



Hub

Issue 3
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Welcome to the first electronic edition of *Hub* Magazine.

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Why issue "3"?

Hub started out as a print magazine. After issue 2 hit the streets it became clear - for various reasons - that the Hub's spiritual home was the internet - 98% of our sales were online, 99.9% of our fiction submissions were online, and 100% of our reader feedback was online. We were also - despite all but selling out every issue - unable to sell enough advertising to keep the dead tree version of the magazine running. The magazine was popular, but we were awful at selling!

Ok, so what are the changes?

Good question. Thanks for asking. *Hub* used to be published 6 times a year (well, would have been, had the print version lasted six issues). We're now published 52 times a year! No, that wasn't a typo. *Hub* is also now free to read! (Neither was that).

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit Publishing, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation. Donations of all sizes are welcome. £1/\$1/1Euro is good, more is (naturally) better. Orbit Publishing helps *Hub* survive, donations help us thrive. You can donate using the PayPal button on the front page of our website.

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If you have a PDA or other device capable of displaying eBooks, you can download a special eBook version of this issue from our website. In future weeks we'll also be experimenting with versions for iPod. Failing that, hit the PRINT button.



Dark Space is not really dark.

Neither is it empty.



The new space opera by Marianne de Pierres - in all good bookshops from May 2007 / www.mariannedepierres.com / www.orbitbooks.co.uk

New York Games

by Eric Brown



"Swifter, Higher, Stronger"
- Olympic motto

Hal Halliday lodged his feet on the desk, poured himself a coffee and watched the opening ceremony of the 2036 PharmOlympic Games on the office wallscreen. Column after column of smiling, waving athletes paraded around the running track. Bayer-Germany marched into the stadium beneath their flag, the company logo prominent in the top left corner. They were followed by ICI-Great Britain, then Roche-Chile. A while later Xenomed-USA filed in, to tumultuous applause.

These guys were hardly human, Hal thought. They had muscle where no sane person should have muscle, and life expectancies - so he'd heard - as low as their IQs.

He'd never followed sports - the futility of mindless athletic endeavour depressed him - and still less the PharmoGames. He did, however, recognise a few faces in the ranks of smiling athletes as they marched past the hover-cameras.

Faces familiar from holo-ads and billboards, and one or two he'd caught in movies.

Movies...

That brought back a slew of unpleasant memories: how he'd rowed with Hannah shortly before she'd dumped him, two weeks ago. They'd been to see some popular holo-movie about a go-getting business-woman fighting her way to the top. Hannah had loved the movie, and Hal had hated its shallow, materialistic moral. They had argued about it, and he'd found himself realising there was a wide streak of ambition in Hannah that he found sickening.

He'd said something of the sort that night, and a day later Hannah had rang to say that she was getting out.

Then, about an hour ago, she called again. She'd been thinking... she'd made a mistake... she wanted him back. And like the coward he was, Hal had kept his options open, said he'd think long and hard about it and get back to her.

* * *

The dollar icon on the top right of his computer screen flashed on and off, heralding a potential customer. He pulled his boots from the desk and attempted to make himself presentable.

The com-screen showed the dark stairway, and a small, bullfrog figure climbing slowly, impeded by too much gut and lungs tarred up by

too many cheap Havanas.

Barney pushed into the office without a greeting, poured himself a coffee and slumped into the sofa behind the desk.

Hal swivelled his chair. "And I thought you were a customer," he said. "Kowalski?"

"Fished out the St Lawrence at dawn. Suicide."

"So we don't collect?" Hal said. "Par for the course, these days. Think we'll ever work again?"

"Hey, cheer up, buddy," Barney said. For an overweight, heavy-jowled ex-cop pushing sixty, he had an infant's grin. "Sure we'll work. Trust me. Something'll come along, make our fortune."

"Yeah, yeah."

Barney lit the stub of a cigar that he kept stowed behind his left ear and gestured at the wallscreen. "Didn't know you were into this freak show, Hal."

"I'm not. Just passing time." Hal watched the strutting athletes. "And people take these grunts seriously?"

"Action, drama, tension. Big money. All hype - but shit, what isn't, these days?"

