

## Life and Death at the Rejuv Club

By William H. Libaw

Carlo Valenti responded to his eye doctor on the phone, "But the right eye was not so bad. Stitch it once more!"

As the doctor began explaining why both retinas were too threadbare to accept another laser treatment, Valenti forced himself to accept the verdict. "Skip all that," he said, "How long?"

"If you follow my advice about lots of rest and no exertion, you might have more than a few months. If you don't, I can't say. In either case, when the time comes, artificial retinas . . ."

Valenti interrupted, "Twenty-second-century science will let me see which pieces on a chess board are which, but little more, right? Good-by."

After the conversation, Valenti told his secretary "Hold all calls but his." He, Valenti's employer, was Pericles Stavros of Stavros Enterprises, the huge multinational corporation that girdled the globe. Valenti pulled his unique sleep-mask from his pocket and placed it over his eyes. The mask provided bright light initially, which made it easier for him to shut his eyes. Then it dimmed slowly to darkness as he rested his eyes, and tried to avoid thinking about living without real eyesight.

He knew that, if nothing else, artificial eyesight would mean giving up his work; executive-vice-presidents do not use bionic eyes to read reports, let alone faces. However, for Valenti, giving up his job meant much more than giving up a powerful position with high earnings. It meant abandoning hope of regaining good eyesight by getting entry into the so-called "Rejuvenation Club." Members of that group shared only one thing. They were the fewer than few with the wealth to purchase rejuvenation by shedding their last dozen years like a snake that slips out of its old thin skin. But Valenti didn't care about looking younger; he cared about regaining good eyesight.

Valenti was nowhere near the threshold of wealth needed to purchase passage on a Rejuv flight. Now fifty years old, he knew it was totally unlikely that he would be able achieve such riches in the two or three decades before old age gave him a free ticket for a short trip down into the earth.

He considered his other options. The best one was to somehow get the super-wealthy Pericles Stavros to loan him the means to purchase admission on a Rejuv flight. The dangerous alternative was to somehow take what he needed; to steal it, where else but from Stavros. Valenti knew an attempt to steal it from his employer could be dangerous, although not as much so as the desperate last option. That alternative was getting some of his boss's wealth by first taking Stavros's life itself. Despite all that, his

strange fanaticism about blindness had already driven Valenti to steal some of the means of theft. He had accessed the digital information describing his employer's likeness, and he had paid to have Stavros's semblance re-created on an intelligent microskin face-mask. Valenti had his boss's fingerprints duplicated on smart handmasks. He also had recorded some of Stavros's vocalizations, now accessible to him as finger-tip-controlled messages from his own vibrating eyeglass lenses.

Valenti's thinking about his options was interrupted by the phone. Knowing the call was from Stavros, he quickly replaced the sleep-mask with his glasses. His failing sight was something he sought to conceal from everyone, especially from old Stavros. A flick of a switch secured the room from electronic intruders. Two touches on the earpiece of his glasses turned on its recorder. If nothing else, he would steal a few more of Stavros's words. Then, with a masking smile on his face, he accepted the call.

The phone showed the image of tan-skinned Pericles Stavros, standing in the cabin of his yacht. "Carlo! You look tired," said the high-spirited Stavros. "Need I tell you again, you can fly down and join me for a few days rest? Relax here for a while?"

Hard-headed Valenti viewed such offers as opportunities for Stavros to feel generous with proposals that were certain to be refused. Valenti had worked long days for most of his almost fifteen years with Stavros Enterprises. As he politely declined the offer to take time off, he observed his employer. Stavros was about as tall as Valenti, but his body was lean and strong, whereas Valenti's was getting soft and starting to bulge. An old old man, he thought as he watched Stavros, I know he is over ninety, but with plural Rejuv trips he looks almost half that age.

