

The Rise of Apophis

#25-Genre: Mystery/Suspense, 1,096 words

Cheri de Lis

Before Mary could summon Henry and Aronia, her phone rang, and a vaguely familiar voice exclaimed, “It’s Sam – your nurse from the hospital. I really need to see you.”

The group agreed to visit the Old Man, then meet up with her after she finished meeting with Sam. It would be the first time both Grace and John met Henry and Aronia, and Mary was excited John would get to know them. She also noted how Grace seemed almost giddy at the prospect of the trip and, for a moment, Mary was reminded of the Mrs. Vargas she used to know.

Fear hit Mary when she arrived at the dimly lit café. A hand motioned to her from a dark booth in the back of the room, far from the exits. Heart pounding, Mary made her way toward it.

Sam’s face was pleasant enough, but before she could speak, Mary exclaimed, “Is it about my test results? Do I have the virus?”

“We’ll get to that.” Sam took a swig of hot coffee. “First, I need to fill you in on some things. Your bloodwork revealed some, um, *interesting* things about you. I have to ask—have you been in contact with a Golden Sassafrass plant lately?”

Mary gasped. “I—”

“I thought so. Another question. How do you feel about root beer floats?”

Mary blinked, taken aback again. “They calm me down. They’ve always put me into kind of a meditative state, I suppose.”

“I thought as much. Mary, your blood chemistry is unlike any I’ve tested. Golden Sassafrass roots are often carcinogenic, but they seem to empower you instead.

Mary looked puzzled. “So, you’re telling me I’m a superhero?”

Sam grinned. “Who knows? But the important thing is that you avoid this man at all costs.”

She fished an outdated phone from the pocket of her distressed leather jacket and flashed a picture of Michael. Seeing Mary’s surprise, she smiled.

“I can see that you have already come into contact with him.”

Mary’s frustration suddenly kicked in. “Look, I don’t know how you know so much about me or what you’re trying to pull here, but you’re not getting anything else out of me!” She leaned back against the tattered leather seat, arms crossed. “Furthermore, if you don’t tell me who you are and why I’m here, I’m walking!”

Sam grinned and motioned the waitress to bring more coffee. “You’re spunky. Good—you’ll need it.” She waited for the waitress to move on to a nearby table of bikers. “What you know about me is true—there’s just a bit more truth. Around January 2019, I was assigned to a CDC taskforce, working undercover as a nurse. We’d received intel that Dr. Michael Rothschild is involved in the spread of a certain virus.”

She studied Mary’s terrible attempt at a poker face and grinned again. “But I see you already know all about that too.”

“Stop reading me!” Mary exclaimed, exasperated.

Sam shrugged. “In March 2019, we received intel about Apophis’ plans to unleash a new series of plagues upon the world, starting with COVID-19.”

Mary frowned. “Apophis?”

“Ah, I finally stumped you! It’s an organization that started in the aftermath of the Black Plague as a medical humanitarian group but fell off the radar after the French Revolution. They resurfaced in 1918. After *Operation Michael* yielded intel about the work of Jules Guiart, a French parasitologist from Chateau Thierry, General Ludendorff sent stormtroopers to retrieve the scientist. He escaped, but they managed to find his work. Apophis relaunched, albeit with the new goal to *start* pandemics rather than ending them.”

Mary uneasily recalled her dream and that terrible sense of foreboding which accompanied it. “So you’re saying Michael is a member of, this, um –?”

“Apophis, right. Egyptian god of chaos. Michael’s been on our radar for a while now, and I need to take him down. It’s personal.”

“So why come after me?”

“When I saw your blood results, I knew I had to warn you. Plus, I was immediately curious when Michael brought you in.”

“*Michael brought me in?* No, my friends took me to the hospital!”

Sam smiled gently. “They did. Unfortunately, the doctors called in a certain famous virologist for a consult.”

Mary sank back into her seat, aghast. “Michael.”

“Ding, ding, ding! And he brought you to me. My guess is that he really needs you alive. Your blood produces something he’s looking for. Plus, he tends to trust his daughter.”

“You’re his *daughter?*”

“Guilty. My parents got together back in San Francisco in the 80s, when they were both recruited by Apophis. They started experimenting with flu strains around 1990, when they had a breakthrough in developing the virus. Five years later, Mother and Dad reunited for a mission when Apophis sent them to La Jolla to kill Dr. Jonas Salk.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “The guy who cured polio?”

Sam nodded. “He was close to curing the new flu strains, so Apophis decided to off him. Mother and Dad dosed his daily coffee with foxglove and managed to stage a heart attack. Apparently, they were so pleased with the job they did they partied a little too hard in Tijuana. I was born nine months later.”

“So it *is* personal with Michael...”

“Well, yes and the fact that he killed my uncle – the man who actually raised me. I think you knew him – nice guy. Owned a hotel in San Antonio.”

Mary gasped. “The Golden Sassafras!”

“Exactly. I learned about my uncle’s death and my parents’ overall horribleness about two years from now.”

“Wait, that’s impossible!” Mary frowned. “Unless...”

The air pressure changed, and Forest Wang materialized from behind Mary’s seat. He sank into the booth beside Sam, giving her an affectionate embrace, then grinned at Mary. “Sam and I met a couple of years from now. It was love at first sight!”

Sam squeezed Forest’s hand, then leaned in, looking somberly at Mary. “I need you to help me to take down my parents. Mother just found the five female seeds. Now all they need is, well, you.”

Mary pulled back, appalled. “That can’t be! My friends – they *just* went to check on the seeds...”

Her voice trailed off as she spied Sylvia, Ella, Grace, John, and Twix walking toward the café. Twix was talking John’s ear off and Grace was smiling as if she carried a secret. Mary felt a moment of peace until she noticed how Sam’s face had whitened. Forest took her hand and, just before they disappeared into the ether, Sam whispered, “Forest, how did Mother find us?”

A proud RGV native, Cheri grew up across Central and South America. She is an avid traveler and a lifelong lover of words. She has chased them across pages and silver screens, taking in their beauty and wisdom, then releasing them to soar and (hopefully) inspire others. Her Ph.D. in Spanish Literature encouraged her to chase words even further – across languages and cultures. Life has introduced her to a living kaleidoscope of characters, and she loves to bring her experiences with culture and quirks into her writing and seminars. In her spare time, she is an unrepentant daydreamer, an eternal student, a devoted bookworm, a fanatic of shoes and chocolate, a well-trained servant to two dogs, and a seeker of adventures.