"Will you take a look at some of those monsters?"

Barney shook his head, then

grinned. "Christ, they almost make me look human."

"Wouldn't go that far."

The com-screen chimed. Hal leaned forward and said, "Halliday and Kluger."

A guy in his fifties, slick silver hair, Mediterranean face, piercing blue eyes. "Hey, Barney Kluger there?"

Barney was up from the sofa and grinning into the screen. "Jesus Christ, if it isn't Nick Pappas himself! Where you been hiding yourself, bud? Thought you were dead and buried way back. What is it, ten years?"

The Greek grinned. "More like twelve. You look good, Barney. How's tricks?"

"Hey, you know... You heard about Estelle?"

Pappas mimed a wince. "On the grapevine. Tough. You pulling through?"

"No problem," Barney said, which Hal knew was a crock of shit. Barney's wife had died two years ago, and Hal often caught his partner staring into space, a sad look on his face.

"How can I help you?" Barney said.

Pappas nodded. "I'm calling on business. You know my son, Jimmy?"

"Little Jimmy? He in trouble?"

"Not so little now, Barney, and yeah, he's in trouble."

"So tell me what gives."

"You heard Jimmy's big in power-lifting?"

"Don't read the sport's pages, Nick."

"No? Anyway, five years back he was on the verge of selection for the American Real Olympic squad. Then XenoMed buys him lock, stock and barrel."

Hal and Barney exchanged a look.

"They thought he had potential," Pappas went on. "Forecast big things for him."

"And it didn't work out?" Barney interrupted.

Pappas was shaking his head. "It worked out okay. Jimmy made it big. Gold medal in the last games. World-record holder."

"No shit?" Barney said, feigning awe. "So what happened?"

"Two days ago, Barney, sometime tried to kill my son."

Pappas recounted how his son had been walking in Central Park, minding his own, when a psycho with a rifle started popping at him. Two shots, both of which missed him by centimetres. He was still alive on account of his speed; so okay, he was upholstered with more muscle than a grizzly these days, but he could move. He moved, chased after his would-be assassin the length of the park, but the psycho got away.

"The police come up with anything?" Barney asked.

Pappas made a spitting gesture. "The PD, these days? Give me a break. They were pissing in the wind in our day, Barney, and things haven't got any better. A gunman in Central Park, who gives a shit?"

"A gunman tries to pot one of XenoMed's top athletes, that's serious."

Pappas shook his head. "The fucking

squad are clueless. XenoMed brought in some in-house guys, but I want someone on the case I can trust."

"I specialise in Missing Persons these days, Nick."

Pappas grinned. "Then diversify. You were the best cop I ever worked with, Barney. What's your hourly charge?"

"Five hundred. I have a partner now."

"I'll double that, and if you nail the bastard who wants my son dead, there's fifty grand waiting for you. Deal?"

"How can I refuse an offer like that?"

"Good man."

"So where's Jimmy now?"

"Get this, I heard about the shooting on the news. I got on to XenoMed pronto, and the bastards wouldn't let me see him. My own son. Security reasons, they said. So I kicked up shit and they told me he was in hiding, holed up in some safe-house north of Nyack. I did some poking about, talked to a buddy in the force up there. He said he knew the place."

"So you paid Jimmy a visit?" Barney asked.

"I tried. Couple of heavies made it clear I wasn't welcome. I thought maybe they'd let you see him if you were officially on the case."

"We'll do our best. So where's this place?"

* * *

On the way down to Barney's beat-up Ford, Hal said, "So this Pappas senior was a big buddy in the force?"

"Way before your time, Hal. Back when some cops were human. Nick

was one of the sincerest. Too good for the job, know what I mean?"

They pushed through the sidewalk crowded with refugees from the Atlanta meltdown. Hal took the passenger seat. Barney gunned the engine, eased them past the fast-food stalls and headed north.

Hal stared out the fly-encrusted windscreen at the derelict streets of Harlem.

Barney glanced across at him. "Hey, you okay?"

"Fine."

"You're not acting fine."

He hesitated, then said, "Hannah called today. Wants us to get back together."

"Hey, say... that's swell."