Valenti told himself, You have no time. You must ask, beg, the other ways are too dangerous. He steered the conversation back to personal matters. "Who is the lion entertaining this week, Peri?" For over a year now, Valenti had called his employer "Peri." Before that it was "Pericles." And for the first decade, it had been "Mister Stavros."

After gesturing to someone off-camera, Stavros said, "I'm entertaining some of my friends, Carlo. Do you know that word? If you would abandon your work habit for a few days and join me, you could meet them." Then, as he grinned, Stavros asked, "You remember Kursanova, Carlo? "

Valenti knew of Stavros's long affair with the famous dancer, even though it ended over two decades ago. "Everyone knows of Kursanova, Peri. Even me."

As Stavros gestured again, the scene on Valenti's phone changed to show a group of people lounging around the pool, the pool which Valenti had years-ago arranged to be filled regularly with fresh water.

"The nymph with hair so much lighter than her body," Stavros said as the far-away camera zoomed in on a golden creature. "That is her grand-daughter! Kursanova's." Then Stavros' own image replaced the girl's.

Valenti summoned a smile and said, "They will call you cradle-robber, Peri."

Stavros replied, "You wrong me, Carlo. It would offend me, for one with a body as old as mine to . . . to pursue someone so young. But perhaps someday the seeming gap in years between us will be less significant."

The conversation was moving to where Valenti wanted it. He supplied his own line, "When she gets a little older, Peri?"

Stavros laughed as he replied, "Not exactly." Then the old man with the less-than-old body lowered his voice, his knowledge of the electronic security of the conversation overcome by old habit. "I am going away for a little while, Carlo. I leave in a couple months."

Although Valenti had some inkling that Pericles Stavros was planning on another Rejuv flight, he was surprised to hear it was coming so soon. It meant he should ask for the monumental financial favor right now.

Valenti phrased his distasteful request. "Peri . . . would you . . . Would it surprise you, Peri . . . that I would like to have your help . . . so I could take such a trip myself?"

"A Rejuv trip? For you, who are still young? You must be joking."

"Peri, if I could, I would be worth much more to Stavros Enterprises. Over the years I mean. Invest in me now, I will make it pay off for you better than any other investment."

Embarrassment flickered over the old man's face. "You know Carlo, I care for you like a son. But if I did this for you . . . should I not have done the same for Nicholas, my eldest? He is . . . well, he is not young." Valenti knew Nicholas to be over sixty, although he looked more the brother than the son of Pericles Stavros. "And for my other children as they get older?"

Valenti sagged in his chair. He had said too much, Stavros might be offended. Valenti thought of a way of converting his request into a joke. He could speak of getting rejuvenation not only for himself but also for his wife. In fact, the two had slowly moved apart emotionally ever since his long long ago insisting that they have no children. That happened even though he had explained to his wife; he felt that way because his own childhood had been miserable due to his caretaker grandmother's growing blindness.

Valenti spoke to his boss, "Peri, I didn't dare ask at first, but now that I have spoken . . . well, there is also my wife. I could not let her look older than me." Then he went on with a fiction, "Also, I have a lady friend. I would like to take her on the flight too. Not to sit with me and my wife, of course."

Stavros's eyes widened as he listened. Then he broke out with a burst of broad laughter. And joined in what seemed a good joke. "You devil! I see now why you want to be Rejuved. All that work, and the ladies."

"But I love them, Peri. Dearly." Valenti twisted his face into a smile.

"Yes, Carlo, dearly would be exactly the word. But enough of this nonsense. Talking about my flight brings something to mind. Would you like to escort me, instead of Nicholas doing so? I should let him take me, but seeing him makes me feel I haven't done enough for him."

Valenti's heart leaped as he agreed to go to the space-port where the shuttle would take Pericles Stavros up to the orbiting Rejuv ship. As he rested his eyes again after the call, He thought, The old fool. His body may look young, but his old mind is slipping. He may have put himself in my hands. Until this moment, Valenti's last option had seemed too desperate a venture, even though he had prepared for it. But now he pictured his employer as dead, and himself masked to appear as if he was Stavros, getting aboard the hyperspace ship. And then he envisioned himself returning from the ship's cryptic means of rejuvenation, returning with his body looking as if it was less than forty instead of fifty, and with his retinas no longer needing repair.

