health scare some years ago.

"A useful prop," Avon said, smiling faintly, "for when desire—or necessity in this case—outstrips performance." And as he looked at Blake, an invitation, a suggestion, alight in his eyes.

Blake grabbed at the chance. "Yes, let's do it."

And Avon nodded once, took the stuff over to the sink and found the other things he needed in the cupboard.

"How do we take it?" Blake asked, brisk and purposeful now there was something positive to do. "Swallow it?"

"Intravenously is the traditional method," Avon said with his back to Blake. "Phyloxygen compounds are partly destroyed by the action of digestive fluid."

"If you say so," Blake said. He did not ask Avon if he were sure that what he held was a harmless physical stimulant; an astonishing omission, Avon thought, since it might equally well be strychnine, almost identical in colour and texture. How Blake trusted him! It was almost amusing.

He mixed the substance with a little water and shook it vigorously to mix it. As he did so, it foamed and turned blue, thereby changing at a stroke the odds of it being a phyloxygen compound into a much greater likelihood that it was, instead, a simple sulphate of some metal salt, and thus of no use whatsoever for the purposes of sexual stimulation. No, it was most likely a simple hygiene preparation for scouring alien skins.

A setback, indeed. Avon stared at it in disgust. He opened his mouth to tell Blake, so content in the knowledge that a practical solution to their problem

lay at hand—and then he shut his lips tight on it and said nothing. His back was to Blake. The mixture he poured down the sink, and rinsed away. He took out of the cupboard another, sterile vial, put into it a small amount of plain water. Then he took up a hypodermic syringe and went over to Blake.

"Give me your arm." Blake extended it without hesitation and watched curiously as Avon searched with the pad of his thumb for the tender blue vein which lay in the crook of Blake's arm. "Ready?" he asked, holding the spot with one hand, rubbing and pressing the vein to encourage it. He made a quick, trial shot with the syringe. A fine spray of drops went flying into the air.

Blake looked down at Avon leaning over him, noting the dark shine of his hair, the long straight nose, fine eyes shadowed by lengthy lashes. He did not blink as the sharp, glinting needle approached but watched steadily. Avon found the blue bulge of the vein with the tip of his needle and quickly eased it in. He looked up into Blake's eyes as he pressed the tab on the syringe; the water flowed into Blake's bloodstream and Avon smiled a little. Blake did not, just watched him soberly, trustfully.

Exhaling sharply, Avon withdrew the needle quickly. A bright red bead of blood appeared on the spot at once; Avon snatched it off with a scrap of lint and folded Blake's arm back on itself. The fact that Blake would certainly be unaware of the erotic significance of all this rather amused Avon; it was not lost on himself.

He rinsed the needle and filed the vial again. A charade: and yet, the success of sexual function being largely lodged in the mind, he had the notion that placebo would serve very well.

And afterwards, what a very handy scapegoat to pin the essential guilt upon.

He handed the equipment to Blake, and was gratified to see a flicker of alarm inform Blake's eye. "I'm out of practice. Don't want to hurt you. Would you rather do it yourself?"

"No," Avon said, though he could perfectly well have done: he wanted Blake to do it. to force him to it, if necessary. But Blake took the syringe, handling it experimentally, getting the feel of it.

"Just make sure there's no air in it," Avon added, watching Blake through black, black eyes. "Unless, that is, you want to kill me." And he smiled, a perverse humour dancing through his