Hal grunted. "Yeah? You know, when she dumped me, it hurt, but I knew in here it was the right thing. It wasn't working..." How could he begin to tell Barney why it hadn't worked? To Barney, Hannah was a good-looking, hard-working broad, a top commodity broker on the NY stock exchange - the kind of woman a man would kill for.

"So you're not gonna get back with her?"

Hal stared out at the passing suburbs. "Jesus Christ, Barney, I don't know..."

They drove in silence. At last Barney said, "Word of advice, Hal. Hannah's a great kid. Don't let the opportunity pass, okay?"

Hal grunted. That was Barney, the widower, speaking.

He changed the subject. "So... this guy, Jimmy Pappas. I've always

wondered what a Pharmo jock would be like."

Barney grunted. "A freak," he said. "A grotesque. Mark my word."

* * *

Hal recalled a time, in his childhood, when upstate New York had had been a mass of trees - but no more. A combination of pollution and arboreal-specific disease had killed off the forests along the eastern seaboard. All that remained was a seared landscape sprouting so many dead pines and elms like spent matches.

They crossed the Tappan Zee bridge, drove through Nyack and took the road along the coast to where Jimmy Pappas was cooling his heels in a villa overlooking the river. Way back, this place would have been made private and secluded by so many elms. Now the blackened boles of the dead trees provided a stark contrast to the villa's brilliant white walls.

The latest model Lamborghini racer stood in the drive. Barney braked his battered Ford next to it and Hal whistled. "Some motor."

"Guy can afford it," Barney said, struggling from the driving seat.

Hal rapped on the front door, then stood back and looked into the windows. They were shuttered. "No sign of the heavies?" Barney asked.

Right on cue, the door opened and an ugly thug stared out at him. "Yeah?"

Hal hung his fake NYPD ID card and said, "Sergeant Halliday, and this here's Lt. Kluger. We're investigating the attempt on the life of Jimmy Pappas. We'd like to talk to him-"

The heavy grunted something, backed off and spoke hurriedly into his com. Thirty seconds later he

turned. "Okay. This way."

They followed the heavy along the hallway and stepped into a sunlit room.

"Couple of cops want a word," the heavy said, and left them to it.

"Sergeant Halliday and Lt. Kluger," Hal said to the slab of meat filling most of a reinforced sofa.

The athlete indicated a couple of armchairs. His head, set atop shoulders each the size of a bison, appeared ludicrously small, his neck lost amid layers of muscle. The face was familiar, the planed perfection of an off-the-shelf Adonis.

Plastic movie mags littered the floor, along with drifts of discs with titles like Kill Scum Five. The wallscreen was playing a movie. Hal recognised the central character, the all-action hero...

As if uncomfortable at being caught watching his own movie, Jimmy Pappas shrugged and killed the screen.

Barney smiled. "I know your father, Jimmy. You won't remember me, but the last time I saw you, you were this high," and he held his hand a metre from the floor.

"Changed a bit since then," Jimmy said. "XenoMed practically rebuilt me." He slapped his thighs, each the girth of a man's torso. "They have stuff that makes your bones bigger, stronger, yeah? I had new muscles inlayed. And the drugs... 'Course, I had to work like hell to get where I am today."

"Your father filled us in on the details of what happened in Central Park," Barney said. "I'd like to hear your own version of events."

"Sure thing," Jimmy said.

He killed the sound on the movie and gave an account of the shooting pretty much in keeping with what Pappas senior had told them.

“This might sound a silly question,” Barney said, “but are you aware of having made enemies recently?”

The athlete frowned. His facial features, so small in relation to the rest of his body, seemed inadequate in conveying whatever emotion passed through his drug-washed senses. “Can’t say that I have.”

Hal said, “What were you doing in Central Park? I mean, did anyone know you were headed there?”

The athlete shrugged, a seismic upheaval of his mountainous shoulders. He looked uncomfortable. “I was meeting someone.”

“You were meeting someone?” Barney leaned forward. “Who were you meeting, Jimmy?”

The athlete shook his head. “She can’t have had anything to do with it, can she?”

“Just tell me who you were meeting and we’ll take it from there,” Barney said.