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Carlo Valenti had completed his preparations during the intervening weeks. He now had a microskin mask of his own face and head alongside his mask of Stavros. He had a pair of contact lenses that were not only the correct colors to match Stavros' eyes, but would show the proper pattern to an eye-search machine. He had a probably-useless Stavros-identity implant in his left fore-arm. Implants had become too easily duplicated, they were no longer relied upon by powerful people.

Valenti had a potent weapon hidden in the bulky palm-side of a ring on his right hand's middle finger. The ring-like weapon was as smart as it was small and expandable. He was flying to the space-port with Pericles Stavros in the latter's jet. There were only the two of them in the comfortable cabin. The crew was up front, and the bodyguards had joined them.

"Let me show you this report," said Valenti, keeping his voice free of the tension he felt. He moved from the seat opposite and sat beside Stavros.

Stavros gave him a sharp glance. Then, as Valenti pulled glasses from his pocket, the young-looking old man complained, "Why do you bother me with . . ."

Valenti interrupted his boss, "Forgive me Peri, it's really important." As he spoke, he swiftly put his

left hand over Stavros's mouth and carefully grasped the old man's neck with his right hand. The right hand's pressure caused its ring-weapon to interrogate the neck's flesh. That allowed it to adjust the direction of its tiny blade. Then the ring telescoped its diminutive sword deep into position above the topmost vertebra, where its injected contrived venom would act immediately. As Stavros slumped, Valenti eased the young-old body back against the seat and began to remove its clothing.

Now responsible for both voices, Valenti continued the conversation, using his lenses to supply Stavros's words. With practiced skill, Valenti pressed the touch-operated switches on the left earpiece of his glasses, summoning the first constructed message from Stavros to reply to his own words. The two lenses vibrated their message into the air, "Details, Carlo. For you to handle."

Valenti replied, "As you wish, Peri." As he spoke, he continued to strip his dead employer down to his underwear.

Then, as his lenses provided more of the dead man's words, "Life is for joy, Carlo, not just work," Valenti began taking off his own outer garments.

He replied, "I try to enjoy my work, Peri." As he put on Stavros's clothes, and then started putting his own garments on the limp body, he looked to make sure that there was no red spot at the back of the neck. He saw that the ring's tiny blade had hidden the wound with a now-dry tiny droplet of fluid as it left the flesh. Clothing the dead body was slow work. When the switch of clothing was finally done, he reached into his briefcase for the mask of Stavros's head and face. Valenti removed his own special glasses for a moment, and carefully pulled the mask over his own head, and down beneath his shirt collar. The hundreds of tiny telescoping struts between the inner and outer layers of the mask quickly adjusted so that the inner layer stayed next to Valenti's skin and the outer layer assumed the image of Stavros. Then Valenti keyed his lenses to say, "Carlo, you look a bit unwell. Are you okay?"

"I do feel a little off," Valenti said. "No, don't bother the crew, I'll just rest with my eyes closed for a few minutes." He withdrew the second microskin mask, this one with his own features and hair, and pulled it over the head of Stavros. Then, as the intelligent mask adjusted itself, he closed the eyes, smoothed the clothes on the dead body, and arranged it in what looked like repose. After clothing himself with Stavros' garments, he took a quick glance to see if the guards were returning. The Lord is gracious, he thought, as he crossed himself. Moving slowly, he sat where he could watch for the guards. He withdrew from the briefcase a last item, a pair of handmasks, which he tugged over his own hands and wrists, replacing his fingerprints with those of Pericles Stavros.

After the last few weeks of practice, exercise and severe dieting, Valenti walked calmly in the stride

and stance of the dead man, walked down the aisle to ask for aspirin. He brought back the pills, which he swallowed as he caused the glasses to say, "You've been working too hard, Carlo. Relax a little."

