

The Age Gene

By

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"Dr Franklyn, that was a most interesting presentation." The speaker was a thin elderly man with silver hair and watery blue eyes. He had approached the podium as Ross was cramming his notes into his laptop case and was towering over him like a bent lamp post.

"Thank you," said Ross.

"Do you really believe you have identified the aging gene?"

"Yes," said Ross, "I really think that we've nailed it."

"And you want to start human trials?"

"Well, as I said in my talk that is still a long way off. We have to get permission from the regulatory authorities and then there is of course the matter of funding."

"Of course." He slipped a bony hand in his jacket pocket, took out a card and lay it on the lectern. "Come and see me tomorrow."

Ross picked it up. It was royal blue edged with gold and more gold words were printed on it which read, Sir Joseph Malthus, Timeworld Global with an address and phone number.

Most everyone had heard of Joseph Malthus. He was reputed to be the richest man in the world and Timeworld Global was the company that had made his fortune. Ross started to speak but the card bearer was already heading towards the exit.

The address did not belong to an office but to a private house. However, to Ross it appeared more than just any house. It was like a palace. Set in leafy countryside half an hour from the city it spread out before him across wide grassy lawns at the end of a long winding drive. He rode his motorcycle passed iron barred gates which swung open when he announced his name at an intercom. He dismounted at the bottom of bone-coloured steps and ascended them to a creamy gothic porch.

The door was opened by an attractive blue-eyed girl with honey blond hair tied up behind her head in a bun. She was wearing a green thigh length towelling robe and her legs and feet were bare. She led him across a dark marble floor and through a lofty hall to a giant orangery which offered a vista of yet another lawn. This one was planted with rose bushes and sloped down to the grey waters of a meandering river.

Sir Joseph was sitting in a white cane armchair facing a panoramic window. He stood up and shook Ross's hand. "Good of you to come. Please sit down." He gestured to an adjacent chair which matched his own. Ross eased himself into it thankful that seated they would seem almost the same size.

"Would you like some coffee or would you prefer tea?" he asked.

"Coffee, thank you."

His host turned to the girl who nodded and drifted away. Then he sat down.

"You have a magnificent home," said Ross.

"It is not mine. It belongs to Timeworld Global but I will make sure you have a chance to look round before you leave. Now let's get straight away to why I asked you here. Tell me, are you happy with the research facilities you have where you work?"

"They are not perfect but they're okay."

"You mentioned something about funding yesterday. Is yours adequate?"

"With Government research it is seldom adequate but I am confident that I'll have enough when I put in for my next grant."

"How would you feel about continuing your work at Timeworld?"

Ross straightened in his chair. He had anticipated that Sir Joseph had wished to discuss a possible investment proposition. He had not anticipated a job offer. "I didn't know Timeworld had any biotech laboratories."

"Indeed we have. And I'm sure you would find them more than suited to your needs. You can pick your own staff and be in charge of your own budget and I think I can promise you a six figure salary."

"I'm not sure what to say. This is quite out of the blue. There is not some sort of catch is there?"

Sir Joseph chuckled. "There's no catch I promise you."

"I'm not sure I would be able to adapt to working for a private company. I will have to see the laboratories to see if they are suitable. Where are they located?"

"They are here in this building."

"You have laboratories that can handle genetic material, separate clean rooms with filtered air devoid of contamination, a dark room for radiography, sequencing machines, mass spectrometers and the latest computer software to analyse the data?"

"Yes, we have all that. And anything we don't have, you can buy in – no expense spared. You can make any structural alterations you like. The whole place will be yours to run as you see fit. Ah, here comes Eve with the coffee."

They watched the girl set a silver tray down on the low table that was between their two chairs and pour black coffee into two china cups with careful slim hands. "Do you take milk or sugar?" She asked. Her voice was soft and husky.

"No thank you," said Ross, "I take it black."

"Would you like some biscuits or perhaps some fruit?"

"We grow our own you know," interjected Sir Joseph. He swept his arm in an arc to indicate the potted trees, shrubs and vines that populated the orangery.

"No, just coffee will be fine."

Sir Joseph nodded. "Thank you, Eve. That will be all."

Ross watched her curved form as it swayed back in the direction from which she had entered.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" remarked Sir Joseph.

"Yes, she's very pretty."

"Tell me?" he asked. "How old would you say Eve is?"

Ross shrugged. "Nineteen – maybe twenty or twenty-two years old. I find it hard to tell these days."

Sir Joseph smiled. "Oh, I'm afraid she is much older than that, much, much older."

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