“Her name’s Natalia Saskova,” Jimmy said in barely a whisper.

“And you two are...?”

“No. I mean, we did have something going for a while back there. I met Nat last year, at the European PharmoGames. Saw a lot of her for a month or so. But it was difficult—”

Hal asked, “Why difficult?”

“XenoMed don’t like us... what’s the word?... fraternalsing with the opposition.”

“And Ms Saskova is opposition, I

take it?” Barney said.

“A gymnast with Hoechst-Rumania,” Jimmy said.

Hal tried to envisage the pair together - the hulking power-lifter with the elfin-thin woman-child gymnast. It seemed an unlikely combination. But who the hell was he to judge? People said he and Hannah had looked just fine together...

“Who arranged to meet whom?” Barney asked.

“Natalia contacted me. See, she said she wanted us to get back together... She said she’d meet me outside the zoo.”

“And you saw her?”

Jimmy shook his head. “The shooting happened before we met. By the time I was through with the cops, she wasn’t there.” Jimmy was gazing down at his hands, abnormally huge even splayed as they were across his massive thighs. He looked up. “You don’t think Natalia could’ve...?”

“There’s nothing to suggest that she was implicated in any way,” Barney said, with a compassion that Hal found touching. “Of course, we’ll need to speak with Ms Saskova, to eliminate her from our enquiries. She taking part in the Games?”

“She’s staying in the PharmOlympic village,” Jimmy said. “Security’s tight. I could contact the authorities and arrange a couple of passes.”

“We’d appreciate that,” Barney said. “With a bit of luck, we’ll get this cleared up before you’re due to compete. When is that?”

“First heat isn’t till next week,” Jimmy said.

Barney nodded. “That gives us a while to work in,” he said. “Take my advice, lie low and don’t go giving press conferences, okay?”

Jimmy grinned. “You think I’m dumb or something?”

As they rose to leave, Barney asked, “You see much of Nick these days?”

The athlete looked blank. “Who?”

“Nick. You father.”

“Oh,” Jimmy rumbled a laugh. “Pap, I call him. No, haven’t seen Pap for a couple of years. Busy schedule, see?”

“We’ll be in touch,” Barney said. They quit the lounge, nodded to the heavy on the way out, and made their way back to the car.

“What do you think?” Barney said as they took the coast road, heading for the Westchester Games complex.

Hal said, “I think too much steroid has found its way to Jimmy’s head and scrambled his logic, is what I think.”

“Top pro athlete, movie star...” Barney shook his head. “Why do I feel sorry for the guy?”

“Cos he’s a brain-dead puppet jumping around on strings manipulated by some fat-cat execs with more dollars than compassion.” He watched the dead trees flick by. “This shooting...”

“Yeah, this broad shows up after so many years, says she wants to get it on again, arranges to meet him and pop, some shooter tries to blow his head way... The romantic in me says it’s coincidence.”

“And the realist?”

“The realist withholds judgement until we interview the kid.”

Hal's com chimed. He answered without checking the identity of the caller. "Yeah?"

"So... you had time to think it over?"

Hal's heart turned to ice. Hannah stared out of the tiny com-screen, her pretty face as hard as an axe.

"Yeah, it wouldn't work out, Han. Like you said, we're too different. Like you said, we couldn't change--"

"We could live with the differences, Hal. We had some good times. Listen, I love you." A note of desperation in her voice. Hal felt sick.

Yeah, and I love you, too, Han...

He said, "I couldn't live with the differences, Han. I'd just get wound up, angry, and end up hating myself when I blew--"

"Hal, I'd understand."

"I'm sorry, Han," he said, and cut the connection. He killed his com so she couldn't call back.

Next to him, Barney gripped the wheel and stared straight ahead, silent.

* * *

They were siphoned through three security checks before they were allowed inside the Games Village proper.

In keeping with the futuristic ethos of the PharmOlympic organisation, the village consisted of fifty low-slung domes arranged in rolling parkland. Training tracks and gymnasia, velodromes and soccer pitches nestled amid the greenery, each surrounded by a security presence worthy of a visiting monarch.