Now he waited with tense confidence. When Stavros's bodyguards did return, Valenti said nothing. The guards, who had surely heard his and Stavros' transmitted words, were satisfied with a gesture.

After the jet landed, Valenti prepared to disembark. He pointed to what seemed the sleeping figure of himself, and with his fingers on his earpiece, lip-synced the words as the brief pre-assembled message came from the lenses, "Let him rest. Call Nicholas . . . when you return." As the guards nodded, Valenti's face pulled its mask into a smile. Nicholas Stavros, over-sixty son of a father who looked under fifty, did not know it, but he was a vital part of Valenti's one-man conspiracy. Might Nicholas look beneath the mask on the body? Unlikely, Valenti thought. Even if Nicholas found the mask, would he then, as Valenti believed would happen, make himself a disinherited son by revealing his father's death? Totally improbable.

Valenti carried no luggage as he walked in Stavros' shoes; neither did Stavros' guards, who walked a judicious few steps behind. Perhaps the bags had been sent ahead, Valenti did not know. Neither did he know where the hyperspace ship went, nor how long it stayed. Such knowledge was not to be had, try though he had to buy it. At the end of a short stroll, he was at the guarded entrance to the terminal where the flying shuttle would take him up to the orbiting ship. With a casual wave to his own guard, he entered the first of the booth's two doors.

"Identity, please," requested the booth's computer.

"Pericles Stavros," replied the lenses as Valenti mouthed the name. He removed the lenses for a moment to press his eyes with their fake blue-grey coloring against the inquiring machine. Then he placed his hands with the microskin copies of Stavros' fingerprints on the scanner, and waited as his pounding heart made the amoeba shapes of light pulse before his faltering eyes.

"Thank you, sir," said the machine as it accepted the voice, eye and finger patterns of Pericles Stavros. And Carlo Valenti walked out as the second door opened. Guards directed him toward the elevator that would take him to the ship. In the elevator, he began to wonder about his fellow passengers and whether any of them might know Stavros.

The elevator delivered him to another identiport. Which in turn checked him, and then directed him to his seat in his capsule. And finally, quiet motors delivered his capsule to its place in the shuttle.

Inside the shuttle, one of his neighbors was Dr. J. G. Gotchalk, the well-known old reclaimed-copper king. Gotchalk, although a modern Midas, was known to be not just old but into his nineties, so why would he have waited to shed a few years? But Valenti had little interest in his neighbor, now that he know he

wasn't someone who knew Stavros.

The shuttle pilot announced the ship's departure. Once again, as he had years ago when he visited Stavros's mining ventures on Mars, Valenti experienced the unpleasant vibration and acceleration of lift-off. This time, however, the experience provided something worse than an annoying feeling. By the time the ship achieved orbit, pieces of his retinas were flapping like sails in a squall. There were black strips and spots in his vision that he could compensate for only by turning his head back and forth.

He waited in anxiety as the shuttle found and then docked with the large Rejuv ship's small passenger compartment. It's so tiny, he thought as he waved his head to see it through his glasslike capsule. Then he could feel the clank and crunch as the passenger capsules were one-by-one shifted into position to deliver their passengers to the no-crew robotic Rejuv ship before returning to the shuttle. As the other transparent capsules slid by, he recognized the second passenger. It was Donnyboy Deacon, once country singer, then brilliant investor, now aging politician and prospective candidate for World Federation President—but not a friend of Pericles Stavros. Next came Valenti's turn to be transferred, presumably to be followed by old Gotchalk and the remaining passenger.

Half-blind, flailing his limbs like a baby, he cursed the shuttle pilot for his earlier announcement that the passengers would have to make their own weightless way to the seats in the orbiting Rejuv ship.