A woman in the blue uniform of the PharmOlympic organisation, with

the sclerotic smile of a terminally bored air-hostess, showed them into the gym dome where the Hoechst-Rumania team were working out.

While their guide went off in search of Natalia Saskova, Hal and Barney stood and watched a practice floor exercise.

A dozen anorexic pre-pubescents flung themselves, with little apparent concern for safety, across a mat as big as a football field.

As Hal watched, a girl of about twelve sprang into the air from a standing start, bounced once on fawn-thin legs, twisted in a complex, clearly pre-arranged pattern, then landed with her legs split horizontally in a pose as improbable as it appeared painful.

"Excuse me..." It was their guide. The kid at her side appeared even younger than the gymnast they'd just watched. "Natalia Saskova," the woman said, and left them with the elfin woman-child.

Hal stared at the girl. The pairing of power-lifter and gymnast seemed even more ludicrous now that he'd seen Saskova in the flesh.

She was about three feet high and stick thin, and although Hal knew that the PharmOlympic teams were not allowed to employ athletes under eighteen, Saskova looked about ten.

Her face was pale and not even pretty - too angular and pared of flesh.

Barney indicated a row of bucket seats beside the exercise mat.

The girl gave a sparkling smile. "You journalists, yes? Here for story?"

"We're cops," Barney said as they

sat down. "We'd like to talk to you about the attempt on Jimmy Pappas's life in Central Park on Sunday."

She opened her mouth in a little o of surprise. "Someone tried to kill Jimmy?" she piped. "He is hurt?"

"Jimmy's fine," Barney said. "Someone took a pot shot at him. You didn't catch it on the newscasts?"

"We are not allowed to watch anything while we're preparing for competition," she said. She pressed her temples. "Concentrate, concentrate all the times, yes?"

"How long have you known Jimmy?" Barney asked.

"About a year."

"And were you two more than just friends?"

"Once... for a short while."

"What happened?"

The kid frowned. "Hoechst, they found out, yes? They didn't want me seeing him. They called him enemy. I think, they frightened I might defect, join XenoMed."

"Real Romeo and Juliet stuff," Barney muttered to himself.

"So you stopped seeing him," Hal said. "Just like that?"

Anger flared in her infant face. "We met even after Hoechst said no. You see, I loved Jimmy, yes?"

"What happened?" Barney asked.

"Then Hoechst, they threaten me, tell me they'll stop my treatment if I still see Jimmy. No treatment, no work. I'll be on scrap heap, yes? So I had to stop seeing him..." She looked up, defiant. "But I promised, I said

one day I will be with Jimmy again, yes?"

Barney nodded. "And you took the opportunity while in New York to contact him, suggest a meeting?"

The girl looked at Barney, shaking her head. "I didn't contact Jimmy. How could I, with Hoechst watching me all time, treating me like prisoner?"

Hal exchanged a glance with Barney.

From across the dome, an overweight coach called something in guttural Rumanian. Instantly Natalia jumped to her feet. "I must go now. Please tell Jimmy that I think of him always, yes?"

Hal thought of Hannah, and something tightened inside him.

"I'll do that," Barney said. "Oh, one other thing... If you don't mind me asking: how old are you, Natalia?"

She told him, then danced away, running on her toes across the mat.

They left the dome and made their way to the exit gate.

Hal remembered something Hannah had said when she'd dumped him. "You're a loser, Hal. Where's your ambition? What do you want in life? I mean, look at the way you dress. Look at your apartment, for chrissake. You've got loser written all over you."

And then he'd let go and told her that she was a grasping, materialistic bitch.

Sure he was right not to get back with her...

They reached the car and Barney slipped in behind the wheel.

"Twenty-three?" Barney said.

"Twenty-three, can you believe that? What the fuck are they doing to those kids?"

* * *

"So what gives?" Barney said as they drove across the county to Nyack. "Little miss pixie back there swears she didn't contact him, and the Incredible Hulk claims she did."

"So the drugs've affected his short-term memory?"

Barney was quiet for a while, then said, "Back at the villa, when I asked if he ever saw Nick these days. He didn't know who the hell I was talking about."

"So, the drugs, again."

"I dunno, Hal. There's something funny going down here. Let's see what he has to say for himself, okay?"

They crossed the river, motored through Nyack and approached the white villa through the blackened trees.

The heavy on baby-sitting duty grunted. "You guys again. Can't keep away, huh?"

Jimmy Pappas was just where they'd left him, wallowing in the sofa, watching the same action movie. He looked up, surprised, when Barney and Hal walked in and sat down.

Barney said, "We talked to Natalia, got her side of the story." He paused to light his cigar. "Only trouble is, she said she didn't call you Sunday."

Jimmy leaned forward, his shoulders hunching. "She did. She phoned me Sunday morning--"

"Phoned, with visuals?"

"No. Voice only. She quit the village and could only find a voice-phone kiosk."

"And you're sure it was her?"

"At the time, yes."

"How long you two talk?"

"Not long. Seconds. Just long enough to arrange the meeting."

"So it might have been someone impersonating Natalia," Hal said, "in order to lure you to the Park."

Barney was on the ball. He pointed at Jimmy and said, "Whoever wanted you dead, they knew about you and Natalia. So who apart from the pair of you knew about your affair?"

Jimmy thought, the effort knotting his brow. "Hoechst," he said at last. "They put pressure on Nat to end it with me."

"Anyone else?"

Jimmy looked up. "XenoMed," he said. "They knew about it, too."

Hal said, "Hoechst might want you dead because you're a competitor, but why would your own company put a contract out on you?"

Jimmy was silent, staring into space. "Those journalists..." he murmured.

Barney said, "What about them?"

"A couple of guys from the Herald. They've been poking around, asking questions. Maybe XenoMed are frightened."

Barney leaned forward, over his gut. "You aren't making sense, Jimmy. Why are XenoMed frightened?"

"They're scared I'll talk - or that the journalists'll work out why Jimmy Pappas isn't winning any more... If it gets out--"

"If what gets out?"

Jimmy Pappas looked up. "XenoMed are shit scared. They don't want the world to know..." He stared at Barney, as if afraid to go on.

"Jimmy..." Barney said.

"They don't want the world to know that I'm not the real Jimmy Pappas."

After a short silence, in which Hal failed to find the right question, Barney said, "So if you aren't the real Jimmy Pappas, just who the fuck are you, and where is Jimmy Pappas?"

The fake Jimmy nodded. "Who I am doesn't matter. I'm a power-lifter made to look like Jimmy by XenoMed."

Hal began, "I don't follow-"

"They made me into a Jimmy-lookalike, yeah, so I could star in all his movies, do all the merchandising shit, make them millions... Only the last couple of movies bombed, and no-one'll give me a contract, and I'm not making them the dollars any more."

"Which begs the sixty-four thousand dollar question," Barney said past the stub of his cigar. "What happened to the real Jimmy Pappas?"

The fake said, "He burned out about three years ago, after the last games. All the surgery, the drugs, it finally caught up with him."

"He died?" Barney said. Hal could see his friend wondering how he was going to break this to Nick Pappas.

The fake shook his head. "He didn't die. He's still alive, just about. XenoMed keep him locked up like some laboratory animal, running tests on him."

"Where they keeping him?" Hal

asked.

The fake hesitated. "They have a place up in Maine, on the coast. I stayed there a couple of weeks, talking to Jimmy so's I could pass myself off as him. He was in a pretty bad way then, and that'd be a couple of years back."

"This place heavily guarded?" Barney wanted to know.

"It's just a house in the woods, very secluded. There's a couple of medics there, two guards who work twelve hour shifts."

Barney looked across at Hal, and Hal nodded.

Jimmy gave them the address in Maine. "I'd wait till nightfall. Around eight. The medics leave the house around then. There'll be just the guards, one on duty, the other off."

He was interrupted by the Star Spangled Banner ring-tone of his mobile. He pulled it from the pocket of his shirt and said, "Yeah?" The device looked the size of a matchbox in his meaty fist.

"Yeah, sure. Twenty minutes."

He cut the connection, his expression dead.

"Who was it?" Barney asked.

"My coach. He said he's coming for me. Taking me to another safe house across in New Jersey."

"If XenoMed hired the gunman," Barney said, "I'd give the heavy the slip and get the hell out. You could come with us."