Valenti made his slow way through the entry passage to the circle of seats rimming the interior of the ship. Once seated, he gained some comfort from the slight gravity provided by the ship's spin. When brown-faced ancient Gotchalk came through with no-one behind him, Valenti realized there were only four passengers. But exulting Valenti cared little about his companions. The shuttle ship would now leave. With his vision restored and more than a decade's aging removed from his body, he thought he'd be better able to handle the problems that arose when he returned and had to shed the mask of Pericles Stavros. He cared little about how the mysterious process of rejuvenation worked. He knew the popular belief of a golden planet somewhere, with god-like creatures granting a renewed lease on life to visiting mortals. He also knew that some people thought that hyperspace itself renewed the bodies of the aging seekers of rejuvenation, while others believed they would go through a wormhole to their own past and somehow come back younger. He did not know that all who had purchased passage on the flight had learned the cryptic fact that the large ship was full of dark-matter that would change to dark-energy to achieve time reversal. Then Valenti's speculations were interrupted.

"Now that we are comfortable, if that is the word," the fourth passenger was speaking, the one Valenti was trying to see, "I suggest we introduce ourselves. For those who may not recognize me, I am

Prince Abdul, son of King Fahd, leader of the United Arabian and Jewish States.”

Valenti knew that King Fahd was one of the few men on earth wealthy enough to afford Rejuv flights for his son as well as himself. What distressed him was that both King Fahd and Prince Abdul were well acquainted with Pericles Stavros. As the self-introductions went around the circle, worried Valenti again used lips and lenses to supply Pericles Stavros's name.

Abdul spoke again. “As we were all told, we have a little time to fill before the Rejuv ship is ready to go. We were further told that the time could be filled with rest or with a game that could be called ‘Truth and No Consequences.’ Each of us can offer a Truth that is too risky to utter except in this ship here and now. Peri, if you agree, would you perhaps give us your Truth?”

Valenti could not understand why a dangerous truth was not dangerous in the present circumstances. Apart from that, he knew he could not say much with the limited set of Stavros' words stored in his eyeglass frames. He finger-keyed some eyeglass words, "Pericles Stavros . . . is tired.”

"How unlike you, Peri!" responded the prince. After a long look at Valenti, he went on, "Well, then. Perhaps Doctor Gotchalk will offer us a precarious Truth?"

A brittle dry laugh issued from fragile old Gotchalk as he nodded his head. The old man glanced at Donnyboy Deacon before continuing. "One thing I can say. Might not interest you, should interest him." Gotchalk pointed a bony shaking finger at Donnyboy Deacon as he went on. "You, yes, you! Donnyboy, I'm your Pappa! Got that? Your Pa! Been secretly pushing you for forty years, long time. Fathered you twenty years before that. Fathering wasn't easy for me, one of the few times I ever parted with my true essence. Wouldn't have lived this long and this strong otherwise. Put my substance into you, Donnyboy. That's the only reason I've taken this Rejuv flight. To live long enough to see you as President. Got that, son?"

Although Valenti could not discern Donnyboy's expression, the one-time country singer was clearly speechless. Donnyboy Deacon was seeking to be the candidate for World President, the nominee of what was formally known as the Western Party, and more vulgarly called the White Party. And J.G. Gotchalk, the old South American reclaimed-copper baron, was a lot darker than white.

But why, Valenti wondered, why had the old man confessed before this group of rejuvers. Surely Gotchalk was not relying on club members to deny themselves the repetition of such delightfully devastating information. Valenti hardly listened as Abdul, with great good humor, said, "Jaygee, you are an old she-camel's dropping! Anything any of us say now will be small talk."

Valenti stopped thinking about Gotchalk's revelation. And started thinking of what he might say if he used his own voice as that of Stavros. He could offer the rumor that he believed were true, that Pericles

Stavros, had made a harsh will that disinherited his children when he died. The idea, of course, was that the children would not seek their father's death if it might make them poor. But Valenti knew that he couldn't verbalize such a negative exposure of the man he was pretending to be.