The fake shook his head. "It's okay. My car's outside. I'll leave before my coach shows."

"If you need help setting up a new

identity," Hal said, "we're experts." He gave Jimmy their card.

The fake nodded. "I'll be in touch," he said. He stood up, towering over Barney and Hal. He shook Barney's hand, then Hal's, and his grip was reassuringly gentle.

"I'll wait till you've gone," the fake said, "then deal with the guard."

Hal followed Barney from the room. There was no sign of the heavy. They left the house and climbed into the Ford. The last they saw of the fake Jimmy Pappas, he was a giant figure standing at the window, right hand raised in a farewell salute.

* * *

They returned to El Barrio and equipped themselves with semi-automatics and neural-incapacitators. Hal strapped a gun beneath his jacket and pocketed an incapacitator.

"All set?" Barney asked.

They left the office and made their way down to the car. Barney started the engine and pulled away from the kerb, tuning the radio in a classical station.

They headed north without speaking, Hal listening to Berlioz and wondering what they'd find at the safe house in Maine.

Three hours later they followed the fake Jimmy's directions through the township of Brighton and around the bay to the headland. A timber A-frame stood on the bluff, guarded by the sentinel army of a thousand blackened tree trunks.

Barney eased the Ford into the side of the road, five hundred metres from the house. "We'll walk from here, Hal."

"Wait," Hal said, indicating the radio. He'd caught the lead-in.

A newsreader was saying, "... confirmed that a body found in the wreckage of a Lamborghini racer was that of XenoMed-USA power-lifter and movie star Jimmy Pappas. A police spokesman didn't rule out the possibility that the star might have been driving while under the influence of alcohol. More on this story as it breaks..."

Hal snapped off the radio. "He said he could handle the guard. He knew they were coming for him."

Barney shrugged. "So they outsmarted him, Hal," he said. "Wouldn't take much doing..."

They quit the car. Hal thought of the little gymnast, Natalia Saskova, and how she still had the hots for the fake Jimmy...

Barney said, "Just hope Nick didn't catch the report..."

"Let's hope Jimmy's still alive," Hal said. "Chances are he died way back, if he was as wrecked as the fake Jimmy suggested."

They climbed the hill in the darkness. A light showed above the porch of the A-frame, and another in a downstairs window.

The paused at the end of the gated driveway.

"We'll go in through the front door," Barney said. "Hit 'em before they know it."

They hurried up the drive and crossed the stoop. Hal hammered on the door. Barney concealed himself from sight, his back to the wall.

A minute later the door opened. A thickset guy, who might have been the twin of the heavy back in Nyack, grunted, "Yeah?"

Hal was all smiles. "We've come to take Jimmy home, bud."

The startled look on the guy's face was enough for Hal. Before the heavy could react, Hal hit him in the gut with his neural-incapacitator.

The guard hit the deck like a sack of cement. Hal dragged him away from the door and Barney closed it behind them.

They drew their automatics, incapacitators clutched in their left hands, and moved along the hallway, checking rooms as they went. The place had the spartan, un-lived-in look of an institution.

The ground-floor was clean. "Okay," Barney said. "Upstairs."

They moved quickly and silently up the narrow stairs. Three doors gave off the landing. Hal checked the first - a bathroom, empty - then moved to the second. He pushed open the door and peered in: there was no one in the room, but the tousled sheets on the bed suggested it had been used recently.

He retreated into the landing. Barney emerged from the third room and shook his head. "Okay, let's try the basement."

They hurried down the stairs, Hal very aware of his heartbeat now. Chances were the house was empty. Maybe Jimmy had died years back, killed by the bastards who'd used him in the name of sport.

Barney found a door giving onto a flight of concrete steps. A light was on in the basement. Barney looked over his shoulder at Hal and nodded.

Hal followed Barney down the steps.

A voice called out, "That you, Doug?"

The basement was fitted out like a hospital: an aluminium frame bed, monitors to either side, a john in the

far corner.

Two men occupied the room. Hal presumed that one was a medic - he was monitoring an ECG screen beside the bed.

And the other guy could only be the real Jimmy Pappas.