As Abdul asked him to take his turn, he slumped in his chair and caused his glasses and his lips to repeat, "Pericles Stavros is tired." Then, he risked using his own voice to follow with a few more words, "No games for me."

Abdul replied, "I can't believe . . . come, Peri, I looked forward . . ."

Donnyboy Deacon interrupted, saying to Abdul with the voice he used to show he was a man of the people, "I'm tired, too. Tired of hearin' empty braggin'. Anyway, I didn't come here to play no stupid game... I came to get Rejuved! And it's high time we started. Let's push buttons to get this ship movin'."

Valenti lowered his eyes and scanned his head back and forth to see his own panel in the ship. One of the push-buttons was labeled, "Depress to start." Above the buttons was what seemed a digital clock, but it was calibrated in years and it read, "12.16 years." Valenti did not know that the number referred to the interval that the ship had been gathering its dark-matter fuel, and thus to the period that the fuel's conversion to dark-energy would take the ship and passengers through reversed time.

After a few moments, Prince Abdul started to take his own turn at the confessional. "I could tell you just how this kind of ship was once the work of science for humankind, how these marvelous vehicles became no more than private Rejuv ships for the ultra rich and powerful. Once men thought to find a way to explore time with them by sending messages back to Earth before the ships returned with years shed. That was before those in power realized the ships were the priceless means for rejuvenation of themselves."

Then Prince Abdul said, "Tell us why you are not your usual self, Peri. Tell us why Stavros is so silent today."

Desperate Valenti used his own voice to say, "I'm here to shed years, not to exchange gossip. I say, let's get going."

Prince Abdul reluctantly joined the others in voicing agreement. Then they all pressed the buttons that would allow the ship to start, and waited in silent tension for the take-off.

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After an interval, the ship began to shudder, to shake, to shiver, to writhe, to twist, to tremble. The ship did all of that at the same time, did it to all the passengers as well as to its structure. All but Valenti

had been told that, seeming to defy all physical laws, the ship would not pin them to their seats with the plural gravities of accelerating for a long interval as it built up velocity. They had not been told just what the ship would do. Maybe the ship would start to travel through three-dimensional space. Or, possibly, it would travel in other dimensions of space. Apart from space, they knew the ship would go through time backwards. All who bought passage would have been told that the passengers would be unconscious, that mind and mentality are absent when time-reversal transposes cause and effect in the human body and mind. All but Valenti should have known that after a negative interval of its own time, the ship and its passengers would again shudder and shake and shiver and writhe and twist and tremble. The second such movement having occurred some twelve of the ship's and its passengers' years prior to the first one, the vehicle would again be orbiting the Earth. This return would take only a few days of normal Earth time. The passengers, their bodies now a dozen years younger than they had been, would again be conscious.

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When the ship returned, Carlo Valenti and his companions went through confusing re-orientations of their location in time and place. Prince Abdul parted with little of the knowledge his father had long-ago given him about the Rejuv flights. After seeing the zeroes on the time meter in front of him, he realized they had come back from a Rejuv trip. When the others voiced their guesses, Abdul was silent, and advised his fellows to say nothing.

Ancient Gotchalk, now eighty-three-year-old, looked wistfully at Donnyboy Deacon, his now fifty-year-old secret son. He wished he could say what he hoped he had said. Prince Abdul, again starting his fifties, looked forward to his reunion with his mid-forties father, King Fahd. And Carlo Valenti, now nearing forty, could only take pleasure in his place, naked among the three also-unclothed wealthy and powerful.

As they waited for their orbiting ship to be reached by the spaceship that would shuttle them back to earth, Abdul pressed Valenti regarding his presence on the flight. "You say you work for Pericles Stavros. Allow me a blunt question: Did he finance your Rejuv flight? If so, why? You are young for a Rejuv trip."

Valenti said, "I'm sure I worked long and hard to make it by myself." Impulsively, he went on with his own question to the Prince, a query that he quickly regretted as unwise, "Can you say the same?"

The shuttle arrived with the preplanned clothing to replace the insufficiently-old garments that disappeared when time was reversed. Valenti and the others started to dress. With his now-good eyes, Valenti admired the stylish expensive suit in the suitcase that seemed, by default, to be his. But when he saw the name of his employer sewn on the jacket lining, he was baffled.

Why would he wear Stavros' clothing? That question preyed on Valenti during the entire earthward shuttle trip. When he and the others departed the shuttle and entered the terminal, he scarcely noticed the noisy group waiting for Donnyboy Deacon. And he didn't see the single servant who waited while old Gotchalk watched wistfully as Donnyboy Deacon departed. As Valenti looked with trepidation for a familiar face, he noticed Prince Abdul and his father, embracing joyously. He also observed that, after the prince spoke with the king, the two drew aside with their guards and watched him.

Then Valenti noticed that a man nearby was approaching him. When the stranger stopped and measured him with coffin-cold eyes, recognition came to Valenti. Although he looked a decade too old, it seemed to be Nicholas, the son of Pericles Stavros!

The man asked, "You think I will disappear?" The voice removed all doubt from Valenti, "You think I'll go away if you pretend you do not know me?" Nicholas Stavros saw the watching prince and king, and lowered his voice, "Just like you thought to make someone else disappear?" Nicholas spoke softly but savagely, "You thought I would not look beneath the impudently switched clothes and that mask of you on my father's face? You thought I would not see the dead body of my father—my beloved father, who, with Rejuvenation, could have lived endlessly? You thought I would not see the work of my father's murderer?"

Now terror-stricken, Valenti could only murmur, "No, no! That can't be!"

"Keep your voice down," hissed the son of Pericles Stavros. "His competitors listen!"

That Pericles Stavros was dead was itself almost as shocking as the accusation that he, Valenti, had killed him. Valenti whispered, "You say he's dead?"

"Dead," said the son, as he spat on Valenti's shoes. "As he requested, his body was sealed immediately in a special traveling bag. And that tightly sealed soft coffin specially booked to replace a would-be passenger on a Rejuv flight. All that was as he long ago instructed me. What he hoped to gain from having his body buried in space, I don't know. It is not my place to know! As always, my duty is to respect my father's wishes. And it is my honor to grieve for him."

Valenti was desperate for some lever to free himself. "Maybe your father wanted to disappear. Perhaps it is a double who died, someone your father found who looked just like him. More important here is this. I know the rumors, the rumors you must know to be facts. When your father dies, you will inherit nothing! Do I have to tell you that? If it becomes believed that your father is dead, you'll get nothing from his will?"

"Do you think I care about wealth?" Nicholas Stavros was red in the face and neck, his eyes bulging with rage. "Do you think I would dishonor his death with secrecy—were it not his request that I do so?"

Were it my wish, the whole world would mourn his passing—but it is not to be. As to inheriting wealth, that means absolutely nothing. Over the years, my father quietly gave me and gave his other children more than we would ever need."

Nicholas Stavros saw the Prince and the King starting to approach. He said to Valenti, "Not a word to them, do you understand? I can make your life such that you would prefer death, even though it was my father's long-ago wish that, if he were killed, his murderer was to be kept alive."

Valenti thought to provoke his captor further, hoping to gain useful knowledge that might be of value to Prince Abdul and his father. "You wouldn't dare do anything to me! You have no real evidence. A court would not..."

"Even if I were foolish enough to do nothing," Nicholas said quietly, "time alone will punish you, Carlo. Do you know you will become blind? Now come with me, before they get here."

Valenti gave the older man a desperate shove. And ran to the approaching prince. "Protect me," he pleaded. "He is mad... protect me, I have useful information."

At the prince's gesture, two bodyguards approached. "Quick, Valenti, you are in no position to bargain. Speak!"