The medic looked up, startled, as Barney rushed him. Instead of hitting the medic with his incapacitator, Barney socked him an upper-cut to the jaw. The guy grunted and fell to the floor. Barney stood over him, a foot on his chest, and aimed his semi-automatic at the guy's head. "I should shoot you like the low-life scum you are," Barney said.

"I was only following-" the medic whined.

For a terrible second, Hal thought Barney was about to squeeze the trigger and splatter the guy's brains all over the linoleum.

Instead he knelt quickly and let the medic have a jolt of electricity in the sternum. The guy spasmed horribly, squealing, then fell silent.

Hal stepped towards the bed. "Jimmy?" he said. "Jimmy Pappas?"

The guy was encased in what looked like a silver frame, a reticulation of filaments following the contours of his body. Inside the frame, the man who had once been a super-fit athlete - albeit one enhanced by drugs and implants - was withered and shrunken. The emaciated face turned to Hal.

"Who are you?" it was barely a croak.

Barney said, "We're working for your father. We've come to take you away from here."

Jimmy's eyes widened. "You have?"

You don't work for XenoMed?"

Hal stepped forward and tried to take Jimmy's hand. Even his fingers, he discovered, were encased in the silver spars.

"An exo-skeleton," Jimmy explained. "It's holding me together."

"Can you walk?" Barney asked.

Jimmy smiled. "Just about."

"I'll bring the car up," Barney said, rushing from the basement.

With a whirr of servo-motors, Jimmy sat up and slowly swung his legs from the bed.

"How long they held you down here?" Hal asked.

Jimmy's shrunken face sketched a smile. "Seems like years... Four, five."

"It's 2036," Hal said. "The PharmOlympics in New York have just begun."

"They have? So I've been here three years. Ever since my body rejected the treatment, the implants, the drugs."

He swayed unsteadily, then smiled at Hal as he stood and moved like a geriatric towards the door.

Five minutes later they were in the car, coasting down the road and around the bay. Jimmy sat in the back seat with Hal, and as they drove south towards the city Hal realised that Jimmy was weeping quietly to himself.

* * *

Jimmy Pappas sat in the sofa in the office, nursing a coffee, while Barney tried to get through to his father.

Jimmy gestured to the wallscreen. "You think I could watch some of the games?"

Hal said, "You really want to, Jimmy?"

He nodded. "You know something? There's a part of me that still... I don't know. I crave the competition. I was up there with the best of them..."

Hal switched on the wallscreen, found the sports channel. A track event was in progress, the camera sweeping around the home bend with the main pack of straining, muscle-bound, steroid-packed losers.

Jimmy leaned forward, rapt.

Barney bent over the desk-com. "Hey, Nick. Barney here. We need to talk."

Hal heard Nick Pappas reply, "Barney, look, this isn't a good time."

"I know that, Nick. Listen, I want you to come down to the office."

Nick Pappas said, "You got my son's killer, Barney? You called to say you nailed the bastard, right?"

Barney smiled. "Let's just say that there's someone here you'd want to meet."

"I'm on my way, bud," Nick said, and cut the connection.

On the sofa, Jimmy smiled, his tears reflecting the panoply of colour flashing across the wallscreen.

Hal thought about Hannah, all the good times, all the bad. He'd call her later, tell her that for all he loved her, he couldn't make it work. He was a loser - she'd said it herself - and he was happy being a loser. Sometimes, he'd tell her, losers could be winners.

She wouldn't understand, but then she never had been able to understand his desire not to

compete.

He'd tell her to switch on the sports channel. "Watch those suckers bursting their guts to win," he'd say.

A medal ceremony was playing on the wallscreen. A commentator ranted, "And it's another gold for XenoMed-USA!"

The crowd went wild, and onto the medal winner's rostrum sprang the smiling, waving sprint champion. The woman looked exultant, at the summit of her personal achievement, and in her eyes Hal saw the desire to live this moment for all eternity.

And a hundred thousand citizens filled the stadium with unrestrained cheers of pride and triumph.

Eric's latest novel, *Helix*, will be published by Solaris on June 4th, and will be reviewed in issue 9 of *Hub* (published June 1st).