Valenti had decided Abdul would be a better patron than the vengeful Nicholas Stavros. After a glance at the prince and his father, he capitulated, "He says his father is dead. And his father's body is secretly booked to be buried in hyperspace. He thinks I am responsible, but I swear to you, I did nothing!"

Prince Abdul's eyes flashed wide. He glanced at his father. And received a small nod in response. Then he gestured to Nicholas Stavros to join him. When the suspicious younger Stavros approached, Abdul said, "We—my father and I—we have the greatest respect for you and your father."

Nicholas was uncertain how to proceed, "Has this scoundrel spoken to you? He is not to be believed, Valenti is a person with no honor."

"We are at your service," replied the prince, "may my guards assist you with him?"

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Some interval of time later, Carlo Valenti was pulled from his lonely guarded cell and placed in a room by himself. When the door abruptly opened, Valenti turned and looked with astonishment at the face of the man who entered. He realized it was indeed an older face just like his own. That meant it must be the mask of himself that Nicholas Stavros had mentioned.

Valenti thought that whoever was behind the mask was sent by Nicholas Stavros. He addressed the

man boldly, "Is that mask supposed to frighten me? Is that why you wear it?"

"On the contrary," replied the masked man. "I want you to get used to it."

There was something familiar about the voice, but Valenti ignored that. "I suppose you work for Nicholas Stavros? Tell him my answer is the same, I am innocent of his father's death."

With a dry laugh, the man responded, "I work only for Pericles Stavros." Valenti suddenly realized: The man behind the mask must be—somehow—none other than Pericles Stavros himself.

Pericles Stavros smiled, face pulling the mask of Valenti into a cold grin, as he said, "You did indeed recognize my voice." He reached both hands beneath his collar for the edges of the mask, and pulled it off his face and over his head.

Shaking now, Valenti said, "Then you are not dead!" He realized what that meant, Stavros's coffin was not on a Rejuv flight to be buried in space. It was there to return Stavros to life!

"Indeed! I am not dead! Although, for a brief period I was beyond mortal illness. My heart stopped its beating; my blood congealed. My body began to lose its flexibility; yes, it began to decay, to putrefy. All thanks to you. All thanks to Carlo Valenti, who tried to end my life so that he could regain his eyesight."

Valenti could only stare. And then summon a feeble protest. "There is no proof that I did it. Someone else could have."

Stavros responded, "Proof? I am not concerned with proof, Carlo. I am not a judge, nor shall I put you before a judge."

Seeing Valenti's sudden fright, he continued, "No, Carlo, I don't plan to have you killed. Not unless you make new trouble for me—by talking to anyone of these matters." He handed Valenti the mask, "Put this on. I want to see that your appearance will be suitable when other people see you. I want to see how you will look when you catch up with your mask in a dozen more years. Yes, Carlo Valenti, you will live on, live with no work to engage you, live on with nothing to occupy you or to entertain you. Yes, Carlo, you will live on with no eye doctors to watch over you, except those who work for me. You will live on with nothing to occupy your mind but your coming blindness."

Valenti pulled the mask of himself over his head and face, but he was beginning to think. He saw how his former boss was enjoying the prospect of revenge. Then it came to him that such retaliation just might be converted to a two-way street. That could be made to happen if he, Valenti, found a way to get the entire story about Stavros leaked and broadly published on the ultra-net. If so, Stavros might indeed arrange to have him killed. Then Valenti told himself, So what! Death will not be as bad as living without eyesight!

Stavros pulled a small mirror from his pocket. "Look at yourself, Carlo. This is how everyone knows you right now. Behind the mask, you will age, your ability to see will diminish. You will live knowing that you'll become blind long before you die. For a man who would kill to regain his eyesight—for him, blindness must be living death. Until real death comes, Valenti will live while his eyes die behind the mask of Valenti."

Valenti looked into the mirror; he put on a mask of fear to cloak his grim idea about revenge..

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